

The VERBAL & the VIOLENT: CONTINUITY & AMBIGUITY

continuity: words can lead to war/peace

ambiguity: speech is a form of force, & violence speaks

1 Day before yesterday, the Mitchell Commission said to Israel & the PLO "Stop the violence so talks can resume." Yesterday, Israel said (in effect) "Good idea, consider it done on our side": the PLO said (in effect) "Good idea, including the 1948 UN structural violence of imposing the State of Israel on Palestine." Israel's reference was to the intifada's active violence --which the PLO sees as nothing but reactive violence. But the UN had viewed its Jewish/Arab partition of Palestine as a *nonviolent* resolution of the tension between Arab rights emergent from the Jewish-terrorist success in persuading the British to leave, & the Jewish-terrorist conquerors' rights to the whole of the territory that the British Mandate included, especially Palestine. Historically, the PLO has it backwards: instead of giving rights to the Jews, who by violence had come into power over all of Palestine, the UN verbally gave the Arabs full rights, including state sovereignty, over part of Palestine.

The 1948 UN decision split the Arab Palestinians into a **peace** party (some of whose members I talked with in Palestine a decade later) & a **war** party. By assassination & other connivance, the later suppressed the former & today has the field to itself, with intifada its normal suicidal mode of being. The tragedy will continue to deepen as long as the PLO survives & continues to hope for a violent solution.

2 My telling of the above does not moralize non/violence: neither is inherently good or evil, & neither is to be the biblical person's repository of **hope**, which is to be only in God, who will in/directly keep your "gates strong" & your "borders safe" (Ps.147.12.14). By contrast, the CCT columnist this 5.22.01 letter challenges is a moralizer of the verbal against the violent: talk, don't fight or (vis-a-vis the death penalty) kill. His utopian split between the verbal & the violent sorts the saints ("Jesus, Tolstoy, Ganghi, the Rev. King, the 14th Dalai Lama") out from us sinners with our "state ideology and its war theology" & our capital punishment as "official legalized revenge" supported by "half-baked, vague philosophical arguments."

(Is there not violence in the very triumphalistic, denunciatory verbiage of ideologues & dogmatists as they black-&-white obscure, wittingly or not, continuities and ambiguities? I'm loth to agree on anything with Nietzsche; but was he not right that religious types use self-deceptive subjectivity to rationalize their impotence & moralize against power [a tendency in Walter Wink on the "principalities and powers"]? Inwardness, unbiblically overdeveloped, looks down on outwardness, soul on body, soul-force on body-force.)

3 The religions of Abraham (or of "the West") have rich, complex **messianic-martyrial** stories/traditions/doctrines irreducible to utopian antiviolence. Ancient empires maintained the peace (meaning violence-dominance) by decapitating insurgencies, whose leaders thus were transformed from violence threats (i.e., messiahs) to violence victims (i.e., martyrs). Almost without exception, killing the rebel leader ended the rebellion. Supreme exception: the Cross killed death.

Columnist has denied two truths on violence

Propagandists make a big show of having reality on their side, but you can protect yourself against them. Just notice the truths they deny as they press on you what they want you to believe.

In his May 15 column, Sean Gonsalves wants you to believe two truths about violence:

1) It breeds violence. Timothy McVeigh so agonized over the government's unnecessary violence at Ruby Ridge and Waco that, he says, he "snapped."

2) Nonviolence breeds nonviolence. Gandhi's nonviolent resistance to the Raj led to the cessation of British violence in India.

But now for his propagandistic denial of the other two truths:

3) "There's not a single example of violence not leading to more violence," Gonsalves says. That is false in every historical instance of adequate violence. Britain has had no war since 1746, when the English slaughtered the Scots 20 miles deep into Scotland from ocean to sea. Indeed, every execution is an example: The executed have no further opportunity for violence. The third truth is that decisive violence ends violence.

4) Nonviolence sometimes occasions violence. Gandhi was so starry-eyed about his nonviolence that he waved aside the warnings of what would happen if he succeeded in persuading the British to leave. They left, and within a few weeks he had a million corpses on his conscience.

Clear thinking is a friend of justice and peace. Propaganda, no matter how good-willed, is an enemy.

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4 Intellectually, Christianity demands a huge tolerance for **ambiguity**: Jesus' death ends not Jesus but death! Though situationally nonviolent, he was not so philosophically: by God's power, not by our goodness, the heavenly kingdom would come "on earth," & the NT sees that power preemptively at work in Jesus' resurrection (Ro.1.4 ["power...resurrection"; v.16, "gospel...power"]). In this power Jesus has "total authority" (Mt.28.18) as Pantocrator (Gk., "All-powerful"; I counted 156 instances in the OT [LXX, for Heb. "El-Shaddai," the Mountain One preceding "Yahweh"]; 2Sam.[Gk., 2K.]5.10 says David's power burgeoned because the Pantocrator was with him)).

4 Our Christian belief in the ultimate **violent** overthrow of evil is not a betrayal of our Lord's vision but a confirmation of it. He prays to the "Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (Mt.11.25), who's so huge & powerful that while heaven is his throne, earth is his footstool (5.34-35); & we're to pray that as it is above, it will be below (6.10), for he rules both realms (28.18; the same "Lord of heaven & earth" appears in Paul's Athens sermon [Ac.17.22-31], which ends with his appeal to the power of Jesus' resurrection as ratification).

Early this May I took a number of photos straight up into Orthodox Church domes where Paul had preached. Subject of the centering mosaic? Always Jesus as the Pantocrator, in heaven looking down upon earth. When on quiet little Patmos, I remembered that only in the Bible's last book, which was written on that island, does the NT use "Pantocrator" (1.8; 4.8; 21.22; except for a qt. from the OT, 2Cor.6.18). The Eastern Churches' accent on **joy** arises from **power**, the Power of "Christé, anasté!" ("Christ is risen!"). No pale nonviolence here!

5 Now look at this 5.7.01 CCT letter in which I'm responding to a philosopher's abuse of Jesus to preach against capital punishment. By a breathtaking leap of illogic, the columnist has (1) imagined Jesus in a government job (though his whole life is a narrative of estrangement from political power), (2) modernized him into an opponent of the death penalty (in spite of Ro.13 & the Gospel references I here adduce), & (3) separated me (& almost all Christians who've ever lived) from this imagined historical Jesus (he being against the death penalty & we for it).

What's to prevent this columnist from writing his own commandments & producing his own designer Jesus? Nothing except something he doesn't have, viz. respect for the **canon** of Scripture, the full range of how the Bible reveals God's holy love --including Jesus as Resurrectus, Lamb, & Pantocrator.

The canon includes a Jesus story that has "no fixed place" in the Gospel corpus but is put, by the Revised English Bible, after the Gospel of Jn., in which it appears in most Bibles as 7.53-8.11. It's shockingly anarchic (since only the sinless, of whom there are none, are fit to administer punishment) but not anomic (since Jesus refers to the adulteress as sinful). The type of punishment is not in the storyteller's mind, & should not be in the interpreter's: the story weighs on neither side of the capital punishment debate.

The Reform rabbi the columnist quoted should not have made (if he did) the flat statement that "Jews are against capital punishment." It depends on how serious the crime is perceived to be. The supreme court of Israel condemned Adolf Eichmann to death: his part in the Shoah was judged sufficiently serious to render him unworthy of further life. According to some (not me), Timothy McVeigh didn't do anything that serious: execution is itself the most serious crime against humanity. To this position (general among secularists & atheists) I've the theological objection that it absolutizes & so virtually deifies the physical life of the individual human being. The Enlightenment, not the Bible, is the source of this radical humanism.

Capital punishment is not unchristian

I In a recent column, Dan McCullough wondered how any Christian could be for the death penalty. Jesus, he said, wouldn't be an executioner.

As a philosopher, Dan should know that this is an instance of the fallacy of the excluded middle. The speculation as to what Jesus would do were he in government service -- as an executioner or in any other office -- should not obscure what he actually said: He was not critical of government's right to execute, but used the fear of capital punishment as an incentive to fear God (Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:5).

Further, Rabbi Gary Mazo's statement that "Jews are against capital punishment" -- quoted in the same column -- requires some nuancing. The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion says that biblical capital crimes should be read as "an indication of the seriousness of a sin," and Judaism so hedges against the death penalty as to make its use extremely unlikely. The state of Israel has the death penalty only for genocide and wartime treason.

Absolutists against capital punishment claim that no crime is serious enough to justify it. Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma bombing was not all that serious.

We Christians are divided as to whether the Oklahoma bombing was all that serious. Those of us who think it was don't appreciate being called unchristian.

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