

# Violence to Conversion

*By Father Joe Schwab*

**A**n atmosphere of fearful suspicion toward other religions and even movements within a religion is hardly a new phenomenon, and Christianity has never been immune from this. My own branch of the Franciscan Order was deeply involved in attacks on other Franciscan movements even while expanding rapidly, particularly within the Spanish Empire and arriving here in Arizona in 1539 at the time of the Protestant Reformation. At the time, European nationalistic governments, economic interests, ideologies and churches, sometimes aligned and sometimes at war, were intent upon their “correct” versions of Christianity. God help any other religion! Communal insight into the nature of sin and virtue, slowly gained over centuries of practice and faith, was often jettisoned in favor of individual interpretation, creating mutual hostility between these ways of knowing and experiencing God. A desire, sometimes a frenzy for unity of thought and expression partially fed the development of communal self-awareness. Extremes of fanatical commitment or rejection dot Christian history to the present day.

The dangers were disintegration of a faith community on one hand or the development of fossilized ideology on the other, typically justified on scriptural grounds. We need to navigate between the two. The acceptance of an integral approach opens scriptural interpretation to insights and developments, both ancient and modern. By integral, I mean an approach that utilizes—and recognizes as useful—change, development, mistakes, sin, virtue, heroism, blindness, insight and other elements of many religions. We can learn from each other.

I am not suggesting that one religion is as good as another; if that were my claim, I would not be who I am today. I am claiming as helpful to me and my religion the story of the other. I mean to learn from others. It is through openness to new influences

and developments that I learn to reject some and accept others while staying rooted in the story of the community revealed in scripture. This does not mean that I believe that all ideas in scripture are good to maintain today. It means that I recognize that these transformative narratives, prophecies, poems, stories and insights, filtered through the lens of the vast expanse of human history they represent, still have their proper power and place in my culture and time. The foundation was laid in human experience and accompaniment, enlightened by God's presence. It requires recognition of human mistakes, cooperation with evil, love of the good, lots of courage, mediocrity, and astounding levels of holiness—all reflected in these texts.

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Some Christians accept scripture as divine dictation, that is, God speaking words into the ears or minds of earthly secretaries. This is not my approach. Instead, I accept scripture as divine inspiration. That is, God moved certain people and groups of people through the action of grace and via the medium of their multiple worldviews, experiences, and insights to record and speak about the relationship of God with creation. Now, it is necessary to note that human cultures and ways of thinking change over time. In some of the eras noted in the Bible, human culture could be characterized as hunter-gatherer, tribal, village, early state, and so on. This means that humans utilized magic, mythology, literalism, rationality and other methods to make sense of the world depending on the type of culture within which they lived. Today, we've recently moved from an industrial age to an informational one and perhaps we're experiencing the birth pangs of moving from concepts of nationalism to one of a planetary form of government. Occasionally, extraordinary people help us move into new ways of thinking, and violence has been a part of their stories as well.

Violence is related to domination, that is, the oppression and disadvantaging of others whose values and actions are imposed upon. Since domination is non-reciprocal by nature, it breeds anger and violence. The Bible records many revelations of this kind of relationship, from the sons of Adam to the suffering community in the Book of Revelation. The Christian community is not exempt from these human experiences.

Many early disciples of Jesus had hoped that he would lead the Hebrew people into a new era of political independence, expelling the hated Roman oppressors in battles reminiscent of

Luke 24:21

*“But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this [trial and death by crucifixion] took place.”*

John 18:36

*“Jesus answered, ‘my kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants [would] be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here.’”*

Matthew 26:52

*“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.’”*

the apocalyptic literature in Daniel (especially 7, 8, 9), Enoch and Esdras, the last two being non-biblical texts. It is against this background that the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus takes on new meaning. These disciples apparently hoped to be involved in such warfare (Luke 24:21) and to rejoice at the destruction of their political enemies. And they knew Jesus personally!

### Sword Imagery

While Jesus himself did not condone these violent means (Jn. 18:36, Mt. 26:52), he did note that he had not come to bring peace. This is perhaps one of the most forgotten passages in Christian scripture. Instead, he stated that he had come to bring the sword (Mt. 10:34-36). Division comes with

change, as he well knew. This was and is an uncomfortable challenge. Some of the people of his times could hear this as a call to arms for the sake of the “Kingdom of God,” a new social order inaugurated by the mysterious, semi-divine “Son of Man” mentioned in Daniel 7. Matthew’s version of the Gospel doesn’t clear up the possible confusion.

### Vengeance

While human revenge is discouraged, divine vengeance is not. Paul notes that it is just for God to afflict and eternally ruin certain people, including those who do not obey the gospel (2 Thes. 1:5-8). Such violent wishes cannot be explained away but must be faced. They cannot be understood outside their context, which is not that of twenty-first century America.

### Atonement/Redemption

Within this complex of ideas is found perhaps one of the most profoundly disturbing spiritual developments within the Christian tradition. While I believe it to be the result of mistaken scriptural interpretations, I also find it to be widespread and tenaciously adhered to. It can be paraphrased

Matthew 10:34

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s enemies will be those of his household.”

2 Thessalonians 1:5-8

“This is evidence of the just judgment of God, so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering. For it is surely just on God’s part to repay with afflictions those who are afflicting you, and to grant rest along with us to you who are undergoing afflictions, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with his mighty angels, in blazing fire, inflicting punishment on those who do not acknowledge God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

like this. God the Father was really angry at the reality of human sin. He left people mired in its consequences for a very long time. Luckily for us, Jesus offered to become a bloody sacrifice so that the Father would relent and call the score even. Otherwise, we'd never get to heaven.

Roots of this viewpoint can be found in scripture, although in a mistaken use of it. However, we are talking about the way scripture is used—and some use it this way. The Letter to the Hebrews addresses Christians growing slack in faith by focusing on the type of priesthood lived in the experience of Jesus. Priesthood, then as today, had a lot to do with sacrifices. In this letter (Heb. 9:22, 23), it is noted that purification happens thorough blood. Here the author is limiting considerations to that of the sacrificial cult and not utilizing other possibilities such as contrition (Ps. 51, 19) and almsgiving (Sir. 3:29). The purpose of this citation is to help relate the type of death Jesus suffered to priesthood and sacrifice, not to ignore other possibilities of purification and atonement for sin. However, taken out of context and utilized in a literalist sense, such a phrase would mean that sins are only forgiven by

*Hebrews 9:22-23*

*“According to the law almost everything is purified by blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”*

shedding blood. It can and has meant for many that God is somehow propitiated by Jesus' violent death. It's pretty easy to extend that to the death of others.

The death of Jesus as a kind of ransom (Mark 10:45) is readily developed into the conclusion noted above that God the Father is only satisfied if Jesus dies a horrible and violent death on the cross. In fact, the quote from Mark is placed in a broader context of service to others and to the

*Mark 10:45*

*“For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

need to witness to the special relationship of Israel to God in a time of persecution (1 Mac. 2:50-65 and especially 6:44-46). We could more satisfactorily note the

fact that goodness is attacked by evil, and that reconciliation is incomplete, in process, until the end of time. It would take later developments in theology to offer people the realization that God could effect healing from sin simply by an act of divine will, but instead acted through human sinfulness and cruelty to overturn the power of death.

## Blood Guilt

The statement of a group of people gathered in front of Pontius Pilate on a spring day

about the year 32 and recorded in Matthew 27:25 has resounded through the centuries as a justification for the persecution of Jewish people. “His blood be upon us and upon our children” still echoes with terrible consequences. Blood guilt is a concept noted in scripture (2 Sam. 1:16, Jer.26:15 and 51:35), but is not permanent. Taken out of context, as fundamentalist interpretation normally does, and then applied to others who had no part in making the statement, we know too well what atrocious actions have been justified, or at least ignored, by many Christians. The words were a human response, not a divine one, and do not square with the meaning given to the blood of Christ in Christian theology.

*Matthew 27:25*  
*“And the whole people said in reply, ‘His blood be upon us and upon our children.’”*

## Holy War

No book in Christian scripture has more war imagery than Revelation, and no book is more frequently appealed to for predictions of disasters to come. Perhaps not incidentally, no book’s title is more frequently changed, for the title is singular, not plural. While the book does not promote armed resistance to Roman imperial aggression and was in fact never used this way historically, it does glory in the coming destruction of the oppressive regime. While giving hope to an oppressed minority, it uses much violent imagery. There are heavenly armies, battles and a sword (Rev. 19: 14-19), and justified killing

*Revelation 19:14-19*  
*“The armies of heaven followed him, mounted on white horses and wearing clean white linen.”*

Out of his mouth came a sharp sword to strike the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod, and he himself will tread out in the wine press the wine of the fury and wrath of God the almighty. He has a name written on his cloak and on his thigh, 'King of kings and Lord of lords.' Then I saw an angel standing on the sun. He cried out [in] a loud voice to all the birds flying overhead, 'Come here, gather for God's great feast, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of military officers and the flesh of warriors, the flesh of horses and of their riders, and the flesh of all, free and slave, small and great.' Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered to fight against the one riding the horse and against his army."

Revelation 19:21

"The rest were killed by the sword that came out of the mouth of the one riding the horse and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh."

(Rev. 19:21) to name only a few. War is glorified, fighting is sacred; a kind of holy revolution against the powers of evil.

What is it about warfare and fighting that fascinates so many men and not a few women? Is it the fact that the war experience transcends normal living, demands much strength, sacrifice and courage, leads to group bonding, the overcoming of danger by dealing with awful risks and finding honor in another's defeat? Cultures throughout history have seen such visceral struggles as something at least related to the transcendence of God. But if we are people of peace we are called to a revolution also.

The revolution of loving, empathy, and ethical behavior is born in struggle with the experiences of our human history, and all elements of this are reflected in scripture, not just the parts we might like to have celebrated today. The struggle is really one of the struggle between the model of domination and the model of communion. Don't be "Pollyanna" about

this. It is a struggle to the death, and we, as believers in peace, can do no less than engage in it. Much is required of us, but we know that we are not alone in this quest, for our ancestors in faith struggled mightily with domination and communion, and they have left us a legacy in the scriptures.

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