

# The Primordial Violence of God

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*What effect should Big Bang cosmology and evolutionary biology have on the Christian understanding of God the creator? If creation originated in a violent irruption of divine power, and if from their first emergence living things have been engaged in a cruel and unremitting war for survival, then, Goetz maintains, "we are driven to the inescapable conclusion that God's involvement in violence [is] primordial." This insight leads Goetz to a different reading of the book of Genesis and to a different diagnosis of the human situation. Human beings never enjoyed sinless existence in a perfect world. On the contrary: "Sin with violence as its prime instrumentality" is primordial, universal and inevitable. God might have created a world free of violence, death, and sin, but God did not. The creation that God declared good, to which God committed his honor, and from which God intends to make a new creation, is this creation, this finite world, a world in which the anguished blood of tens of millions cries to God for redemption. These reflections push Goetz toward radically new understandings of the purpose of the Incarnation, the object of the atonement, and the eschatological shaping of Christian ethics.*

If the Big Bang theory of cosmic beginnings is on the right track scientifically, then I take it as a given that our universe came into being out of an event of unparalleled violence, a violence that dwarfs any subsequent violence that the cosmos has generated since its inception. Faith in creation, that is, faith in the divine origin of the universe, involves a different order of commitment than does belief in any scientific theory about the universe. Nevertheless, when we speak about creation we must of necessity have in mind that present reality which our senses informed by our science present to us. Our universe is not the universe of Babylonian mythology; it is the post-Newtonian universe of Einstein and Heisenberg. Therefore, if we, with our conceptions shaped as they are by this post-Newtonian perspective, affirm that God is the ultimate source of the universe, the universe we are speaking of is the universe that began in the Big Bang. This means theologically that if God began all things in a Big Bang, we are driven to the inescapable conclusion that God's involvement in violence was primordial.

Assuming that the universe came into being out of what was an inconceivably violent explosion, and there would be no light or matter or space or time were it not for that pre-cosmic blast, then the measured, indeed liturgical calm of the first chapter of the book of Genesis needs to be read differently than once seemed to be required. In Genesis, God says, "Let there be light," and then *ex nihilo*, effortlessly, out of the utter calm of eternity, there was light. To read the book of Genesis without the benefit of the insight of modern science might well permit the conclusion that Jahweh didn't engage in violence until human beings defied the Holy will.

However, given what we now know, from the first instant that eternity entered into time the result has been anything but tranquil. The universe is moving at dazzling speeds out toward an ever increasing magnitude, creating and destroying whole galaxies as it expands.

Further, if science is right, and the universe cannot continue its violent expansion forever, it will ultimately end in one of two mutually exclusive, though equally catastrophic, scenarios. Either the outward expansion of the universe will slow to a stop and finally reverse itself, and all things will end in the final violence of the big crunch, or if there is not enough mass in the universe to bring about such a reversal, the evolution of the universe will terminate in the bleak triumph of entropy. The universe will at last achieve an end to its violence and finally find peace: the eerie, moribund peace of matter in endlessly inert, dark, frozen suspension.

It might be objected that my application of the term violence to the Big Bang and its cosmic consequence does a certain violence of its own to the term. Among Webster's several definitions of violence, the term is defined as I have been using it. Let us call it "Violence I": "intense, often devastatingly or explosively powerful force or energy as of a hurricane or volcano." Some readers might nonetheless argue that our subject is not catastrophic typhoons, tidal waves, earthquakes, hurricanes or any other by-products of the primal Big Bang. Isn't the subject violence in a quite different sense? More to the point is what I would call "Violence II," quoting another of Webster's definitions: "physical force used so as to injure, damage, or destroy; extreme roughness of action." Yet even this definition of violence is merely descriptive, essentially value free. Violence, especially in a theological context, has an ethical dimension, that is, "Violence III." Webster again: "unjust or callous use of force or power, as in violating another's rights, sensibilities, etc...the harm done by this." It will be my claim that given the cosmic fact of Violence I, both Violence II and III are inevitabilities. Indeed, Violence II and III should be understood as existential epiphenomena of Violence I.

Sentient beings took a long time in appearing. But finally the cosmos evolved into at least one planet (and probably many more planets) on which life could emerge and evolve. When that happened, a universe wrought in Violence I ("intense often devastating or explosively 'powerful' force or energy") ineluctably gave birth to Violence II ("physical force used so as to injure, damage or destroy").

A century before modern cosmologists began telling us of that pre-sensate violence in which the lifeless stars move and have their being (Violence I), Charles Darwin focused our attention on biological conflict and the suffering and death so integral to natural selection. Inanimate violence (Violence I), which necessitates universal impermanence, was from the first emergence of life inexorably linked to a new biological violence—"physical force used so as to injure, damage or destroy"

(Violence II), making suffering and death the precondition of life. Darwin's doctrine of the survival of the fittest forces us to the unvarnished recognition that the whole of evolutionary development is lubricated by the blood and sap of living things shed in ceaseless competition for survival. Darwin himself was deeply troubled by such a thought. Nature so "unconscious and unpitying" was one of the chief factors in Darwin's gradual turning from Christianity to a vague deism to ultimate agnosticism.

Seen in a Darwinian light, certain themes in the book of Genesis seem curiously in phase with what Darwin made so manifest—that there is no survival, not to say evolution, without conflict and dominance. For example, in the first story of creation we are told that on the sixth day God made living things. First came "cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth" (Genesis 1:24). As in the creation of light and all that followed from day one to day five, the creation was achieved effortlessly. God spoke, and that which was not, appeared. However, when God's creativity got closer to home, and God created humanity in the divine image, the issue of the exercise of power and authority became an urgent matter. The first man and woman were to "have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26; emphasis mine). To do so they must "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue* it" (Gen. 1:28; emphasis mine).

Augustine of Hippo, in his attempt to get God off the hook for moral responsibility in nature's harshness, extravagantly praised the original perfection of nature and, above all, human nature. It was the sin of Adam and Eve which brought corruption both to themselves and to the natural order. For Augustine, humanity was innocent and deathless when suddenly, by their one act of disobedience, Adam and Eve created virtually *ex nihilo* that which did not until that moment exist, i.e., sin and evil. Despite the metaphysical dubiousness of such a claim, one or another species of such thinking has survived as near orthodoxy in Western Christendom ever since Augustine. Even today, both on the theological right and left, though belief in the validity of the Genesis creation accounts as natural histories of the universe has long since given way to a more metaphorical reading of the text, one still can hear talk that sounds as if a vaguely actual Adam and Eve (or some segment of humanity designated as the exploitive source of earthly woe—capitalists, dead white males, etc.) were the primal source of violence and suffering. If Darwin was right, humanity from the very moment it evolved into life existed in an evolutionary continuum that has always required suffering and death and the eventual extinction of whole species.

In the post-modern theological context, when the book of Genesis features God as commanding the first man and woman to "subdue" the earth, the word "subdue" virtually explodes from the text as a vitally operative term. One is reminded of Lynn

White's thesis that the Bible is the ideological source of Western ecological piracy, or the feminist contention that a God who would have us relate to creation as its coercive ruler is nothing but *machismo* projected on to the clouds. While there is considerable insight in such critiques, what the book of Genesis is getting at is more primal, more grave, and more unalterable.

As God uses inconceivable force in creating the universe, and in pitilessly demanding the eventual termination of every finite life in achieving the evolution of the cosmos, we who are created in God's image are compelled by our natures as essentially furless, rational, tool-bearing animals to alter and thereby subdue every environment in which we find ourselves. We must use force, for there is no other way to exercise the dominion we need in order to exist in the kind of world God has made. The Augustinian claim that there once existed a qualitatively more benign universe before the fall of Adam and Eve is not only shaken by modern science but by the Genesis text itself in its use of the terms "dominion" and "subdue" to describe humanity's obligations toward the creation.

The presence of the serpent in the second Genesis story of creation also punctures the myth of some primal Edenic innocence. The very fact that the Bible writers chose to preserve the ancient tradition of the scheming serpent seems a clear indication that they never conceived of a primal condition of perfect innocence and peace in a primal garden that could have provided everlasting tranquility and life if only Adam and Eve had not erred. Since God had placed a subtle tempter in the garden it was all but a sure bet that Adam and Eve—those naïve, primitive, naked, inexperienced berry pickers—were destined for a fall.

The serpent claimed that Adam and Eve would not die when they ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. He told at least half the truth. Adam and Eve were not poisoned. They survived the eating, they survived God's angry interrogation and curse and the cherubim's flaming sword as he drove them from the garden. Of course, Adam and Eve did eventually physically die. But was it due to a divine curse for having eaten of the fruit of the tree or was it merely that they were made of dust and to dust they had of natural necessity to return? Clearly, in the text, Adam is cursed with having to labor for his food: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread. . ." However, the last part of the verse relating to death can be read not as a curse at all, but as a simple observation of a natural fact—indeed, pure Darwinism almost three thousand years before Darwin. The curse that Adam must work hard if he would eat, is followed by a recitation of the primal fact that, as we were formed from the earth and must, of course, return to the earth. We must "return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

In any case, the book of Genesis was not intended as a part of a natural history of the universe on the basis of which we are being given to understand, as a scientific fact, that it was we and not God who created death.

As biological beings we are a part of the food chain. We cannot live without killing. We have the teeth of carnivores, but even vegetarians kill weeds and insects in order that edible vegetables might grow, and cut worms and grubs in half with their gardening spades. Soil is fertile because it is composed of decomposed, once living, plants and animals. We drive or fly to peace conferences in cars and planes powered by petroleum, the subterranean rot of once living things.

It is the modern predisposition to see nature as good. For our part, we modern Christians, deeply hedonistic in our values, focus on the goodness of material creation, never tiring of rooting out the Manichaeian, anti-materialistic elements that crept into the pre-modern Christian tradition. Secularists as diverse as nature despoiling capitalists and radical ecologists each, in their own way, affirm the worldliness of the world. Virtually the whole of Western culture sees the material order as good – what we disagree about is how we should sup at nature’s table. Both capitalists and ecologists, consistent in their commitment to the material world in all its evolutionary violence, affirm the logic of their commitments. For the ecologist the wolf is as innocent in killing the lamb as the lamb is innocent in bleating its final death agony. The wolf’s function in the great ecological scheme is as vital as the lamb’s. Similarly, many capitalists see economic struggle as the way to economic progress. To destroy another business competitively is legitimate if that business is weak enough to be destroyed.

We contemporary Christians certainly gravitate, at least in our theory, more toward the world affirmation of the green than to that of the dealers in greenbacks. Our praxis is often less clear. Certainly many of us Christians who favor human and ecological liberation drive cars, use air conditioning, eat well, see the doctor when sick, expect police protection, and make our livings in an economic system that is exploitive. Many of us believe, down deep, that if we had power, we could far better address both the ecological dilemma and poverty in the developing nations than is presently being done. But as we are presently lacking power, we are compelled, however reluctantly, to prosper as well as we can, thank you. We manipulate the society we did not choose, and which we would prefer to make new, in ways that make our outward lives appear to be little different than the unenlightened majority.

How times have changed. In the second century, for example, one of the then most *avant garde* of Christians, the remarkable theological renegade Marcion, regarded with horror all materialism. Just as he was repelled by the materialism of the Old Testament, so too he would have been repelled by the world that Darwin described. For Marcion, to affirm the material world entailed an affirmation of the suffering which the

inevitable violence of the material order inflicts upon humanity. Typical of his time, Marcion did not seem to share our sympathy for animals. However, had he known Darwin, Marcion's case against the creator God might have been strengthened, for he already understood the terrible logic detailed in affirming the material order as it applies to human life.

A modern Marcion would argue that a purely personal affirmation that life is worth living, based on one's personal happiness, carries with it the implication that my existence justifies all the suffering that nature's and humanity's violence has inflicted upon all sentient life from the beginning to the end of time. On the other hand, to base an affirmation of life not on merely personal experience but rather on more global, philosophic grounds entails a similarly remorseless celebration of the rights of nature's winners. The suffering of life's most terrible victims is consummated in the fulfillment achieved by life's success cases.

Marcion, in the name of what he claimed to be the revelation of a heretofore unknown God of love, manifested in a phantom Christ, broke with the God of a creation which forces upon our consciences such grizzly calculations. Marcion believed that the only way out of the violence of this world was extreme asceticism. Celibacy was a critical tool in resisting the power of the God of this world. For if we don't breed, the creator God is deprived of his subjects. I need not remind you of how repugnant such a solution seems to most of us moderns. Not only does a militant celibacy cut to the heart of one of our very highest values, the pleasure of good sex, but Marcion was guilty of the metaphysically unspeakable: dualistic thinking, an unwarranted polarization of the physical and the spiritual. Didn't he understand that we are whole persons, body and mind? Didn't he understand that dualistic thinking provides the ideological basis for humanity's exploitation of itself and nature? Marcion would regard such anti-dualism as a bit of self-justifying hedonism. Of course, he would insist, radical dualism and world renunciation is the only answer to evil.

One obvious reply to Marcion is to counter him with the realistic observation that to live at all involves us in the world. There are radical limits on how far one can get out of the world short of suicide. Therefore, by virtue of the fact that one is still alive, one cannot escape violence and suffering—certainly not by a merely ascetic escape from the world. Since many of us find it impossible to despise the world, notwithstanding all of the horror we affirm when on balance we affirm life, we counter Marcionite other-worldliness by advocating ways of living in the world that are as blameless as possible.

For example, rather than conceiving of societal order in terms of a hierarchical dualistic model that serves to justify control by those who take themselves to be superior over those whom such self-anointed superiors take to be inferior—Western

over non-Western, male over female, successful over the impoverished, etc. – we should seek models of cooperation with our fellow humans and nature. We should not judge differences in human conditions and lifestyles as signs of inferiority; rather, we should celebrate the human variety represented in such differences. As we are open to the diversity of other people, so we ought also to be sensitive to the rights of other species. The animal kingdom has an equal right to exist.

A modern Marcion would be unimpressed. Suppose that humanity at large can be convinced to curb its ecologically destructive potential and maintain dominion over the earth in a cooperative, wise, considerate, and largely unobtrusive manner. Nevertheless, there are limits to what we can change. There can be no alteration of the fact that neither we nor any other living thing can avoid competing unto the death with other living things. We can curtail some of our killing, but we cannot achieve the peaceable kingdom of the eleventh chapter of First Isaiah, where the lion will eat straw like an ox.

Perhaps our violent impact on nature can only be limited to the extent that we are willing to redirect that violence against the most helpless in our own species, and only thereby can we contribute to the preservation and restoration of the planet's ecological balance. A finite planet cannot support an unlimited number of human beings, particularly as modern technologies have raised our expectations as to what constitutes a minimal "quality" of life. Birth control is a way to save nature by subduing it; that failing, abortion is, I think, a dualistic and hierarchical decision on the part of the presently viable that personal and/or societal and/or ecological conditions are such that certain fetuses must be made to cease to be. If we grant, if only for the sake of argument, that the planet's survival requires acts of such terrible sacrifice, a modern Marcion would regard his point as having been made.

Even if we save ourselves and nature from ecological catastrophe, the best we can finally accomplish is the preservation of that arena in which the relentless struggle for survival goes on. Nature's elementally pitiless cruelty will remain unaffected. Marcion might have been sadly amused, though I doubt he had much of a sense of humor, to see the ecologically responsible among the human creatures of the creator God struggling to be more merciful in their enjoyment of nature than that God is himself.

Despite nature's violence, can we not hope that Violence III, which is an exclusively human undertaking can be eradicated? Violence III: "unjust or callous use of force or power, as violating another's rights, sensibilities, etc. . . . The harm done by this." Ought not Darwin's law of the survival of the fittest be repealed if only within the human race?

Animals kill by instinct. That a cat kills a canary is pitiless and merciless, but not unjust or immoral. Sometimes we kill as does the cat, instinctively. We swat a mosquito. But there is killing, and there is killing. Mosquitos—unless one is perhaps a Jain—no problem. Pick a plant for food before it can go to seed and finish its life cycle—no problem. It is harder to kill a pig. It seems almost heartless and cruel to kill a pet pig. Many might become vegetarians if they had to do the slaughter themselves—though perhaps not; I know a pacifist who hunts deer for sport. Though most Americans are carnivores, most would balk at the eradication of whole species. Perhaps because animals' mortality suggests our own mortality, humanity generally takes slaughter to be a serious matter, as, for example, the practice of ritual sacrifice in many religions testifies.

If killing animals is disquieting, a unique horror surrounds the act of murder. Although murder may be defined differently, all cultures have prohibitions against it. Cultures characteristically make war the exception to the prohibition against murder, for if acts of war were to be held to be murderous, nations or classes or tribes could hardly induce their members to fight with abandon. To make it morally bearable, the mayhem of war must be justified by glorifying the warrior and dehumanizing the enemy. So too capital punishment requires special justifications.

Despite the fact that violence has historically been a well nigh universal factor in human interaction, are we compelled to conclude that violence is necessary because it has to date been universal? If it is *necessary*, how is it that people of good will experience, not just sorrow, but remorse and guilt when they do even a minor violence toward their neighbor (to say nothing of ultimate violence)? How can many of us feel so morally impelled to seek domestic and world peace? Can acts that arise out of necessity and thus are inevitable be perceived as morally wrong?

In his high neo-orthodox period, Reinhold Niebuhr attempted to do in utopian optimism by resurrecting the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. Niebuhr states this doctrine in all its logically offensive paradox:

Here is the absurdity in a nutshell. Original sin, which is by definition an inherited corruption, or at least an inevitable one, is nevertheless not to be regarded as belonging to man's essential nature, and therefore, not outside the realm of his responsibility. Sin is natural to man in the sense that it is universal but not in the sense that it is necessary.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Nature*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1949), 242.



Niebuhr and mainstream Western Christian theology generally have used the “absurdity” of the doctrine of original sin (or some similar variant) as dual bulwark, first, against what from the Augustinian point of view is the even greater absurdity of Pelagianism. Pelagians have characteristically held that individual and social perfection is humanity’s to obtain by recourse to one or another nostrum such as free will, or education, or legalistic observance, or the violent revolution of the proletariat, etc. Secondly, and even more importantly, the doctrine of original sin was supposed to provide a bulwark against the conclusion that I have been driving toward in this paper: that God is up to the Holy eyeballs in the violence and suffering of this world, and that human sin did not create violence but that our sin is our response—variously confused and self-justifying, prideful and inadequate, murderous and lustful, arrogant and cowardly, self-centered and chauvinistic, greedy and indulgent—to the conditions of violence that have existed from the first primal explosion.

Unless one can buy into the historicity of the story of the fall, then the notion that we are primordially responsible for what Niebuhr calls the “universal” character of sin is in deep trouble. Science has forced us to recognize that the conditions necessary for sinless existence have never existed. Sin with violence as its prime instrumentality is both universal and inevitable.

Prior to Darwin it was possible to think of humanity as metaphysically distinct from animals. Therefore, the problem of the violence in animal suffering and death could be bracketed from consideration in the problem of theodicy by the expedient of claiming that animals were created finite, a lower metaphysical order.

However, if Darwin is right and all life springs from a common source, then animal suffering has on the face of it a genuine metaphysical connection to human suffering. We can no longer evade the matter of the moral significance of a violent world and animal suffering, as it bears upon the innocence of God. Furthermore, insofar as we are animals to say nothing of sinners, we cannot hope to step totally beyond the natural order of violence and suffering. Our animal situation, despite any anguish of conscience we may feel, compels us to be implicated in the battle to live by the mere fact of our being alive.

The evolution of humanity from pre-human forms to the first humanoid species was gradual. There was never a moment when a first man and woman had before them a *tabula rasa*, a choice to proceed in peace with their fellow creatures, human and non-human, or to choose the way of violence. Rather, they inherited structures of behavior, including male-female manners and mores that grew out of the ways of coping developed by their less self-aware evolutionary forbearers. This illustrates the problem of the *antecedent environment*. As history until this moment has witnessed terrible human violence, everyone inherits the ways of coping with violence that our violent

ancestors have devised, just as their ancestors inherited the ways of those who preceded them. For example, before any American is mature enough to come to his or her own moral decisions about violence, he or she has for years been defended by the army, protected by the police and the legal system, fed by the economic system, acculturated in a class, gender, and racial system that he or she may, upon mature reflection, come to abhor.

By our very birth in culture we are bound to the violent structures of the past, and the past so warps our present perspective as to make inevitable the perpetuation of violent structures in the future. We rarely, if ever, know of a certainty what is the “true” state of affairs. Certainly our sense of justice is radically colored by such as our culturally-effected interests, ideologies, values, loves and prejudices. Thus, as we look to the future and seek “true” and “just” societal reform and “peaceful” resolutions to conflict, it must of necessity be *our* culturally, personally, even idiosyncratically-colored, sense of the right that shapes our proposal for other people’s lives as well as our own. There is an undeniable potential for oppression in even the most idealistic, to say nothing of utopian, dreams for a better world.

Chaos theorists point out that in weather calculations, for example, if one begins with variant assumptions as seemingly small as 1/10 of the fifth decimal point, the outcomes will be wildly different. This ought to give pause to anyone to imagine that, beginning as we do after over millions of years of pre-human and human history, we could now seize control of the variables in such a way that we could not only envision a universally viable peaceful future but also implement a way out of the patterns of violence in all prior history. The future is opaque not only because it does not yet exist, but because we must face it warped by a past that has largely slipped away, a past which shapes our every thought and deed, but which we can but barely remember and cannot even remotely affect. One obvious theological conclusion from all this is that we can never hope to rescue God from primal responsibility for the world’s violence by *our* moral action.

Have I been running an analysis in which the traditional Christian recognition of human sinfulness has given way to a sense of finitude and tragedy and human ethical insignificance? Haven’t we here a schema in which God gets the blame for violence while we are permitted to excuse our venality on the grounds of our tragic helplessness? My first response is that there is enough blame to go around. I would never deny that there is a profound human culpability, as we so often, by deeds of omission and commission, exacerbate evil and suffering. We are culpable sinners no doubt about it. What I am arguing against is our tendency to take such inordinate pride in all we are and do, including our sin, that we end up in the self-centered posture of supposing that we are the primal source of the world’s woes. With reference to the

problems of the world's violence as well as to our hopes for world survival, there is far more that is out of our hands than is in our hands.

Nor am I arguing for a conservative or a quietistic acceptance of the inevitable brokenness of our finitude. If our aggressive intrusion of ourselves upon nature and our fellow humans, with our solutions to the world's woes, can be an occasion of our sin, so also can cynicism or a world-weary quiescence or a self-indulgent sloth. We can indeed make a difference. The whole history of human civilizations represents, in my view, humanity's collective effort to create greater good and less evil. On balance, I would be prepared to argue that in fits and starts, by astonishing feats of creativity and invention, and despite moments of unspeakable barbarism, those of us who have survived the barbarism have made a certain relative progress in staving off the impact of the world's primal violence. At least we have achieved pockets of relative progress for *some* people. For example, virtually all Americans, are doing better *vis-à-vis* economic security, health care, education, racial and gender justice, than we did one hundred years ago. To be sure, the wretched of the earth remain wretched. However, without access to the science and technology which the Western world has created, the developing nations and our own poor can see no hope for their plight.

We do not need to minimize the function of Western cultural genius in the achievement of the West's great economic and cultural power in order to expose the fact that ascendancy is also a function of the West's exploitation of and indifference to the world's poor. Indeed, the greatness of the West's accomplishments makes it all the more apparent that such a culture ought to recognize the clear moral imperative to alleviate human suffering. No political effort should be spared in seeking to sensitize the powerful of the first world to the ethical obligation that bears upon it both to share the world's wealth and to produce wealth in a manner that is eco-responsible. It is clearly within the world's present resource capacity to end world hunger and to provide at least basic medical resources to all humanity. Further, there are far more equitable ways than are presently being employed to draw the world's poor into the world economic order.

However, these rudimentary steps toward world peace and justice and eco-responsibility, if they are achieved, will of necessity have been built upon the bones of millions who, in the process of its development, were not helped but rather destroyed by the creation of Western economic-scientific and technological power. That very power base, the evils of which are so justly deserving of censure, must nevertheless be built upon if there is to be any way out of the present world ecological and economic crisis.

The recent flood of denunciations from revisionist historians aimed at the imperialism of the West contains some important correctives to Western triumphalism.

However, in the ire presently being generated against such as Christopher Columbus there is a danger that we become forgetful of the fact that there is no going back, and that progress toward the goal of human justice and eco-responsibility cannot be made unless humanity commits itself to solutions which presuppose an intimate, albeit critical, mastery of the scientific, technological, aesthetic, philosophical and theological tools by which the Western world has achieved its vaunted, and fashionably despised, ascendancy. We cannot go morally forward except as the wise masters of that wealth—both material and cultural—the amassing of which caused millions of oppressed peoples over the past five hundred years great distress and even their lives.

As I understand it, the Christian faith is, in language inspired by Julian of Norwich, about the almighty God who has the power to redeem what he has done and who, as our loving mother, will not let her beloved children sink into oblivion. This almighty, parenting God could have created a non-violent world, but choose not to do so. The God who alone truly exists bases the credibility and righteousness and honor of the divine motherhood and fatherhood in the holy capacity to make from this finite world a new creation. A new creation that will finally, as the Eastern Church has always so clearly envisioned, be deified, that is, raised from finitude to eternity and thus so united with God's own being that the suffering of this present world will become as nothing when compared with the Glory that shall be revealed. The God who in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, has made an all-sufficient down payment on the holy promise of redemption and re-creation.

My hope that God can pull off such a redemption rests in the self-assurance of such a God who dares to come into the world as a sufferer and a servant, thereby demonstrating that suffering can never destroy us, for the God who is the origin and guarantor of our existences has prevailed in suffering. The crucifixion demonstrates that God has, from the foundation of the universe, been determined to be the co-victim of the creation's violent order.

In many circles it has become unfashionable to speak of a genuine resurrection and a genuine eschatological hope. However, if there was no resurrection—and thus no eschatological promise to which it points—I see nothing of unique significance that the church has to say either to itself or to the world. Without its witness to God's ultimate redemptive commitment and power, the church can only offer the world one or another warmed-over version of the world's own wisdom.

The Church, as the people of God, is called to witness to the eschatological fulfillment of God's purpose. However, the eschaton should be proclaimed and lived not just as an agreeable possibility in a conveniently remote future but as a reality ready to break into history now. Despite the inevitable violence of existence, the Spirit of the

risen Christ can achieve genuine historical moments—and even more than moments—that are reflections here and now of the ultimate glory of God’s consummating purpose! In the light of that glory glimpsed, we have every right to insist on humanity’s even now mirroring in its political life the perfecting love that is the ultimate goal toward which the Spirit of God is drawing all things. By the power of God’s Spirit, working both inside and quite beyond the Christian church, human beings can be better than they are, far better than a mere realism, such as I have been arguing for, gives us any reason to expect. Even granting that there must of tragic necessity be conflict and even innocent blood on our hands whenever we change things—even for the better—it is not beyond our power, by the grace of God, to make things, on balance, better. Certainly Christians are not called to submit to the darkest realities of the created order. We are called to point to that change in all things which God ultimately intends, when the cosmos is finally freed from its groaning travail.

Nevertheless, a due sense of the limitations of our earthly situation is critical if our striving after a better world is not to erode subtly into a self-righteous contempt for those who do not share our own hope and efforts for a better vision of the human possibility. Our righteous longing notwithstanding, we are all still subject to a violent order and we are all sinners. We are all—Christians and non-Christians, progressives and conservatives—united in the ironic fact that we can see the evils and injustices of the world about us more acutely and clearly than we can suggest convincing agendas for ways out of our problems. Further, we are rarely permitted a fresh start; most of the time we are compelled to keep decaying structures in repair.

None of this is intended as a counsel of despair. Far from it. They are counsels rather of circumspection. In our attempts to make peace, as we are called and impelled to do so by the love of Christ, let us not too facily regard those who do not share our vision of peace or the God of Peace as the enemy. They are fellow sinners for whom Christ has died. We have to recognize our common destiny even with those we judge to be wrong-headed. The Hitlers, the Stalins, the organizers of the death squads in El Salvador are of course political degenerates with whom it seems no earthly solidarity is possible. However, psychopaths and sociopaths, unless the whole society has become degenerate, are the minority. Most people are neither degenerates nor are they saints. Most people are morally somewhere in the middle of a bell-shaped curve. Most clear-cut moral superiority ends up being clear only to the beholder who is looking in a mirror. What is saddening is the way that we are tempted, in the name of our vision of God and love and peace, to canonize ourselves in canonizing our doctrines and causes, and to demonize those who have not been given to share our vision—the very people with whom we must be reconciled if there is to be peace. In truth, in the words of G.K. Chesterton, “We are all in the same boat in a stormy sea and we owe each other a

terrible loyalty." This is the positive flip-side of Pogo's famous dictum, "We have met the enemy and he is us." If we have to make strident ideological war before we can achieve the conditions on which genuine peace is to be built, then our vision of peace becomes not the solution but merely one more manifestation of the problem.