

Does God Require Violence?

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Giving honor to the spirit of Father Bill O'Donnell, who continues to be a deep inspiration to me and to so many of us.



It's a gruesome story. Here we have this, the central story of the Christian faith, and it's horrible, repulsive. Jesus was killed on the cross. If he had been killed by the electric chair, would we have a chair up there? Or if he had been stabbed through the heart, would we have a bloody knife? A hangman's noose? A little cluster bomb? A firing squad? a vial of poison?

The central symbol of Christianity is this ancient means of torture and murder at the hands of the state. Why? Does God require violence?

Some would say, yes. In fact, much of the Christian world says, yes. God is disgusted by your sin, and angry at you for your sinfulness, and someone has to pay. In a nutshell: you are bad, and God is mad. Someone has to be killed, it doesn't really matter who. Now, lucky for you, Jesus stepped in, so when God reached down to smack someone, he hit Jesus, and now you're off the hook.

Others would say, it's not that God is mad. It's that God is **just**. Because God is just, every good deed must be rewarded and every sin punished. Parity must be achieved. It's not that God *wants* violence, but God requires it so that justice may be served.

Still others would say, it's not that God is mad at *you*. You're people of faith; you've got God's blessing. God cares for those who care for Him. But the other ones - those who don't know him or

serve him - well, if they burn to a crisp, it's their own fault.

Is that what God is like?

- God needs to smack someone for your sinfulness? The roots of that concept go to a reading of the sacrifices offered by the Hebrew people for sin. God would have punished you, but since you brought the animal to the temple, the lamb got the whack. God was going to destroy you, but then Jesus stepped in and got smited by God for your sins. Let's think about this for a moment. The bible says that God was reconciling the world to God-self through Christ, and now God's given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:19) That would mean that if I'm upset with you, but I want to heal my relationship with you, all I have to do is find someone else to take out my anger at, then you and I can be fine. Is that the ministry that God has given us - to look for scapegoats? Is that the kind of God we serve - one who can't control his anger?

- How about the idea that God requires violence because of justice? Let's look at that for a moment. Do you remember the parable Jesus told of the workers who were told they'd get a coin for a day's pay. They began work, and all throughout the day, more workers were hired on. At the end of they day, all were given the same pay. The ones who'd been working all day got mad, but the landowner said, you got what we agreed to. Are you getting stingy because I am generous? Where's the justice in that? Where's the parity? Where's you get what you deserve? Those who only worked a half day, deserved a half day's pay. And yet they get more. What about the woman caught in adultery and brought to Jesus? Who pays for that sin? Looking at the teaching and practice of Jesus overturns that concept of justice.

- Finally, what about violence to people of other religions or interpretations? Does God require that? Did God give rise to an earth with such rich diversity and then say, OK, this kind of people are with me, the others are toast? That would be like saying, God made all the colors of the rainbow, but God only accepts white.

So if we see, based on the life and teaching of Jesus, that God does not require violence, then what? What does the cross mean?

Have you considered that it may not be God inciting or requiring violence, but rather us - human beings?

- Maybe it's not God that's mad, but I'm mad. You bug me, you really bother me, so I want to hurt you.
- We ascribe tit-for-tat justice to God, but we're the ones that want to punish wrongs. Forgive, forgive, forgive. Why does Jesus repeat himself? Because we don't do it. We hold grudges. We want people to pay for their misdeeds.
- Finally, God may not be ready to smite those who are not like us, but maybe we are happy to do it. Maybe, like the man stranded on the desert island, we form our identity in opposition to others. When they found him, he had built two churches. 'Why?' 'This is the one I go to, and that's the one I don't go to.'

The crucifixion is for us to come to terms with our own violence. And Jesus offers us a particular and unique way to reckon with it. This may be unique among all religions. In the Christian story, the violence that I do, I do *to God*. Not *for* God, as in many ancient religions that required human bloodshed to appease the divine. Here Jesus testifies that the violent results of our lust for power (expressed in Governor Pilate), our group-think, uncritical mob mentality (as in the crowd), our spite and jealousy (represented in the religious leaders), our dumb brutality and meanness (as in the soldiers) *hurt God*.

...the God who dies for our sins, at our hands, who doesn't retaliate with violence, whose non-violent direct action reveals the stark reality of our brutality, giving rise – as only non-violence can – to the potential for awareness, repentance, conversion.

...the God who has given us morning dew, white egrets, warm sunshine, ripe strawberries. The faithful One who paints the morning sky in purple,

red and gold, and teaches flowers to turn their whole lives into a celebration. The Love that knitted us together in bodies that breathe without intentionality on our part, bodies that heal themselves from more cuts and bruises that we've ever been aware of. The Creator of longhaired cats that curl in laps, and big-tongued dogs, prodigal with their kisses. The source of a dream that lives as a fountain of hope in dry times. The Power that sent wildflowers up through the concentration camp concrete. The Savior of lives spent coiled in greed, knotted in anxiety, shrunken by fear.

That God is hurt by our violence. By my unwillingness to visit those in prison. By my willingness to let my comfort be a higher priority than the life of another human being. By my practice of squelching my unique voice, and abnegating my agency. By my willingness to push over people to get my way, or make my point, or prove that I'm right, or show that I can't be messed with. By my meanness. By my pettiness. We are hurting the one who has given us life.

God does not require violence. We have required it, and God is paying the price. Lord, have mercy. Amen.

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