

# 11. THE MYTH OF REDEMPTIVE VIOLENCE



**FOCUS:** The most potent religion in Western culture is not Christianity, but a belief in the redemptive power of violence. Although Jesus inaugurated a new order based on partnership, equality, compassion and non-violence, his example and teachings have been eclipsed by an emphasis on a human unworthiness that demands and defends the need for Jesus' violent, suffering, atoning death.

---

## RED IN TOOTH AND CLAW

*"We are going to deal theologically with the problem of violence forever because it is intrinsic to our inheritance. The question for God for all of us who follow this God is whether we can resist that stuff that is intrinsically present in our existence."*

– Walter Brueggemann in *Living the Questions*

Tennyson wrote that despite any love we may profess of God, despite our claims to revere love as Creation's final law, we, and nature along with us, are "red in tooth and claw." After countless generations of ruthless competition for survival, it's our nature as human beings to carry within us the primal urge to act out in violent ways. We are a violent species – and as a practical matter, violence more often than not "works." So if a turn to violence can get the desired result, why bother with any namby-pamby alternative?

According to Bill Nelson, myths are not "true" or "false." The question one must ask of a myth is, is it alive or dead? In 1966, John Lennon was vilified for claiming that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. While he was probably right, he could have also said that the Myth of Redemptive Violence is more popular than Jesus. From even the most cursory evaluation, it's clear that the Myth of Redemptive Violence is not only alive and well, but has completely eclipsed Jesus' teachings, example, and the basic principles of Christianity. In fact, the Myth of Redemptive Violence managed to infiltrate the writings and teachings of Christianity from such an early date, that many people are unable to separate one from the other.

In his seminal article on the subject, *The Myth of Redemptive Violence*, Walter Wink describes how violence essentially functions as a god, enjoying faithful obedience from its followers and seeming to come through when all else fails. First captured in writing around 1250 B.C.E., the Myth of Redemptive Violence is at the heart of the Babylonian Creation epic called the *Enuma Elish*. The epic tells how the very order of the universe is established through "god on god" violence with the defeated female deity being dismembered and her corpse strewn about to create various elements of the cosmos.

*“The simplicity of this story commended it widely, and its basic mythic structure spread as far as Syria, Phoenicia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Germany, Ireland, India, and China. Typically, a male war god residing in the sky fights a decisive battle with a female divine being, usually depicted as a monster or dragon, residing in the sea or abyss (the feminine element). Having vanquished the original enemy by war and murder, the victor fashions a cosmos from the monster’s corpse. Cosmic order requires the violent suppression of the feminine, and is mirrored in the social order by the subjection of women to men and people to ruler.”*

– Walter Wink, *The Myth of Redemptive Violence*

As opposed to the Biblical witness of Yahweh creating human beings from the dust of the earth and animating them with the very breath of God, our Babylonian origin is owed to an extreme act of violence. In order to create servants for the gods, the god Marduk executes a fellow god to use his blood to create human beings. Marduk then establishes a divine hierarchy in which a strict adherence to order is upheld through violence and the threat of violence. Obedience is the supreme virtue and is enforced in the daily ordering of human relationships: women subdued by men, slaves subdued by masters, peasants under kings, people under rulers, laity under the priests (pardon that visual image).

Essentially, the Myth of Redemptive Violence is what Wink calls, “the original religion of the status quo.” It not only exists to legitimate power and privilege, it perpetuates the value of ideas like peace through war, security through strength, and the notion that fear can only be overcome through domination.

## THE ART OF WAR

*“Compared to war, all other forms of human endeavor shrink to insignificance. God, I love it so!”*

– General George S. Patton, Jr.

Since 1250 B.C.E., only the names have changed. The virtue and superiority of violence are gobbled up by young and old alike in our cartoons, comics, video games, and movies. We absorb violence through sports, foreign policy, nationalism, militarism, and judging by the popularity of Lao Tzu’s *Art of War* among business people, in our corporatism, as well. Violence is entertaining, exhilarating, and as Chris Hedges has said so poignantly, it gives us meaning (cf *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*, Public Affairs Books, 2002).

And then there are the televangelists and the religious right. They not only use Christianity to perpetuate the Myth of Redemptive Violence for their own benefit, but do so with barely concealed glee over the anticipated violent fate of those with whom they disagree.

The Myth of Redemptive Violence has so infiltrated our culture, that even our language is overwhelmed with a continual drum-beat of violence. From seemingly

innocuous phrases like, “Shoot me an email” to the “war on poverty” to “He’s da bomb” and even the “Fight for Peace” are simply “to die for” in our culture. Even expressions like “to beat a dead horse,” meant to convey futility, imply that if the horse were alive, violence would lead to success.

We spank children to teach them not to hit one another. We sanction the killing of killers. We advocate the arming of citizens to promote personal safety. Is it any wonder that people are being deluded into complying with a system that allies them with violence, not compassion – with death, not life? We are a wholly compromised culture that can’t even imagine the existence of any alternatives. In short, Wink says the Myth of Redemptive Violence “is the simplest, laziest, most exciting, uncomplicated, irrational, and primitive depiction of evil the world has ever known.”

But our complicity is not our fault. Really.

## ORIGINAL SIN

*"Father, bless me for I have sinned, I did an original sin...  
I poked a badger with a spoon."*

– Eddie Izzard

We're only human. Flawed, full of selfishness, omissions, laziness, half-truths, rebelliousness, and willfulness. Many Christians might explain the shortcomings of being human with a vague reference to something called “original sin” (along with it having something to do with sex). But beyond that, original sin just lurks around as one more of those Christian ideas lots of people recognize but can't explain. Surprisingly to many, original sin is nowhere in scripture (explaining in part why the idea of original sin never developed in Jewish theology).

Out of his own sense of guilt and self-understanding, St. Augustine cobbled together the idea of "Original Sin" in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Part of Augustine’s reason for going into the priesthood was to seek absolution for his early uninhibited sex life. So, it's not surprising that he would connect sex as the primal transmission of sin from one generation to the next. He suggested that since Adam sinned, all of his descendants are inheritors of this "stain" of sin.

To make his point, Augustine looked to Romans 5. There Paul sets up an argument that Adam’s sin necessitated Jesus’ sacrifice in order to appease God. “Adam did it, Jesus undid it” is one of the foundations of the idea of blood atonement. Our inherent sinfulness was so great that our profoundly offended God could only be appeased by the violent spilling of blood. Although *our* blood being spilled was deserved, *Jesus’* blood would suffice.

Here the crucifixion falls right into the hands of anyone wanting to prove the efficacy of redemptive violence. Although “Christ crucified” was Paul’s primary message, it is clear from his multiple attempts to explain its meaning that even he wasn’t exactly sure how it all “worked.” Whether describing it as “expiation,”

ransom, or redemption, Paul's efforts have left a lot of room for multiple theories to emerge.

**Satisfaction Theory:** Derived from ancient Jewish ritual practices (including the Day of Atonement) where animals were sacrificed to satisfy God's need for blood. Jesus becomes the ultimate sacrifice to appease a God who is so offended by human sin, that only the spilling of his own son's blood will bring satisfaction. Incidentally, Canaanite religions were not the only ones to sacrifice their children to appease Baal and other gods. There are a number of Biblical examples of Judean kings and leaders who also ritually sacrificed their children, much to Yahweh's *displeasure*.

**Substitution Theory:** The death of Jesus is NOT a sacrifice, but a pay-off to God. Human beings are so sinful that each of us deserves a horrible lingering and bloody death sentence. However, Jesus loves us so much that he was willing to step in and be our substitute. God would just as soon kill us for our sins, but the slaughter of the innocent satiates the Divine's blood lust.

**Ransom Theory:** If through sin, humanity is now stuck in and operating on the Devil's "turf," God had to pay off Satan in order to win our freedom. How? By paying with Jesus' death.

**Victory Theory:** NOT a payment to the devil (which is the equivalent of giving in to terrorists), but a defeat-in-principle of the power of evil. Through Jesus' "obedience unto death," he showed he could take anything that the Devil could dish out.

**Moral Theory:** Embraces the idea that the real point of Jesus' obedience and death was to provide an example for humanity to follow – to stay faithful to one's convictions even in the face of injustice, brutality, and ignorance. The universe is structured to deal with consequences – and consequences are *not* punishment. They're just consequences. Jesus had to deal with the consequences of his actions and so do we.

These theories offer VASTLY different "cosmic" dynamics. The first two are directed toward God by appeasing or compensating God for humanity's trespasses. The second two are aimed at Satan and mark the end of "demonic control" through two diametrically opposed methods – did God "pay off" or "punch out" the Devil? The last "moral" theory suggests a change of disposition, not of God or Satan, but of humanity itself.

The satisfaction theory has tended to be the most popular. It is reflected in Campus Crusade's "Four Spiritual Laws," the Roman Catholics' sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the altar, and in the hymns of American Protestantism ("There is a fountain filled with blood," "Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?" and "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus."). Though Jesus was still executed, the theory that is least dependent on justifying the violence

done to him is the Moral Theory. Not surprisingly, it has also been the least popular among orthodox theologians. Instead of glorifying the redemptive power of violence, it suggests that the virtue in the story comes from Jesus' obedience, even as he suffers the violence inherent in all things human. Those who are convinced of humanity's Original Sin find this theory unsatisfactory, for if humanity only needed an example to follow, it must not have been so sinful after all.

The existence of all these mostly violent theories of atonement and their lack of any uniform understanding of what happened on the cross is due to the Biblical witness being unclear. Paul vs. the Gospels vs. Hebrews suggest different ways of grappling with a mystery. Since the theories of atonement are so confusing, have never been made uniform in scripture (let alone Christian theology), and lurk in a mishmash of imagery in each of our own religious upbringings, it's no wonder that we have ideological pandemonium in the streets.

## ORIGINAL BLESSING

The opponents of the idea of the vague and inherited guilt of Original Sin have been numerous and clever in their critiques, from Franz Kafka's *The Trial* to Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing*. Bishop Jack Spong puts the question in everyday language when he asks,

*"What would be the influence on a child's life if the parents, seeking to improve their parenting skills, purchased a book that instructed them everyday to inform the child that they are a horrible person? 'You are incapable of doing anything about your destiny.' 'You are not even good enough to pick up the crumbs under the family table.'"*

Would that create a healthy adult? Yet this is the message the Church has given people for centuries. Why portray God practicing parenting skills that would be so clearly unhealthy for our own children?

History is rife with the evidence of human beings' capacity for evil. Be it the holocaust, Islamic terrorists, or "Christian militias" praising the carnage of the Oklahoma City bombing, anyone's faith in human goodness and the idea of progress can be shaken. But to spend energy concentrating on how sinful and hopeless human beings are is to fail to appreciate the incredible good that human beings are capable of – wonders of science and symphonies, art and generosity, the gentle touch, the healing word. Evil is not hard to find in human life, but neither is it the ultimate and defining characteristic of humanity. Perhaps it's like a roadside accident that attracts the morbid attention of passersby, but we spend an inordinate amount of time dwelling upon and struggling with the mystery of evil when the real mystery is where *goodness* comes from. It should come as no surprise that irrational urges toward violence and evil are part of our primal being. But the true wonder is in human beings showing signs of transcending those patterns with mercy, compassion, and forgiveness.

In *Original Blessing*, Matthew Fox recovers an ancient, Biblically-rooted tradition in Christian spirituality in which the Creator takes great delight in creation –

including humanity. Likewise, Bishop Spong suggests that in a post-Darwinian age, it doesn't make sense for us to continue wallowing in the notion of our having once been innocent garden dwellers, now exiled. Far from being "fallen" creatures trying to return to a mythical Eden, human beings are "emerging" as a species from more primal and baser instincts to become more responsible and mature beings. Granted, our "emergence" has included a knack for ever-increasing efficiency in killing one another, but alternatives have also emerged.

## SATYAGRAHA

*"Truth is God;  
Non-violence is Love in Action; and  
Peace, the result of enduring conflict resolution, is the Fruit of Satyagraha."*  
– Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi believed that at the root of every conflict there is untruth, and that the only permanent solution was truth. In an effort to systematize his belief, Gandhi conceived the practice of *Satyagraha*. Combining *Satya* (Truth) with *Agraha* (Firmness) Gandhi advocated the *Unwavering Search for the Truth*. He was convinced that the only way of getting to Truth is through love, and that the only practical definition of love is when the security and well-being of the other person becomes as important as your own. It followed that the *Unwavering Search for the Truth* would be characterized by non-violence. Following its success in the Indian sub-continent, the principles of Satyagraha were adapted and successfully utilized in affecting change in the United States by Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. And while this ideal of non-violence is overshadowed by the dominance of the Myth of Redemptive Violence, the practice of "relentless non-violent resistance" continues to be used today by groups like Soulforce ([www.Soulforce.org](http://www.Soulforce.org)). Carrying on Gandhi's teachings, Soulforce reminds its adherents that the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation, not victory – and that refraining from violence is not only a discipline of the fist, but of the tongue and heart, as well.

## SAVING WORK?

*"Those who take up the sword perish by the sword."*  
– Jesus, *Matthew 26:52*

Our culture has been and will continue to be awash in depictions of and the practice of violence as the ultimate solution to human conflicts. But the witness of Jesus' life, teachings, and death model a different paradigm. Jesus inaugurated a new order based on partnership, equality, compassion, and non-violence. His teaching carries us beyond pacifism, beyond just war theory, beyond domination and its spiral of violence to the remarkable possibilities of non-violence and understanding.

For 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, God's "saving work" in Jesus makes more sense being about integrity rather than suffering and satisfaction on a cosmic level. To say "Jesus died for our sins" is not substitutionary or ransom-based, but Biblical

shorthand for Jesus having died as a result of our collective sin; that is, from the normal operating procedure of unjust, oppressive, insecure, and violent human beings. Yet despite who and what we are, the grace of God is modeled in Jesus' "obedience to death," obedience to remain forgiving and gracious even in the face of misrepresentation, humiliation, and extreme violence. Being faithful to convictions like justice, non-violence, and the needs of the poor and the downtrodden are ways not only to take atonement out of the musty halls of speculative theology, but to actively counter the Myth of Redemptive Violence in the world.

---

## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

### DVD Chapter 2:

What are some of the characteristics of the "radical community" Jesus inaugurated?

According to Crossan, "substitution" or "suffering" is not the point, *sacrum facere* is. Explain.

What was Anselm's rationale for "coming up with" substitutionary atonement?

### DVD Chapter 3:

What's wrong with the image of "Jesus, the Divine Invader" dying for our sins?

What part does love play in communicating the message that there's nothing you can ever do or be that will separate you from the love of God?

Hauerwas describes God overwhelming us not with violence, but “with a beauty that is so deep, it’s frightening.” Explain.

**DVD Chapter 4:**

According to Scott, what is the definition of “death” in the New Testament? What are its consequences?

What rationale does Crossan give for the radical claim that God is non-violent?

How does the “postponed violence” of God betray our hope of wholeness?

Hauerwas claims that Christians should be committed to the heart of the Gospel: non-violence. Explain.

What are the implications of Christians actually practicing non-violence?

How is the violent execution of Jesus a warning about our behavior in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**SPIRITPRACTICE:**

“I was in prison and you visited me.” (with Sr. Helen Prejean)

**Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

**Consider the following questions as a group:**

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

---

**PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

**Blood-free zone**

If you are part of a faith community, do a “blood survey” of the liturgy, music, and worship in general. Then determine where you can change the blood metaphor to reflect the meaning behind the rote words. It’s remarkable how easily the word “love” can replace “blood” in many hymns and prayers and sound like that was the way it was supposed to be in the first place. Making communion a “blood-free” celebration requires using words that express what the metaphors of blood and body have always meant, but which have traditionally been taken to literal extremes. Transitioning is as simple as replacing Jesus’ “blood” and “body” with sharing the “cup of God’s mercy” and the “bread of new life.” For theological justification, one can point to the Moral theory of atonement and its consideration of Jesus’ life, teachings, and practice of mercy and inclusion.

**Be sure to follow up on this session’s theme with Session 10’s *Living it Out: “Redemption, Violence, and Salvation,”* distributed by your facilitator.**