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Joe L. Coker

Peace and the Apocalypse: Stanley Hauerwas and Miroslav Volf on the Eschatological Basis for Christian Nonviolence

Mr Coker, who is a research student at Princeton working on the cultural and political function of eschatological beliefs, offers a by-product of his studies.

Key words: Theology; eschatology; non-violence; Hauerwas; Volf.

Introduction

Among contemporary Christian pacifists, two in particular stand out because of the alternative vision they offer of Christian non-violence: Stanley Hauerwas and Miroslav Volf. Hauerwas is an American who teaches Christian ethics at Duke University. Volf, a Croatian, teaches theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. Both theologians ground their arguments for nonviolence firmly in eschatology, though each has a unique eschatological vision. Each offers a compelling argument for Christian pacifism, especially for evangelical Christians who take seriously the eschatological nature of the New Testament.

Two Pacifists

Hauerwas is unhappy about having to be identified as a 'Christian pacifist' because he is convinced that Christians 'cannot be anything other than nonviolent.'¹ Being a pacifist should be synonymous with one's identity as a Christian, he believes. Hauerwas sees being a Christian as being incorporated 'into a community constituted by the stories of God.' This identity automatically 'puts one in tension with the world that does not share those stories.'² Christians are therefore torn between two histories: the violent history of the world or the peaceable

1 Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches From the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 137.

2 *Ibid.*

history of God. For Hauerwas the choice is clear; the latter is the history with which the church is to participate and identify. Christians, he believes, are a group of people 'who believe that God will have them exist through history without the necessity of war.'³

Hauerwas argues that war is nothing more than the human desire 'to be rid of God' and to 'claim for ourselves the power to determine our meaning and destiny.'⁴ He believes that there is no such thing as a 'just' war. The 'so-called just war theory,' Hauerwas writes, has only made it 'more difficult for Christians to distinguish their story from the story of the United States of America.'⁵ He views pacifism and just war theory not simply as two different 'ethical strategies for the achievement of God's justice in the world,' but as different ways of thinking about history and humankind's destiny.⁶ It is up to Christians, Hauerwas contends, to take the risk of forgiving and thereby 'break the circle of violence.'⁷

Like Hauerwas, Volf does not see violence as a legitimate option for Christians. He too talks of 'breaking the cycle of violence,' a feat accomplished by the crucified Messiah and which Christians must imitate.⁸ Volf realizes, though, that Christians are slow to imitate this aspect of the work of Christ. 'We may believe in Jesus,' he observes, 'but we do not believe in his ideas, at least not in his ideas about violence, truth, and justice.'⁹ Volf believes that many Christians have an un-Christ-like stance towards violence because they refuse to reflect on the 'whole drama of Jesus Christ's coming into the world, living in it, and judging it.'¹⁰

Volf realizes that one reason Christians have difficulty adopting nonviolence is that we live in such an unjust world. 'We would be both less desirous of inflicting violence and more willing to suffer it if we lived in a world where justice were done and truth respected,' he remarks.¹¹ We feel that if truth and justice are to reign, we must rely on the use of force by the state. But Volf believes we must look at the issue differently. Christians must concern themselves with 'how to live under the rule of Caesar in the absence of truth and justice.'¹² How do

3 S. Hauerwas, *Should War Be Eliminated?: Philosophical and Theological Investigations* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1984), 53.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Hauerwas, *Dispatches From the Front*, 137.

6 Hauerwas, *Should War Be Eliminated?*, 52.

7 Hauerwas, *Dispatches From the Front*, 134.

8 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 291.

9 *Ibid.*, 276.

10 *Ibid.*, 291.

11 *Ibid.*, 277.

12 *Ibid.*

we as Christians live peaceably in an unjust world? Finding a way to do so, Volf believes, is the only way of putting an end to the use of religion as a 'force for legitimizing the use of violence for political ends.'¹³

Two Eschatologies

Hauerwas and Volf share more than a commitment to Christian nonviolence; they also share a similar answer to the question 'how and why are Christians to live peaceably in a violent world?' For both theologians, the proper foundation for a Christian understanding of nonviolence is eschatology, or the doctrine of the end times and the coming of God's kingdom. Richard Miller observes that Hauerwas has 'devoted considerable attention to the theology of history and Christian eschatology to accentuate the differences between pacifism and just-war theories.'¹⁴

Hauerwas believes that the eschatological teachings of the New Testament are fundamental to being a Christian pacifist. He is dismayed that liberal Christian scholarship has 'spent the last century trying to explain Jesus' and/or the early church's apocalyptic pronouncements in a manner such that we do not have to take them seriously.'¹⁵ This is disappointing, Hauerwas believes, because a proper understanding of Christian nonviolence must 'inextricably presuppose an eschatological framework.'¹⁶ The eschatology of the New Testament reveals to us that God is firmly in control of both the beginning and end of human history. 'We can rest in God,' Hauerwas assures us, 'because we are no longer driven by the assumption that we must be in control of history, that it is up to us to make things come out right.'¹⁷ For him, the peace that Christians are to bring into the world 'is a genuine eschatological peace.'¹⁸

At the center of Hauerwas' eschatology is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He writes that learning 'to see the world eschatologically requires that we learn to see the life of Jesus as decisive for the world's status as part of God's kingdom.'¹⁹ Through his death and resurrection, Hauerwas believes, Christ ushered in the kingdom of

¹³ *Ibid.*, 282.

¹⁴ Richard Miller, 'Christian Pacifism and Just-war Tenets: How Do They Diverge?', *Theological Studies* 47:3 (September 1986), 453.

¹⁵ S. Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 165.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁷ S. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

God. 'In his death the history of the world reached a turning point,' he says, 'the end has come, the kingdom has been established.'²⁰ Hauerwas believes that Christ makes known the fact that 'the world does have an end' and that the end, just like the beginning, is God's.²¹ Miller observes that in Hauerwas' eschatological vision Christ 'inaugurated a new aeon which points forward to the kingdom, of which the present is only a foretaste.'²² Hauerwas believes that in Jesus Christ, the kingdom has come.

Because the inbreaking of the eschaton into human history occurred with the death and resurrection of Jesus, Hauerwas sees Christians as living in 'a period in which two ages overlap.'²³ Even though human history continues, Christians can 'begin to point to the fact that the kingdom is present in our midst.'²⁴ Because the kingdom of God has fully arrived, a 'new moral order' has been made possible and Christians are to live according to it.²⁵ Hauerwas believes that the Christian commitment to non-violence is therefore 'an eschatological commitment' demonstrating to the world our confidence 'that in fact we live in a new age.'²⁶

The church, for Hauerwas, is called to be 'a foretaste of the peaceable kingdom' of God.²⁷ The church itself is not the kingdom, but rather a means of making visible to the world the 'implications of God's kingdom of peace brought in Jesus Christ.'²⁸ To participate in violence, therefore, is the antithesis of the very purpose of the church. For Hauerwas, eschatology is the key to understanding the church's purpose in the world and to understanding why Christians must be nonviolent.

Miroslav Volf views eschatology as 'a center that holds the whole web of [theological] doctrines together.'²⁹ It is certainly the key element of his argument for Christian nonviolence. Like Hauerwas, Volf believes that 'violence is not human destiny because the God of peace is the beginning and end of human history.'³⁰ Unlike Hauerwas, however, Volf's eschatological vision seeks to take seriously all the eschatological

20 Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 165.

21 S. Hauerwas, 'The Need for an Ending', *Modern Churchman* 28 (1986), 6.

22 Miller, 454.

23 Hauerwas, *Should War Be Eliminated?*, 50.

24 S. Hauerwas and Mark Sherwindt, 'The Kingdom of God: An Ecclesial Space for Peace', *Word & World* 2 (Spring 1982), 134.

25 Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 165.

26 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 88.

27 *Ibid.*, 100.

28 *Ibid.*, 132.

29 M. Volf, 'Eschaton, Creation, and Social Ethics', *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (April 1995), 138.

30 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 305.

images of Christ found in the New Testament, including those found in the book of Revelation. Of particular importance to Volf's eschatology is Rev. 19, where John sees a vision of:

a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. He is dressed in a robe dripped with blood, and his name is the Word of God. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule with an iron scepter. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.³¹

Volf seeks to reconcile the peaceful image of Christ as crucified Messiah with the violent image of Christ as the Rider on the white horse. 'As opposites,' he argues, 'the Christ of the gospels and the Christ of the Apocalypse belong to each other.'³² Volf believes that the two can not only be reconciled but that together they provide a convincing basis for Christian nonviolence in a violent world. Volf does not attempt to water down the violent imagery of Revelation. 'The violence of the Rider on the white horse,' he suggests, is the 'portrayal of the final exclusion of everything that refuses to be redeemed by God's suffering love.'³³ Even without softening the Rider's image, Volf is convinced that the two images of Christ—that of the gospels and that of Revelation—'do not underwrite violence but offer important resources for living peacefully in a violent world.'³⁴

According to Volf, it is precisely because Christ will usher in the new kingdom with violent justice that Christians can follow the peaceful example of the crucified Messiah. 'In a world of violence,' he says, 'we are faced with an inescapable alternative: either God's violence or human violence.'³⁵ Because Christ, as the Rider on the white horse, has taken upon himself the task of overcoming the evildoers of this world, Christians are exempt from such actions. Volf says the important questions Christians must ask themselves is 'who should be engaged in separating the darkness from the light? Echoing the whole New Testament, the Apocalypse mentions only God.'³⁶ The violent imagery of Revelation is not a call for Christians to 'take up their swords and gather under the banner of the Rider on the white horse, but to take up their crosses and follow the crucified Messiah.'³⁷ Volf believes that vengeance belongs solely to God and is never an appropriate activity for a Christian. In this way the peaceful Christ of the cross and the violent Christ of the

31 Rev. 19:11, 13, & 15, New International Version.

32 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 288.

33 *Ibid.*, 299.

34 *Ibid.*, 278.

35 *Ibid.*, 303.

36 *Ibid.*, 301.

37 *Ibid.*, 302.

Second Coming 'are not accomplices in spilling blood, but partners in promoting nonviolence.'³⁸

In Volf and Hauerwas, then, one finds a single vision of Christian nonviolence founded on two visions of Christian eschatology. Hauerwas' vision is of a 'realized' eschatology where Christ has ushered in the peaceable kingdom of God through his death and resurrection. Christians, because they are a part of this new kingdom, are to reflect its nonviolent nature in their dealings with the world. Volf's vision is of a 'not yet' eschatology in which Christ will some day return to violently vanquish the forces of evil. Christians can live peaceably in this violent and unjust world because they know that ultimately God's justice and vengeance shall reign. For both, a proper understanding of the eschatology of the New Testament makes nonviolence the only option for Christians.

Two Contributions

One important contribution that Hauerwas' and Volf's views on Christian nonviolence make is that they both offer an alternative to the traditional liberal arguments for Christian pacifism. Rather than relying upon optimism about the potential of humans to co-exist peacefully, the pacifism of Volf and Hauerwas is founded upon a realistic understanding that Christian nonviolence will not ultimately overcome the violent history of this world. Hauerwas admits that Christian pacifism 'is not a pacifism that guarantees a world without war,' and Volf observes that 'if history is any guide, the prospects are good that nonviolence will fail to dislodge violence.'³⁹ What Volf and Hauerwas propose, however, is not outcome-based pacifism. Rather, Hauerwas testifies that Christians 'are pacifists not because pacifism promises to create a world free of war, but because we believe God would not have us be otherwise in a world at war.'⁴⁰

Volf particularly eschews the notion that war can be abolished. 'Against the brutal reality of the Holocaust,' he writes, 'belief in the progressive elimination of violence appears as a peculiarly modern superstition posturing as truth about history.'⁴¹ He also dismisses the theory put forth by Christians such as Hans Küng that ecumenical and inter-religions dialogue is the key to world peace. 'Peace between

38 Ibid.

39 Hauerwas, *Against the Nations* 166 and Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* 297.

40 S. Hauerwas, 'The Sermon on the Mount: Just War and the Quest for Peace', *A Council for Peace*, eds. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 42.

41 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 281.

religions would do little to create peace between peoples,' he believes.⁴² Volf urges Christians to be nonviolent not because he believes it will spread peace, but because it is the place of God alone to take up the sword against the wicked.

The nonviolent views of Hauerwas and Volf are grounded in the understanding that ours is an evil and bellicose world, but that its ultimate end is in the hands of God. Volf's theology, forged in the war-torn former Yugoslavia, particularly reflects this rejection of liberalism's optimistic view of human nature. He knows that his thesis 'that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine judgment will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West.'⁴³ Both Volf and Hauerwas realize, though, that if a theology of pacifism is going to survive when confronted with the violence of this world it must be firmly grounded in a realistic understanding of human nature and an eschatological vision which offers hope. Unless one grounds Christian pacifism in such an eschatological vision, Hauerwas warns, 'the demands to forgive our enemies push us beyond what we normally think to be humanly possible.'⁴⁴ Volf states these sentiments more bluntly, indicting the comfortable environment from which the traditional liberal views of Christian pacifism come. 'It takes the quiet of a suburban home,' he writes, 'for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die.'⁴⁵

A second important contribution which Volf's and Hauerwas' views on Christian nonviolence offer is that they provide a theology of pacifism for those Christians who take seriously the eschatological and apocalyptic teachings of the New Testament. Liberal Protestantism, where Christian pacifists are most commonly found, has traditionally downplayed or simply ignored such portions of scripture. In evangelical Protestant circles, though, where pacifism has not been heartily embraced, great emphasis is placed upon eschatological interpretation. The pacifism of Hauerwas and Volf should resonate with Christians from both camps. For liberal Christian pacifists, this brand of nonviolence offers a new emphasis on the rich yet often overlooked eschatological portions of scripture and re-interpretation of violent apocalyptic imagery. For evangelicals, it offers a new way of thinking about Christian nonviolence which values and takes seriously all of scripture, even the apocalyptic visions in books such as Revelation.

For both Hauerwas and Volf, it is unacceptable for Christians to take

42 Ibid., 285.

43 Ibid., 304.

44 Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 165.

45 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 304.

up the sword. Both argue that through the eschatological teachings of the New Testament, Christians know that the final victory belongs to God. Because the end is assured, Christians do not have to resort to violence in their dealings with the world. While both theologians ground their pacifism in eschatology, each has a unique vision of the eschaton. In Hauerwas' eschatology, the new kingdom of God has already been ushered in by Christ's death and resurrection. For Volf, the kingdom is still coming, and will be escorted in by Christ as the Rider on the white horse bringing justice to an unjust world. Both Volf and Hauerwas, however, offer important and compelling new options for Christian nonviolence.

Abstract

Stanley Hauerwas and Miroslav Volf represent a new way of thinking about Christian pacifism. While their argument *that* Christians should be nonviolent is not unique, their reasoning about *why* Christians should be nonviolent is. Both ground their vision of Christian pacifism firmly in eschatology, seeing God's control of the end of history as assurance that Christians should and can live peacefully in a violent world. This article examines the views of Volf and Hauerwas on pacifism and argues that their eschatologically-based vision offers an important alternative to traditional liberal Protestant arguments and a compelling new way for evangelical Christians to think about nonviolence.

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