

Exorcising War

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Resource book

By Metropolitan George of Mount Lebanon

What is most tragic about violence is its absurdity. Whoever has known the collective experience of death during long years of suffering, knows irrationality in its purest form...

When you spend the better part of your existence under fire, spend months on end without water, food, light or work, the notion of "revolution," of the "just cause" arouses only uncontrollable laughter. The only goal to strive for is existence itself. Day and night one sees oneself whirling about in a play put on by madmen. The shadow of a city in shambles perform a dance of death. One's only memories are of a world that is no longer there. Any statement is ambiguous and disconcerting because all discourse is condemned to triviality. Hope disappears because time itself is empty, although occasionally nostalgia comes to supply the void. All boundaries between external evil and internal trials disappear. An aching body is the only impression left upon an aching soul. A bruised body understands the futility of things, knows the absence of God. Sin surfaces to form a hallucinatory presence. I sin, therefore I am.

Yet one feels in common with the dead of one's own tribe, that one has been humiliated, the only protest is by way of arms. A weapon is a refusal, a "no" a protest against historical inequities as one waits for a justice that is yet to come. If the witness of the cross is felt to have been in vain, then others will have to be crucified. There death will be proof of one's own existence. Perhaps relations between men loyal to different causes will no longer be adulterated by the lie of what one had thought to be conviviality. One is not suffocated either by receiving or by giving death, but it is hard indeed to bear a truth that weighs down the shoulders because it has not been lived to its full potential in the gentle and peaceful light of the Saints.

In the fragile shelters of the Lebanon, God's peace alone was able to triumph over violence. And it brought with it an infinite forgiveness. One felt guilty when giving away to hatred. One knew from reading of God's mercy that the stranglers were perhaps poor ignorant people who might one day discover the beauty of God. One sensed in the dense morass of evil that no one was on the side of God, that each, in his way was a murderer, and that henceforth we could only live in forgiveness.

God becomes an idol if one kills for his sake and when the individual believes himself to be God's agent in a collective murder. One thinks of oneself as the defender of a "holy" nation. But moral and physical violence transform the holy nation into a sociological reality. What was once the sign of a Presence becomes merely the focus of absolute power. No other place has any meaning. The human community that once united these groups is annihilated by their mutual negation. Community is negated right from the start, and all those who try to bring it back risk death. In this situation, death is the only rational support one has.

Those who start a civil war in countries where peoples' mentality has not been secularised believe that they are engaging in a metaphysical struggle. Wherever social structures divide along confessional lines, as in Lebanon, any war is perceived as a religious war. And if it involves direct intervention by the West, it is called a Crusade. The trauma of the Crusades still affects the Islamic world. Even if the Islamic world knows intellectually that Western countries are far from motivated by religious considerations, it continues to perceive Europe and its cultural extension, the United States, as Christian countries.

Whether it is called a civilizing mission or a campaign of pacification, it always benefits the occupier. His conscience has need of words. A myth is always needed to justify violence. War, even modern war, is a struggle between gods. It does not matter if they are dressed up with new names. And this is all the more apparent in the visceral war of a developing country. Within the different communities mythologies concerning their past, their place and their vocation infuse their knowledge of facts and condition their responses.

Such a "reading" of the facts also determines the "reading" of the other, and its inevitable consequence in his physical or moral elimination. His disappearance includes that of his history, which must have been an error. And if present efforts prove to be insufficient to eliminate him from among the living, at least by falsifying his history one can eliminate him from among the dead. He will no longer belong to the collective memory of the country, even if one might eventually tolerate his physical existence. It is essential, however, that he should have no place in the procession of the true gods, that is, in history.

In this situation it is the wish for the other's death, which underpins the ideology. There is no fundamental difference between an international and a civil war. The enemy's country, his religion or race are so many closed impermeable societies destined to disappear. The death myth alone is changed. Both sides deny the identity of the other, and a new history must be created to accommodate the wish. History must be set aside to meet the demands of a truth, which by its very nature is absolute. Truth is characteristic of a group, of its historical existence, and of the salvation it will bring once the hostilities are over.

In civil wars there is a subtle violence, which deeply corrupts those who use it. They become travesties of themselves, at home with the worst of lies, those of the heart, for it is the heart that conceives and proclaims the anathemas.

There is something worse still. It is to find justification for this lie in God, a God who deliberately chooses his lieutenants and makes them into murderers. We are then confronted with a doctrine which is unaware of that fathom of antiquity whereby gods and goddesses were subject to human passions. The death of the other becomes obligatory as soon as God who is the All-Mighty who drives out the devil and does not choose death as his portion, his inheritance. The only way for God to enter in to dialogue with man is through renouncing his omnipotence out of infinite compassion and total respect for the freedom of his creature. God then comes forth from his voluntary death in a resurrection which gives an independent reality to man.

Was St; Bernard of Clairvaux so very different from a Moslem scholar when he said, addressing the people of England, that, "the earth trembles because the God of Heaven is loosing his land, the land in which he appeared among men. And now because of our sins, the enemy of the Cross is raising there his sacrilegious head and with his sword devastates that sacred promised land"? St. Bernard probably never asked himself whether Palestine might not also be sacred land for the Moslems, since it was there that the Prophet was taken up t heaven. In all reflection of this kind, the sword validates the Word...

A Kenotic Reading of the Scriptures

In the Church a vision of inwardness where peace becomes our vocation is plausible only if war can be exorcised. How can it have come about that pure and pious men like the inquisitors had such a bad theology? This constitutes one of the tragedies of our past. Nothing can be accomplished until the biblical foundations of violence are shattered. For us terror lies not in history but in theology .Violence is justified, fed by the belief that the God of the Bible led Israel from victory to victory and that he willed all nations to submit to it.

The Old Testament attributes to God the great power deployed against the Egyptians. It is the Lord who "will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast" (Exodus 12: 12). It is also the Lord who will drive out from before you the Canaanites and the Hittites" and all the other people (Joshua 3:10). And as regards the city of Ai, God's captain Joshua says: II And it shall be, when ye have taken the city, that ye shall set the city on fire: according to the commandment of the Lord shall ye do." (Joshua 8:8). It is God himself who is portrayed as carrying out a "scorched earth" policy. In this perspective God himself is placed at the service of Israel and its hegemony over the land of other people. It is not Israel, which makes the divine thought its own, but the Lord himself who reflects the thirst for an all too human conquest on the part of a confederation of Semitic tribes...

Alongside this blood thirsty God, there arises the image of a merciful God whose voice speaks in prophets like Jeremiah and Hosea and in the Songs of the Servant in Isaiah. We are confronted here with two irreconcilably opposed faces of the Lord in the same Scripture.

In their day, the Fathers of the Church adopted the typological style of exegesis because they saw that Christ is the only true image of God. Thus many acts of war, many objects and persons were considered to be symbols (or "types") of Christ or of the Cross. Clement of Rome, commenting on the story of Rahab and the spies, said that the scarlet rope, which the prostitute was to attach to the window, was a symbol of the blood shed by the Lord.

Such exegesis can obscure the historic meaning of the Scriptures. That is why I would like to suggest that we adopt a "kenotic II reading of the Scriptures, borrowing the notion from St Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (2:6-8):"Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man." In

this voluntary self-annihilation Christ does not cease to be God, but his divinity is not manifest.

The dogma of the two natures of Christ governs also the status of the Scriptures, where the culture of the epoch, the opacity of its understanding, hide the truth beneath the words. The subjectivity of the author intervenes. But we ourselves need not therefore assume this subjectivity. For us -following the tradition of Origen - Joshua the son of Nun, Yeshuah in Hebrew, is the model, the 'type', of Jesus, Yeshuah of Nazareth, who conquers not Canaan but the world of sin, who does not inflict death but accepts it.

There is no possible transition from the God of Joshua to the Father of Jesus Christ. The power of ancient Israel cannot prepare the way for the power of God on the Cross. The Cross alone is the Locus of divine victory , and the source of the meaning of -f faith. Anything in the Scriptures that does not conform to the mystery of Love is a veil over the Word. Love is the true Locus of the Word, because it alone is divine Epiphany.

Christ lives in the Scriptures in a dialectic of veiling and manifestation. The Scriptures are understandable only to the extent that they can be referred to him. That is why in fact, he was on the side of the peoples of Canaan, the conquered peoples. God has never been on the side of the armies that have trampled on his Name. It was only when Jesus was made perfect in his suffering that God's true nature was revealed. And this clemency of God is transmitted to us by those "makers of peace" who are the blind, the maimed, and all the handicapped of the earth. They, above all others, transmit the divine gift of non-resistance to evil.

The Cross as an Instrument of Worldly Triumph

Early Christianity before St Augustine abhorred the use of violence. In his Catholic period Tertullian wrote that the Lord, by disarming Peter, had disarmed every soldier. Later Origen, citing the way Peter was forbidden to kill, said that Christians should not defend themselves against their enemies, that we no longer take up the sword against another nation, that we no longer learn war. We find the same tone among the apologists. St Basil imposed an ecclesiastical penance on military personnel who had taken part in war.

The first Christians hoped to overcome war by prayer, faith and the power of God. But the Empire, though it was becoming Christianised, could not simply abolish the army. The Empire was not yet the Kingdom of God. It had to defend itself against the barbarians. It perceived its victories and its continued existence as a defence of the Christian cause. The Cross was becoming the instrument of a purely worldly triumph. The Byzantine liturgy is full of this ideology. Yet simultaneously that same liturgy was developing a spirituality of humility and meekness. Admittedly, no doctrine of the just war was elaborated in the East. However it did except the idea of a defensive war, waged against the Turks or against the "Catholic" armies whenever they invaded an Orthodox country like Russia. Pacifism as a theory was no longer known in the Christian East.

With the disintegration of the Byzantine empire most of the Orthodox Churches outside the ancient patriarchates became autocephalous Churches whose geographical areas coincided with that of their respective nations. These 'national' Churches are even imbued with nationalistic feelings and have therefore more or less explicitly blessed the wars undertaken by their respective countries. So one is Russian, Greek, Serbian or Bulgarian because one is Orthodox. In this confusion of categories the fact of war itself no longer troubles the conscience.

Justice and Peace are Inseparable

Justice and peace are inseparable. Injustice becomes entrenched in the very flesh, bringing with it despair and impatience, revolt and desire for destruction. It reveals the will to power that brings the tyrant an occupier into being and, hence, that lie that serves to cover up injustice in a state governed by the rule of law and thus institutionalises the process: injustice-revolt-repression. Hatred, suspicion, fanaticism, racism and oppression then bring all social discourse to an end.

All power politics come politicised beyond any possible witnessing. If a free - or at least tolerable -existence is denied me, then my inner being itself is denied me. I can accept this treatment in the witness of creative silence or martyrdom. Then, socially annihilated, I am at least known to God and nourished by the hope of the Kingdom. The community of the Saints can be realized even in the midst of war and persecution.

Martyrdom puts its seal on a peace with God, which is beyond all politics. No force can crush someone who contemplated the light of the face of whom it is written: "He shall not strive, nor cry out; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall he not break, nor quench a smouldering wick." (Matthew: 12:19-20).

The kingdom of peace was announced by the coming of one whom the liturgy, following Isaiah, calls, "the prince of peace." (Isaiah 9:6) Paul speaks in an even more startling, more intimate manner when he says "he is our peace," adding "having abolished in his flesh the enmity." (Ephesians 2:14)

The Logic of Holiness

Either force or law, two areas equally foreign to the logic of holiness govern the reality of history. Law is coercive and uses force. Law is politics. Peace seen as an absence of war belongs to the realm of political reflection and ethics, and this is also an offshoot of a humanistic civilization. The politician seeks this kind of peace. And here and there he will achieve it. But he is enough of a realist to understand that the total disarmament of mankind is unthinkable, and that the war industry remains indispensable to the very fabric of the Great Powers.

We need not dwell on that source of evil, both individual and collective, which is fear. Until the end of history, men will be enslaved to their fear of death. Non-violence understood merely as the absence of force is not a victory over violence. And non-violence as courage and transcendence of self is not a political attitude but a

witness. Although there is no common denominator linking the saint and the politician in the essential nature of their behaviour, nonetheless, the saint prays that political peace may be achieved on earth. Peace is the appropriate context for the development of man as a sign of his victory over greed. Belief in our moral obligation to seek peaceful solutions is a considerable step ahead. However, peace at any price is often a sign of cowardice. Man does not improve simply because peace has been negotiated.

Peace becomes a moral value insofar as it expresses a genuine reconciliation between two peoples where before tension had reigned. We have then arrived at what the Byzantine liturgy calls "peace from above." And, having prayed for it, the liturgy speaks of "peace for the whole world." What emerges from this text therefore is that the universe can be pacified in depth only insofar as it is converted.

Peace, as a call from God and as a reality to be brought to fulfilment in the Kingdom, remains the divine realm to which the Lord invites us in the midst of the tribulations of our earthly existence. This vision demands unceasing effort against war among men.