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The Tipping Point to Peace

ON FAITH - WASHINGTON POST - WILLIS ELLIOTT

On this anniversary of 9/11, this is what I have to say to religious extremists who believe that violence advances their religion's cause.

1. Because I, like you, am strongly religious, and strongly at odds with much that passes as acceptable behavior in my society and in the wider world, I feel a kinship with you. If we were to have a conversation, we would probably both learn something useful. This is an invitation.

2. What I would *not* learn from you—what I would not listen to you on—is how-where-when to use violence in advancing my cause. The Bible and the Qur'an preach persuasion for the advance of religion, and condemn violence as a means of promoting one's religion or demoting the religion of another. In religion, violence is not power; it is the unwitting admission of rhetorical weakness.

3. I would listen in hope of hearing your deepest voice, the voice of your hurting and caring and loving and hoping. And if I could help you hear *my* deepest voice, we just might hearken together to a third Voice—the Voice always calling us to hear that we are brothers and have work to do together for the glory of God and the good of humanity and of the good earth.

4. Finally, as a Christian, I would want to remind you that Jesus chose to suffer violence rather than to become violent—and he did not lose out for his choice. His was not the love of power but the power of love, love (he said) even for enemies. Violence—though it may assuage one's thirst for vengeance—is a shame rather than an honor to one's religion, and a danger to one's destiny. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us not to expect God's forgiveness unless we are ourselves forgiving; we have offended God, who will forgive us only if we forgive those who have offended us. (Gospel of Matthew, 6:12-14) To believe that violence against the innocent will earn you paradise—that blasphemous notion of murderers imagining themselves to be martyrs is repugnant both to Islam and to Christianity.

5. While I must participate in the forces resisting your violence, I pray that your confidence in the sword of violence will diminish, and your conviction of the power of the word will increase. If you can manage that reversal to the tipping point, the potential for peace on earth will be less remote.

BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | SEPTEMBER 13, 2007; 5:24 AM ETSAVE & SHARE:



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Comments

Please report offensive comments below.

Dear Rev Willis -

Thanks for your comments and responses. After reading through this thread, it seems that you've adopted what PZ Myers has called "The Courtiers Reply" (here: http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the_courtiers_reply.php)

Off to other threads.

POSTED BY: MR MARK | SEPTEMBER 17, 2007 11:59 AM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

This conundrum CAN be resolved... quickly... easily... economically... once and for all.

My simple solution requires only that for one whole month, every newspaper in the free world devote its front page to cartoons ridiculing Allah (peace on him) and Mohammed (peace on him, too). By the end of that time, all of Islam will have self-destructed in a paroxysm of snits, hissy-fits and terminal apoplexy. WARNING: This will not be pretty... but the world will be a much better place for it.

My only regret in this is that I cannot think of a similarly uncomplicated, cost-effective and efficient stratagem to dismantle Christianity... but, oh well... one thing at a time. One only does what one can.

POSTED BY: DUCKPHUP | SEPTEMBER 15, 2007 1:44 PM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

And exactly what part of 'love your neighbor as yourself' are you following?

And as long as there is an Earth, ground for you to walk on, air for you breathe, water for you to drink and fire for you to purify anything with, seasons to change every year, the Goddess will always be. Believe what you like, but don't try to tell me otherwise.

Thank you for your witness, which I printed & will read parts of (without "Priver"!) in teaching at church tomorrow.

PLEASE don't. My point in having this discussion is not to have it held up as some sort of example as 'see what this person is missing'. My purpose "is for my self education and to try to correct misunderstandings about who we are and what we do and where we're coming from. I am NOT giving consent to this, and am very angry that you would even consider this. I am aware that this is a public forum, but NOT one that I have never given permission to be shared with a congregation of which I am not a part. It is an insult, and I ask you to stop. I do not represent all Pagans. I represent only myself, and do NOT endorse anything being put out in such a fashion. I only got into this discussion as a way to learn ways to try to work together to accomplish real things. only to be told what I 'believe'.

I actually think Christianity could be about so much more than spreading the "good" news.
Like working to make things better for people with less than you.

"If you believed that some world-transforming, humanity-delivering Good News had been given to you to share, would you refuse to share it?"

Yes, especially if the people on the receiving end are not interested. If someone wants to ask me what I learn, that's different. And that's what people in this country are objecting to.

"Your Goddess is so placid! Look at the pre-Bible (or present-day Hindu) goddesses; not a pretty sight."

This appears to be a contradiction in terms. Which is it, placid or not?

"Your say "I don't hate the Bible" & then refer approvingly to "Harris/Dawkins/Hitchens"—world-class Bible haters who remind me of grumps who are happy only when they come upon something to complain about."

I admire them for the guts to stand up and say that they don't fall in with the majority of the country. They see what 'faithiness' has brought in terms of the conflicts we are in today and are presenting an alternative point of view, which should not be put down as 'grumpy old men'. They deserve to be listened to. I never said I agreed with everything they said, or even in the polemic manner in which they addressed them. Sometimes the way to get people's attention, especially these days is to shout back. It's not right but it's what the effect of being preached to for years has wrought. In that, I can't blame them. When you cannot actually provide a good argument for something, you resort to name calling. Infantile.

"One of my earned doctorates is from a school whose first five presidents were professional Bible-teachers, & that school's faculty has earned more Nobel Prizes than the faculty of any other school."

That has nothing to do with the Bible and to do with the good works (hopefully) of those people you mentioned. And why parade your degree around? Again, you speak to incredible ego.

"The truth is that you hate the Bible but are unaware of your hatred."

I don't know if I hate something? That's certainly news to me. How arrogant to think you can tell someone what they 'SHOULD' think, experience or feel. My point in mentioning what I have so far (and you have absolutely no knowledge of what my experiences have been, since I keep them to myself) is to show that there is a lot of commonality in what you think i "should" feel/experience and what I "have" experienced. I just interpret it differently. I just think the Divine is bigger, and more awesome than anything that can be found in any book.

I would expect that you would get permission to use someone's words for a sermon or something. You DO NOT have my permission to use my words in a service of which I am not a part.

"I'm not trying to "make that determination" for you."

Actually, you already have. Sound and fury, signifying, nothing.

MR MARK: Thank you for saying why you've been talking about Jesus' one act of violence: you think I said he was absolutely non-violent! That is so obviously false that you must have misread me. "Violence" intends destruction: Jesus' act was prophetic (particularly Isaianic) demonstration—as evidenced by the fact that it was a solo act: he didn't involve his disciples, as would have been natural had he intended destruction. Indeed, Jesus act was so far from the usual meaning of "violent" that its questionable whether it should be put in the semantic domain of "violence."

PRIVER: Thank you for your witness, which I printed & will read parts of (without "Priver"!) in teaching at church tomorrow. / No, I didn't tell you what I "think" you experience." I have been telling you what I think you SHOULD experience, what the Goddess has blinded you from seeing and experiencing. (You object to my use of mythological language & in the same post you yourself use it—freeing me to continue to use it.) This blindness appear in your asking "why the need" for me to witness to you what I believe. If you believed that some world-transforming, humanity-delivering Good News had been given to you to share, would you refuse to share it? I believe that God, Creator of the universe, loves humanity & in the Lord Jesus Christ has come to us & made provision for our deliverance from sin & death. That's the Bible, & the Christian gospel, in one sentence. INSIDE the Bible & the Church, that makes the best sense in & beyond the world; OUTSIDE (i.e., to outsiders to Bible & Church), its the worst nonsense—contagious disease, poison, vice, white noise. / Of course "pre-Bible" mythology "cannot be overlooked." I look at it, & thank God it's been transcended. Have YOU really looked at it? Your Goddess is so

placid! Look at the pre-Bible (or present-day Hindu) goddesses; not a pretty sight. / You say the “‘historical battle’ is only spoken of by those who believe in the bible”: 9/11 is the historical battle come crashing down on America, & this horror was not committed by Bible-believers. / Your say “I don’t hate the Bible” & then refer approvingly to “Harris/Dawkins/Hitchens”—world-class Bible haters who remind me of grumps who are happy only when they come upon something to complain about. The truth is that you hate the Bible but are unaware of your hatred. The Bible is grounded in history from Genesis 12 onward, yet you claim its no more historical than Aesop. The Bible preaches love & freedom, yet you see its deity as “limit[ing] the Divine to an angry, jealous Deity who would rather kill his own ‘child’ than make a difference” in peoples’ lives: I cannot imagine a more hateful, vicious attack on God. The reverse of the truth! One of my earned doctorates is from a school whose first five presidents were professional Bible-teachers, & that school’s faculty has earned more Nobel Prizes than the faculty of any other school. The Bible is for freedom! “The truth shall make you free” is carved in stone at the entrance of the divinity school of that school, the University of Chicago. Your ignorance of the Bible is shockingly deep. I suggest you try reading a little each day & not getting hung up when you come across something to complain about: keep reading for the parts you can sing about in your longing (try Psalm 84; then the Gospels). / You ask why I need to witness to you? It is what you accuse me of believing, viz. that “I know what God wants.” From your disbelief in God’s existence (“God” meaning deity as revealed in & through the Bible), you conclude that my witness to you is an ego-trip, “an ego claim.” My claim is that my ego is captive to Christ, whose servant I am in witnessing to the Good News that God not only is but speaks (beginning with Genesis 1.3), calls (again, Genesis 12), & is present with those who open to him (the last sentence of the Gospel of Matthew; the sentence before that says God’s “name” is Father, Son, & Holy Spirit). / As for threatening people “with fire,” that is apocalyptic language for the truth that human beings who are confronted by truth & turn away are wandering off into error, unreality, loss of the peace & joy & communion & community God offers--& the loss is as time-long as the turning away lasts: the (metaphorical-apocalyptic) fire burns, & what is burned up is unrecoverable (or, in the shorthand of apocalyptic, hell is eternal, the loss is everlasting). So the Bible preaches to us not only the Good News of God’s loving offer of forgiveness in Christ but also the bad news of hell: two reasons why I “need” to witness this to you (& you need to hear God’s word through the Bible’s words). Of course you are correct that it’s “up to the individual to decide whether or not they are ‘separated from God’.” I’m not trying to “make that determination” for you. But I must tell you that your attachment to your (nonexistent) Goddess is—in Biblical light—a delusional impediment to your becoming attached to the One who says “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Gospel of John 14.6).

TERRA GAZELLE: You ask “how can anyone” believe in the Biblical God? I hope you read what I’ve written to Privet (immediately above). I’m pleased to see that you’re myth-knowledgeable, & thank you for trying to inform me (though I taught mythology, & you did not add to my information). As for anger, did you not feel your anger in writing bitterly about Biblical monotheism, that the Bible’s Yahweh is “just one of several Canaanite deities”?

MR MARK: On hell, please read what I said to Priver (above). Jesus’ use of hell was not innovative; he was using common apocalyptic speech. / On OT/NT, you do not understand the Christian doctrine of Scripture (e.g., our teaching that what is implicit in the Old is explicit in the New). Of course the Hebrew Scriptures are Jewish! Otherwise, I wouldn’t have taught them in Hebrew (including to rabbis)! And the Bible flows forward: logic cannot demand that the Jews accept any Christian literature.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT, PANELIST | SEPTEMBER 15, 2007 8:18 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Rev Willis writes:

"Nothing in the NT comes close to the OT story of God’s drowning everybody except his favorite family (Genesis 7)."

In sheer numbers of deaths, no. But the point that Hitchens is making is that those OT deaths didn't involve eternal suffering in some afterlife. As Hitchens says, it took Jesus to bring that particularly repugnant idea to the party. If we believe Jesus, the horror of the multiple deaths in the OT is compounded because all of those people are also now suffering in hell for eternity, while pre-Jesus, their deaths meant only extermination from this world and no afterlife. What's better, no afterlife at all, or an afterlife of eternal suffering?

"Your notion that Old Testament passages “apply only to Israel and the Jews” is a misunderstanding of the Bible. If it were true, the Christian Bible would consist only of the New Testament."

Bad logic. Let me put it this way - for it NOT to be true, the Jews would need to embrace the NT along with the OT. As the Jews do not embrace the NT, they need not believe that the passage you cited in Daniel applies to anyone but them, because without the NT, there is no mission to or inclusion of the gentiles in the Yahweh-based faith. In fact, the mission to the gentiles is a Pauline doctrine, not a doctrine of Christ.

POSTED BY: MR MARK | SEPTEMBER 14, 2007 2:00 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

A world banking system was being set up here... a superstate controlled by international bankers, acting together to enslave the world for their own pleasure. The Fed has usurped the government. --Louis McFadden

There is something behind the throne greater than the King himself. --Sir William Pitt, House of Lords 1770

The world is governed by very different personages from what is imagined by those who are not behind the scenes. --Benjamin Disraeli, English Statesman 1844

The real truth of the matter is that a financial element in the large centers has owned the government since the days of Andrew Jackson.
--Franklin D. Roosevelt, U.S. President 1933

Our great industrial nation is controlled by its system of credit. Our system of credit is privately concentrated. The growth of the nation, therefore, and all our activities are in the hands of a few men. Who necessarily, by the very reason of their own limitations, chill and check and destroy genuine economic freedom. --Woodrow Wilson

POSTED BY: PEACETROLL | SEPTEMBER 14, 2007 6:37 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Rev. Elliot,

You insist that there is a battle going on between God and Goddess because of what man does in their name. You use a fight over power between two factions as proof that your God of anger and hate, did not like Baal and Asherah(Astarte). And we do know that Jezebel was murdered by those who followed that old testament god.

Praise Qadashu, Lady of of the Stars of Heaven, Mistress of All the Gods,
May She grant life, welfare, prosperity, and health.
Mayest thou grant that I behold thy beauty daily.

Have you read The Malleus Maleficarum ? Do you believe in what it says? This was the truth of what was done to human beings by the church, because of what your book said and some power hungry, ego driven men that had a fear of women.
So should we be defined by Sprenger and Kramer? Should we be defined by you who have about the same amount of ignorance...the only difference is we have laws where you can not strike the match.

You seem to think that we do not believe in the Christian god..we do not believe in the angry, jealous god of hell and brimstone...what I don't understand is how can anyone?

You do not understand myth. Do you know about the Descent of the Goddess? A myth that is 6000 years old...and only one of many of the same myth from all cultures and times. Your Jesus' descent can be counted among another of the same myth.

Mithra born of a virgin in a cave on the Winter Solstice...Apollo called Christus.
Odin hung on a tree in sacrifice to knowledge. My God sacrifices himself for his people...Eostre comes yearly bringing renewal.

You think your mythologies are so unique? Your God is real but all other's false?

Goddess is. She is all there is... you see your god as a being separate from all else. You put him in a box and he is given your reflection. Are you an angry person...are you jealous? Do you get off on thinking your god is real and all the folks that revere other gods...Gods that the first humans called out to... what makes you think that your god is not just another mountain god? Why not just another fire god?Just another God of the desert? Yahweh just one of several Cannanite dieties. Just one more Baal...How about EI?

Are you so sure that your god is not created with the ingredients of ancient Cannanite gods?

terra

POSTED BY: TERRA GAZELLE | SEPTEMBER 14, 2007 1:50 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

In my view, it's actually quite easy. This planet, in all her bounty, plants, animals, elements, us, exist. Therefore, Goddess is.

See, the thing about the bible is.. Pagans don't follow it. It's a book I don't use. And yes, I have read it. Therefore, the so called 'historical battle' that you enjoy referring to is only spoken of by those who believe in the bible. As was said on another thread, 'not my book, not my problem'.

We look at the mythologies that existed pre-Bible, that at some point have probably migrated to the area, evolved and coalesced into those pages. The similarities of the biblical to the stories of old are really striking, and cannot be overlooked.

Oh, and keep in mind- I don't hate the Bible either. I just don't follow it or think there's any more historical record in it then there is in.. say, Aesop. Some good ideas, in both, but ultimately lacking in the words for what limits the Divine to an angry, jealous Deity who would rather kill his own 'child' than to actually make a difference in the lives of those whom he wants to adore him. I actually think it's disrespectful to what that God could be about to limit him in such a manner.

Besides, why wouldn't it be up to the individual to decide whether or not they're 'separated from God?' What gives you the right to make that determination for someone that you do not know? As Goddess for me is everywhere, I am never ever separated from her. I touch anything in this world, I feel her presence. It bothers me to hear someone who doesn't know anything about me tell me what they 'think' I

experience. What I have wondered though, is why the need to do this? Especially about something as personal as one's belief or non belief in the Divine?

I think this is especially important because I think this is what Harris/Dawkins/Hitchens et al are protesting. The insistence that 'God' knows best and "I" am going to tell them what they are to feel or think or believe. Because "I" know what "God" wants. And if they don't agree, "I'm" going to threaten them with fire. Or maybe not just threaten. Maybe it won't just be verbal this time.

Your choice of the language that you use reflects upon your insistence on division, whatever your intentions may be. Why wouldn't I read it as an ego claim? Why not just say what you mean? Your three "levels" that you claim to write in/on seem to simply be there to obfuscate to the point of division, and then you wonder why you feel misunderstood? As a 'teacher' you should know better than that. And your students have a right to expect better from you.. as do your readers.

Believe it or not, there is common ground. It's about what you DO.

Namaste.

POSTED BY: PRIVER | SEPTEMBER 13, 2007 7:22 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Jesus ran some cattle, doves and dishonorable people out of God's house. This whole event was simply all about honoring his Father and fulfilling prophecy. Of course, for those who are against, it is a stumbling block. But as for me I say, "What son would not run the scum bags out of his father's house?" They are all very lucky to not have been vaporized. Nobody got hurt but God was honored in his Holy house and there is a ritual cleaning prior to His own offering. This had to happen to prepare the way for His sacrifice. It is also a prophesy for the future as the temple mount will once again cleansed when the Lord returns.

POSTED BY: TIM | SEPTEMBER 13, 2007 7:06 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dear Rev Willis -

Yes, John puts the violence at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, but Matthew places it squarely in Holy Week, at the end of his ministry. While we can thank John for putting a whip in Jesus' hands for this violent act (doesn't happen in Matthew), I'd have to ask you why it makes any difference when the act happened unless you are using John to refute my idea that Jesus was saying "Bring 'em on" to the religious leaders to hasten his demise. The question was whether or not Jesus ever performed an act of violence, You said no, the Bible says yes.

I know that the Bible can't agree on when these events happened (what's new?), but I think we can both agree that placing the act in Holy Week certainly adds drama to the proceedings of the week that can't be matched in an act that transpired 3 years earlier when Jesus was living a fairly tranquil "endless summer" kind of existence.

If I was the minister rather than you, I'd go with Matthew getting the timing right for the simple fact that John isn't a synoptic Gospel while Mark, Matthew and Luke are.

The rest of your comments are interpretive, and I grant you your own interpretation. Let's not forget that this discussion started when you averred that Jesus never performed a violent act in his life. That now debunked, it seems that you are trying to put the best spin on it. That's your right, but it's pretty apparent that you're spinning.

POSTED BY: MR MARK | SEPTEMBER 13, 2007 4:51 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Be assured, all commenters on my columns, that I read carefully everything you write; & be aware that I cannot comment on all your comments; & be accepting of the fact that sometimes it will seem to you that I have not read what you have written.

PRIVER: I have stated my awareness of "the old" POLYTHEISTIC paganism of divine couples, but you have not given me any evidence that you are aware of the historical MONOTHEISTIC mutual antagonism of God and the Goddess. For a 9th-century BC/BCE instance, read the standoff between Elijah (the prophet representing Israel's deity, YHWH [Yahweh], "God") and Jezebel's priests, whom she brought with her into Israel to replace Israel's God with the God+Goddess of Tyre: First Kings 18:17-19:10. / I have no "vested interest in keeping people apart." I do have a vested interest in helping people who are apart from God to realize that they are apart from God and that this apartness is serious & unnecessary. Of course this witness is divisive! Jezebel tried to kill Elijah for it, and Jesus was killed for it. As for mutual non-existence of the competing deities, it's a plain fact that I believe the Goddess does not exist, and another plain fact is that Pagans believe that God (the Bible's God, the One-and-Only God, Creator and Redeemer) does not exist. / Of course some writers are "more powerful" than I! My purpose in describing my style and its provenance was in hope of being better understood; I was shocked at your reading into it an ego-claim. I've never imagined that I am a good writer.

MR. MARK: Your take on Jesus' "cleansing the temple" is that it was a dramatic suicide to advance his cause; that's one take: I gave another. You seem unaware that this single violent act of Jesus occurs, in one Gospel, not at the end but at the beginning of his ministry (Gospel of John, chapter 2).

Further, by his quotation from a prophet to explain his action, he made clear that he was not substituting force for persuasion but was executing a limited demonstration against the commercialization of worship. / You cannot rightly confine "apocalyptic" to the Bible. It's a literary genre requiring, for its understanding, a knowledge of its literature in and outside of the Bible. In the Bible, it begins with Daniel (12:2). One feature of apocalyptic is "intensification by infinite extension": consequences of good/bad behavior are "everlasting" or "eternal"—examples, hell as "suffering" or "shame and contempt." As for your allegation that God encouraged slaughter of enemies,

apparently you did not read (above, immediately before Priver's comment) my lecture on Joshua. / Christopher Hitchin's chapter "How the NT Exceeds the Evil of the OT" is an instance of his cheap, attention-grabbing excess. Nothing in the NT comes close to the OT story of God's drowning everybody except his favorite family (Genesis 7). / Your notion that Old Testament passages "apply only to Israel and the Jews" is a misunderstanding of the Bible. If it were true, the Christian Bible would consist only of the New Testament. / Your afterlife comments range within the sphere of the Bible's rich range, but do not speak to my column on this week's question

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT, PANELIST | SEPTEMBER 13, 2007 4:16 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Violence is the "unwitting admission of rhetorical weakness." So is repression.

Islam is an obsolete system for governing. Those who try to force Islam on us unwittingly know this as secular, capitalistic, democracies are a clearly superior choice, unless you just happen to have a lot of oil. Oil is the economic equalizer and without this, Islam would be confined and contained as it was until oil was exploited in the 1950's. Now oil money funds the expansion of Islam and the activities of the terrorists.

Let's acknowledge the legacy of the great prophet: government and religion as one with religion having the upper hand; death penalties for apostasy; the horrific penalties against women for imagined crimes against family and husband; the Muslim concept of jizyah, dhimmitude, and other quaint realities which are seldom talked about; the mutilations for minor law infractions; and the murders condoned and ordered by clerics over cartoons. This is a system that needs to be put into the grave of history. It really angers these guys to have to admit that they have an inferior / obsolete culture and way of governing; hence, they will defend it to the death rather than modernize and admit the Quran, the Shariah and the Hadith are flawed.

The violence is just an expression of their anger over rhetorical weakness and has little to do with anything else. As they claim Allah as the most high and Islam superior they look around and see that it is really an inflexible system meant for the middle ages and does not pass the test of time. I guess I'd be bent out of shape, too.

POSTED BY: TIM | SEPTEMBER 13, 2007 1:14 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Rev Willis -

One further point: when you cite passage from the OT, surely you realize that these passages apply only to Israel and the Jews, not the gentiles? These are "First Covenant" passages. When Daniel refers to the "many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth," he is referring to the Jews and nobody else. The OT holds no afterlife for anybody except the Jews, so, Apocalyptic or not, hell holds no fear for those who are not Jews.

Still, it bears repeating that both Judaism and Xianity extol the belief that the dead remain dead and in their graves until "the last trumpet." Xians attending funerals today who state that "Little Johnny is in heaven now with his Lord" don't know their Bible. If Little Johnny is a Xian, he's moldering in his grave until that last trumpet sounds, and who knows when that will be? Friday, if we're lucky.

This Biblical concept gives added weight to Jesus' words on the cross when he told the criminal hanging next to him, "TODAY you will be with me in Paradise" (though one wonders whether or not the thief took that 3-day detour into hell with Jesus or went straight to heaven without passing "GO" and without collecting the \$200). Here, Jesus spares the criminal from any time at all moldering in an unmarked grave. His soul is being sent straight to heaven, just as Elijah got whisked up in that holy chariot. Without the concept of believers moldering in their graves, the special dispensation given to the thief on the cross is no big deal, is it?

Then again, if one reads Einstein, one can believe that time is fluid, and that at the moment of one's death one is immediately whisked forward (or backwards or sideways??) in time to the moment of that last trumpet sounding, and that any time spent grave moldering may be a matter of milliseconds rather than millenia.

But that's Einstein, not the Bible.

Back at ya.

POSTED BY: MR MARK | SEPTEMBER 12, 2007 3:55 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Rev Willis -

Thanks you for responding to my post and for admitting that contrary to what you wrote, Jesus did, in fact, resort to violence on occasion.

The rest of your comments on this fact are your opinion/interpretation and don't change the basic fact that Jesus *did* resort to violence. Indeed, I could easily posit that Jesus' violent acts in the temple were committed to ENSURE "advantage for his movement" by further vexing the religious leaders and ensuring (or at the least, encouraging) his eventual crucifixion at their hands.

Wouldn't you admit that Jesus' violence in the temple was at least a gauntlet thrown down to 1) fulfill prophecy, and 2) to encourage his arrest and execution? After all, if Jesus wanted to avoid crucifixion, he could have avoided Jerusalem. Once in Jerusalem, he could have kept a low profile. Let's not forget that Jesus' violent acts in the Temple came AFTER he rode into Jerusalem on a colt, knowing full well that he was entering Jerusalem to die. Seems to me he was rather loading the gun.

You speak of the "Apocalyptic" in response to my statement that "a hell of eternal suffering was not in the Bible before Jesus floated the idea." You'll notice that I qualified that with, "in the Bible." You cite Daniel 12:2 as an example, yet you fail to quote the verse, which in the KJV reads: "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

If you're saying that "shame & contempt" are the equivalent of a "hell of eternal suffering," then have at it. My point, if I might clarify, was that when the OT god went about his business of having Israel slaughter his opponents (including the women and children whenever possible), he did NOT say that said opponents would be consigned to eternal hell fire. No, their existence (on Earth AND in some afterlife) simply ended, god was glorified, Bob's your uncle and we're off to carry out god's next massacre.

But I'm not the best advocate to argue this point. I direct you to Chapter 8 in Christopher Hitchens latest book, *God Is Not Great*, to read "How The NT Exceeds the Evil of the OT" for a well- and cogently argued exposition on the subject.

But on the subject of the "Apocalyptic," I would ask you this: outside of the Book of Revelation, how much of the Bible falls into this category, and how do any of the Apocalyptic books that were NOT INCLUDED in the Bible have any bearing at all on the discussion at hand (seeing as how I modified my original statement with the words, "in the Bible"?).

Thanks again for your response. I wish more columnists felt the urge or obligation to do so.

POSTED BY: MR MARK | SEPTEMBER 12, 2007 3:06 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

"Between Christianity & Paganism, the mythological way to put it (though you object!) is that God & the Goddess (in the metaphorical sense) hate each other to such an extent that they even deny each other's existence."

Evidently you didn't read what we were saying all along.
More proof that you don't get it- so stop trying to define us.

Read some world mythology sometime. The OLD stuff.
Variations of the Goddess/God marriage stories abound almost everywhere.

Your eagerness to jump automatically to the 'war/hate' metaphor says that you may have a vested interest in keeping people apart. Dividing and 'conquering', if you will. How is that supposed to foster understanding? The language you use is the basis people with your words have used to hurt us and others. Don't tell us you're words aren't violent.

And how is where you live supposed to 'generate and foster more colorful and emotionally powerful writing?' Wow. There's so much ego in that statement that it frightens me. I know people who used to live in an area that would never be thought of as 'rough and tumble' who did more to actively get people out of bad (horrifyingly bad) situations that can speak truth to everyone, as storytellers, far more powerfully than you.

POSTED BY: PRIVER | SEPTEMBER 12, 2007 2:39 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

NORRIE HOYT:

No difference between legal & Biblical hermeneutics on your point: When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense. But if you read the below (a lecture I'm soon to give, chiefly on God's violence in the military reading of Joshua), it may help you to see that the plain sense sometimes doesn't make good sense! Scholars see three legitimate & illuminating readings of the Israel-origins stories: military, immigration, & social-revolutionary.

Grace and peace--
Willis Elliott

JOSHUA as a people-flow story Willis E. Elliott / First Bap.Ch., Kearney NE / 9.16.07

A The Bible is sacred literature which, when opened in anticipation of encountering the Holy One, becomes "The Holy Bible." In a death-camp barracks, the Jews considered the essence of the Word (as on a thrown-out sheet of the Talmud—a sheet that had been a sandwich-wrapper) superior to their own existence. The canonical principle is that the whole of the biblical canon (all the items that passed the "measure" for inclusion as Scripture) is capable of transmitting revelation-inspiration, God's words-communicating with humanity.

B Underlying the canonical principle is the literary-historical principle. It is two-stage.

FIRST STAGE: God, "Maker of heaven & earth," gave some people (the basic story-tellers) silent signals to "Write that down!"—others (the redactors), to "Rewrite that!"—still others (the book-composers), to "Include only the latest layer of the story!" or "Include the layers!" We Bible-believers rejoice that the Lord has lead us to believe that this whole Bible-production process was, as each/all scripture-texts is/are, theopneustos ("God-breathed," "inspired by God").

SECOND STAGE: Why? Why the Bible? Because God wants his people to remember-by-reading the stories & praises of his "mighty works," lest we forget who he is & who we are. The Holy Spirit, who hovered over the chaos in creation (Gn.1.2) & over the producers of the Bible, witnesses within us as we read the Bible (Calvin called it *testimonium spiritus internum*, "the Spirit's internal witness"). God wants us to read the past (especially Scripture), through which then he can guide us to live aright in the present & toward the future.

C The continuity-discontinuity principle. The Bible's continuity is that it has the same subject or theme throughout, viz. GOD (Christianly put as "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" [Heb.13.8 NRSV]). Throughout the Bible, the Spirit is a steady wind

(physically, “spirit” in Hebrew/Greek/English means “wind”) blowing the reader toward the full-come Kingdom of God. Its discontinuities are far less important. Written over many centuries, it’s an archive of progressive layers of p-tie-p (two p’s tied together): peoples/times/ideas/events/places. Even anybody’s single book is not like a loaf of bread, equally nutritious in all its parts. An archive is a stack of books on the same subject but without total agreement on viewpoint: expect differences & even oppositions. In the Bible, e.g., God says don’t eat pig & Jesus says it’s OK—so who’s right?

Well, if you understand what the Bible is (i.e., what is its literary genre), you recognize that as an ignorant question. If you say Jesus should have stuck with kosher, you’re guilty of the genetic fallacy, constricting a later stage by an earlier. To orthodox Muslims, the Qur’an is literally God’s word & (as a loaf of bread) equally nutritious & true in all its parts; but it’s false, & a betrayal of Scripture, to claim the Bible to be (& defend it as) a perfect, errorless book without internal contradictions or external deficiencies. (And it is unfair to exaggerate the contradictions & deficiencies, of both of which there are few.)

D That difference on pig-eating is a dramatic way of introducing the christological principle. In Mt.5.17-20, Jesus has come “not to abolish” anything in the Bible (his “the law and the prophets”) “but to fulfill” Scripture: not even the smallest marks in the Hebrew text “will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” Same idea, L.16.17. But in M.7.19, Jesus abolished kosher, “declared all food clean” (RSV, NRSV; CEV, “Jesus meant that all foods were fit to eat”—“kosher” is Hebrew for “fit,” as stated in Lev.11 & Deut.14.3-21 [Torah portions which he did indeed abolish on his own authority, for he—as we Christians see it—is the Lord of the Law]). The christological principle is that the OT is to be read with Jesus’ eyes, (more modestly put) in the light of Christ; & the whole NT spells this out: fundamentally: the NT is the OT peshered (re-conceived, re-understood) in light of the Christ Event (Jesus’ incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, parousia [presence now & second coming]).

E So how are we to read JOSHUA in the light of Christ (in Luther’s words, what here “drives Christ [treibum christum])?” One way to get at this is by asking questions:

Who are God’s people? You can tell in restaurants because God’s people bow their heads for silent grace—all the other diners eat like dogs, they just dive in.:) Before Jesus, God’s people were visible in what they wouldn’t eat; Jesus cancelled that element in Jewish ID (identity, tribal self-definition), implicitly calling for some redefinition of “God’s people.” But from Gn.12 forward, it’s clear that God intended —by his call/promises/covenant—the maintenance of his people’s tribal-ethnic ID from Abraham to Jesus.

At our close last Sunday, I indicated this process of ID-maintenance in God’s names at the close of the Hexateuch (the Bible’s first six books), Josh.23-24. A dozen times in chap.23, God’s name (in old Joshua’s mouth) is “the LORD your God.” In 24.2, Joshua identifies the God he’s preaching as “the LORD [all capital letters for Yahweh, God’s personal name announced to Moses in Ex.3], the God of Israel”—the name by which outsiders would speak of Israel’s deity, in contrast to “other gods” (same verse). The land is now at peace; & Joshua & his family, worshiping only the LORD (24.15), are a witness & model to the not-yet-entirely-monotheistic Israelites (verses 14 & 23).

What was Israel’s response to Joshua’s challenge? 24.21: “We will serve the LORD.” Now notice the change in God’s title, now that the people have owned their divine Owner (vs.24): “The LORD our God we will serve.”

How did God’s people come to live in Canaan, “the promised land”? Well, it was not a military conquest on their own: “not by your sword or by your bow” (14.12). Canaan was God’s gift to Israel (23.16; 24.13). And how did God manage that? As a warrior (23.3,10; 24.8,10,12). But specifically & historically, how? Three possibilities, each with some scholarly support. (The two most prominent scholars in the development of this spread of views are George E. Mendenhall [a shirttail relative of Loree’s], THE TENTH GENERATION: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition [Johns Hopkins U./73-74]; & Norman K. Gottwald [for three years, my teaching assistant, & student papers’ corrector, in Hebrew & Greek], THE HEBREW BIBLE: A Socio-Literary Introduction [Fortress/85].) Now, the THREE VIEWS:

(a) THE CONQUEST MODEL (NG.261-9)

“Israel seized Canaan in a massive unified military conquest.” Josh.1-12

(Like scores of historically known people-flows-over-people.)

“A highly problematic view,” with poor archeological support. (E.g., the still visible collapsed walls of Jericho slid down a few centuries before Joshua got there. 234: The ark of the covenant was carried around “the ruined [= ‘captured’] city of Jericho.” 266: In the late 13th c., Jericho was “no more than a small unwallled settlement,” “Ai was not occupied,” and there are “no Late Bronze Age remains” at Gibeon. The storytellers, “consolidating and simplifying the [military] traditions,” “attribute[d] the victories to the archetypal conqueror Joshua.” “The assembly of tribes he gathered at Shechem was more truly Joshua’s historical work than the various battles claimed for him.” There were many other destroyers in successive layers of Canaan, including inter-city & intra-city warfare.

(b) THE IMMIGRATION MODEL (NG.269-272)

269: “a long, complicated process of peaceful infiltration.” The patriarchs lived “for the most part in harmony with the resident population,” “Canaanite cities became Israelite clans” (Josh.12.17,24; 17.2-3), & there was “open” intermarriage with Canaanites (Gn.38).

(c) THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION MODEL (ng.272-6, with references to the Mendenhall book & to NG’s THE TRIBES OF YAHWEH)

Hebrew nomads became farmers amid Canaanite cities, whose aristocrats “laid heavy burdens” on the surrounding inhabitants—which led to rebellions (273): “the religion of Yahweh became the socioreligious ideology and [egalitarian, democratic] organizational framework that won over these rebellious peoples and helped to forge them into an effective revolutionary movement that expelled the tributary mode of production from the highlands and substituted a system of free peasant agriculture within a loose tribal design.” 274: Lower-class Canaanites “threw off the Baal religion” & “their own clan gods” & “accept[ed] Yahweh,” gathering with the Israelites at Shechem (Josh.24). This third model best fits the archeological evidence.

276. The second and third models accommodate “the belief that the traditions of early Israel were frequently compressed, inflated, transposed, and conflated in the process of slow accumulation toward their finished status as a literary etiology of united Israel.” 288. “The name ‘Israel’ referred not merely to a religious community but to a sovereign retribalizing society concerned with fundamental issues of survival and the good life....Canaanites-become-Israelites.” Further, these two models have the further advantage of defending the Bible against the charge of extreme violence (though in Gn.7 God kills everybody except Noah & his family).

How are we to understand God's speeches in Joshua? (1) They are true in that they show the LORD is in charge of history (as well as nature). (2) They are true in that God did indeed see Israel through to surviving & thriving, as he had promised Abraham. (3) They fit the action, interacting conversationally with God's chosen people. (4) Some of them are genocidal commands (e.g., 10.40) which cannot pass the christological test: Jesus, who said yes to pig-eating after God (in the OT) had said no, would certainly say no to genocide even though God (in the OT) said yes (i.e., is said to have said yes).

Now, brothers & sisters, you've just been through a short course in "biblical hermeneutics," using Joshua (which we've just finished studying these Sundays) as the text.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT, PANELIST | SEPTEMBER 12, 2007 1:23 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dr. Elliott,

I'm sorry you can't join us in Vermont - we'd love to see you here in person.

I realize I'm just a kid in age compared with you, and certainly not at all learned or even that familiar with the the Judaic-Christian scriptures, but I still like to throw my two cents into the religious discussion pot.

As a lawyer, I'd invoke the "plain meaning rule" of statutory construction when reading the quoted passages from Deuteronomy. When the text says "destroy them and their religious symbols", I just follow the literal words and don't see any other way to reasonably interpret them.

Be that as it may, if religious people want to soften the words' plain meaning, that's fine with me.

By the way, I consider myself to not be an atheist. I've never denied the possibility that a being exists who could reasonably be called "God".

I call myself an "agnostic Buddhist sympathizer". I think that Buddhist ethics are the best ever devised, particularly because they treat animals and humans as having the same inner nature and being equally deserving of compassionate treatment.

I stand in awe of the Buddhist psychology of the human mind, devised over two thousand years ago. It is still valid and useful, though not, of course, the same thing as modern psychobiology, which may actually be less useful to an individual seeking to understand his mental functioning than the Buddhist theory.

Beyond those beliefs, I am agnostic as to traditional Buddhist teachings, such as the Bardo, reincarnation, karma, the seven planes of existence, enlightenment, and so on. I think that such things may exist but I don't positively believe in them.

Of course there are, and have been, horrible, violent Buddhists and Buddhist regimes. But, unlike the case of violent Abrahamic individuals and regimes, I doubt that a Buddhist scripture can be found that incites or justifies the violence. At least I've never seen one.

I admire your activities and wish you the best.

POSTED BY: NORRIE HOYT | SEPTEMBER 12, 2007 9:14 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

As always, thanks to all who try to improve my understanding & behavior. A few comments on some of your comments:

PAGANPLACE: You are so right that "Words can be much like a sword." Words can lead to physical violence but can themselves be metaphorical violence ("violent metaphors" being the instance you mention). And I thank you for your phrase (new to me), violent language as "deniable violence." Something to think more about.

Here are a few things I'd like YOU to think about:

(1) The word "violence" is itself a weapon, I weapon unfairly used against me. I may be accused of "violent" language when my language could more accurately be called engaging, combative, sometimes even pugnacious. But violence aims to destroy: I aim to stir up, stimulate to thinking & rethinking. (2) "Consider the source" is a wise word to all hearers/readers. When you read me, you're reading someone who for decades had offices on Manhattan & participated in the rough & tumble of life on the world's most feisty island. From such a person you should expect more colorful & emotionally powerful writing. But I thank you for (implicitly) reminding me that not all "On Faith" readers are as tough as New Yorkers! (3) Yes, the 9/11ers & I believe religion is "some kind of war." But--& here I differ radically from them--religion-wars need not be "violent" (in the physical, nonmetaphorical sense) SWORD-wars; they can be logomachies (WORD-wars). My column today should convince anybody that I am, in religion, not only nonviolent but ANTIviolent. (4) The world makes no progress toward peaceable interreligious-intercultural conversation when participants point to the violence in the histories of one another's religion (actually cultures, religion being the root of cultures). In addition to violence, all traditions have peaceable stories we could & should learn from one another & feed on: peace is food, violence is poison. (5) Some of you Pagans play the game of "Less Violent Than Thou." What you have to say for what you believe is in the competitive marketplace of ideas, & "war" (in the metaphorical sense) is the strongest term for perceiving what is--and always has been--going on among religions. Between Christianity & Paganism, the mythological way to put it (though you object!) is that God & the Goddess (in the metaphorical sense) hate each other to such an extent that they even deny each other's existence. (6) I admit it: Since I speak/write on three levels--the literal-physical, the metaphorical, & the mythological--I'm not easy to read, & am easy to disagree with (may I say, violently?).

MR. MARK: Jesus' saw his life-work as non-violent witness to God's loving-forgiving care for humanity, & he resisted his disciples occasional urges to violence: "Put up your sword," he said.

Yes, he once used violence in the prophetic-symbolic mode, but it was not to achieve any advantage for his movement: indeed, he knew very well that it would be disadvantageous. As for "a hell of eternal suffering," you are incorrect that "it was not in the Bible before Jesus floated the idea." The idea is in the literary genre called "apocalyptic," & it had been around for several centuries before Jesus used it. It's highly poetic, not to be understood literally. Apocalyptic paints only in primary colors & revels in hyperbole. It's really true that our fundamental life-decisions have unending ("everlasting," "eternal") consequences, & apocalyptic projects these onto a post-mortem screen (for example, Daniel 12:2). As for Revelation, the apocalypse with which the Bible closes, we Christians believe that (1) its message is true, that Jesus Christ is Lord not just of the church but--as the future will reveal--of the future, & that (2) as apocalyptic, Revelation cannot be read literally (though it so often is, as though its intention were to "reveal" the details of the future). Finally, you are correct in stating the historical fact that sometimes successful terrorists "become statesmen." (When it happens, historians change "terrorists" into "freedom fighters," what they called themselves before they became successful.)

NORRIE HOYT: (How I'd love to be able to accept your invitation to dinner! But my 90th birthday is coming up, & I live more than 1,700 miles from you. Now to your comment:) Before a lecture (a few days from now) on how to read God's alleged violence in the Bible, I will read to the audience your latest post to me: it's such a clear example, from an honorable 76-year-old atheist lawyer, of a literal reading of Judaism's origin stories. Learned Jews do not so read them, & we Christians read the Hebrew Scriptures (which we call the "Old Testament") through Jesus' eyes (& the extension thereof, the "New Testament"). As for my 9/11-anniversary column (on which you're commenting), you see its nonviolence as more Buddhist than Christian. I could respond by telling you about Buddhist violence! But it is more Christian of me merely to point to the nonviolent spirit of JESUS as the sphere within which my column proposes conversation with violent religionists.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT, PANELIST | SEPTEMBER 12, 2007 1:03 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

I mean, I think *his* bumpersticker is:

"No Jesus, No Peace."

You can't make peace with threats like that.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 11:06 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

I think, Norrie, the good Reverend should maybe look at the old Catholic bumpersticker:

If you want peace
Then work for Justice.

I'm not so sure he knows how to apply that just yet.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 11:03 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

R.T.STALLGISS:

Right you are, & thanks!
Soon after your reading, the editor (at my complaint) added my (underlined!) word "peace."

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT, PANELIST | SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 9:15 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dr. Elliott writes:

"The Bible and the Qur'an preach persuasion for the advance of religion, and condemn violence as a means of promoting one's religion or demoting the religion of another. In religion, violence is not power; it is the unwitting admission of rhetorical weakness."

And yet Yahweh demanded of the Hebrews that when they entered the lands of their neighbors they must:

"... defeat them, then utterly destroy them,
make no covenant with them, and show no favor to them."

And also:

"you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire."

From Deuteronomy 7:1-5.

Dr. Elliott: Do you still stand by what you wrote?

If you want a belief system or religion that agrees with what you wrote, perhaps you should consider Buddhism.

Regards.

POSTED BY: NORRIE HOYT | SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 6:05 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

I mean, don't you get it, Reverend?

The people who did this thing thought religion was some kind of war.

As you do.

Don't you F'n get it?

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 5:08 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

I think, Mr. Mark, the Reverend resorts to violent metaphors like 'sword' and 'minefield' ...because he cannot see the effects of what he says and does as those subject to the repercussions do.

Safely-insulated from how that's expressed, maybe he is, but isn't that a problem.

The people who speak so rarely have to hold someone's thumb on after someone knifed them, ...or clean up the blood.

Christians say: "What you do to the least of these, you do to me,"

And Muslims say, "If you hurt one innocent, it's as if you have killed the world."

Pagans hear, 'B***h was asking for it' and, 'They needed killin'

And we see what you do.

Breathe the concrete dust of your righteousness, even.

Wake up.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 5:02 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Finally, a column by Rev Willis that I could actually read. Who woulda thunk it?

The good Rev says that, "Jesus chose to suffer violence rather than to become violent." Was there no violence in his turning over the tables of the money changers in the temple whilst putting his fellow human beings to the whip? Try that in a Wal*Mart and let's see how the law views the act.

More violence from gentle Jesus, meek & mild: bringing a sword, dividing families, the idea of a hell of eternal suffering (not in the Bible before Jesus floated the idea) and the slaughter of millions in Revelations for "his glory." Nice.

Rev Willis also writes: "While I must participate in the forces resisting your violence, I pray that your confidence in the sword of violence will diminish, and your conviction of the power of the word will increase."

Easy to make such statements when the same sword of violence has already vouchsafed the citadels of one's own religion. Yesterday's terrorists become today's statesmen - the eternal Ponzi scheme works only for those at the top of religion's terrorist pyramid.

I think the world has had enough of religion's peace, for it is the peace of the tomb.

POSTED BY: MR MARK | SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 3:43 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

The Reverend does say this:

"5. While I must participate in the forces resisting your violence, I pray that your confidence in the sword of violence will diminish, and your conviction of the power of the word will increase. If you can manage that reversal to the tipping point, the potential for peace on earth will be less remote."

I say that when he stops using 'the word' *as deniable violence,* he might really get that.

Basically, I'd say the same of him.

ripping S off the word Sword and sticking it on varsity sweater.

Peace.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 3:02 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Maybe he don't know what fills in the blank just yet, Richmond, but he's been talking to Pagans. Maybe he'll get there. :)

Ha, Ok, sorry for the dig. :)

Maybe he'll even come to figure that words are much like a sword. Don't matter where you *say* you stuck it to whose kidney your bad technique ended up puncturing. :)

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 2:56 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

"the potential for on earth will be less remote"

am I missing a word here?

the potential for _____ on earth will be less remote

-RT

POSTED BY: RICHMOND T. STALLGISS | SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 11:02 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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