

Reflections of the Myth of Redemptive Violence

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One of the most influential and thought provoking theologians of our day is Walter Wink, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City and author of several books dealing with what he calls “The Myth of Redemptive Violence.” The Myth of Redemptive Violence comes from an ancient Babylonian creation story known as “The Enuma Elish,” and dates from about 1250 BCE. In this story, creation is the result of a gruesome act of violence. Marduk, a god who is the super hero in the myth, murders and dismembers Tiamat, the mother god and dragon of chaos. He slits open her skull, scatters her blood, and from her corpse, creates the cosmos. To quote Professor Wink in his book *The Powers that Be*:

In this myth, creation is an act of violence. Marduk murders and dismembers Tiamat, and from her cadaver creates the world. As the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur observes (*The Symbolism of Evil*, Harper Collins 1967), order is established by means of disorder. Chaos (symbolised by Tiamat) is prior to order (represented by Marduk, high god of Babylon). Evil precedes good. The gods themselves are violent. (Wink, 1998:45)

This Babylonian myth also has its comparable version in Hindu mythology where the body of Purusha, the Supreme Cosmic Spirit, is dismembered by the gods to bring forth creation. Hymn 90 of the 10th Mandala of the Rig Veda depicts Purusha as a giant primeval man, the “ruler of immortality,” who is bound for this primordial sacrifice.

1. The Man has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervaded the earth on all sides and extended beyond it as far as ten fingers.
2. It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality...
3. Such of his greatness, and the Man is yet more than this...

6. When the gods spread the sacrifice with the Man as the offering, spring was clarified butter, summer the fuel, autumn, the oblation.
7. They anointed the Man, the sacrifice born at the beginning, upon the sacred grass...
11. When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him?...
13. The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born. Indra and Agni came from his mouth, and from his vital breath and Wind was born.
14. From his naval the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus they set the worlds in order.
15. There were seven enclosing-sticks for him, and thrice seven fuel-sticks, when the gods, spreading the sacrifice, bound the Man as the sacrificial beast.
16. With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed the sacrifice. These were the first ritual laws. (O'Flaherty, 1981: 30, 31).

Expressed in more general terms, The Myth of Redemptive Violence is an archetypal story where a super hero, representing Good, is pitted against an evil and equally powerful villain, representing evil. The superhero, after much struggle and suffering, finally, through violence, vanquishes the villain, restoring order and re-establishing Good over Evil. In this general sense, one sees this archetypal plot re-enacted time and time again in movies like *Star Wars* and cartoons like *Popeye the Sailor Man*.

According to Wink, the Myth of Redemptive Violence:

enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. It is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world. (Wink, 1998: 42).

The myth of redemptive violence is the story of the victory of order over chaos by means of violence. It is the ideology of conquest, the original religion of the status quo...(Wink, 1998: 45).

Wink, however, also points out that the Biblical creation myth found in Genesis exists in stark contrast to the Babylonian story. Again to quote Professor Wink:

The biblical myth in Genesis 1 is diametrically opposed to all this (Genesis 1, it should be noted, was developed in Babylon during the Jewish captivity there as a direct rebuttal to the Babylonian myth). The Bible portrays a good God who creates a good creation. Chaos does not resist order. Good is prior to evil. Neither evil nor violence is part of the creation, but enter later, as a result of the first couple's sin and the connivance of the serpent (Genesis 3). A basically good reality is thus corrupted by free decisions reached by creatures. In this far more complex and subtle explanation of the origins of things, violence emerges for the first time as a problem requiring solution. (Wink, 1998: 45, 46)

In reflecting on this dramatic difference in creation stories, I began to look for other nonviolent creation myths, myths that are harmonious and transformational rather than violent. Some readers may be familiar with the ancient Lenape native American story of the Earth being raised out of the primordial waters on the back of a turtle. In addition, the Taoist creation images found in the Tao Te Ching portray the feminine creative force not as an evil chaos but rather, in the positive as a great mystery that gives birth to the "10,000 things."¹

Despite the existence of these nonviolent, transformational creation myths, the violent creation myths appear to have had a far more enduring influence on the human psyche. For later in Genesis, when God realizes the ways of humans are evil, it is said that He destroys the world with a violent all-consuming flood. And centuries later in the Christian scriptures, the "Day of Judgment" is conceived of as a violent act, with the great final battle of Armageddon preceding the triumphant return of Christ. Indeed, such violent creation and re-creation myths preoccupy popular religion today, and too often convince world leaders that war is an evitable part of the human condition and even a holy human response. Such beliefs provoke many politicians into making overly optimistic estimates about war. They blind us to the law of unintended consequences, and delude us into believing that God is on our side.

Moreover, violent myths are told by the victors and become part of religiously inspired histories. Jewish writers were exceptionally good at integrating myth and history, and did so in such a convincing way such that, for many people, it is difficult to determine where history leaves off and myth begins. It is known, for example, that the Israelites spent time in Egypt, that they migrated from Egypt through the desert, eventually settling in the land of Canaan, which they believed was their "promised land." But did Moses really part the Red Sea and hear God's voice in a burning bush? Did his staff really turn into a serpent when he threw it on the ground?

The miracle of the Jewish Passover, where God sends the "Plague of the First Born" over Egypt in a final attempt to convince the Pharaoh to free the Israelites from slavery, presents us with another dilemma. Consider the Passover story from the vantage

¹ Tao Te Ching, Chapter 25. In some translations, "10,000 things" is translated "myriad things."

point of a young Egyptian wife who, after three years of marriage, finally gives birth to a son who subsequently dies from the plague. When told it was the God of Israel who sent this plague to free his people from Pharaoh's bondage, she sees nothing but injustice. For she, her husband and her son had nothing to do with enslaving the Jews. It was Pharaoh who was responsible. Why would God commit such a horrible genocidal act, the killing innocent children, to liberate a people? In this religiously inspired history, one person's miracle turns out to be another person's tragedy.

Realizing this, I have asked myself, must creation necessarily arise out of violence? Or, expressed another way, is violence truly necessary to change or transform the world?

If we look to the natural world, we do certainly see creation arising out of violence. It was a violent volcanic eruption that created the awesome and picturesque coastline on the island of St. Lucia, and it is now believed that the Earth's violent collision with an asteroid is what ultimately led to the demise of the dinosaurs, making possible the evolution and ascent of human life on earth.

But the natural world also reveals harmonious creative processes of rebirth and transformation that are not violent and disruptive. In the earth's temperate zones, such a process can be observed every spring as life re-awakens from lying dormant during the winter months. Perennial flowers emerge from their winter "graves" and caterpillars are soon transformed into butterflies. Indeed, the earth's landscape is continuously being re-formed and re-shaped as rivers slowly modify their courses, carving out deep canyons, as the wind over time erodes mountain peaks, and as plant succession creates old-growth forests. But these natural, harmonious, transformations processes are gradual and uneventful. Humans, unfortunately, tend to be impatient, provoking change in ways that are too often detrimental to our planet and to the human condition.

Psychologist Sigmund Freud theorized that social pressures force one to repress our aggressive instincts (Barash and Webel, 2002: 125-126). Over time this repression creates inner conflict until our repressed aggressive tendencies are given an opportunity to be expressed in the legalized violence of war. At that point these instincts are as if "cut lose" and a person is able to fulfill their aggressive desires through war. If Freud is correct, there will always be a need for

police and government military organizations to provide retaliatory capabilities as a deterrent to the expression of innate aggressive behavior.

A counterargument to Freud's belief is that deterrence to aggression can be provided through positive means. That is, rather than deterring violence by negative consequences such as through fines or imprisonment, the deterrence can be a cooperative symbiotic relationship, the benefits of which would be lost if the rules that sustain the cooperative relationship are violated. The more a society makes use of positive methods of deterrence, the less reliance there would have to be on police, jails, and military institutions.

Freud also proposed that injury and rage have its psychological roots in narcissism (Barash and Webel, 2002: 125-126). As he so defined, narcissistic injury occurs when you take as a personal attack, an injury to a member of the group to which you belong. If someone attacks a member of your family, and you react as if it were an attack on yourself, you are experiencing narcissistic injury; and if, in your anger, you decide in return to attack a member of your aggressor's family, (other than the person who was actually responsible for the original attack), you are engaging in a calculated form of "narcissistic rage" or what may be called narcissistic revenge. The group to which you belong, however, can be much larger than your family. It can, for example, be defined by the race to which you belong, your nationality, or your religious sect.

After September 11, 2001, Americans who sought to take revenge against Muslims solely because the 9/11 hijackers were Muslim, and Islamic extremists who seek to kill Americans solely because they are Americans, are experiencing narcissistic injury and engaging in narcissistic revenge.

Once a conflict reaches this psychological plateau, the number of people that join the conflict can increase exponentially because revenge is being taken against individuals not initially part of the dispute. The individuals involved in the conflict no longer are seeking justice against the actual perpetrators, but are pursuing revenge against a group that has been stereotyped. In seeking such narcissistic revenge, the conflicting parties broaden the scope of the conflict, drawing into the fray relatives, friends and associates who then experience feelings of narcissistic injury that motivate future attacks.

If we apply this understanding to the war in Iraq, we have a psychological model that helps explain why the insurgency the United States is battling defiantly continues to

sustain itself and at times appears to be growing stronger. What is in play here is a group psychosis that is feed by violence.

If Freud's models are correct, we have little reason to be optimistic that humanity will ever overcome its predilection for violence, especially in the political arena.

Throughout history, power has proven itself to be a dangerous temptress, and resorting to redemptive violence is often a temptation nationalist leaders and the people who follow them find too hard to resist. For if they win, they emerge as heroes, the rewards of which include asserting their cultural and economic values, an writing history in their favor.

If humanity is ever to evolve into a non-violent race, we must develop the wisdom to control and subdue our repressed instincts, conquering our primitive defense mechanisms that respond out of fear and deceive the mind into thinking that violence is the answer. This inner conquest has been achieved by certain nonviolent individuals from every wisdom tradition, saints as it were, who come to reflect the light of the Divine image in which we were created, as the moon, when full, radiantly reflects the light of the sun. But the appearance of such leaders is far too infrequent. A more genuine effort must be made to provide each person with the technique to experience self-transcendence whereby one is freed from the negative attachments of resentment, jealousy, hatred and revenge. For ultimately the Myth of Redemptive Violence takes place within us. It is an allegory of the human condition. Subconsciously, each one of us wishes we could emerge as hero, ending the uncertainty we fear as chaos by imposing, through whatever means necessary, our own vision of order and justice. But by recognizing and renouncing this gripping primal urge, we awaken ourselves to a higher path, a path that enables us to appreciate the positive power of uncertainty. From such an awakening we learn to benefit from coincidence, using it convincingly to our advantage, re-channeling the negative power it has over us into the positive direction of compassion, reconciliation, and freedom.

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