Critical Perspectives:The Myth of Redemptive Violence

Hart Wiens, Director of Scripture Translation
Canadian Bible Society
Toronto, Canada

Hart Wiens has served as the Director of Scripture Translation at the Canadian Bible Society since 1997. He directs the overall work of Bible translation in Canada, especially as it applies to the languages of First Nations communities. This paper was presented at the United Bible Societies' Triennial Translators' Workshop in Mombasa, Kenya, June 2006. Click here to learn more about the work of Mr. Wiens and the Canadian Bible Society: http://www.biblesociety.ca/.

Abstract
Redemptive violence is a myth which is cast in the framework of an indestructible good character who, upon finding that the law is too weak to prevail in the conditions of near-anarchy, takes the law into his own hands and battles an equally indestructible evil character. Although the good character seems to be fighting a losing battle for most of the story, he somehow mercilessly vanquishes his opponent and restores order and civility. The writer argues that such "Superman-like" actions are born out of the myth that violence is required, and accepted, to crush evil so that good can ultimately triumph.

Introduction
The myth of redemptive violence has its origin in the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*. In contrast to the biblical narrative, where the creation is presented as good and where evil enters later as a problem to be solved, in the Babylonian story creation itself emerges out of violence. This story provides the plot for much of the entertainment in society today, from the standard comic strip or cartoon sequence to feature length movies and novels. Typically, an indestructible good guy is set in opposition to an equally indestructible bad guy who is beyond hope of reform. Nothing can kill the good guy, although for the first three-quarters of the story he suffers grievously, appearing hopelessly trapped. Somehow the hero breaks free, vanquishes the villain, and restores order again. The plot is depicted graphically in movies like "Jaws," "Rambo," and "Air force One." Likewise, the classic gunfighters of the "Western" settle old scores and restore order by shootouts, never by due process of law. The law in fact, is suspect, too weak to prevail in the conditions of near-anarchy that fiction has misrepresented as the Wild West. The gunfighter must take matters into his own hands. Similarly in the big city, in movies such as Dirty Harry, a beleaguered citizen finally rises up against the crooks ...and creates justice out of the barrel of a gun.[1] This is the environment in which we are catechized – more effectively than in any Sunday school.

The Theology of Violence
Walter Wink exposes the "Myth of Redemptive Violence" in his trilogy on the Powers, especially the last volume, "Engaging the Powers." Behind Wink's understanding of the "Myth of Redemptive Violence" is a fresh and thorough analysis of the biblical language concerning the "principalities and powers" which he identifies as "the inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power."[2] He maintains that every Power has an outer, visible manifestation along with an inner aspect or spirituality. The outer reality is visible in such things as political systems, appointed officials, and laws. The inner reality, while invisible, is the "driving force that animates, legitimates,

[1] Wink, Walter. Babylon Revisited: How Violent Myths Resurface Today. Santa Monica: Center for Media Literacy. 2002-2003. 02 August 2005 <http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article95.html>.
[2] Walter Wink, *Naming the powers: the language of power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 5.

and regulates its physical manifestation in the world."[3] The two realities, the inner and the outer, exist together as an inseparable whole which becomes demonic when it ceases to act according to God's purposes for the common good.

Wink reformulates biblical concepts, such as angels and demons, principalities and powers, in light of contemporary experience. Beginning at the *ancient* worldview which held that everything earthly has its heavenly counterpart and moving on beyond the *spiritualist* worldview which sees the spirit as good and matter as evil, the *materialist* world view which acknowledges no spiritual reality and the *theological* worldview which concedes the earthly reality to science and preserves its privileged "spiritual" realm, he postulates a new *integral* worldview emerging from contemporary streams of thought such as, the new physics, liberation theology, feminist theology, and others. "This integral view of reality sees everything as having an outer and an inner aspect."[4]

Religious tradition, especially in the ancient and spiritualist world views has often tended to treat the Powers as angelic or demonic beings fluttering about in the sky. Wink brings a more current view of reality to bear on the biblical teaching about the Powers. From the perspective of his integral worldview, "the powers are the inner aspect of material or tangible manifestations of power."[5] So the Pentagon, or Enron, or the Mafia, or the United Bible Societies are all examples of the Powers. All have an inner reality – a spirituality. It is this inner spiritual reality, combined with the outward manifestation, which impact our lives and the world around us. In the Bible this view of the Powers is most clearly evident in the book of Revelation where the angel of the church is presented as its corporate reality, its ethos, or essence – its spirituality. According to Wink, the Powers are good; they are fallen and they are being redeemed.[6] He points to the apostle Paul's dialectic on the law in Romans 7 as a biblical articulation of this view.

Violence and The Powers

A key to understanding how the myth of redemptive violence gets perpetuated is the doctrine of the Fall – the recognition that the Powers, created in, through, and for Christ (Colossians 1:16,17), are fallen. Created for good works (Ephesians 2:10), they/we fail to live up to their/our calling. In Wink's words, "Their evil is not intrinsic, but rather the result of idolatry."[7] The Powers, as well as individuals, fail to live up to their true vocation, and now "live under the conditions of the Domination System,"[8] where violence is required to maintain order and avoid chaos. Scriptures such as the vision recorded in Revelation 12 and 13 provide evidence for the claim that in the biblical narrative, "evil is represented… as the system of order that institutionalizes violence as the foundation of international relations."[9] The good news is that God liberates individuals from the domination of the Powers and at the same time liberates the Powers from their destructive behavior as well.

Wink is not the first to "reinterpret the 'principalities and powers,' not as disembodied spirits inhabiting the air, but as institutions, structures, and systems."[10] Liberation theologians had already

[3] Ibid.
[4] Walter Wink, *The powers that be: theology for a new millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 19.
[5] Wink, *Naming*, 104.
[6] Wink, *The powers*, 36.
[7] Wink, *Engaging*, 65.
[8] Ibid., 72.
[9] Ibid., 90.
[10] Wink, *The powers*, 24.

come up with a similar analysis. At the risk of misrepresenting both Wink and liberation theology by oversimplification, I would suggest two important distinctions between their respective analyses of the powers and consequent views on the role of violence in engaging the Powers. The first is that liberation theology builds on Marxist social analysis which is based on the materialist worldview. As a consequence, their analysis of the "principalities and powers" tends to focus on the outward, physical manifestations of the Powers – the institutions and structures, while Wink, coming from the integral worldview stresses the importance of recognizing both the inner and outer aspect of the Powers. The second difference I would profile is that liberation theology tends to see the "principalities and powers" as essentially godless or evil, while in Wink's view the Powers are good creations of God, they are fallen and they can be redeemed. Consequently, liberation theologians tend to be more open to the use of "redemptive" violence in the struggle for liberation from the Powers,[11] while Wink views violence itself as one of the characteristics of the Powers in their fallen state. He makes his strongest case for the repudiation of all violence on the basis of God's domination-free order established by and reflected in the life and teachings of Jesus (e.g. Matthew 5, Luke 6, Luke 22:24-27, Luke 12:37, etc.).[12]

Violence and the Atonement

Our human understanding of the theology of the atonement correlates to how we respond to the myth of redemptive violence. The New Testament reveals some ambivalence in the Christian understanding of the atonement. The earlier writings and all of the Gospels, reflect the understanding that Jesus was executed by the Powers. The violence perpetrated against Jesus by the Powers only served to unmask their illegitimacy. Through his death and resurrection Jesus was understood to have defeated the Powers. This view is articulated in theology as the "*Christus Victor*" theory of atonement. According to this view, Christ triumphs over the Powers under which humanity is in bondage and suffering, and in Christ God reconciles the world to himself. This theology of the atonement could not be sustained by the Church, especially after Constantine.[13] In some of the later Christian writings, and especially those following the conversion of Constantine, which led to a situation where the success of the Church was linked to the success and preservation of the empire, competing views of the atonement gained prominence. In the post-Constantinian context, the view that Christ triumphs over the Powers was seen as subversive, and atonement came to be regarded as a highly individual transaction between the believer and God. The *Christus Victor* theory gave way in many theological circles to the blood theory of atonement which suggests that, in sinning, humanity has injured God's honor. God must be appeased because of these sins and Christ paid that debt to God through his sacrificial death on the cross. This theory "has usually correlated throughout Christian history with support of a reactionary status quo."[14]

In contrast to the blood theory of atonement which presents the crucifixion as the ultimate act of redemptive violence, the cross is frequently presented in Scripture as "the ultimate paradigm of non-violence."[15] This is the case in Paul's assertion in Colossians. 2:13-15, that in Christ's death on the cross, God disarmed or unmasked the Powers (rulers and authorities). The cross was the divinely set trap in which the Powers were destroyed. It revealed evil where the people had always looked for

---

[11] "Liberation Theology generally, as Roger Vekemans remarked, is a 'theology of violence' giving rise to a 'redeeming crusade'." Quoted by Simon Valentine in: *Theology and Doctrine 19* <http://www.farmington.ac.uk/documents/old_docs/Valentine.htm>

[12] Wink, *Engaging*, 109-137.

[13] J. Denny Weaver, *The nonviolent atonement* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001)

[14] Wink, *Engaging*, 150.

[15] Ibid., 141.

good – in the guardians of religion. It exposed humanity's complicity with the Powers – our willingness to trade away freedoms for security. The cross also exposed the inability of the Powers to make Jesus become what they wanted him to be, or to stop being who he was. They could not kill what was alive in Jesus and so the cross revealed the impotence of death. "The cross marks the failure, not of God, but of violence."[16]

The Anthropology of Violence

French anthropologist René Girard[17] helps explain what sets off the cycle of violence. Girard develops the concepts of "mimetic desire" and "mimetic rivalry," as explanations for the rise of violence in human society. Both concepts are also evident in the explanation for wars advanced in the New Testament in James 4. In the act of reaching for or acquiring something, humans make it desirable for others (mimetic desire), but in the act of acquiring something we also prohibit others from having it. This has the tendency to arouse desire for the item in others resulting in mimetic rivalry and ultimately conflict and violence as both parties attempt to acquire the same thing. Girard also explains how violence is managed for the survival of society, through the "scapegoat" mechanism. "Girard proposes that the roots of violence can be traced back to the mechanism of mimetic conflict…. Those societies that survived did so, he believes, because they discovered a mechanism by which all parties could perform a 'final' killing of a surrogate victim."[18] This is the scapegoat.

Girard's work in anthropology also helps to explain how the sacrificial system in religion had become a form of organized violence used to restore and maintain social order and tranquility. According to Girard, violence is managed and kept outside society by deflecting it onto the scapegoat. So for the religious leaders in the first century, Jesus becomes the ultimate scapegoat. Caiaphas articulates this eloquently when he advances the view that it is better to have one man die rather than have the whole nation destroyed (John 11:50).

"Girard understands the Hebrew Bible as a long and laborious exodus out of the world of violence and sacred projections, an exodus plagued by many reversals and falling short of its goal. … It is not until the New Testament that the scapegoat mechanism is fully exposed and revoked. Here at last, Girard asserts, is an entire collection of books written from the point of view of the victims…. God is revealed, not as demanding sacrifice, but as taking the part of the sacrificed."[19] Jesus in effect becomes the archetypical victim, profiling the plight of and vindicating the victims from Genesis to Revelation, who cry for justice and deliverance from their role as scapegoats in a world caught up in the myth of redemptive violence.

Shattering the Myth of Violence

This paper has tried to demonstrate the truth behind Wink's contention that the predominant religion in our world today is not Islam or Judaism or Christianity and certainly not the non-violent way of Jesus, but rather the myth that through violence we can bring order out of chaos. The Psalmist expressed it well when he wrote, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God." (Psalm 20:7)

---

[16] Ibid., 140.
[17] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977); *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, with Jean-Michel Ourgoulian and Guy Lefort (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1987); *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986).
[18] Wink, *Engaging*, 144.
[19] Ibid., 146-147.

I close with this summary statement on violence taken from the Nobel address by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in December 1964: “Violence as a way of achieving justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.”[20]

[20] Nobel Address, Oslo, December 11, 1964.