

Apocalypse Now?

Reflections on Faith in a Time of Terror

DUNCAN B. FORRESTER

New College, University of Edinburgh

ASHGATE

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Prologue: Two ‘Terrible Manifestos’?

1914

On the day in 1914 when the First World War broke out, a group of 93 leading German intellectuals issued a statement giving unqualified support to the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The young pastor of Safenwil in Switzerland, Karl Barth by name, who had recently completed his theological studies in Germany, read this ‘terrible manifesto’, and discovered to his dismay among the signatories almost all his German theological teachers. ‘It was,’ he wrote, ‘like the twilight of the gods when I saw the reaction of Harnack, Herrmann, Rade, Eucken and company to the new situation.’¹ Theological scholarship, it seemed to Barth, had been converted into an ideological weapon of war, and his teachers had been fundamentally compromised. This ethical and political failure, he believed, called into question the theology he had been taught, and ‘a whole world of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics and preaching, which I had hitherto held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to the foundations, and with it all the other writings of the German theologians’.² Schleiermacher, the father of German liberal theology, was, Barth believed, ‘unmasked’. A new and very different theological beginning must now be made.

Barth’s distress was not because he was a pacifist, opposed to violence and coercion on principle in all situations. He never was a pacifist in the thoroughgoing or principled sense, but he continued to wrestle with the theology and ethics of particular wars and acts of violence throughout his life. Indeed, in the early days of the Second World War, Barth himself issued rousing theologically grounded calls to Christians in France and Britain and the United States to take up arms against Nazism. It was rather that, in 1914, the young Barth saw the liberal theology that almost all his teachers in Germany shared had come to do little more than reflect and reinforce the assumptions and purposes of the German state, giving an aura of holiness to its bellicose military and political purposes. Theology, he believed, had, as it were, been enlisted into the army, where it was under

1 Letter to W. Spoendlin, 4 January, 1915, quoted in E. Busch (1976), *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, London: SCM Press, p.81.

2 *Nachwort*, 293, cited in Busch (1976), p.81.

orders to act as the ideological wing of the state. Its prophetic voice was silenced, and its arguments had scant reference to the gospel of the Prince of Peace. Instead theology issued a singularly unqualified call to arms. Barth responded by affirming that only a theology which returned to basics, and re-entered ‘the strange new world of the Bible’ would be capable of making a proper response to the conflicts and hostilities of the day. A new or renewed theology that was far more critical, and suspicious of the intentions of politicians, and sensitive to the ambiguities of politics was required; indeed what was needed, Barth believed, was a theology which actually proclaimed the gospel in the circumstances of the day, and denounced sin, aggressive violence, and the arrogance and idolatry of power.

A very similar situation was to be found in Britain at the time, with prominent churchmen and theologians declaring the war against Germany to be a holy war. The Bishop of London called on every able-bodied man to fight for God and country, and wrote to the *Guardian* in 1915, proclaiming that it was the Church’s duty ‘to mobilise the nation for a holy war’. In a now notorious Advent sermon he called on British soldiers in the field ‘to kill the good as well as the bad, to kill the young men as well as the old’.³ And in the Second World War no less a figure than William Temple, Archbishop of York and then of Canterbury, and one of the most influential theologians of his day, argued first in traditional just war terms that civilian deaths were permitted provided only that they were not directly made targets, but later on he agreed with Churchill that civilians and non-combatants might be intentionally made targets because in modern total war the distinction between combatants and civilians has been radically eroded.⁴

Theology, Barth realized in 1914, must operate in a different way. It should provide a distinctive and challenging discernment of ‘the signs of the times’, and call believers to new patterns of costly obedience. It should not collude in the often shady purposes of ‘The Powers’ or amplify their voice, at that time an unambiguous clarion call to battle. It should rather speak clearly and faithfully with its own voice. Barth’s reaction to the pro-war letter of his liberal theological teachers has been argued to be the single most significant turning point of twentieth-century theology.

9/11

In February 2002, in response to the terrorist atrocities of 9/11, a group of some 60 leading American intellectuals, including a number of prominent

3 Adrian Hastings (1986), *A History of English Christianity 1920–1985*, London: Jonathan Cape, p.45.

4 Nigel Biggar, ‘Anglican Theology of War and Peace’, *Crucible*, Oct.–Dec. 2004, p.9.

theologians and church leaders, signed a 'Letter from America: What We Are Fighting For', which was drafted by Professor Jean Bethke Elshtain, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics in the University of Chicago Divinity School. Professor Elshtain also wrote a book with a significant title, expanding and explaining the position taken up in the Letter, *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*.⁵ After declaring that 'We are united in our belief that invoking God's authority to kill or maim human beings is immoral and is contrary to faith in God',⁶ the signatories appeal to the tradition of the just war and say that, 'there are times when waging war is not only morally permitted, but morally necessary, as response to calamitous acts of violence, hatred and injustice. This is one of these times'.⁷ Apparently waging a 'just war' in the course of which many innocent non-combatants will be killed is acceptable provided the name of God is not invoked.

The Letter seeks to make clear the reasons for which America has gone to war against 'Terror': 'We fight,' the signatories declare, 'to defend ourselves and to defend ... universal principles'. These universal principles include that all human beings are born free and equal, that government should 'protect and foster the conditions for human flourishing', freedom of conscience and religion, the affirmation that human beings naturally 'seek the truth about life's purpose and ultimate ends', and that 'killing in the name of God is contrary to faith in God and is the greatest betrayal of the universality of religious faith'.⁸ The issue, it appears, is not simply self-defence. America is founded 'directly and explicitly on the basis of universal human values', and the struggle is therefore to protect these key values, which 'do not belong only to America, but are in fact the shared inheritance of humankind, and therefore a possible basis of hope for a world community based on peace and justice'.⁹ This is not a crusade, but it is certainly presented as a Manichaean ideological conflict, in which the unambiguously good confronts the totally evil. Thus the signatories conclude, 'with one voice we say solemnly that it is crucial for our nation and its allies to win this war. We fight to defend ourselves, but we also believe that we fight to defend those universal principles of

5 Elshtain, Jean Bethke (2003), *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*, New York: Basic Books. Signatories of the Letter included, in addition to Elshtain, Amitai Etzioni, Francis Fukuyama, Os Guinness, Mary Ann Glendon, Samuel Huntington, James Turner Johnson, Richard J. Mouw, Michael Novak, Robert Putnam, Max Stackhouse, Michael Walzer, George Weigel and John Witte, Jr.

6 Elshtain, p.186.

7 Elshtain, p.189.

8 Elshtain, pp.182-3.

9 Elshtain, p.185.

human rights and human dignity that are the best hope for humankind'.¹⁰

The Letter appears to offer unconditional support to the American-led 'war on terror'. It operates with a somewhat simplistic view of democracy and its excellences and has little of the suspicion of power and the need for humility on the part of the powerful that we can find in the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and his school of Christian Realism. There is hardly any theology to be found, at least on the surface of the Letter, and as a consequence it manages to say little that is in any way distinctively Christian, or to call on the profound insights of the gospel. As a consequence it throws little light on why 9/11 happened, or how it is to be understood, except as an unqualified and unintelligible evil.

The *burden* of American power of which the letter speaks is like 'the white man's burden' of the old British Empire, suggesting that the imperial power is acting, not for its own economic and political interests, but on behalf of the subjected people, and indeed of all humankind. The 'burden' is to bring order, justice, security and peace to the world, however much it may cost. And the ultimate goal is assumed to be to educate subject peoples so that they may in course of time possess freedom, democracy and independence – all modelled on the American type of liberal democracy, which is assumed to be without fundamental defects or ambiguities. This is a classic approach of imperial powers seeking to justify their dominance over others, much used by Britain in the heyday of its empire.

Furthermore it is assumed throughout the 'Letter from America, What We're Fighting For', that *war* is the appropriate response to terror. As a citizen of a country which has had its own share of terror, I shudder to think what would have been the outcome if Britain had declared 'war' on the IRA, bombarded its strongholds in Belfast and South Antrim, and invaded Dublin. Britain came fairly close to this under Margaret Thatcher, who tried to stop anyone from talking to the IRA, and declared them all to be 'terrorists'. The short step from this to waging war on terror was taken in events such as 'Bloody Sunday', which not only resulted in numerous civilian casualties, but made progress towards a resolution of the underlying issues far more difficult. The possibility that terrorism should be treated as criminal and dealt with through legal processes while seeking political, economic and social ways forward in relation to the underlying issues is strangely not even mentioned in the Elshtain letter.

In the view of Sir Michael Howard, the doyen of British historians of war, the 'war' on terror has been 'a terrible and irrevocable error' from the start. The British in their time had fought many 'wars' against terrorists, in Palestine, Ireland, Cyprus and Malaysia, but they labelled them 'emergencies', never 'wars'. 'This meant that the police and intelligence services were

10 Elshtain, p.193.

provided with exceptional powers, and were reinforced where necessary by the armed forces, but all continued to operate within a peacetime framework of civil authority.' The rhetoric of war tends to create a 'war psychosis' that is wholly counterproductive for the strategic objective of winning 'hearts and minds' in order to deprive the militant networks of local support. Above all, talk of war raised unrealistic and inappropriate expectations, according to Howard: 'The qualities needed in a serious campaign against terrorists – secrecy, intelligence, political sagacity, quiet ruthlessness, covert actions that remain covert, above all infinite patience – all these are forgotten or overridden in a media-stoked frenzy for immediate results, and nagging complaints if they do not get them.'¹¹

The American Letter appears to give an unqualified endorsement to the 'War against Terror' as the letter signed by the leading German intellectuals had done some 90 years before in relation to the First World War.¹² In November 2002, a group of nine of the original signatories of the Letter from America, including two theologians, issued a statement on 'Pre-emption, Iraq and Just War: A Statement of Principle', in which they gave qualified support to an attack on Iraq if it did not cooperate in arms inspections or comply with UN resolutions. They appeared also to support in certain circumstances pre-emptive strikes and a kind of regime change, although within a central restraint of traditional just war thinking, the insistence on 'last resort': 'As President Bush recently stated, true disarmament in Iraq would constitute "regime change" in its most relevant aspect – it would dramatically reduce Saddam Hussein's capacity to threaten his neighbours and the world. That should be the principal aim of U.S. policy, and we should resort to war only if we have exhausted all other reasonable means of achieving it.'¹³

Interestingly enough, both American letters are singularly short of theology. Indeed the nearest Elshtain comes to explicit theology in her Letter is the defence of separation of church and state in America, which is seen as one of the precious gifts that America is now generously sharing with the rest of the world.

As had been the case with the German intellectuals' letter of 1914, the American Letter of 2002 found its critics, most notably Stanley Hauerwas

11 See Professor Sir Michael Howard's incisive article, 'Mistake to Declare this a War', *Royal United Services Institute Journal*, Dec. 2001.

12 Note that this time the Letter from America elicit a vigorous response signed by more than one hundred German intellectuals: *A World of Justice and Peace Would be Different*, available at http://www.americanvalues.org/html/german_statement.html, and the response by the Americans, 'Is the Use of Force Ever Morally Justified?' which seeks to confine the discussion to the issue of pacifism: http://www.americanvalues.org/html/is_the_use_of_force_ever_moral.html.

13 'Pre-emption, Iraq and Just War', 14 Nov. 2002.

and Paul Griffiths, who produced a peculiarly sharp response to Elshtain's book which expounded the Letter.¹⁴ Hauerwas and Griffiths accuse her not only of affirming the right of self-defence, but of endorsing pre-emptive strikes and the strategy of 'regime change'. This amounts, they say, to a 'new imperialism' which 'means that the more a state diverges from American principles, the more pressing will be America's duty to remake it in its own image'. Elshtain is accused of a taking up a position which is virtually identical to the National Security Strategy of the Bush Administration. America should intervene militarily when she judges a state to have 'failed': the kind of imperialistic intervention advocated by Michael Ignatieff and others. 'Her work,' they say, 'is ideology masquerading as dispassionate analysis'.¹⁵ She does not consider the possibility that a 'war on terror' is not the most appropriate response to a huge crime like 9/11: 'You do not go to war against murderers', Hauerwas and Griffiths, in agreement with Michael Howard, declare, 'Instead you try to arrest them'.¹⁶

Above all, Hauerwas and Griffiths echo in a new context Barth's 1914 accusation that his theological teachers had abandoned serious and critical Christian theology in order to give unqualified support to military and chauvinist ideologies and courses of action. They accuse Elshtain and her co-signatories of recognizing little or no distinction between the way Christians and Americans should think about the 'war on terror', and finally they declare that the use of Christian language and ideas in Elshtain's book is nothing more than window dressing for 'a passion to impose America upon the world'.¹⁷

Without necessarily endorsing in detail Barth's critique of his liberal theological teachers in 1914, or the attack of Stanley Hauerwas and Paul Griffiths on Jean Elshtain's book and the Letter signed by leading American intellectuals, I agree with them that, in times of conflict, violence and terror such as the present there is an urgent need for serious *theological* engagement with the issues, attempting to discern the signs of the times and suggest the most appropriate responses for disciples – and also for 'The Powers'. At the start of such a process, we have to set aside Manichean assumptions that our democratic societies are good and innocent, and those who criticize and those who attack them are obviously and totally evil and wrong. Before we make theological and political judgments about how most appropriately to respond to awful and portentous events such as 9/11, we need to attempt to understand, for instance, why young Palestinians were dancing

14 In *First Things*, Oct. 2003, no. 136, pp.41–4. Elshtain's incandescent response is on pp.44–6.

15 *First Things*, p.42.

16 *First Things*, p.43.

17 *First Things*, pp.43–4.

and singing in the streets for joy when they heard news of the attacks on the twin towers and the Pentagon. Very uncomfortable facts have to be faced, and the ambiguities of the political sphere have to be acknowledged, as they were in an earlier generation by Reinhold Niebuhr and others. Above all, the 'battle for hearts and minds' has to be 'fought' and won. And this is only possible if we start by asking very seriously why there is such antagonism and hatred directed towards the West, and America in particular.

The Manichaeic streak in American politics – we are innocent and our antagonists are wholly evil – was understandably reinforced by the struggle against Nazism, and by the horrors of the Holocaust. The demand for unconditional surrender was a reflection of this Manichaeic attitude: absolute evil must not be compromised with. It was further strengthened by the Cold War, with Communism presented as the Great Satan. The collapse of 1989 was widely understood in America as another unqualified and total victory over evil. But such an unqualified victory over 'terror' is impossible, even if the main assaults are on states or regimes which are believed to harbour terrorist networks.

What I miss from the theologians who signed the Letter is serious and distinctive critical theology after the style of Reinhold Niebuhr and others. Niebuhr was as committed to democracy as Elshtain and her colleagues. His little 1945 'vindication' of democracy, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*,¹⁸ famously declares that 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.'¹⁹ Yet Niebuhr is constantly aware of the ambiguities of democratic systems and his vindication of democracy is worlds apart from the panegyric of the American style of liberal democracy that we find in the intellectuals' Letter. Niebuhr also constantly emphasizes that the possession of power aggravates the sinful human tendency to deal unjustly and proudly with others. 'That,' he writes, 'is why irresponsible and uncontrolled power is the greatest source of injustice.' Theologians should, in this context, be asking hard questions about the only surviving superpower and its purposes and practices from long before 9/11.

Elshtain's account of Tillich and Niebuhr's attitude to the Nazi regime before and during the Second World War is illuminating. They took sides unambiguously against the horrors of Nazism, while remaining suspicious of every manifestation of a Manichaeic division of the world into the absolutely good and the absolutely evil. Niebuhr in particular was towards the end of the war peculiarly sensitive to the dangers of the power of the victors corrupting their behaviour and making them oppressive.

18 Reinhold Niebuhr (1945), *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, London: Nisbet.

19 *Ibid.*, p.vi.

Good News?

This book is an attempt by one Christian theologian to begin the complex and confusing task of reading ‘the signs of the times’. This I do by moving between two times of terror – the early centuries of Christianity, and today – in the hope that this may give some clues as to how to understand what is happening and how most appropriately, constructively and faithfully to respond. First, I explore in general terms the two times of terror, seeking for similarities and differences. The good news of Jesus Christ emerged in a time of terror. The light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1.5). Does that light continue to shine in the darkness of today and, if so, how?

There is certainly plenty of bad news around these days. Some of us hesitate to turn on the radio news, or open the paper, because there seems to be a kind of limit to the bad news we can absorb and deal with. Some of us are old enough to remember the appalling film footage of the freshly liberated extermination camps shown in the cinemas immediately after the Second World War, ‘lest we forget’. We are still coming to terms with the Holocaust and wrestling with the terrible question of how one can speak of God, and of good news, after Auschwitz. And then the awful truth of the Gulag in the old Soviet Union unfolded before our eyes as we listened to Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn telling us of their experiences, and of the millions of others who were humiliated, degraded, starved and worked to death in the camps in what had been regarded by many as a beacon of hope, anticipating the future for humankind, ‘a new civilization’ as Sidney and Beatrice Webb called it.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the communist dictatorships seemed at first to be unqualified good news, but it was quickly overtaken by the outbreaks of internecine violence in the Balkans, the massacre of 7300 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica in 1995. In Palestine and Israel vengeance and retribution spiral constantly out of control, with rage and despair turning perfectly normal children into suicide bombers, while sophisticated armaments supplied by the United States are used to devastate and attack refugee camps and kill innocent men, women and children as well as militants. The war in Afghanistan was bad enough. Then we had the daily horrors of the Iraq War and the continuing bloody occupation of that country. Terrorist outrages, so fearfully predictable, mean that millions walk in fear while their leaders seem incapable of an understanding, prudent and just response. Rage, despair, hatred and immense cruelty characterize the end of an era in which many people, in the West at least, expected the new Jerusalem to be builded here. The very values that the ‘war on terror’ is said to defend are sacrificed in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prison, and many another place. There does not appear to be much good news

around. We all – Christian believers, and others as well – have immense difficulty in making sense of it all, in finding God in the imbroglia of today's awesome events, in daring to speak of the gospel, or to believe that there is in fact 'good news'.

Those who believed in a worldwide rapid and remorseless decline of religion in face of modernity, enlightenment, rationality and the scientific spirit have had in recent times to recognize, often with a mixture of puzzlement and dismay, that religion in a huge variety of diverse forms not only survives but grows and flourishes. People today can sensibly speak of the 'desecularization of the world'.²⁰ Globally religion does not survive timidly in the private and domestic sphere; it is rampant today in the public sphere all over the world. And those who saw religion as fairly uniformly sweetness and light, a benign and peaceable force for good – perhaps the basis for 'global ethics', as Hans Küng argues – have had to face the fact that there is in many situations today, as always, a strong alliance between religion and violence, religion and terror, religion and rage.²¹ To believers, their religion represents truth and is a powerful determinant of behaviour, but religion and religious arguments can also, of course, be used to enrage, to disguise what is really happening, and to encourage people in radically evil courses.

Christians believe in the gospel; that is, that they have good news to proclaim and offer, even – perhaps especially – in times of despair and fear. The Christian gospel initially appeared in a time of terror, with striking similarities to today. Can we recover the ability to discern and proclaim good news in a world that is full of violence and despair and evil, when all the news appears to be bad? In handling this question we need to look backwards to the early years of the faith to see if we can learn lessons that are relevant to today's context from the way the faith was presented and shaped two thousand years ago. And then we need to look seriously at today's situation with its challenges and opportunities for the proclamation of good news.

Christian Public Theology for long engaged in a dialogue with the great ideologies, particularly Marxism, democratic liberalism and neoconservatism. These debates continue to be important, but it is a central argument of this book that Public Theology must engage today far more directly and urgently with the realities of religion in all their diversity and power, and with theologies some of which may seem primitive and savage, but which have a continuing power to touch the heart and elicit courage, brutality and self-sacrifice as well as love and a passion for justice.

20 See the essays in Peter Berger (ed.) (1999), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

21 See René Girard (1977), *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

I think there is a threefold responsibility laid upon the shoulders of religious people and theologians, particularly in the West, today:

- a To interpret to our secular societies the continuing power, significance and meaning of religious discourse about, and in, the public sphere. This must not neglect religious discourse of an apparently extreme form, but should try to explain why it has such influence for many in today's world.
- b To engage in direct, and sometimes hard-hitting, dialogue within and between religions. This is not simply a matter of identifying some generally agreed ethical commonalities of a broad sort, as in Hans Küng's project of a 'Global Ethics'. Fundamental differences have to be faced and discussed, as well as the evil effects of some of these views and positions.
- c To avoid the idealism which does not take interest, sin and brokenness seriously in the efforts to produce good out of the political process in the world's rather wild political arena. Eschatology, hope, aspirations and goals are of the greatest importance. But Public Theology must also have a dimension of realism if it is to operate effectively for good in a world which still 'waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God' (Romans 8.19).

Chapter 1

Vexed by a Rocking Cradle

The darkness drops again but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle.¹

The Christian gospel came first in an age of terror, when multitudes and, particularly, the authorities were vexed to nightmare by the world in which they lived and by a particular rocking cradle. Jesus, according to Luke's gospel, was born in Bethlehem rather than his home town of Nazareth, because of an autocratic imperial decree from a despotic foreign government. Again according to the tradition, shortly after his birth he was visited and honoured by Magi, or 'kings', from the East who recognized on behalf of the Gentile world his cosmic and earthly status as Messiah and Prince of Peace. The enquiries of the Magi in Jerusalem provoked desperate and draconian measures on the part of the Roman stooge, King Herod, who initiated in Bethlehem the 'massacre of the innocents', at the time just one of many massacres of innocent people on the part of political and religious authorities. The baby in Bethlehem was seen from the beginning, the tradition suggests, as a threat to established authority and the existing order, political and religious.

The massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem on the order of Herod was just a typical example of what today would be called state-sponsored terror. Herod was both a ruthless tyrant and a collaborator with the alien Roman regime. The child Jesus was, we are told, taken to Egypt as a refugee, an asylum seeker, from Herod's wrath by Mary and Joseph.

The teaching of Jesus and the movement that gathered around him were seen consistently as spiritual and religious threats, which were also political challenges which had to be dealt with. The Roman Empire, in all its provinces, was full of torture, injustice and exploitation. The Pax Romana was substantially built on terror and intimidation. The ultimate, horrifying penalty of crucifixion was freely used, especially with dissidents and rebels. Thus the crucifixion of Jesus was no unusual event; thousands of slaves were crucified along the Appian Way in the aftermath of the revolt led by Spartacus, and Jesus was crucified along with two criminals. Unjustly

¹ W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', 1919. Written shortly before the start of a peculiarly bloody civil war in Ireland.

condemned by the Roman Procurator, Pilate, Jesus was scourged, tortured and executed in the most hideous way imaginable. Mel Gibson's controversial film is realistic in its depiction of crucifixion – too much so for many. We have difficulty in coping with such terror and so much vindictive cruelty, just as we have difficulty in responding wisely and well to the terror and the horrors of the world today. We suffer from compassion fatigue, and our anger seems to achieve nothing.

Jesus: Witness to Truth²

John's gospel depicts the trial of Jesus before Pilate as a direct confrontation between the One who has been declared to be the embodiment of truth, and the ultimate political power in the conquered land of Israel. It was also a confrontation between two very different understandings of politics. The Jews take Jesus before Pilate because they do not wish to be responsible for the execution of Jesus, and they are unwilling to be defiled ritually. There then takes place between Pilate and the chief priests a struggle of jurisdictions, otherwise called evading responsibility, or passing of the buck.

Pilate as the judge assumes that he is dealing with a petty, domestic Jewish religious squabble rather than a cosmic event. Power, represented by Pilate, confronts truth, represented by Jesus. 'Are you the King of the Jews? A political threat? Seditious?' asks Pilate. Jesus stands silent, as if to question Pilate's jurisdiction. Pilate presses on with his examination: 'What have you done? What is your offence? How do you plead?' Jesus responds, somewhat obliquely: 'My kingdom is not from this world. It doesn't follow the rules of worldly politics, with fighting, violence, coercion as the ultimate sanction.' 'Ah,' says Pilate, 'so you *are* a king then; you are a politician; you are a threat to the established order.' 'Your word,' says Jesus (note that he does not deny being a king, or being relevant to the political order), 'I came into the world to testify, to witness (*martureso*) to the Truth. Everyone who belongs to the Truth hears my voice.'

Pilate asks the rhetorical question so beloved of academics, an abstract, free-floating question detached from the personal, the concrete, the particular: 'What is Truth?' And then, without pausing for an answer, he proceeds as a politician, as a judge, to fulfil the duty of his office – to determine and declare the truth: 'This man is innocent!' Then Pilate concocts a subtle political compromise; he will release Jesus who claims to be the Truth, with a vague implication of guilt now lurking about him. And so Pilate hopes to satisfy the people without putting to death a man he

2 John 18.28–19.16. I am indebted in this section especially to Lesslie Newbigin (1982), *The Light Has Come*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp.237–60.

knows to be innocent. But they cry for Barrabas instead. Because he is not of the Truth, Pilate cannot face the hatred of the world which the Truth arouses.³ He is trapped in his own stratagem, for when the people cry out for Barabbas it is no longer possible for him to set Jesus free. Having failed to acknowledge the Truth, he is in the power of the lie.

Pilate tries another tack. If Jesus, the innocent one, is humiliated, flogged and tortured, perhaps the people will let him release Jesus. But no, the democratic voice is, 'Crucify him.' Pilate tries to shift the buck: 'You take him and crucify him,' he says. Then Pilate is afraid, for he is told that Jesus, like the emperor, claims to be *the* Son of God. Pilate did not need to be reminded that, if he released one who threatened the emperor's throne, he would be 'no friend of Caesar'.

Jesus declares that Pilate's power comes from God, and should be used for God's purposes of good and truth. Pilate presents Jesus to the people: 'Here is your king!' he says. But the chief priests reply, 'We have no king but Caesar.'

There are two understandings of power and politics at work in this narrative. Pilate is deflected into denying the Truth by a common language of politics which prioritizes expediency and personal advantage over Truth. Pilate betrays his trust and betrays the Truth. In order to do this one has to assume that the question, 'What is Truth?' is unanswerable or that 'the sword of truth' can be manipulated for sordid purposes. The lesson is that truth and truthfulness are necessary in politics, and it makes no sense to ask if what is meant here is *religious* truth, in the narrow modern sense; it is truth *simpliciter*. The paradoxical truth is that politics is not about the reversal of the power structures of today, but about the transfiguration of politics by the rule of the Lamb that has been slain, and is now, despite appearances, on the throne.⁴

And vocation, calling, as of Pilate as judge, is necessary in any decent society, and carries with it its own imperatives. But we are not speaking here of some free-standing common morality, but rather of something that needs constant challenge, refreshment and limitation from the Truth. A sense of calling carries with it a sense of accountability to more than the popular will. For one in authority is responsible to more than a democratic majority, but indeed to the Truth.

And then there came the Resurrection and the development and spread throughout the Empire of the Church, which continued to vex, in its own distinctive way, the established order of things in religion and social and political life alike.

³ John 7.7.

⁴ On this theme see especially John Howard Yoder (1988), 'To Serve our God and to Rule the World', *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, pp.3-14.

Empire and Collaborators

The Roman Empire, which spread around the Mediterranean basin and beyond, built on the conquests of Alexander the Great and his successors, the Ptolemaic and Seleucid rulers of the fragments of the Empire Alexander had established by force of arms. The Romans gradually, especially after the conquest of Carthage, built up a colossal empire and by 63BC they controlled the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean. They established the so-called 'Pax Romana', which was based very largely upon terror, although it also allowed the development of trade and commerce around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and far beyond.

This was also a time of economic exploitation, by the Romans and their allies, as resources were drained from the periphery of the Empire to Rome itself. And even the temple in Jerusalem which Jesus 'purged' had become a symbol and exemplar of economic exploitation of the people. Jesus' action in the Temple was a challenge to an interlocking system of political, economic and religious control.

Many parts of the Empire, like the various territories which made up Palestine, were mainly ruled by local collaborators, a political arrangement that in the heyday of the British Empire was called 'indirect rule'. Jewish society was thus controlled largely by the collaborating Herodian kings, a self-serving Jewish aristocracy, and a deeply compromised priesthood.⁵ Sometimes the two forms of regime operated side by side. Consider, for instance, the trial of Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin, before the Roman Procurator, Pilate, and before the Jewish collaborator, King Herod. Indirect rule was, and is, an economical and effective way of exercising imperial authority. Sometimes the local rulers who were coopted into this kind of system were deeply hated by their subjects; but often indirect rule gave a plausible suggestion of at least a semblance of independence. And commonly the Romans left much of the really unpleasant work of suppressing the people and putting down uprisings and protests to these local and indigenous rulers.

Thus Herod Antipas, the tetrarch at the time of the birth of Jesus, was a repressive tyrant, whose rule was hated by his own Jewish people, who saw it as a lightly disguised form of foreign Gentile domination and oppression. Herod had an army of non-Jewish mercenaries, a spy system and a secret police.⁶ According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, he felt deeply threatened by the multitudes that thronged around John the Baptist, and the gospels tell how he did John to death.

5 Richard A. Horsley (1987), *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, pp.44–5.

6 Richard A. Horsley (1987), *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, pp.44–5.

Terror

Indirect rule was an effective way of cowing an oppressed people with the fear or the reality of terror, sponsored and carried through by the authorities. ‘Roman warlords,’ writes Horsley, ‘used crucifixion as an instrument to terrorise subject peoples into submission to imperial rule.’ Roman military terror established the context for the emergence of the Jesus movement. The Roman-sponsored state terror against rebellious Judean and Galilean people ‘included thousands enslaved at Magdala/Tarichaea in Galilee in 52–51BCE, mass enslavement in and around Sepphoris (near Nazareth) and thousands crucified at Emmaus in Judea in 4BCE, and the systematic devastation of villages and towns, destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and mass enslavement in 67–70CE.’⁷

There were, of course, also resistance movements which often also had recourse to appalling violence – the Zealots, or Sicarii, of Jesus’ time come to mind. They specialized in assassinations, especially of members of the high priestly families who collaborated with Rome, and kidnapping in order to obtain the release of captured members of their own group.⁸ Their last stand was at Masada, near the Dead Sea. They committed collective suicide with their families before the rocky stronghold fell to the Roman armies in 73AD. The Zealots drew much of their inspiration from the Maccabean revolt some centuries before, which is recounted in the apocryphal books of the Macabbees. This was against the Ptolemaic and Seleucid heirs of Alexander the Great’s empire. Antiochus Epiphanes and others instituted a programme of enforced Hellenization which led to a huge, violent and prolonged culture war led initially, on the Jewish side, by Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers.

Culture Clash

The Christian good news emerged at a time of the clash of cultures, civilizations and religions. Throughout most of the Roman Empire both cultural Hellenism and the official cult of the divine emperor were imposed ruthlessly on subject peoples with all sorts of threats and inducements.

The Maccabean revolts were the most famous and effective ways in which pious Jews violently opposed both Hellenization and the power of the empire. Maccabean saints embraced death as martyrs rather than obey

7 Richard A. Horsley (1997) (ed.), *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press, pp.10–11.

8 Richard A. Horsley (1987), *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, pp.40–42.

the imperial order to renounce their faith and its practices. They also fought, ruthlessly and often successfully, against the forces of empire. But to many 'educated' and 'civilized' people at the time it seemed to be a conflict between rationality and fanaticism. The Maccabees saw themselves as resisting in the name of the God of Israel a ruthless tyranny which was determined to destroy their religion and their culture and make them Hellenes. And there were among the Jews many 'renegades' who welcomed the adoption of Gentile ways and the abandonment of the customs which God had commanded their forebears to keep for ever. 'They built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil.'⁹ The Temple in Jerusalem was profaned and 'on the fifteenth day of Chislev in the one hundred and forty-fifth year [167BC], they erected a desolating sacrilege on the altar of burnt-offering ... The books of the law that they found they tore to pieces and burnt with fire ... they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung their infants from their mothers' necks.'¹⁰ But 'many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant, and they did die. Very great wrath came upon Israel.'¹¹

In response to what they understood as Gentile cultural, religious and political aggression, the Maccabees 'organized an army and struck down sinners in their anger and renegades in their wrath; the survivors fled to the Gentiles for safety. And Mattathias and his friends went around and tore down the altars; they forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel. They hunted down the arrogant and the work prospered in their hands'.¹²

Terror and cultural and religious aggression, directly or indirectly on the part of the Empire, were thus met with a violent traditionalist backlash, although 'all the renegade and godless men of Israel' collaborated with the imperial authorities. The Jews, who felt that their faith and their culture were being threatened by the imperial power, hit back with savage violence, and in doing so they were remarkably successful. Many Jews triumphed in dying as martyrs, condemned to an agonizing death by cruel alien tyrants for their adherence to the Law and for their rejection of Hellenizing forces in religion and culture. One of the most detailed and terrible stories of the torture and killing of seven brothers and their mother in II Maccabees 7

9 I Maccabees 1. 14–15.

10 I Maccabees 1.54, 56, 59–61.

11 I Maccabees 1.62–4.

12 I Maccabees 2.44–8.

clearly assumes the hope of resurrection for those who are faithful to the Law.

How similar it all sounds to the world today!

Political Religion

There was, of course, a persistent and unavoidable conflict between the developing political religion of the Roman Empire and Jewish faith. In the Empire, piety and patriotism were virtually indistinguishable. In Judaism, on the other hand, the kingship of Yahweh was resolutely affirmed, and all other claims to final authority were firmly denied. Political religion in its simplest form was found in most of the city states of antiquity. The city is watched over by its gods, who share in its joys and sorrows. The cult is an affirmation and a celebration of the life of the city. This kind of religion did not seek to change, challenge or question the established order; rather it proclaims that it is god-given and sacrosanct. The pious person, the good person and the good citizen are all one and the same.

With the growth of the Roman Empire came the development of a highly formal imperial cult which served the turn of a civil religion, eliciting and confirming loyalty to the Empire, but making few and infrequent demands, like Shintoism in modern Japan. Hospitality to and tolerance of a wide range of local cults and mystery religions was in no way incompatible with the maintenance of the syncretistic imperial religion, provided that these other religions made no universal or exclusive claims which conflicted with the special position of the official public religion of the Empire, and were willing to serve as voluntary and mainly local embellishments to the official religion or, like Judaism for long periods of the diaspora, were content to confine themselves and their universalistic claims to a social ghetto from which they posed no threat, protected by law as a *religio licita*.

But this form of symbiosis was difficult in the Promised Land when occupied by a pagan Gentile Empire which for much of the time was active in discouraging and opposing Judaism and in propagating aggressively the religion, customs and cultures which were dominant elsewhere in the Empire. Conflict between the Empire and the faith of Israel, and then of the Church, was almost inevitable. The claims of the emperor were incompatible with the claims of Yahweh.

Vexing Good News

In the midst of all this the Word became flesh, Jesus was executed in agony, and was raised again, disciples gathered together to break bread and

worship, and showed themselves willing to die as martyrs rather than deny the good news which they proclaimed with astonishing boldness. Hope overcame despair, and non-violence was shown to be a way forward. The baby in the cradle and the young man on the cross vexed and challenged and rocked the security of the emperor and all his panoply of power, confronted the structures of injustice and oppression, and the lies which supported oppression.

And then there came the Church, a new form of egalitarian and non-hierarchical community, which burst into the Gentile world after being nurtured in the womb of Judaism. From the first it believed that it had good news to proclaim, even, or especially, in a time of terror. The world-view in which it clothed the gospel was apocalyptic, and the whole community was initially nourished on apocalyptic literature. But the early Church had a very different view of violence and of the hope of the coming of the new Jerusalem from most who dwelt in an apocalyptic world.¹³ Christians believed that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the end time had already come and there was good news to proclaim. It was good news of something that had happened, rather than a new set of laws or ethical injunctions, although to be sure the good news carried with it injunctions to be faithful to the teachings of the Lord. It was good news which nurtured hope in an age when many despaired, and this hope was otherworldly, not in the sense that it regarded what went on in the world as matters of indifference, but rather that God's reign which was to be realized in its fullness at the end time. Then a new heaven and earth would be revealed, and the holy city, the home of the faithful, the new Jerusalem would come 'down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband'. Then God would make all things new, and wipe away every tear from the eye. The early Christians effectively and dramatically challenged the existing authorities and 'Powers' by calling their claims to ultimacy into question, and showing that there was a better way, which was bound to triumph at the last.

And the early Christians, living in a time of terror, did not only proclaim in words good news of a coming order of peace, justice and love, a new and fresh understanding of community; they exemplified it in their fellowships. According to Tertullian, and many early Christian writers, Christians are 'resident aliens', whose true citizenship is in heaven rather than here:

We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope ... Your citizenship, your magistracies, and the very name of your curia is the Church of Christ ...

13 See especially Revelation 21.

You are an alien in this world, and a citizen of the city of Jerusalem that is above.¹⁴

‘Nothing, Tertullian continued, ‘is more foreign to us than the state. One state we know, of which all are citizens’.¹⁵ This did not mean that the early Christians, holding the faith in a time of terror, were detached from the world of politics, from the Empire with its idolatrous claims, from the life of society. In politics, as in private and domestic life, they understood themselves as offering and demonstrating a new and better way, which was neither the path of the violent Zealots, seeking to overthrow the existing order of things, nor passive detachment from the principalities and powers that operate in the public sphere. The rocking cradle and those who found there their truth and hope continued to vex the principalities and powers, and those who live by violence. And yet there was hope, even for the powers whose true mandate was to be servants of God’s love and justice.

From the beginning, the Christian Church believed that it had, especially in times of terror, Good News which has a bearing not only on subjectivity and the inner life, but on the public life of the world, on politics and economics in a world that is full of coercion and violence, and fear. The Church has the responsibility to be a faithful steward of the Good News, and to discern the signs of the times with reverence and rigour. Despite appearances, the early Christians believed, God is mysteriously in control, and God’s purposes of love, justice and mercy will triumph in the end. In a real sense, their task was to ensure that the world was aware that it was being vexed by a rocking cradle.

In the next chapter I will discuss the conviction, increasingly common in eighteenth-century Europe and America, that religion, especially apocalyptic religion, is the problem, not the solution, and accordingly there was in the Enlightenment project an attempt to establish a rational way of restraining violence and ensuring peace.

14 Tertullian (1869–70), *Apologeticus* 39; *De Corona* 13, in *The Writings of Tertullian*, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 3 vols, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

15 *Apologeticus* 28.