

Religion and Terror

Religion has a long relationship with terror. The fear of the Lord, after all, is the beginning of wisdom and the experience of the *mysterium tremendum* is a well-attested theme in religious literature of many traditions.

However, not all terror is induced by an encounter with God. The human race has its own demonic capacity for creating terror. Sadly, religion has often abetted this capacity and found itself a willing partner in human evil.

In light of religion's complicity in violence and terror, it is not an idle pastime to ask whether the world's religious communities can respond constructively to human terror and violence. Can they respond in ways that promote peace and well-being? Can their members truly become peace-makers?

Of course, it is not only religion that has generated terror and violence; political communities likewise have a history of terror-inducing behavior. Consequently, we can ask of them the same question we ask of religious communities, namely whether they can respond constructively to terror and violence. Do national governments have the moral resources needed to bring about peace?

In their contributions to this volume, Hans Küng and Walter Wink address these questions in the course of setting forth theological ideas that are simultaneously simple to state and seemingly difficult to practice. The simplicity of the ideas means that they can be set forth briefly: A better world is possible.

- This better world can be attained if we, individually and collectively, undergo conversion—a change of thinking and behavior.
- Conversion especially summons us to find alternatives to violence.
- Non-violent solutions to human political problems are the only practical solutions.

In spite of the fact that non-violent solutions to political problems are eminently practical—they are, in fact, the only solutions that can actually bring about a better world—putting these practical non-violent solutions into practice is daunting. It is tempting to attribute this daunting character to original sin but there are more proximate reasons that deserve attention.

One reason, adduced by Wink, is Christians' confusions about the moral demands of the gospel. There is perplexity enough when these demands are considered from a hermeneutical perspective. Everyone with even a cursory knowledge of the New Testament knows that Jesus commended us not to resist evil people and to turn the other cheek when struck. Our problem is that all we have are the bare words of the gospel and not the social context in which they were uttered. This is a recipe for hermeneutical mischief, as it encourages us to load our assumptions onto the words. The result, Wink argues, is that Jesus' words routinely incite us to passivity toward evil. In the face of evil, we tend to believe that our duty is to suffer its harm. We intuitively know that this passivity is a poor strategy for overcoming evil, so we turn to a more familiar strategy with proven results—violence. The alternative that Wink proposes is that we see Jesus as commanding an active (although non-violent) resistance to evil. Evil, then, is not something to be tolerated but is instead something to be overcome and eliminated. Wink thus argues that the gospels show us how to respond constructively to terror and violence in a way that breaks the cycle of retaliation.

But the challenge of interpreting gospel sayings is not the only reason for the difficulty of finding and implementing non-violent solutions to political problems. Another reason is that Christians today (perhaps especially Protestants in America) are collectively a bit confused about their role in politics and their relation to the nation. In the optimistic

days of the 19th century, many Protestants—conservative and liberal—in America agreed that their efforts at evangelism and social reform were preparing the way for the millennial kingdom of God. History and human deeds within history, in other words, were continuous with the work of God and with the eschatological kingdom. However, in the 20th century an increasingly apocalyptic eschatology seized the imagination of conservative Protestants, with the result that they increasingly regarded history and human effort as *dis*continuous with the kingdom of God. Politics was seen as at best useless, for nothing that humans could do would alter the eschatological timetable that God had set. In the meantime, theologically liberal Protestants, now enjoying leadership of many of the largest denominations, turned politics into a major preoccupation, especially in the reform-minded 1960s and 1970s. But, with America turning more conservative in the 1980s, liberal Christians found themselves seriously out of step with America's political direction. To add to their woes, by the 1990s worriers emerged among the liberals, crying out that the liberal denominations had sold their souls to the nation and its agendas. The church's only hope, they declared, was to distinguish the church from the nation-state and its politics and from the nation's people and their morality. The church must be true to its own ethos and heritage. It must be a culture within a culture. While liberals were thus engaged in internecine debate, conservatives, now called evangelicals, were by the 1980s wondering why they were missing out on the fun of politics and came to believe that politics could be an instrument of God's righteousness. Consequently, they threw themselves into local and national politics with great gusto, convinced that America's political problems could be fixed by correcting its moral failures and that moral failures could be remedied by political means. However, the collapse of the Moral Majority has thrown cold water on that party.

So, in the first decade of the 21st century, Protestants find themselves in a state of confusion about their relation to politics and the nation. In this post-Christian context, where both evangelicals and liberals feel that the aims of the nation are at variance with the aims of the church, one thing Christians could use is a vision of the nation and its politics that is simultaneously realistic about the moral failings of nations and hopeful about the prospects for nations undergoing genuine conversion. Hans Küng proposes the outlines of such a vision in his contribution. In the morally ambivalent history of international politics, Küng finds hope in the power of ideas to change politics, especially as these ideas find concrete expression in international treaties and agreements. Although discouraged by the policies of the current American president, he believes that a better world, characterized by reconciliation, understanding, and cooperation, is appearing. The way toward this better world is, Küng argues, peace among the religions. The religious impulse is vital for an improved world because the major religious traditions affirm exactly what is required: basic moral injunctions such as the golden rule and moral ideals about the way in which human beings ought to be treated.

Wink's and Küng's essays offer a vision of religion liberated from violence. But the vision is more than the possibility of a freedom from violence. It is also the vision of religion freed to be communities of peace-makers. In this way religion can be true to its calling of serving God and God's purposes. Of course, this requires this requires religious communities to pursue peace not only in the world but also among their members and between themselves. In other words, they will have to set a good example of peacefulness in order to be effective at peace-making.

The vision that Wink and Küng set forth implies as well a healthy attitude toward political involvement by religious people. Protestants in America perpetually face a two-fold

temptation: either to identify the kingdom of God with a political party (and thus to believe in a maximum of continuity between the kingdom and human political action) or to abandon political involvement (and thus to believe in a maximum of discontinuity between the kingdom and human political action). What is needed is a view of politics as the “art of the possible” (Küng). With this view, we can commit ourselves wholeheartedly and in good faith to the political process in the hope of achieving concrete good. At the same time, we will recognize that politics is the art of what is *humanly* possible and will recognize that some problems can be solved only by God’s grace. This is not to deny that grace is effective within the political process; however, as Wink and Küng argue, the reduction of violence and terror in the world requires conversion—the change of thoughts, attitudes and behaviors. Although political processes can curb violence, only God’s grace can change the heart. But it is also true that the conversion of the heart is insufficient to solve the problem of terror and violence. This is because humans are social and political beings and because we need political structures to give shape to our moral lives. The religious and moral impulse that happens in conversion requires nurturing in and by social communities.

Wink’s and Küng’s essays call upon us who dwell in religious communities to turn our backs on whatever violence lies in our past and to take up the life of active peace-making. For Wink, this is the clear implication of the gospel, when it is properly understood. For Küng, it is required if our world is to become a humane world in which everyone is treated with dignity and in which peace reigns. These are surely worthy considerations. Although politics cannot bring about God’s kingdom, Wink and Küng help us remember that it can actualize anticipations of that kingdom. Accordingly, politics can be a holy vocation for those whose calling is to be peace-makers.