NOT PEACE BUT A SWORD

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Jeremy Young, *The Violence of God and the War on Terror* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007). 978 0 232 52666 0, pp. xii + 217, £12.95.

Ignatius Jesudasan, *Roots of Religious Violence: A Critique of Ethnic Metaphors* (Delhi: Media House, 2007). 978 8174 952653, pp. 175, $6.95

Christianity and Peace

NEAR THE START OF HIS FAREWELL discourse in the Gospel of St John, Jesus declares: 'Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you' (14:27).[1] Yet he states just as confidently in chapter 10 of Matthew's Gospel, 'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth; it is not peace I have come to bring, but a sword' (Matthew 10:34).[2] Few today will be surprised to find such seeming contradictions within scripture. A consideration of the different theologies of the two evangelists, or of the contexts in which the passages in question occur, would no doubt go a long way towards resolving what seems at first to be a dilemma. I highlight these texts, though, not to invite such scriptural study, but to point to what I take to be a generally accepted truth. If the two quotations are taken at face value, most Christians are going to feel more comfortable with the first than with the second.

[1] Jerusalem Bible translation.
[2] Jerusalem Bible translation.

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Our instinct is, I suggest, that the living of a good Christian life ought to lead to peaceful co-existence, at least with those engaged in a similar quest, maybe with other religious believers, and perhaps even with all 'people of good will' (the phrase some Vatican documents use for the widest category of those whom they address). No doubt there will be disagreements, on matters of faith as much as in other areas, and these may indeed be deep-rooted and serious, but they must surely be capable of being settled amicably. Indeed it is possible to give a plausible (if admittedly superficial) reading of modern history in which the post-Reformation 'Wars of Religion' between different Christian denominations in Europe and beyond give way to the ecumenical movement; and the often violent attack on other religions which accompanied Western imperial expansion is gradually being succeeded by inter-religious dialogue.

A closer look at the evidence, though, suggests that this is at best too sweeping a generalisation, if not an outlook that borders on naive optimism. Those responsible for the deaths of the El Salvador martyrs, both the men who actually carried out the shootings and those who, more remotely, issued the orders, almost certainly regarded themselves as Christians,[3] and may even have thought of themselves as doing God's work in defending their country from the spread of godless communism. The last decade has seen a growth in forms of religion, often labelled 'fundamentalist' by those who do not share their outlook, which have seemingly little interest in dialogue with other approaches. This is as true of branches of politically influential Christianity as it is of sections of Islam or Hinduism. Martyrs are as likely to be killed by other people of faith, even of the 'same' faith, as by those who violently reject altogether the idea of God or the transcendent.

Two recent books try to analyze the roots of the kinds of violence that are provoked and sustained by religion. Although they take very different approaches they are united in maintaining that there are fundamental strands in the concept of religious faith as presently understood that inevitably lead it to bring division, and violent division at that, rather than peace.

[3] This assumption is based on the make-up of Salvadorean society, and not on any direct knowledge of the beliefs of any of the individuals themselves.

The Violence of God

Jeremy Young is an Anglican priest and a trained psychotherapist who specialises in work with families. In *The Violence of God and the War on Terror* his approach is to look at the character of God as it is portrayed in the biblical narrative taken as a whole. This should not, however, be mistaken for a naive or uncritical approach to these texts. He recognises that the Jewish and Christian scriptures are made up of a great variety of writings, composed by different authors with differing outlooks over several centuries, and subject to complex editing processes. Nevertheless he argues that within the Bible as a whole a dominant picture emerges, and that it is one which has often been overlooked. It is an image of God as a violent, manipulative and, by contemporary standards at least, abusive patriarch. In Young's view this theme is to be found not only in the Hebrew scriptures, the Christian Old Testament, but also in large parts of the New Testament as well.

It is not difficult to discover evidence that can be used to support his claim: God's draconian punishment of Adam and Eve for a seemingly minor infraction of an arbitrary command;[4] God urging mass slaughter to clear the Promised Land of its native inhabitants in favour

The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, *by John Martin*

[4] Genesis 3: 16–19.

The Great Day of His Wrath, *by John Martin*

of the Chosen People;[5] the repeated invasions by other nations of that same land, which are interpreted by the scriptural redactor usually known as the Deuteronomic Historian as God's punishment of the people's unfaithfulness;[6] and the relish with which the destruction of the whole earth is described in the Book of Revelation.[7] All of these are indisputably part of the biblical record, and lend themselves to the kind of interpretation that Young offers.

Furthermore Young goes beyond the idea of a merely violent God to demonstrate that, in dealings with God's people, the biblical God shows the same kind of manipulative behaviour as is to be found in certain kinds of dysfunctional human relationship. God convinces the people that it is their own fault that they are being chastised; if they would only be the kind of people whom God wants them to be, no such punishment would be necessary. God is inordinately jealous of the people having other relationships, and is constantly suspicious that they are defecting to the worship of 'other gods'. God accepts no

[5] For example Deuteronomy 20: 16–18; Joshua 6: 17–21; 8: 1–2, 22–25.
[6] For example 2 Kings 23: 36 – 24: 4; 2 Chronicles 21: 8–15.
[7] Revelation 16: 1–21.

responsibility for the difficulties that exist between God and God's people, putting the blame wholly on their infidelity.

Two kinds of 'defence' are typically offered by those who want to preserve a different kind of image, that of a benevolent and caring God. The first argues that what is outlined above represents only part of the scriptural testimony, and needs to be supplemented (and may perhaps be outweighed) by accounts that portray a God who shows a tender, loving, empathetic and even suffering concern for all that has been created. The second argues that this notion of God is a human (mis-)construction, based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the divine nature which has subsequently, over time, been nuanced and corrected.

Young addresses both of these objections to his thesis. In answer to the first, he invites the reader to look with fresh eyes at the evidence within scripture itself. He cites Raymund Schwager,[8] who estimates that there are more than 1,700 verses in the Hebrew Bible alone where God acts with violence, either directly or by inciting the people. Schwager's claim is that anyone who came to these texts for the first time would immediately recognise that the violence of God is a, if not the, major theme within them. He puts forward two reasons for the fact that Christians and Jews do not normally react in this way. The first is that they have become desensitised by over-exposure to the texts, as, it is claimed, children become inured to violence if they see too many violent films. The second reason is that, over the centuries, complex interpretations have been developed within both faiths to explain away the evidence of God's violence. There is some strength to his arguments here. At the very least, he shows that there is a case to answer, and that the weight of scriptural material that points in this direction cannot easily be dismissed.

His rebuttal of the second defence—that the notion of a violent God is a human misunderstanding, subject to correction—is perhaps less convincing, partly because he outlines a number of complementary reactions to the idea rather than a single convincing argument. In part he holds that, for those who believe that scripture is in some sense divinely inspired, the basis on which such a widespread theme of

[8] See Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible* (London: Gracewing, 2000).

biblical witness can simply be rejected is unclear. Elsewhere he maintains that he does not want to say that the God of Christians and of Jews (and of Muslims too, although, recognising the limits of his knowledge, he devotes comparatively little space to Islam) is a violent patriarch, but that this is the way in which he (and the pronoun is apposite here) has traditionally been understood. This has then led his followers to accept and make use of violence as a coercive tool in their dealings with each other and with other peoples.

If God is believed savagely to punish those who do not keep his (many and seemingly convoluted) commands, it is unsurprising that God's followers, acting according to their own understanding of themselves as his agents, react in the same way. 'Unbelievers' or 'infidels' will be subject to the most severe chastisement, and Young interprets the current 'war on terror', led by the US Christian right, in this way. But those who claim to follow the same God, yet in ways of which these followers do not approve, are to be similarly punished, using whatever degree of violence is necessary, according to the mandate of God. And where Christians are not in a position of power, such an understanding of their faith places little value on dialogue or accommodation. If uncompromising proclamation of the truth and denunciation of alternative views are what God expects then martyrdom is a not wholly unexpected outcome. The story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, illustrated on the cover of this edition of *The Way*, provides a good example of this.[9]

Simile and Metaphor

Ignatius Jesudasan, an Indian Jesuit social scientist, has written a different kind of book. In *Roots of Religious Violence* he brings together ideas from sociology and linguistic theory to argue for a key distinction in religious language, that between simile and metaphor. Such language almost inevitably uses images since, with the possible exception of some varieties of mystical experience, it is recognised that we have no unmediated access to God. But such images can be employed in two ways. In simile, the religious object is *compared* with something more familiar. Many of the parables of Jesus work in this

[9] See Acts 6: 7–60.

way; the kingdom of God (itself an image) is like the growth of a seed,[10] or the discovery of a hidden treasure.[11] In Jesudasan's view the use of simile in this way is inviting and uncoercive. It leaves room to acknowledge that there are aspects of religious experience that the simile itself does not capture. There is clearly much about the kingdom of God that is unlike a seed or a buried treasure; and using images in this way openly invites further exploration and development. Specifically, when applied to God, similes do not allow me to think that I have captured the essence of God in my definition.

Images, though, may also be metaphorical. Crucially, here the religious object is not so much compared with something better known as *identified* with it. God *is* a God of battles:[12] a war leader. We *are* God's chosen people.[13] If simile invites exploration, metaphor (at least as employed in religious language) attempts to compel assent. Jesudasan believes that, over time, religious metaphors lose their status as images and come instead to be regarded as truths. The believer must then either give assent to them or risk expulsion from the community. Religions, which he links with ethnic groupings,[14] form around particular clusters of metaphors, and new religions come into being when breakaway groups evolve their own distinctive metaphorical world-views. Such competing systems are clearly incompatible, may often be in competition with one another, and tend, when they meet, towards violent confrontation.

Over time, religious metaphors lose their status as images

Here, then, martyrdom can be seen as a result of a failure to recognise the truth of the religious language that is employed by someone from outside my own community, because I cling too closely to the metaphorical system used to present my own religious experience. Someone who uses different metaphors is regarded as wrong, and needs to be corrected, by force if necessary. The necessity comes from the desire to defend my own community and its understanding from a pernicious error. Since my faith, enshrined in its

[10] Mark 4: 30–32.
[11] Matthew 13: 44. Matthew speaks of the 'kingdom of heaven', a euphemism to avoid having to use the sacred name.
[12] A title of God derived from verses such as 2 Chronicles 32: 8 and Psalm 46: 7, and used to translate the term 'YHWH Sabaoth', otherwise 'Lord of Hosts'.
[13] Deuteronomy 14: 2.
[14] This emphasis may have much to do with the fact that he writes from an Indian perspective.

metaphors, is that which is most important in my life, I am willing to kill or be killed to defend it. By contrast the more open understanding that the use of simile represents enables me to enter into fruitful dialogue with others, through which our different similes may be explored and seen, perhaps, to be complementary, and may then generate further images and similes, and a new and shared understanding. The ARCIC statements on concepts which were formerly seen as insurmountable barriers between Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism are a good example of this process at work.[15]

It is difficult for the non-specialist to evaluate ideas such as those Jesudasan outlines here. Most people are unaccustomed to regarding their behaviour and that of their communities as greatly constrained and shaped by the language they employ. In religious settings, it is likely that few, even of those who are aware of the difference between simile and metaphor, will have given a great deal of thought to which of them they are using in any given instance of theological reflection or communal worship. Yet it is certainly true that much religious violence has been occasioned by disagreement among Christians about what precisely, for example, Jesus meant when he said at his Last Supper 'This [bread] is my body', 'This [wine] is my blood'. Is this a simile, a metaphor, or a statement of literal truth? And it is also the case that at different times in their history believers in each of the three Abrahamic faiths have regarded those belonging to the other two (let alone people who subscribe to other faiths, or none) as no more than godless infidels, and treated them accordingly.

Violence and the Salvadorean Martyrs

How might Young and Jesudasan understand that specific violence that led to the deaths of the eight martyrs of El Salvador? Neither comments directly upon it, so such analysis is necessarily speculative. Nevertheless, Young might start from the insight that those responsible for the deaths had, long before that time, accepted the concept of a God who routinely uses violence to maintain the social order that God desires. This allowed them to act in the same way against those whom

[15] See e.g. ARCIC (Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission) statements on the Eucharist (1972), on ministry (1973), on authority in the Church (1977), and on the doctrine of salvation (1986).

they saw as undermining that order. The witness of the martyrs, on this understanding, is to a different idea of both who God is and, more specifically, how God works to bring about God's intentions.[16] The martyrs' God does not operate by violent coercion or by semi-concealed manipulation, even on behalf of the poor whose side God takes. Rather, this God seeks to help the oppressed to become free agents, and works through those who share this vision. In this way there is a continuity between the Salvadorean martyrdoms and such 'classical' martyrdoms as those of the Roman persecutions of the first few Christian centuries. In each case believers in a seemingly powerful, state-sponsored, 'false' God are attacking those who speak and act in the name of a new, subversive notion of a God who takes a stand on behalf of the politically powerless.

Jesudasan's emphasis on language and its uses might suggest viewing the martyrs' deaths as the result of the struggle between two groups with opposing world-views and vocabularies. One believed in ideas such as state security, the United States' 'backyard' in Central and South American countries,[17] the need to prevent a communist 'domino effect' taking over these countries, and terrorist infiltration. The other had its own slogans, which were often criticized as being overly influenced by Marxist thought and concepts: the 'preferential option for the poor', a 'faith that does justice', conscientisation and empowerment of the oppressed. The civil war compelled people to make their choice between these two camps; and the eight who died were the victims of the choice that they made. The terms of engagement allowed little room for a non-violent comparison of ideas and images, let alone for the conversion of either side or both to a new and common viewpoint.

Beyond the Violence of God

Without exception, the major world religions would all claim to be promoters of peace at the individual, group, societal and even global level. Yet it is equally undeniable that much of the violence in the

[16] Liberation theology coined the term 'orthopraxy' for this sense of how God and the Christian disciples work, by contrast with the 'orthodoxy' of correct belief.
[17] The idea that the United States had the right to intervene directly in the political arrangements of its near neighbours in order to ensure its own security.

world is prompted in part by differences in faith perspective. The analyses of Young and Jesudasan offer complementary views of why this might be so, and some indications of how such violent religious impulses might be overcome. The deaths of the eight Salvadorean martyrs two decades ago can be discussed in the light of these analyses. The result is not an attempt to occupy the middle ground between the perspectives of those who died and those responsible for their deaths. It is rather a challenge to move beyond allegiance to an image of a God who achieves God's ends through violence, and beyond a narrow concentration on, and defence of, the images of God with which one feels most familiar. It is an openness to dialogue with those who understand God and the ways in which God operates in the world very differently. To do this, surely, is to carry forward the work of the martyrs themselves, and thus to offer them a fitting memorial.

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