

Babylon Revisited: How Violent Myths Resurface Today

By Walter Wink

Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. What is generally overlooked is that violence is accorded the status of a religion, demanding from its devotees an absolute obedience-unto-death.

Its followers are not aware that the devotion they pay to violence is a form of religious piety, however. Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it does not appear to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. It seems inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts. It is embraced with equal alacrity by people on the Left and on the Right, by religious liberals as well as religious conservatives.

That threat of violence, it is believed, is alone able to deter aggressors. It secured us 45 years of a balance of terror. We learned to trust the bomb to grant us peace.

The roots of this devotion to violence are deep, and we will be well rewarded if we trace them to their source. When we do, we will discover that the religion of Babylon -- one of the world's oldest continuously surviving world religions -- is thriving as never before in contemporary life...it, and not Christianity, is the real religion of (the United States).

Jesus taught the love of enemies, but Babylonian religions taught their extermination. Violence was, for the religion of ancient Mesopotamia, what love was for Jesus: the central dynamic of existence. For this early civilization, life was as cruel as the floods and droughts and storms that swept the Fertile Crescent. Recurrent warfare between the various city-states in the region exhausted resources. Chaos threatened every achievement of humanity. The myth that enshrined that culture's sense of life was the Enuma Elish, dated to around 1250 B.C.E. in the versions that have survived, but based on traditions considerably older.

In the beginning, according to this myth, Apsu and Tiamat (the sweet and saltwater oceans) bear Mummu (the mist). From them also issue the younger gods, whose frolicking makes so much noise that the elder gods

resolve to kill them so they can sleep. This plot of the elder gods is discovered, the younger gods kill Apsu, and Tiamat pledges revenge.

The rebel gods in terror run for salvation to their youngest, Marduk. He exacts a steep price: If he succeeds, he must be given chief and undisputed power in the assembly of the gods. Having extorted this promise, he catches Tiamat in a net, blows her full of an evil wind, shoots an arrow that bursts her distended belly and pierces her heart; he then splits her skull with a club, and scatters the blood in the out-of-the-way places. He stretches out her corpse full length, and from it creates the cosmos.

We are indebted to Paul Ricoeur for his profound commentary on this myth. He points out that in the Babylonian myth, creation is an act of violence: Tiamat is murdered, dismembered, and from her cadaver the world is formed. Order is established by means of disorder. The origin of evil precedes the origin of things. Chaos (symbolized by Tiamat) is prior to order (represented by Marduk, god of Babylon). Evil is prior to good. Violence inheres in the godhead. Evil is an ineradicable constituent of ultimate reality, and possesses ontological priority over good.

Good vs. Evil

The biblical myth is diametrically opposed to all this. There, a good God creates a good creation. Chaos does not resist order. Good is prior to evil. Neither evil nor violence is a part of the creation, but enter as a result of the first couple's sin and the machinations of the "serpent." A basically good reality is thus corrupted by free decisions reached by creatures. In this far more complex and subtle explanation of the origins of things, evil for the first time emerges as a problem requiring solution.

In the Babylonian myth, however, there is no "problem of evil." Evil is simply a primordial fact. Our very origin is violence. Killing is in our blood. Humanity is not the originator of evil, but merely finds evil already present and perpetuates it. We are the consequences of deicide. Cosmic order results from the violent suppression of the female (Tiamat) and is mirrored in the social order by the oppression of women by men.

Thus, human beings are naturally incapable of peaceful coexistence; order must continually be imposed upon us from on high. Nor are we created to

subdue the Earth and have dominion over it; we exist but to serve as slaves of the Gods and of their earthly (representatives.).

Do you begin to sense where all this is leading?

The ultimate outcome of this type of myth, remarks Ricoeur, is a theology of war founded on the identification of the enemy with the powers that the god has vanquished, and continues to vanquish, in the drama of creation. Every coherent theology of holy war ultimately reverts to this basic mythological type. According to this theology, the enemy is evil and war is its punishment. Unlike the biblical myth, which sees evil as an intrusion into a good creation and war as a consequence of the fall, this myth regards war as present from the beginning.

This myth is the original religion of the status quo, the first articulation of "might makes right." The gods favor those who conquer. The mass of people exists to perpetuate that power and privilege which the gods have conferred upon the king, the aristocracy, and the priesthood. Religion exists to legitimate power and privilege. Life is combat.

The Myth Today

This myth of redemptive violence inundates us on every side. We are awash in it yet seldom perceive it. Its simplest, most pervasive, and finally most influential form, where it captures the imaginations of each new generation, is children's comics and cartoon shows.

Here is how the myth of redemptive violence structures the standard comic strip or television cartoon sequences: An indestructible good guy is unalterably opposed to an irreformable and equally indestructible bad guy. Nothing can kill the good guy, though for the first three-quarters of the strip or show he (rarely she) suffers grievously, appearing hopelessly trapped, until somehow the hero breaks free, vanquishes the villain, and restores order until the next installment. Nothing finally destroys the bad guy or prevents his reappearance, whether he is soundly trounced, jailed, drowned or shot into outer space.

The psychodynamics of the TV cartoon or comic book are marvelously simple: Children identify with the good guy so that they can think of themselves as good. This enables them to project out onto the bad guy their own repressed anger, violence, rebelliousness or lust, and then

vicariously to enjoy their own evil by watching the bad guy initially prevail. (This segment of the show actually consumes all but the closing minutes, allowing ample time for indulging the shadow side of the self.) When the good guy finally wins, viewers are then able to reassert control over their own inner tendencies, repress them, and reestablish a sense of goodness. Salvation is guaranteed through identification with the hero.

Cartoon strips like Superman and Dick Tracy have been enormously successful in resolving the guilt feelings of the reader or viewer by providing totally evil, often deformed, and inhuman scapegoats on whom one can externalize the evil side of one's own personality and disown it without coming to any insight or awareness of its presence within oneself. The villain's ways and heaps condemnation on him in a guilt-free orgy of aggression.

No premium is put on reasoning, persuasion, negotiation or diplomacy. There can be no compromise with an absolute evil. (It) must be totally annihilated or totally converted.

Lawless Solutions

The classic gunfighters of the "Western" settle old scores 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, just as, in the anarchic situation of the big city... (in movies such as Dirty Harry , and, in real life, Bernard Goetz, a beleaguered citizen finally rises up against the crooks ...and creates justice out of the barrel of a gun.

As Robert Jewett points out, this vigilantism betrays a profound distrust of democratic institutions, and of the reliance on human intelligence and civic responsibility that are basic to the democratic hope (the movie High Noon). It regards the general public as passive and unwise, incapable of discerning evil and making a rational response. Public resources are inadequate, so the message goes; we need a messiah, an armed redeemer, someone who has the strength of character and conviction to transcend the legal restraints of democratic institutions and save us from an evil easily identifiable in villainous persons.

These vigilantes who deliver us by taking the law into their own hands will somehow do so without encouraging lawlessness. They will kill and leave

town, thus ridding us of guilt. They will show selfless and surpassing concern for the health of our communities, but they will never have to practice citizenship, or deal with the ambiguity of political decisions. They neither run for office nor vote. They will reignite in us a consuming love for impartial justice, but they will do so by means of a mission of personal vengeance that eliminates the due process of law.

The possibility that an innocent person is being executed by our violent redeemers is removed by having the outlaw draw first, or shoot from ambush. The villain dresses in dark clothing, is swarthy, unshaven, and filthy, and his personality is stereotyped so as to eliminate any possibility of audience sympathy. The death of such evil beings is necessary in order to cleanse society of a stain. The viewer, far from feeling remorse at another human being's death, is actually made euphoric. Some movie audiences actually stand and cheer when the villain is blown away...

Rather than shoring up democracy, the strong-man methods of the superheros of popular culture reflect a nostalgia for simpler solutions. They bypass constitutional guarantees of legal procedure in arrest, or an appreciation for the tenet that a person is to be regarded as innocent until proven guilty.

What we see instead is a mounting impatience with the laborious processes of civilized life and a restless eagerness to embrace violent solutions. Better to mete out instant, summary justice than risk the red-tape and delays and bumbling of the courts. The yearning for a messianic redeemer who will set things right is thus, in its essence, a totalitarian fantasy...

Violent Lessons

The myth of redemptive violence is the simplest, laziest, most exciting, uncomplicated, irrational and primitive depiction of evil the world has ever known. Furthermore, its orientation toward evil is one into which virtually all modern children (boys especially) are socialized in the process of maturation...

Estimates vary widely, but the average child is reported to log roughly 36,000 hours of television by the time she or he is 18, including some 15,000 murders. In prime time evening shows, our children are served up about 16 acts of entertaining violence (two of them lethal) every night; on

the weekend the level of violent acts almost doubles (30.3). By the age of 16, the average child spends as much time watching TV as in school.

From the earliest age, children are awash in depictions of violence as the ultimate solution in human conflicts. And saturation in the myth does not end with the close of adolescence. There is no rite of passage...but rather a years-long acclimatization to adult television and movie fare. Redemptive violence gives way to violence as an end in itself (in) a religion in which violence has become the ultimate concern, an elixir, an addictive high, a substitute for relationships.

The modern individual, stripped of the values, rites and customs that give a sense of belonging to traditional cultures, is the easy victim of the fads of style, opinion and prejudice fostered by the communications media...people live under the illusion that the views and feelings they have acquired by attending to the media are their own. Overwhelmed by the gigantism of corporations, bureaucracies, universities and the military, individuals sense that the only escape from utter insignificance lies in identifying with these giants and idolizing them... one's personal well-being is tied inextricably with the fortunes of the hero-leader. Right and wrong scarcely enter the picture.

Thus the myth of redemptive violence has become the cornerstone of foreign policy, enshrined in the doctrine of the national security state. Might is right. Everything depends on victory, success, the thrill of belonging to a nation capable of imposing its will in the heavenly council and among the nations. For the alternative—ownership of one's own evil and acknowledgement of God in the enemy—is for many simply too high a price to pay.

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