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A THEOLOGY OF PEACE

Despite a perception that religions lend legitimacy to violence, the world's faiths have been instrumental in providing a moral framework for justice and share a common, unifying vision of peace.

On the one hand, religious people have a lot to say about peace. Most would say that achieving a peaceful and just world is central to their religion's teachings. Most if not all scriptures contain texts that support the claim that religions embrace peace, not war or conflict. Religious leaders often make statements in support of nonviolent resolution of disputes during crises, confrontations, or hostilities. Some of the best-known advocates of nonviolent protest, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and the fourteenth Dalai Lama, were or are men of profound religious faith.

On the other hand, many religions have had violent histories. Some have spread violently, and scriptures can be read as sanctioning war. God can be depicted, based on scriptures, as a violent deity. Religious people are perceived to be involved in any number of conflicts around the world. Religion is popularly regarded as having caused most wars in human history and as continuing to fuel conflict in too many situations. The case in favor of religion's peacemaking role is far from proved. Some significant thinkers suggest that humanity would be well advised to grow up and leave religion behind as a relic of childhood, a game that adults should not play. Scriptures and religious history do have a case to answer. A "theology of peace" would begin to answer this case against religion by removing some of the misconceptions about the nature of God and the human-divine relationship, and by suggesting how the very serious problem of violent scriptures can be tackled.[1]

1. The ideas set out in this article will be expanded in my forthcoming book *In Search of Solutions: The Problem of Religion and Conflict*, to be published by Equinox in September 2007.

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Faith seeking understanding

First, what do we mean by a theology of peace? Theology can be usefully defined as "faith seeking understanding." Theology originates from belief in God, or a suprahuman ultimate Reality that created the universe and continues to sustain life. God can also be described as a "noncontingent being."

A young Lebanese boy with his mother under stress from continuous air raids in Beirut in 2006. Conflicts rooted in religious rivalries have undermined peacebuilding role of religions.

HAITHAM MOUSSAWI / RIIN

That is, whereas everything else in the universe depends on God for its existence, God's existence is totally self-sustaining. Hindus tend to see the cosmos as emanating from the Absolute, rather than as a distinct reality created in time, but it still depends on the Absolute for its existence. Literally, theology is knowledge (*logos*) about God (*theos*), so a basic question is where does this knowledge come from, and how can its truthfulness be evaluated?

Theology has traditionally recognized two sources of knowledge. First, it recognizes scriptures, which God reveals or communicates to humanity. Second, it recognizes God's presence within creation, speaking through nature as well as through women and men of great spiritual depth and achievement. If the first source is identified with revelation, the second is often identified with reason. Revelation can be understood as the drawing back of the curtain on God. However, it is God, not people, who draws back the curtain, allowing us to glimpse enough of His reality to understand His nature but not to see the whole of God. Human minds simply cannot grasp the total reality of who God is.

The debate over the relationship between revelation and reason, and which takes priority, has engaged thinkers from many religious traditions. Almost all theological thought among the world's religions gives priority to revelation. Theology is usually understood as a confessional discipline, that is, it assumes that something called "faith" exists, that there is a God, and that its role is to shed more light on God's purposes for humanity. In this sense it does not claim neutrality vis-à-vis religion, unlike sociologists or psychologists of religion, who hold no particular view on whether any divine reality stands behind religion or whether religion contains truths. They merely study how religion functions in society or within the human psyche. Theologians may offer arguments in support of the rationality of belief in God, but they are primarily interested in enabling those who already have a religious faith to develop their understanding of that faith and in discerning God's purposes for their lives and the whole of humanity.

Practical theology

Much theology can appear to have little to do with the realities, challenges, joys, disappointments, pain, hopes, and fears of real life, to be asking questions for which nobody is seeking answers. What we call practical or sometimes applied theology, however, tries to deal with issues and questions that confront people of faith in the real world. The first type of theology involves scholars in the academy talking to other scholars; the second involves bridging the gap between the academy and those believers who sit in pews or pray in mosques and temples. A theology of peace could be abstract, idealistic, and academic, or it could be practical, applied, and realistic. In my view, a theology of peace needs to be practical if it is to address the actual challenges and issues that peacemakers encounter.

A theology of peace cannot afford, if it is to be of any real use, to be too pious, asserting without proof, for example, religion's utility in peacemaking. Religious people who ignore the accusation that religion is a major cause of war risk their own voices being ignored unless they can answer this charge. Having analyzed conflicts in which religion has an obvious presence—specifically, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Israel-Palestine—I contend that religion did not cause any of these conflicts but has been recruited to fuel continued hostility. All three cases have rival nationalisms and injustice at their root. However, even if religion is not a major or direct cause of conflict, it still has a case to answer if it is so easily recruited to fuel hatred and violence.

What follows is an attempt to articulate a theology of peace that explains why, even if religions may have sanctioned violence in the past—indeed, even if God sanctioned violence—religion should not do so in the future. The evidence of scripture and reason argues that a unified world of peace with justice is the end goal of religion. A divine providence dependent on flawed human beings may have countenanced war as a necessary evil, but voices of faith call upon our consciences to fix upon the goal of peace, which today is within reach, but only through renouncing violence as a means to that end.

Religion here refers not to a single religion, such as to my own Christian religion, but rather to the religious aspirations of humanity. Increasingly, there is a demand to extend theology beyond the narrow boundaries of a single religion, to an engagement with the religious heritage of all people. If world peace involves recognition of the worth and dignity and right to freedom and justice of all people, a theology of peace needs to address all of humanity. Only a theology that is inclusive of all the faiths that nourish people can expect a global audience.

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The problem of violent scriptures

The problem of violent scriptures is so serious that a theology of peace that fails to deal with it would be fundamentally flawed. Historian of religion Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer thinks that the solution to the problem of violent scripture is to regard scriptures as human writings.[2] Thus violent men, making God in their own image, conveniently depicted God as sanctioning violence against their enemies. The problem with this solution is that millions of Hindus, Jews, Christians, and Muslims do not believe that their scriptures are human writings but are divinely revealed. Another problem with this proposition is that it leaves open the possibility that everything we say about God is humanly conceived, that all theology is human talk. Revelation, from a theological perspective, provides us with divine truth about God that can guide us in determining whether what we deduce about God from reason and nature is true or false.

The humanizing of scripture is not an attractive or acceptable option for the vast majority of religious people. Hindus believe

2. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us: Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

that their scriptures were "breathed out" by the gods; they certainly were not made up by men and women. Muslims believe the Qur'an was dictated to the Prophet Muhammad by God. Humanizing scriptures departs too far from what my tradition calls the "consensus of the faith" (*consensus fidelium*).

Another strategy is to allegorize descriptions of divinely sanctioned violence; Gandhi viewed the Bhagavad Gita, which consists of a conversation in the middle of a battlefield, as an allegory. Gandhi, comments Henry Thompson in his *World Religions in War and Peace* (McFarland, 1988), interpreted this as "a spiritual battle in human hearts rather than as an historical war." Krishna, the avatar or manifestation of Vishnu, tells Arjuna that as a *ksatriya* (warrior) he must fight, even though teachers and relatives face him on the other side of the battle line. Krishna also says, during the discourse, "knowledge means humility, sincerity, nonviolence" (Gita 13:7). However, many Hindus believe that the great battle described really did take place, and Hindus do not have a nonviolent history. Hindu scriptures contain many descriptions of battles and also define the duties of the warrior class, which include fighting with courage and skill.

No passages of scripture describe the end of God's ultimate purpose as a world of war, conflict, and injustice. When pointing toward the future that God intends for the world, scriptures extol peace.

The biblical description of the conquest of Canaan could also be allegorized. Was God demanding absolute obedience from his chosen people, so that a total commitment to God was necessary and any possibility of contamination, of being tempted into immorality or idolatry, had to be annihilated? Even if the conquest is an allegory, it still describes a God who not merely condoned ethnic cleansing but commanded it, which suggests that allegory does not help us much. Although the historical reality of the conquest of Canaan tells a somewhat different story, as non-Hebrews remained in the land, it is easy to see how some modern-day Jews, believing that God has given them the land and that they must separate themselves from the existing residents, could justify discriminatory policies and practices that reduce any possible threat to their possession of it.

Nelson-Pallmeyer argues that "violence of God traditions are at the heart of the Bible and Qur'an." He suggests that even the Christian notion of Jesus' death as an innocent sacrifice that paid the price of human sin "only makes sense if we embrace violent and punishing images of God featured prominently in the Hebrew Bible." He cites many verses from both scriptures that threaten divine retribution for sin, that divide the world into a good "us" and an evil "them," and that sanction violence. Of the Qur'an, he says, many verses "considered individually or collectively could reasonably be interpreted to justify or even to require violence, terrorism, and war against enemies in service to Allah or in pursuit of 'Islamic justice.'" He acknowledges that the vast majority of Muslims reject terrorism but comments that the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks cited many passages from the Qur'an to justify their actions. At least two hundred biblical verses, including New Testament verses, can be cited as evidence that the Bible is a violent scripture.

Christians often claim that Christianity is a religion of peace, which they contrast with Islam as a religion of the sword. Yet Christians have a history of religious warfare whose roots can be traced as early as the Emperor Constantine (c. 288–337). During the Crusades, the church went further and blessed war against infidels as a positive good and on numerous occasions compelled conversion on pain of death. For their part, Muslims do not deny that war was used to expand Islamic territory. Rightly or wrongly, such warfare was believed to be furthering God's will. Muslims do deny, however, that people were forcibly converted, drawing a distinction between territorial expansion and the spreading of Islam as a faith. Of course, Christian kings and rulers have also acquired empires, sometimes with papal blessing.

Recently, however, Islam has become associated not so much with war as with terrorism, which for many observers has acquired an Islamic face. Yet acts of terrorism are carried out by Christians in Northern Ireland and in Spain and by Hindus in Sri Lanka, so Muslims are not the only religious people who engage in terrorism. In addition to the scale of these attacks, perhaps one significant difference is that some Muslim terrorists justify their acts by citing scripture. At least two Qur'anic verses, 9:5 and 9:29, are widely cited as justifying indiscriminate, unprovoked violence. Unfortunately, many other verses, such as 2:217 and 22:39–40, that cannot be interpreted in this way are rarely mentioned. Many verses that do legitimate war in self-defense also extol peace.

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A teacher and student use stick pointers to study the Qur'an in Kalimantan, Indonesia.

The vast majority of Muslims reject the contention that 9:5 and 9:29, known as "sword verses" (*ayaat us-saif*), justify indiscriminate violence. These tell Muslims that "when the forbidden months are passed" they can kill pagans wherever they find them, lie in wait for them using every stratagem of war; those who disbelieve can be fought until they submit and agree to pay tribute. These verses, then, refer to an armistice during an existing conflict and do not permanently sanction aggression. No doubt "every stratagem of war" could include suicide bombings and 9/11, except that the Qur'an prohibits taking your own life. Verses such as 2:154, 3:157–158, and 3:169, which promise paradise to those who die in battle as martyrs for the cause of Allah, may well encourage young men to volunteer in Bosnia, Chechnya, Palestine, or Afghanistan. However, 3:169 addresses those who were "driven out of their homes," while the other verses, as traditionally understood, refer to casualties during wars that have been authorized by the caliph according to rules of engagement stipulated by Islamic law. These verses, however, do not actually encourage martyrdom; rather, they state that those who die while fighting for God have no reason to fear.

Violence, whether by Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists—or those professing no faith whatsoever—has been a plague upon human existence. That religious people have been guilty of violence and inhumanity merely underscores a universal human fallibility and does not discredit religious ideals of peace, only bears witness to human limitations in measuring up to them.

The principle of peace

My suggestion is that the Bible, the Qur'an, and indeed all scriptures contain a higher principle, the principle of peace. This relates to the ultimate concern of these scriptures. No passages describe the end of God's ultimate purpose as a world of war, conflict, and injustice. When pointing toward the future that God intends for the world, scriptures extol peace. The end-time descriptions of the Hebrew Bible contain the much cited words that swords will be beaten into plowshares

and spears into pruning hooks (Isa. 11:6–9; Mic. 4:3), while the Qur'an describes Islam as the "abode of peace" and Muslims as those who do what is right and refrain from what is wrong (10:25; 3:110). As humanity embraces peace and the reconciliation of all things to God, creation will be restored to its original perfection.

The higher principle of peace, which is the unambiguous end-time goal of God's purposes in scriptures, also resonates with what many people believe to be the ideal condition for human life. Chinese religion, too, sees social stability and unity as the highest ideal. In Confucianism, "in the end, victory without bloodshed is the highest skill" (Thompson, 124). Our consciences, which collectively inform such documents as the UN Charter, attest that peace is the higher principle.

A mature humanity will banish war to the museum of the mistakes humanity has made and embrace nonviolence as the only means of reconciling difference.

Yet it has taken humanity many centuries to arrive at our contemporary understanding of peace. Even in ancient days, notions of peace existed, yet peace was achieved by one group dominating others. The Pax Romana and even the more recent Pax Britannica were imposed by strength. Unlike the peace envisioned by the UN Charter, their "peace" did not include upholding fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of every person, the equal rights of men and women, or the promotion of social progress and better standards of "life in larger freedom." Such freedoms did not exist, and many people felt that they were oppressed.

Recent affirmations of the meaning of global peace, such as the Commitment to Global Peace signed by religious and spiritual leaders from around the world following the UN-sponsored Millennium Summit in August 2000, extend peace to embrace the natural environment, calling on governments and on all people of goodwill to collaborate in caring "for the earth's ecological systems and all forms of life." Peace in its fullest sense involves the rediscovery of the spiritual dimension to human and to planetary life. Peace involves humanity working with, not against, the planet and the planet's creator to sustain and nurture, not to harm and destroy. Peace involves the discovery of the essential oneness of humanity.

The higher truth that we are part of, not separate from, the earth has long been taught by traditional religions but has been largely ignored by greedy men and women. Too often, fellow Christians have regarded the earth as a finite resource because it will ultimately be destroyed. The higher principle says that the earth, once restored, will continue to flourish.

The UN Millennium Declaration affirms that the eradication of poverty is a condition of true peace. This holistic understanding of peace resonates with the scriptural goal but cannot be said to have featured prominently in historical human discourse, which tended to regard peace as absence of war brought about by military dominance or political power. This view of peace is contained in scriptures, but it has taken centuries for humanity to catch up with the biblical and Qur'anic vision.

The UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are, in my view, among the noblest documents yet written by human hand. The idea that something that can be referred to as a collective human consciousness has evolved is, of course, derived from G. W. F Hegel (1770–1831), as is Francis Fukuyama's concept of the "end of history." Fukuyama points out that unfortunately, prejudice against Hegel caused by the close association between Hegel and Marxism (others add twentieth-century totalitarianism) blinds people to the importance of his thought. Fukuyama argues that liberal democracy stands at the pinnacle of human achievement in the political sphere and will eventually triumph. This triumph, he believes, may not bring about the end of all conflict; nevertheless, conflict is likely to diminish and international relations will deal with "the solving of technical problems, environmental concerns and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands."

The higher principle witnessed in scripture thus corresponds with aspects of contemporary thought. Developments in the material world, in this view, are brought about by prior development in the realm of consciousness or ideas. Liberal democracy in this context should not be confused with moral laxity or permissiveness prevalent in Western society; rather, it refers to those societies that allow government of the people by the people for the people, free trade, and cooperation with other democracies for mutual benefit.

God's respect for His creation

Working with human material and respecting human freedom, God chooses to work with humanity as humanity actually exists. God enters history through intervening in the lives of those whom He chooses. In a world of violence, God has to deal with violence. Until humanity was ready to accept the truth of the higher principle, a lesser principle, that of war as a qualified good, was needed. Even if we accept that we cannot fully comprehend God's inscrutable purposes, we may be able to accept that if God has sanctioned wars, these were necessary as part of God's plan, which we believe is ultimately good.

In Christian understanding, the law was necessary and divine yet fell short of what God ultimately intended for humanity, which was a "new covenant" written not on stone but in the hearts of women and men (Jer. 31:31). This does not mean that the law was wrong. Rather, God voluntarily subordinates His divine perfection by demanding of humanity what only humanity is mature enough to give. The higher principle, contained in scripture and more recently confirmed by our God-gifted consciences, should be the interpretive lens through which all scriptures are read. When read through this lens, peace emerges as the ultimate goal.

War can never be the highest good. Christians and Muslims and Jews and Hindus and others who have managed to justify violence in religious terms were quite simply wrong. As Thompson says, even Buddhist rulers have been as bloodthirsty as their Hindu neighbors, and different Buddhist groups have "conquered and slaughtered each other." A mature humanity will banish war to the museum of the mistakes

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The founding of global bodies dedicated to achieving peace, such as the United Nations, attests to the movement toward higher ideals shared by the entire human family.

humanity has made and embrace nonviolence as the only means of reconciling difference. Wars result in winners and losers, and the losers inevitably resent their defeat and wait for the opportunity to take revenge. Violence always spirals into more violence. As nonviolence becomes the norm of conflict-resolution strategy, humanity will begin to shoulder the responsibility of restoring the world to its original perfection, which is the goal of history.

The free flow of capital would enable people to purchase the services they need, and large economic differentials between nations would self-adjust toward a fairer distribution of capital.

What the future might look like

This theology is practical because the world it envisages can be achieved and may be prefigured politically by Fukuyama's liberal democracies. Liberal democracies engage in free trade with other liberal democracies; as consumers and suppliers rely on each other, they will protect each others' interests. What I desire for myself will become what I desire for my provider or my purchaser: a decent home, a meaningful job, food to eat, access to education and to health care. A devolution of governance down to local communities to deal with standard-of-life issues and up to a world federation to deal with such global issues as the environment and peacekeeping would also change the way the world works.[3] Localized self-governing communities would have many advantages: They consist of people who know each other and could forge alliances with similar communities across traditional national boundaries. Also, with power devolved, self-interest would play a less significant role than it does in national politics.

More localized societies will become more aware of the reality of human interdependence, of the truth that if we live more simply, consuming less, others may be able to simply live. As Gandhi said, "There is enough in the world for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed." People will realize that they do not require all the material objects that propaganda offers them, that eating less is healthier, that human life is not only about existing physically but has a spiritual dimension too. It is here that religious insights may gain a new hearing.

The material culture that presently dominates and divides the world is also an individualistic culture. It places "me" and "my desires" at the center at the expense of others. The power of large corporations that set profit over morality will be dissipated when local communities choose to take a moral stance against rampant materialism and permissive values that denigrate commitment and respect for self.

The centrality of family units, honored by most if not all religions, could be reaffirmed as people realize the advantages of living in communities that care and share, rather than in anomie, accumulating more and more objects for selfish personal use. Spiritual awareness may encourage people to turn to religions as places where spiritual wisdom is traditionally found. We may also become receptive to new truths about humanity and humanity's relationship with God as we climb onto a higher plateau of existence. Chinese religion especially sees the common good as a central concern and posits the family as the microcosmic society.

The free flow of capital would enable people to purchase the services they need, and large economic differentials between nations would self-adjust toward a fairer distribution of capital. Such a world order might well see the nation-state play a less dominant role; religion, too, having united humanity and God, might also recede. This is what some religions mean when they speak of God, in the future, dwelling with us. If God dwells with us, the role of religion as a mediator between us and God becomes redundant. Those who think that dreadful battles must be endured before this type of world becomes reality tend to believe that the "new heaven and the new earth" will be a different creation, spiritual and probably nonmaterial. Only divine intervention can create this reality.

The description of the world as a confederacy of more local communities, in which people of different faiths and races cooperate in self-governing units, thereby ensuring that all basic needs are met and that real opportunities exist for people to flourish intellectually, spiritually, and culturally, can, I believe, be constructed by human hands. The Bible rarely if ever sets out to predict actual events. Our future does not follow an inevitable plan but depends on the course of divine-human cooperation; thus, there are different possibilities, not just one. The future could be violent, if that is what we choose; it can be peaceful, if we accept our partnership with God, who waits for us to shoulder our responsibilities. God's perfection, like that of the universe, depends on our enabling God to achieve His fullest potential. In creating us, God took the risk that we would rebel against Him. The perfection of the self-emptying God is divine potential, not divine reality; its fullest realization depends on our cooperation. Until that day, creation groans in travail (Rom. 8:22).

3. I am drawing here on Benjamin Barber's "Jihad vs McWorld," originally an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1992) and later published as a book. Barber argues for a "confederate union of semi-autonomous communities smaller than nation-states, tied together into regional economic associations and markets larger than nation-states—participatory and self-determining in local matters at the bottom, representative and accountable at the top."

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A panoramic view of Vancouver, British Columbia. Free trade between modern liberal democracies has led to mutual interdependence and increased prosperity.

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