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Christianity and Violence

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Boardman Lecture XXXVIII. Editor and Foreword by Adam Graves.

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Abstract

Professor Volf counters the claim that religion fosters violence and that the "resurgence of religiously legitimized violence" is a direct consequence of a "contemporary resurgence of religion." Limiting himself to a case-study of Christianity, he argues that the cure to social violence "is not less religion, but, in a carefully qualified sense, more religion." Professor Volf identifies and criticizes a number of influential arguments found in the work of several authors, including Mark Juergensmeyer, Maurice Bloch, Regina Schwartz and Jacques Derrida, which he believes erroneously link Christianity and violence. These arguments are organized around four general themes: religion, monotheism, creation, and new creation. At the heart of his thesis lies the distinction between 'thin' and thick' religion. According to Professor Volf, 'thick' religion entails a stronger, more conscious commitment to a faith rooted in a concrete tradition, while 'thin' religion entails nothing more than a vague sense of religiosity "whose content is shaped by factors other than faith (such as national or economical interests)." Throughout the lecture, Professor Volf contends that although 'thin' Christian faith may potentially lead to violence, 'thick' Christian faith actually serves to create and sustain a culture of peace. In the conclusion of his Lecture, he offers some reflections on "why misconceptions about the violent character of Christian faith abound" in contemporary society.

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Comments
Boardman Lecture XXXVIII. Editor and Foreword by Adam Graves.

THE BOARDMAN LECTURESHIP IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS
(FOUNDED 1899)

XXXVIII

CHRISTIANITY AND VIOLENCE

DELIVERED BEFORE
THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
MARCH 6, 2002

BY
MIROSLAV VOLF

EDITED AND FOREWORD
BY
ADAM GRAVES

Foreword
Adam Graves

In the wake of September 11th, it was decided that this year's Dana Boardman Lecture in Christian Ethics at the University of Pennsylvania (the thirty-eighth in the series) should address the relationship between religion and violence. The Boardman Lecture was delivered by Miroslav Volf, Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale University Divinity School. As a native Croatian, Professor Volf's work grows out of his firsthand experience of living and teaching in Croatia during the violent ethnic/religious war in former Yugoslavia. He is the author and coeditor of numerous books, including *Work in the Spiri: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann* (ed. with T. Kucharz and C. Krieg, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), and *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Professor Volf tackled the immense ethical and theological challenges posed by the political, ethnic, and 'religious' conflicts which seem to occupy nearly every corner of today's globe. Owing to his combination of personal background and theological expertise, Professor Volf offers a unique perspective on the religious issues raised by the recent events of September 11th.

In his Boardman Lecture on "Christianity and Violence," Professor Volf counters the claim that religion fosters violence and that the "resurgence of religiously legitimized violence" is a direct consequence of a "contemporary resurgence of religion" (2). Limiting himself to a case-study of Christianity, he argues that the cure to social violence "is not less religion, but, in a carefully qualified sense, *more* religion" (3). Professor Volf identifies and criticizes a number of influential arguments found in the work of several authors, including Mark Juergensmeyer, Maurice Bloch, Regina Schwartz and Jacques Derrida, which he believes erroneously link Christianity and violence. These arguments are organized around four general themes: religion, monotheism, creation, and new creation. At the heart of his thesis lies the distinction between 'thin' and thick' religion. According to Professor Volf, 'thick' religion entails a stronger, more conscious commitment to a faith rooted in a concrete tradition, while 'thin' religion entails nothing more than a vague sense of religiosity "whose content is shaped by factors other than faith (such as national or economical interests)" (3). Throughout the lecture, Professor Volf contends that although 'thin' Christian faith may potentially lead to violence, 'thick' Christian faith actually serves to create and sustain a culture of peace. In the conclusion of his Lecture, he offers some reflections on "why misconceptions about the violent character of Christian faith abound" in contemporary society.

The lecture appearing in this volume is a revised version of the lecture given on March 6th, 2002.

CHRISTIANITY AND VIOLENCE

Miroslav Volf

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Introduction: Resurgence of Religion

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center it was not unusual to hear that the attack "changed everything." "Everything" is certainly an exaggeration, but 9/11, as the terrorist attack is sometimes called, did change a good many things, including our relation to religion. For the attack, in which more than 3000 lives were lost and the economic life of the nation was disrupted in a major way, was in part motivated by religion. Religion, we were led to conclude, is alive and well today, and is a force not only in private but also in the public lives of people around the globe.

This is not what the mainstream sociologists of the 20th century, who followed in the footsteps of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emil Durkheim, were predicting. Instead of slowly withering away or lodging itself quietly into the privacy of worshipers' hearts, religion has emerged as an important player on the national and international scenes. It is too early to tell how permanent this resurgence of religion will be. The processes of secularization may well continue, though likely not in the older sense of an overall decline of religious observance, but rather in the newer sense of the diminishing influence of religion in contemporary social structures. Nevertheless, religion is presently alive and well on the public scene, so much so that a collection of essays entitled *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (which, when originally published in 1994, was seen as pushing the boundaries of its discipline) has become obligatory reading for diplomats in many countries, Western and non-Western. [1]

In many people's minds, the reassertion of religion as a political factor has not been for the good. It seems that the gods have mainly terror on their minds, as the title of Mark Juergensmeyer's book on the global rise of religious violence, published before 9/11, suggests. [2] Among the intellectual elite in the Western cultural milieu the contemporary coupling of religion and violence feeds most decisively on the memories of the wars that plagued Europe from the 1560s to the 1650s, in which religion was "the burning motivation, the one that inspired fanatical devotion and the most vicious hatred." [3] It was these wars that contributed a great deal to the emergence of secularizing modernity.

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[1] Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson*, Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[2] *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[3] Scott R. Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred. Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 2. See Ronald Asch, *The Thirty Years War. The Holy Roman Empire and Europe, 1618-48* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

A secularizing impact of the wars of religion was felt even as far afield from everyday concerns as theories of knowledge are sometimes deemed to be. As Stephen Toulmin has argued in *Cosmopolis*, modernity did not emerge, as often claimed, simply as a result of its protagonists' endeavor to dispel the darkness of tradition and superstition with the light of philosophical and scientific reason. It was not accidental that Descartes "discovered" the one correct method to acquire knowledge in a time when "over much of the continent … people had a fair chance of having their throats cut and their houses burned down by strangers who merely disliked their religion."[4] A new way of establishing truth "that was independent of, and neutral between, particular religious loyalties" seemed an attractive alternative to war fueled by dogmatic claims.[5]

As did key Enlightenment figures, many contemporaries see religion as a pernicious social ill that needs aggressive treatment rather than a medicine from which cure is expected. Did not the perpetrators of the 9/11 terrorist attack appeal to religion as the primary motivating force for their act? In the recent war in the Balkans, did not the Serbs fight for the land on which the holy sites of their religion stood? Is not difference between Catholicism and Protestantism at the heart of the civil war in Northern Ireland? Is not religion a major factor in clashes in India? The contemporary resurgence of religion seems to go hand in hand with the resurgence of religiously legitimized violence—at least in the public perception. Hence, the argument goes, it is necessary to weaken, neutralize, or outright eliminate religion as a factor in public life.

In this lecture I will contest the claim that the Christian faith, as one of the major world religions, predominantly fosters violence, and argue that it should be seen as a contributor to more peaceful social environments. This may seem a bold claim. Lest I be misunderstood from the start, let me clarify my thesis. I will not argue that the Christian faith was not and does not continue to be employed to foster violence. Obviously, such an argument cannot be plausibly made. Not only have Christians committed atrocities and engaged in less egregious forms of violence during the course of their long history, but they have also drawn on religious convictions to justify them.[6] Moreover, there are elements in the Christian faith, which, when taken in isolation or when excessively foregrounded, can plausibly be used to legitimize violence. Second, I will not argue that Christianity has been historically less associated with violence than other major religions. I am not sure whether this is or is not the case, and I am not sure how one would go about deciding the issue. I will leave these important but difficult questions unaddressed.

What I will argue is that at least when it comes to Christianity the cure against religiously induced and legitimized violence is almost exactly the opposite of what an important intellectual current in the West since the Enlightenment has been suggesting. The

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[4] Steven Toulmin, *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 17.

[5] Toulmin, 70.

[6] For a survey see Gottfried Maron, "Frieden und Krieg. Ein Blick in die Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte," in: *Glaubenskriege in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, ed. Peter Herrmann (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), 17-35. See also Karlheinz Deschner, *Kriminalgeschichte des Christentums*, 6 Vol. (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rohwolt, 1986ff) and a response to his work H. R. Seeliger (ed.), *Kriminalizierung des Christentums? Karlheinz Deschners Kirchengeschichte auf dem Pruefstand* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1993).

cure is not less religion, but, in a carefully qualified sense, *more* religion. I don't mean, of course, that the cure for violence lies in increased religious zeal; blind religious zeal is at the heart of the problem. Instead, it lies in a stronger and more intelligent commitment to the faith as faith. In terms of how Christian faith is conceived, my thesis is this: The more we reduce Christian faith to vague religiosity which serves primarily to energize, heal, and give meaning to the business of life whose content is shaped by factors other than faith (such as national or economic interests), the worse off we will be. Inversely, the more the Christian faith matters to its adherents as faith and the more they practice it as an ongoing tradition with strong ties to its origins and with clear cognitive and moral content, the better off we will be. *"Thin" but zealous practice of the Christian faith is likely to foster violence; "thick" and committed practice will help generate and sustain a culture of peace.*[7] This thesis amounts to the claim that approaching the issue of religion and violence by looking at the *quantity* of religious commitment—more religion, more violence, less religion, less violence—is unsophisticated and mistaken. The most relevant factor is, rather, the *quality* of religious commitments within a given religious tradition.

In the present lecture I will support the above thesis by countering some influential arguments about the violent character of Christianity. This is only half of what I would need to do to make my thesis plausible, a negative half. The other, positive half would be to show that at Christianity's heart, and not just at its margins, lie important resources for creating

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[7] The best way to explain more closely my use of "thick" and "thin" is to compare it with usage by others. Clifford Geertz has is has made popular the use of the contrasting pair "thick" and "thin" (*Interpretation of Cultures* [New York: BasicBooks, 1974], 3-30). He himself has taken it over from Gilbert Ryle. Both use the term in the syntagm "thick" or "thin" description of the same phenomenon. A typical case of "thin" description is "rapidly contracting his right eyelids" and of the "thick" description "practicing burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion." In his book *Thick and thin: moral argument at home and abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), Michael Walzer has introduced an altered sense of "thick" and "thin" as he applied them to moral argument. He writes, "it is not my claim to offer a thick description of moral argument, rather to point to a kind of argument that is itself "thick"—richly referential, culturally resonant, locked into a locally established symbolic system or network of meaning. "Thin" is simply a contrasting term" (xin1). (For a more recent and still different use of "thick" and "thin," where these designations refer to "the two types of human relations," and where "thick relations are in general our relations to the near and dear" and "thin relations are in general our relations to the stranger and the remote" see Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002], 7, 37f.). My use is similar to Walzer's, in that, just as Walzer claims that it is the case in relation to morality, one arrives at the "thin" understanding and practice of the faith by abstraction from the "thick" understanding and practice. "Thick" for me is, for instance, exhibited by a worshiper who expresses a conviction that God is triune and understands this conviction to be governed by the story of Jesus Christ and to imply an obligation to act in certain ways; "thin" exhibited by the flashing of three fingers on the part of Serbian soldiers in what looks like a victory sign, but is in fact a sign of a Trinitarian faith reduced by that very act to no more than an empty marker of cultural difference. Or, to give an example from the USA, "thin" is when the words "under God" on the Pledge of Allegiance are drained of specific religious content so that they become more a cultural tradition than a theological assertion; "thick" is when "God" in the said phrase refers to the God of Jesus Christ or to Allah or to Jahwe, which would make the phrase unconstitutional under the "no establishment" clause (see the editorial "Taking on the pledge," *The Christian Century*, July 17-30, 2002, 5). Walzter and I, however, have different concerns. I am concerned to show how "thinning" of religious practice opens religious convictions to be misused to legitimize violence because it strips away precisely what in "thick" religious faith guards against such misuse, whereas Walzer is concern to show that morality is "thick" from the beginning and that the "thin" morality as universal always resides within the "thick" as particular (Walzer, 4).

and sustaining a culture of peace.[8] In the past, scholars have argued in a variety of ways that the Christian faith fosters violence. I will engage four arguments which, in my estimation, go to the heart of the matter.[9]

1. Religion

The first argument for the violent character of Christianity claims that religions are by nature violent, and that the Christian faith, being a religion, is therefore also by nature violent. Mark Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God* rests on such a reading of religion. A central reason why violence has accompanied religion's renewed political presence, he argues, has to do with "the nature of religious imagination, which always has had the propensity to absolutize and to project images of cosmic war."[10] Cosmic war is waged not for its own sake but for the sake of peace, of course. Precisely as a phenomenon at whose core lies cosmic war, religion has been "order restoring and life affirming."[11] But if in its pursuit of peace religion is not to leave a trail of blood and tears, it cannot be left to its own devices. It needs "the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society."[12] Religion qua religion is violent. To have a socially positive role, it needs to be redeemed by Enlightenment values.

The argument that a religion which counts among its great teachers Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Luther (to name just a few great theological minds) would need to learn to be "rational" from Enlightenment thinkers, betrays a rather narrow understanding of "rationality." But at least such an account of rationality is plausible. Implausible is, however, the claim that a religion which counts St. Francis among its greatest saints does not have resources of its own to learn about fair play but must borrow them from Enlightenment thinkers. The pressure to make such implausible claims comes from "thinning" Christian convictions to general religious beliefs and then placing images of cosmic war at the heart of these. In the process, everything specific to the Christian faith has been lost.

Whereas Juergensmeyer asserts that religion is inherently violent by appealing to the images of the cosmic war which lies allegedly at its heart, Maurice Bloch argues for the same assertion by offering a general theory of religion. In his book *Prey into Hunter* he argues that

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[8] See my *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

[9] There are other arguments for the same thesis as well, some of which I will address indirectly. One is based on the combination of the claims about God's omnipotence, omniscience, and implacable justice, for instance. A belief in an all powerful God who sees everything and wills the punishment of every transgression is central to the Christian faith, the proponents of the argument claim, and is bound to lead to violence. Another argument for the violent character of the Christian faith is based on the authoritarian character of every revealed religion. Adherents of a religion resting on the irrational authority of revelation will tend to adjudicate disputes not trough rational means and compromise but through assertion of irrational authority. Space does not allow me to address these and other arguments. But my comments below go a significant way toward indirectly addressing them.

[10] Juergensmeyer, Terror in the Mind of God, 242.

[11] Ibid., 159.

[12] Ibid., 243.

the "irreducible core of the ritual process" involves "a marked element of violence or ... of [a] conquest ... of the here and now by the transcendental."[13] He explains,

> In the first part of the ritual the here and now is simply left behind by the move towards the transcendental. This initial movement represents the transcendental as supremely desirable and the here and now as of no value. The return is different. In the return the transcendental is not left behind but continues to be attached to those who made the initial move in its direction; its value is not negated. Secondly, the return to the here and now is really a conquest of the here and now by the transcendental.[14]

This return from the transcendental sphere motivated by the goal of conquest, Bloch continues, explains "the often-noted fact that religion so easily furnishes an idiom of expansionist violence to people in a whole range of societies, an idiom which, under certain circumstances, becomes a legitimation for actual violence."[15]

Let us assume that Bloch has analyzed the core of the ritual process correctly. The question still remains whether one should look at the core of the ritual process, stripped of the texture as well as of the larger context that a concrete religion gives it, in order to understand the relation of religions to violence. Here is a thought experiment. Imagine that the first part of the ritual—the leaving of the here and now by the move toward the transcendental—were understood by a religion as the death of the self to her own self-centered desires and as her entry into a transcendental space of harmonious peace. And suppose that the religion stipulates that the second part of the ritual – the conquest of the here and now by the transcendental – must be achieved in a peaceful way, consistent with the content of the transcendental. If the formal structure of ritual were filled in with this content, would such a religion serve as "a legitimation of actual violence"? Would not the "conquest," if successful, be precisely the victory of the "transcendental" peace over the violence of the here and now?

As you are certainly aware, such a religion need not be imagined as hypothetically existing. For what I have asked you to imagine is precisely how the Christian faith, at least in some of its important strands, understands itself and its initiation ritual, baptism. Bloch engages the Christian faith directly, and envisages a possibility of it not underwriting violence. But in his account such a possibility is predicated on Christianity's "refusal of the second phase of rebounding violence, that is, a refusal of the conquest of external vitality which is therefore ultimately a refusal to continue with earthly life."[16] The Apostle Paul's Christianity, he believes, is an example of such a refusal—or rather, an example of a half-hearted refusal, since Paul also undertook "prudent organization of a well-organized church firmly embedded in the continuing practical and political world."[17]

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[13] Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter. The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), 4-5.

[14] Ibid.,5.

[15] Ibid., 6.

[16] Ibid., 90-91.

[17] Ibid., 94.

Yet, a more careful study of the Apostle will show that he advocated neither a full-fledged nor a half-hearted refusal of the "conquest." Explaining the significance of baptism for earthly life he writes, "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we might walk in the newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Paul understands walking in the "newness of life" as *imitatio Christi* and therefore as "repetition" of the transcendental sphere in the here and now. So he is after "conquest." But equally significant as the conquest itself, is the character of the conquest, for conquering in the right way is the only way to conquer. Since Christ died in self-giving love for the godless, Paul must affirm a kind of non-violent conquest of the here and now. To paraphrase Paul's famous summary of Christian life in the world (Romans 12:21), to seek to conquer evil with evil is to be conquered by evil; evil can be overcome only with good.

Will Christianity understood as a peaceful conquest of a violent world by the God of peace foster violence? One could argue that any victory of the "transcendental" over the here and now amounts to violence. But if non-coercive victory of peace over violence is itself implicated in violence, then one may well wonder whether the notion of violence has been hopelessly muddled. Put differently, one would need to show why "violence" understood in such a way is not desirable rather than objectionable.

As applied to Christianity, the victory of the "transcendental" over the here and now will be violent only if the notion of the "transcendental" is stripped of its particular content and infused with the values of the "here and now" around which conflicts rage. This often happens when Christian faith is employed to legitimize violence. God is declared to be on our side and we see ourselves as soldiers of God, so that the earthly goals acquire a "transcendent" aura and the struggle for them becomes a religious duty. One may describe this as inverse projection—not the projection of what humans deem supremely valuable onto a heavenly screen, which 19th century critics of religion deplored, but the projection of heavenly values onto earthly goods. The second projection is more dangerous because the first generates religiously sanctioned passivity in the context of oppression and suffering whereas the second generates religiously sanctioned violence in the context of struggle for scarce goods. Such a projection of transcendent values onto earthly goods can succeed, however, only if Christian faith is illegitimately stripped of its "thick" content so as to be able to support an engagement in a struggle that was already under way and carried out for other than religious reasons and by means other than those sanctioned by the religion.

2. Monotheism

Other scholars, like Regina Schwartz in her book *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, try to argue for the Christian faith's complicity in violence by pointing not to the general features of the Christian faith as religion, but to one of its characteristic components. Along with Judaism and Islam, Christianity is a *monotheistic* religion, and therefore, Schwartz argues, an *exclusive* and *violent* religion. "Whether as singleness (this God against the others) or totality (this is all the God there is), monotheism abhors, reviles, rejects, and ejects whatever it defines as outside its compass."[18] Given that the belief in one

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[18] Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 63.

God "forges identity antithetically," it issues in a mistaken notion of identity ("we are 'us' because we are not 'them'") and contributes to violent practice ("we can remain 'us' only if we obliterate 'them'").

In addition, monotheism imports the category of universal "truth" into the religious sphere. Jakov Jukic, a Croatian sociologist of religion, has noted that this fact lies at the heart of monotheism's exclusivity. To believe that there is only one God means to believe in the only *true* God. Moreover, since such a claim to truth must be universal, it is inescapably public. Universal public claims cause strife when they encounter opposing claims, of either a particular or a universal sort. For this reason, too, monotheism is bound to have a violent legacy, the argument goes.[19] "We," the faithful, have on our side the one true God, and stand in opposition to "them," the infidels and renegades.

This argument should be taken seriously. And yet it is not clear that an affirmation of divine oneness *as such* leads to violence. Does not the monotheistic claim to universal truth work also against the tendency to divide people into "us" and "them"? If one accepts the belief in one God, in an important sense everybody is "in," and everybody is "in" precisely on the same terms. True, "being in on the same terms" may feel like violence if you don't want to be "in" or you want to be "in" on different terms. But take monotheism away, and the division and violence between "us" and "them" hardly disappears, and if "us" or "them" are religious, they each will appeal to their good to wage war. This is in fact what happens whether religion is monotheistic or tribal. In a polytheistic context violence may reassert itself with even more force, because it will necessarily be justified by locally legitimized or on arbitrary preferences, against which, in the absence of a divinity which overarches the parties, there now can be no higher court of appeal. Even if monotheism is taken vaguely and abstractly as belief in one God without further qualification, it is not clear that it is likely to generate more violence than polytheism or atheism.

None of the monotheist religions espouses such a vague and abstract monotheism. Specifically Christian monotheism contains a further important pressure against violence, especially violence caused by self-enclosed and exclusive identities of the type criticized by Schwartz. For Christian monotheism is of a Trinitarian kind.[20] What difference does Trinitarianism make?[21] One of the socially most important aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity concerns notions of identity. To believe that the one God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is to believe that the identity of the Father, for instance, cannot be understood apart from the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father's identity is from the start defined by the Son and the Spirit, and therefore it is not undifferentiated and self-enclosed. One cannot say without qualification that the Father is not the Son or the Spirit because to be the Father means to have the Son and the Spirit present in one. The same holds true, of course, of the Son and the Spirit in relation to the Father and one another.

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[19] Jakov Jukic, *Lica i Maske Svetoga. Ogledi iz drustvene religiologije* (Faces and Masks of the Holy) (Zagreb: Krscanska sadasnjost, 1997), 242f.

[20] For a critique of Schwartz along these lines see Miroslav Volf, "Jehovah on Trial," *Christianity Today* (April 27, 1998), 32-35.

[21] For the following see Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement" *Modern* Theology 14:3 (July 1998): 403-23.

Moreover, the divine persons as non-self-enclosed identities are understood by the Christian tradition to form a perfect communion of love. The persons give themselves to each other and receive themselves from each other in love. None has to wrest anything from others, none has to impose anything on others, and none needs to secure himself from the incursions of others. Far from being a life of violence, the life of the divine being is characterized by mutually uncoerced and welcomed generosity.

It would be difficult to argue that such monotheism fosters violence. Instead, in Maurice Bloch's terminology, it grounds peace here and now in the "transcendental" realm, in the love and peacefulness of the divine being. The argument for the inherent violence of Christianity's monotheism works only if one illegitimately reduces the "thick" religious description of God to naked oneness and then postulates such abstract oneness to be of decisive social significance. I do not dispute that such reduction in fact happens within the Christian community. I do contend, however, that this is a sign that the Christian faith has not been taken seriously enough because non-religious values have taken precedence, rather than that it is inherently violent.

3. Creation

So far I have argued that Christian faith may generate violence in its "thin" but not in its "thick" form—when a "thick" character of divine being's differentiated and complex identity is reduced to an undifferentiated "One" and when divine engagement with the world to make it a world of harmonious peace is rendered as a generalized "conquest." But what about the argument that some very "thick" and "concrete" Christian convictions generate violence? Central here are the convictions about the world's creation and redemption.

It is a basic Christian claim that God *created* the world. In her influential book *Sexism and God-Talk* Rosemary Redford Ruether starts with the observation that in the Hebrew Bible, the creator is like an artisan working on material outside his own nature. God does so, she argues, by "a combination of male seminal and cultural power (word-act) that shapes it 'from above'."[22] In such an account, creation is a result of an imposition of form on formless matter from outside by an alien force. Hence creation is an act of violence.

So what is wrong with this account of creation? Everything—almost. Even if we assume that creation is best described as "forming" pre-existing material, one would have to argue that this material is "something," and that it is a specific kind of something which deserves respect. But it is not clear at all that chaos, which according to this account of creation God formed, is a "something." And if the chaos were a "something," why would it not be something analogous to a boulder from which an artisan can fashion a sculpture? For all the sparks flying off his chisel, Michelangelo working on "David" can hardly be described as perpetrating violence. For the activity of "forming" to do violence, the entity that is formed must possess an integrity of its own that demands respect. If someone were to smash Michelangelo's "David" into pieces of granite, this would be an act of violence.

On the whole, however, the Christian tradition has not understood creation as "forming." Instead, it has underscored that God the creator is not a demiurge working on

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[22] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 77.

pre-existing matter; God created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. The consequences of this understanding of creation for its putative violent character are significant. As Rowan Williams puts it in *On Christian Theology*, when we say that God creates we do not mean that God "imposes a definition" but that God "creates an identity." He continues, "Prior to God's word there is nothing to impose on."[23] From this it follows that creation is not the exercise of an alien power, indeed that it is not an exercise of power at all, understood in the usual sense. Williams writes,

> Power is exercised by x over y; but creation is not power, because it is not exercised on anything. We might, of course, want to say that creation presupposes a divine potentiality, or resourcefulness, or abundance of active life; and 'power' can sometimes be used in those senses. But what creation emphatically isn't is any kind of imposition or manipulation: it is not God imposing on us divinely willed roles rather than the ones we 'naturally' might have, or defining us out of our own system into God's … And this implies that the Promethean myth of humanity struggling against God for its welfare and interests makes no sense: to be a creature cannot be to be a victim of an alien force.[24]

Creation, then, is not a violent act. Indeed, one may even argue that short of having a doctrine of creation, relationships between entities in the world, especially human beings, will be necessarily violent.[25] If identities are not created, then boundaries between identities must be emerging out of interchanges between these entities. And these interchanges themselves must be described as violent, since boundaries, precisely because they are always contested, must be described arbitrarily from a vantage point that transcends either of the contesting entities. Given scarce resources, boundaries will always be the products of power struggles, even if those power struggles take the form of negotiations. Moreover, no appeals for arbitration between the contending parties can be made to something which ultimately stands outside the power struggle.

4. New Creation

If creation is not a violent act, Christian convictions about creation do not generate violence—provided, of course, that they are not stripped of their specific texture and reduced to the formula "*x* forms *y* which possesses integrity of its own," so that they can be employed in ways contrary to their inner logic. But what about the eschatological *new creation*? What about God's activity to redeem creation from consequences of sin? Clearly, the new creation is not *creatio ex nihilo* (out of nothing), but *creatio ex vetere* (out of old creation), and that "old" and "sinful" creation does possess an integrity of its own (even if it is an integrity in tension with its true character), and can and does assert its will over against God. In redeeming the world, God intervenes into the existing sinful world in order to transform it into a world of perfect love. Is this intervention not violent and does it therefore not generate violence on the part of human beings?

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[23] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 68.

[24] Ibid., 68f.

[25] See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

The most radical critique of redemptive divine engagement as violent and violence inducing comes from post-structuralist thinkers. For them, any determinacy of the goal to be achieved by divine transformation of this world and any specificity about the agent of transformation already breeds violence. On their account, for what needs *to come*, in contrast to what *is*, not to be violent, it must always remain completely other and cannot be expressed as "onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design."[26] As John Caputo, speaking in a voice of his teacher, Jacques Derrida, puts it, "if the Messiah ever actually showed up… that would ruin everything."[27] Any and every Messiah is problematic because by necessity he would exclude something or someone. Hence the only acceptable goal of desirable change is "absolute hospitality," a posture of welcoming the stranger without any preconditions, just as the only acceptable engagement to achieve it is "radical and interminable, infinite … critique."[28]

"Absolute hospitality" seems generous and peaceful, until one remembers that unrepentant perpetrators and their unhealed victims would then have to sit around the same table and share a common home without adequate attention to the violation that has taken place. The idea ends up too close for comfort to the Nietzschean affirmation of life, in which a sacred "yes" is pronounced to all that is and "But thus I willed it," is said of all that was, with all the small and large horrors of history.[29] Absolute hospitality would in no way amount to absence of violence. To the contrary, it would enthrone violence precisely under the guise of non-violence because it would leave the violators unchanged and the consequences of violence unremedied. Hospitality can be absolute only once the world has been made into a world of love in which each person would be hospitable to all. In the world of injustice, deception, and violence, hospitality can be only conditional—even if the will to hospitality and the offer of hospitality remain unconditional.

Transformation of the world of violence into a world of love cannot take place by means of absolute hospitality. It takes radical change, and not just an act of indiscriminate acceptance, for the world to be made into a world of love. The Christian tradition has tied this change with the coming of the Messiah, the crucified and the resurrected One, whose appearance in glory is still awaited. Is this messianic intervention violent? Does it sanction human violence? The answer is easy when it comes to the Messiah's first coming. Jesus Christ did not come into the world in order to conquer evildoers through an act of violence, but to die for them in self-giving love and thereby reconcile them to God. The outstretched arms of the suffering body on the cross define the whole of Christ's mission. He condemned the sin of humanity by taking it upon himself; and by bearing it, he freed humanity from its power and restored their communion with God. Though suffering on the cross is not all Christ did, the cross represents the decisive criterion for how all his work is to be understood.

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[26] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Rutledge: New York, 1994), 75.

[27] John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 74.

[28] Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 90.

[29] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 139, 253.

Does the belief in the Crucified generate violence? Beginning at least with Constantine's conversion, the followers of the Crucified have perpetrated gruesome acts of violence under the sign of the cross. Over the centuries, the seasons of Lent and Holy Week were for the Jews a time of fear and trepidation; Christians have perpetrated some of the worst pogroms as they remembered the crucifixion of Christ for which they blamed the Jews. Muslims too associate the cross with violence; crusaders' rampages were undertaken under the sign of the cross.

However, an unbiased reading of the story of Jesus Christ gives no warrant for such perpetration of violence. The account of his death in 1 Peter sums up the witness of the whole New Testament well: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness" (2:21-24). If there is a danger in the story of the cross in relation to violence, it is the danger that it might teach simply to acquiesce to being mistreated by others, not the danger of inciting one to mistreat others. Whenever violence was perpetrated in the name of the cross, the cross was depleted of its "thick" meaning within the larger story of Jesus Christ and "thinned" down to a symbol of religious belonging and power—and the blood of those who did not belong flowed as Christians transmuted themselves from would-be followers of the Crucified to imitators of those who crucified him.

Finally, what about the Messiah who is still to come in glory? He will come with grace for his followers. But does not the book of Revelation portray him as a Rider on a white horse whose "eyes are like a flame of fire," whose robe was "dipped in blood," from whose "mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down nations" and who is coming to "thread in the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (19:11-16)? Some New Testament scholars have attempted to re-interpret the Rider so as to make him fit the generally non-violent stance of the New Testament. What is right about such efforts is that in Revelation the *martyrs* are the true victors so that, paradoxically, the "Beast's" victory over them is their victory over the "Beast." In this they mirror Jesus Christ, the slaughtered Lamb, who conquered his enemies precisely by his sacrificial death.[30]

Yet, the Rider is not simply the Lamb; he is the Lamb in his function as the final judge. But why is the final judgment necessary? Without it, we would have to presume that all human beings, no matter how deeply steeped in evil they are, will either eventually succumb to the lure of God's love or, if they don't, willingly embrace not only the evil they do but the destructive impact of evil upon their own lives. This belief is not much more than a modern superstition, borne out of inability to look without flinching into the "heart of darkness." True, evil is self-contradictory and, if unchecked, is bound to self-destruct. But evildoers are so much "better" as evildoers, the better they are at knowing how to keep making themselves thrive while wrecking havoc on others. No doubt, goodness can and does overcome evil. But the power of evil rests in great part in the fact that the more one does evil the thicker the shield becomes that protects the evil from being overcome by good. The book of Revelation rightly refuses to operate with the belief that all evil will either be

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[30] See Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 74, 90.

overcome by good or self-destruct. It therefore counts with the possibility of divine violence against the persistent and unrepentant evildoer. Those who refuse redemption from violence to love by the means of love will be, of necessity, excluded from the world of love.

How should we understand this possible divine violence? In the context of the whole Christian faith, it is best described as a symbolic portrayal of the final exclusion of everything that refuses to be redeemed by God's suffering love. Will God finally exclude some human beings? Not necessarily. I called the divine "violence" "possible." For it is predicated on human refusal to be made into a loving person and therefore to be admitted into the world of love. Will some people refuse? I hope not—and the Bible along with the best of the Christian tradition has never affirmed with certainty that some will refuse and therefore be excluded.[31]

It is possible (though not necessary) that the coming about of the new creation will require divine violence or exclusion of what is contrary to the world of perfect love. The crucial question for our purposes is whether this possible divine violence at the end of history sanctions actual human violence in the middle of it? The response that resounds throughout the New Testament, including the book of Revelation, is a loud and persistent "No!" Though imitating God is the height of human holiness, there are things which only God may do. One of them is to deploy violence. Christians are manifestly not to gather under the banner of the Rider on the white horse, but to take up their crosses and follow the Crucified. If they were to do otherwise, once again, they would be involved in "thinning" out a "thick" element of faith and making a mischievous use of it. They would be arrogating for themselves what God has reserved only for himself, to transpose the divine action from the end-time to a time in which God explicitly refrains from deploying violence in order to make repentance possible, and, finally, to transmute the possibility of violence into an actuality. A "thick" reading of Christian eschatological convictions will not sanction human violence; to the contrary, it will resist it.

Conclusion

Let me underscore one more time that my point in this lecture was not that the Christian faith has not been used to legitimize violence, or that there are no elements in the Christian faith on which such uses plausibly build. It was rather that neither the character of the Christian faith (its being a religion of a monotheist type) nor some of its most fundamental convictions (such as that God created the world and is engaged in redeeming it) are violence inducing. The Christian faith is *misused* when it is employed to underwrite violence.

How does such misuse happen and how should we prevent it? If we strip Christian convictions of their original and historic cognitive and moral content and reduce faith to a cultural resource endowed with a diffuse aura of the sacred, we are likely to get religiously legitimized and inspired violence in situations of conflict. If we nurture people in historic Christian convictions that are rooted in its sacred texts, we will likely get militants for peace, if anything. This, I think, is a result not only of a careful examination of the inner logic of

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[31] On the important distinction between hope for and belief in the universal salvation see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope That All Men will be Saved?,* trans., David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

Christian convictions; it is also borne by a careful look at actual Christian practice. As R. Scott Appleby has argued in his book *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, on the basis of case studies, contrary to a widespread misconception, religious people play a positive role in the world of human conflicts and contribute to peace not when they "moderate their religion or marginalize their deeply held, vividly symbolized, and often highly particular beliefs," but rather "when they remain religious actors."[32]

In conclusion, let me briefly address the question as to why misconceptions about the violent character of Christian faith abound. I have already given part of the answer: Christians have used and continue to use their faith to legitimize violence they deem necessary to deploy. Misconceptions of the Christian faith mirror widespread misbehavior of Christians; and misbehavior of Christians rests on misconstruals of their own faith, on "thinning" of its "thick" and original elements.[33] But there is more. For one can easily show that the majority of Christians—and the majority of religious folks in general—are non-violent citizens, peace-lovers, peace makers, some even peace activists, and are such precisely for religious reasons. The purveyors of violence who seek religious legitimation are statistically a minority among Christians.

So why is the contrary opinion widespread? Reasons are many. What Avishai Margalit writes about ethnic belonging applies equally well to religion. "It takes one cockroach found in your food to turn the most otherwise delicious meal into a bad experience…It takes 30 to 40 ethnic groups who are fighting one another to make the 1,500 or more significant ethnic groups in the world who live more or less peacefully look bad."[34] One may describe this as *self-inflation of the negative*, the tendency of the evil to loom larger than the comparatively much larger good.

This general tendency is strengthened in the modern world whose information flows are so pervasively dominated by mass media. Consider the following contrast. The Serbian paramilitary who rapes Muslim women with a cross around his neck has made it into the headlines and is immortalized in books on religions violence. Katarina Kruhonja, a medical doctor from Osijek, Croatia, and a recipient of the alternative Nobel prize for her peace initiatives, remains relatively unknown, not to mention the motivation for her work, which is thoroughly religious. As she writes, she became a peace activist when, during the Serbian shelling of Osijek, the re-centering of her own self on the crucified Christ "freed [her] will" and "she was able to resist the power of exclusion and the logic of war."[35] We know little about people like Ms. Kruhonja partly because the success of their work demands low visibility. But our unawareness of them has significantly to do with the character of mass-media communication in a market-driven world. Violence sells, so viewers get to see violence, without qualms about a disproportion between represented and actual violence.

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[32] Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred,* 16.

[33] Michael Sells' account of religion's relation to genocide in Bosnia (*The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996]) rests on an extremely "thin" account of the Christian faith; it functions more like a cultural resource with little connection to its origins than as a living faith committed to the sacred scriptures and the best of the tradition. The "thinning" was, of course, not undertaken by him, but by people he studied.

[34] Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 100.

[35] Personal communication.

The mass media create reality, but they do so by building on the proclivities of viewers. Why does the Serbian paramilitary rapist seem more "interesting" than Ms. Kruhonja? And why are we prone to conclude from the cross he is wearing around his neck that his religious faith is implicated in the acts, whereas it would never occur to us to conclude from the ring on his finger that the institution of marriage is to blame? Religion is more associated with violence than with peace in the public imagination partly because the public is fascinated with violence. We, the peace-loving citizens of nations whose tranquility is secured by effective policing, are insatiable observers of violence. And as voyeurs, we show ourselves as vicarious participants in the very violence we outwardly abhor. We are particularly drawn to religious violence because we have, understandably, a strong interest in exposing hypocrisy, especially of a religious kind. Put the two factors together—inner deployment of violence and delight in exposure—and it looks like we want to hear of religious people's engagement in violence partly because we ourselves are violent but expect them to act otherwise.

If we were more self-critical about our own hidden violent proclivities and more suspicious about the presentation of violence in media, we might observe on the religious landscape not just eruptions of violence but a widespread and steady flow of work that religious people do to make our world into a more peaceful place. Our imagination would then not be captured, for instance, with religion as a motivating force for a dozen or so not particularly religiously zealous terrorists who destroyed the Twin Towers. Instead, we would be impressed with the degree to which religion served as a source of solace and orientation for the majority of Americans in a time of crisis, with the motivation it gave to many of them to help the victims, to protect Muslim co-religionists from stereotyping, and to build bridges between religious cultures estranged on account of violence triggered largely by non-religious motives. It is these anonymous people who acted out of the true spirit of Christian faith.