

WINTER 2019 • ISSUE 13

PROVIDENCE

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIANITY & AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY



PEACE in a FALLEN WORLD

PEACE IN A FALLEN WORLD:
UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AT 70

ELIZABETH EDWARDS SPALDING
HARRY, ELEANOR & THE DAWN OF UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS

THE REALITY OF PEACE
By DREW GRIFFIN

MARK TOOLEY
RUSSIA, HUMAN RIGHTS & CHRISTIANITY

WALTER RUSSELL MEAD
AS CHRISTIAN AS CHERRY PIE

PETER LEITHART REVIEW
By PAUL D. MILLER

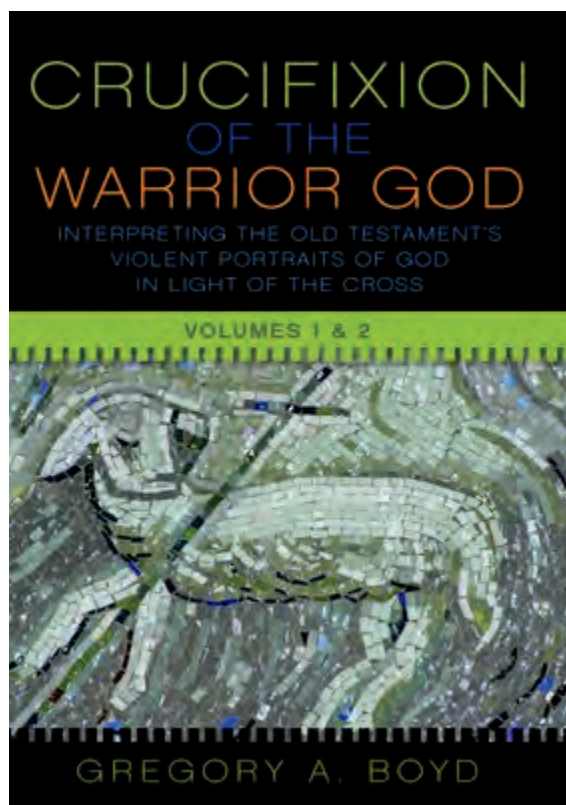
TIMOTHY KELLER REVIEW
By MARK MELTON

GREG BOYD REVIEW
By DARYL CHARLES

The Lamb *and* the Lion

Review of *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*

Gregory A. Boyd, Fortress Press, 2017, 1445 pages



J. Daryl Charles

This is an excerpt of Charles' review, which can be accessed in full online at providencemag.com.

Gregory A. Boyd's *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* is a massive, almost 1,500-page double volume that represents the author's attempt to resolve the tensions between a Jesus who is thought to reveal "an *agape*-centered, other-oriented, enemy-embracing God who opposes all violence" and "the many Old Testament (OT) portraits of Yahweh violently smiting his enemies" (xxviii-xxix). These tensions, which are very real and confront any serious reader of the OT, are magnified for pastor and theologian Boyd, who professes to stand within the Anabaptist tradition (15-17, 205, 260, and 544, n. 80) and who attempts their resolution

with a pre-commitment to ideological pacifism (xxvii-xxxiv). This pre-commitment is stated from the outset and guides the entire project, governing the author's use of a "cruciform hermeneutic" and the author's treatment of all OT texts and narratives.

This task, of course, is complicated by numerous factors, not least of which is Jesus' and the New Testament (NT) writers' authoritative citing of OT figures, events, and categories. But it is further complicated (1) by the NT's unqualified recognition and acknowledgement of the OT scripture's inspiration and authority (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:1-12; 2 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 11:1-40; James 2:8-13; 2 Pet. 1:19-21); (2) by Jesus' acknowledgement of the continuity of moral law as revealed in the OT (Matt. 5:17-20), which Boyd misinterprets (75-78); and (3) by the NT writers' constant and authoritative use of the OT in myriads of ways, some of which are at times baffling to the modern reader. These realities create for Boyd a "conundrum" insofar as his own view, to be developed below, is lacking support from the historical Christian tradition.

Boyd's project, then, requires a hermeneutic that begins with the presuppositions of ideological pacifism and *works its way backward*. It works its way backward (1) through the NT, in which John the Baptist, Jesus, the evangelists, and the apostles are made to espouse pacifism; (2) through church history and the early church in particular; and then finally (3) through the texts of the OT itself, whether found in the Pentateuch, the historical narratives, the Psalms, or the prophets. In light of the clear commands of God given to the leaders of Israel of old, this will not be an easy interpretive task. Along the way, Boyd finds one church father, the pacifist Origen, to assist him in reinterpreting the Old Testament and thereby helping to furnish a "new perspective" (xxxii-xxxiv) on a difficult question.

This "new perspective" wrestles with canonical material in the OT that seems "unworthy of God" (xxxii) and finds a "solution" (xl) to the theological tensions that emanate from OT



The Opening of the Fifth and Sixth Seals, Revelation 6:9-16, by Matthias Gerung, circa 1530–32. Verses 15-16 say, “Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, Fall on us and hide us from the presence of him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.” Source: Wikimedia Commons.

“texts of terror.” It does so in the following manner: “the Spirit,” Boyd informs the reader, “will enable us to see beyond the surface appearance of things, where the conundrum resides, and find a resolution in a deeper, more profound, revelatory truth” (xxxiii). “Prayerfully contemplating Scripture’s violent portraits of God,” as Boyd retells it, he “suddenly began to catch glimpses of the crucified God in them” (ibid.). What he calls the “Magic Eye” approach to understanding the OT (xxxv-xxxvii) becomes for Boyd the key in interpreting those ethically knotty accounts in the OT of God supposedly destroying human beings. In a nutshell, what is this “Magic Eye” approach? “God, who is indiscriminate in his love and non-violent, had to accommodate his self-revelation to the spiritual state and cultural conditioning of his people in the ages leading up to Christ” (xxxv). This starting point for Boyd becomes the essence of his “crucicentric” reading of scripture. In the end, he realizes, “Origen’s advice” (i.e., a mystical interpretation) “proved right” (xxxiii). With this inspiration in place, Boyd begins to apply his “cruciform hermeneutic.”¹

Briefly summarized, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*² (hereafter *CWG*) attempts to argue that the OT accounts of God’s “violence”—i.e., “texts of terror” (279)—are not true portraits of the character of God. Rather, they are misconstrued and culturally conditioned—i.e., fallen—accounts that “mask” God’s true character and self-revelation. These accounts, therefore, are to be understood as “literary artifices” (548) and not to be taken at face value. Let the reader beware: Boyd’s argument consists of seven parts, 25 chapters, 10 appendices, one postscript, 100 pages of indices, and 40 pages of suggested reading, all of which consumes 1,445 pages of print. Wading through this project is not for the faint in heart.

Boyd’s position, as represented in his “cruciform” hermeneutic, is not only that Christ fulfills OT revelation but that he *abrogates* and *corrects* it. This, however, is heretical and wholly incompatible with Christian tradition. Boyd’s understanding and explanation of divine “accommodation” as a “concealing mask,” moreover, fully undermine the inspiration and authority of OT scripture. In truth, sacred scripture in its totality—both the OT and the NT—contradicts Boyd, for God indeed *does* kill, annihilate, and destroy in his judging acts, as NT writers remind us in all sobriety. In addition, Boyd’s “open theistic” presuppositions about

the divine nature are utterly repudiated by the doctrines of divine sovereignty, providence, divine inscrutability, and common grace, which the historical Christian tradition has always affirmed. And consistent with religious pacifism’s misreading of the so-called “Sermon on the Mount,” Boyd fails to observe the context of Jesus’ prohibition of personal revenge, which prevents Boyd from recognizing Paul’s (and the NT’s) distinguishing between vengeance (Rom. 12), which is private and illicit, and retribution (Rom. 13), which is public and required of the governing authorities. In the end, this misreading of the Sermon induces a host of interpretive errors in Boyd’s thinking that are simply far too numerous to enumerate in the present review.

Boyd’s project, which renders not merely the OT “texts of terror” but *all of scripture* as “non-violent,” fails to adequately represent Christ in scripture’s culmination, the NT Apocalypse. There he is depicted *both* as crucified Lamb *and* conquering Lord, that is, the Lion of Judah and Lord of Hosts who judges, not by “withdrawal,” but by violent conquest. Moreover, he does this partly in response to the cries of those who have been martyred (Rev. 6) and who await divine retribution, as symbolized by the sword. This retribution, alas, is so dreadful that even the kings of the earth cry out for mercy against such wrath (6:15-17). It is retribution by the Lord Almighty, whose name is King of kings and Lord of lords, and it is described in terms that are clearly not “non-violent” (19:11-21).

Then there is the considerable problem of our reading of church history, or, to put it bluntly, the pacifist’s non-reading of that history. For the great majority of religious pacifists, only periodic outbreaks of recognizing God’s “non-violent” nature have confronted the Christian church in her two millennia of existence. Supposedly, the early church until the fourth century was wholly pacifist. Then, some 12 centuries later, with emergence of the “radical reformers” and Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, did this awareness fortunately resurface once more. And now, it is thought, those who are Anabaptist-minded like Boyd are seeking to carry on the neglected tradition. But this caricature—one that is even imbibed by a good number of non-pacifists—is false. The stereotype of the early church as wholly pacifist has been shown in recent decades by serious historical scholarship to be, in fact, mistaken and needing adjustment. A more accurate picture of the early centuries is that we find a *mixture* of convictions. This is as we might ex-



David and Goliath, by Titian, between 1542-1544. Santa Maria della Salute, Venice. Source: Olga's Gallery, via Wikimedia Commons.

pect. What is remarkable is that, based on the literature, the question of war and peace is not a topic of concern in the early church. We find neither major controversy, nor councils, nor ex-communications over the issue, which itself is quite instructive and should tell us something.

Nevertheless, the assumption behind the pacifist's rendition of church history is that those who genuinely embrace pacifist "non-violence" are the true bearers of Christian faith; and those who do not are compromised, coopted, and collaborating with evil and political power.³ Yet this minority position does not represent—nor has it ever represented—mainstream thinking in the church, whether among Catholics or Protestants.

One of the abiding frustrations for the reader of CWG is the fact that, in his application of the "cruciform hermeneutic" to OT "texts of terror,"

Boyd never offers any sort of guide or guidelines to allow the reader to discern and distinguish between OT texts that are authentic and those which "misrepresent" the character of God. This is a major oversight, especially *if* the church historically *has* erred in its interpretation of these divine portraits. On the other hand, this is perhaps as we might expect since Boyd's reading does not represent the church's normative reading of the OT; rather, it deviates. Such guidelines, if they exist, would be necessary not only for the sake of coming to grips with the "texts of terror" but also other parts of the canon which are normative. For example, the pacifist—along with Boyd's application of the "cruciform" exegesis—disavows God's self-revelation to Noah after the flood. As recorded in Genesis 9, the commandment regarding the shedding of blood is both clear and binding; it stands parallel to the Sixth Commandment as recorded in the Decalogue: "You shall not murder."⁴ The dis-

“In another era, this 1,445-page project would have been called heresy. Today, however, such is not the case, for in a post-traditional, “post-consensus” age...what is at its core heterodox easily passes muster in the Christian community—and, in fact, is often celebrated.”

tion between guilt and innocence, of course, permeates moral law as revealed in the OT and forms the very backbone not only of “criminal justice” but of law, order, and civil society.

The pacifist reading of scripture, with its pre-commitment to “non-violence,” fails to make yet a further important distinction. It is the distinction between “force” and “violence.” In his important work *We Hold These Truths*, Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray describes the difference between the two entities in the following manner: “Force is the measure of power necessary and sufficient to uphold...law and politics. What exceeds this measure is violence, which destroyed the order of both law and politics.”⁵ As an instrument, then, force is morally neutral in itself. Surely, it would seem that pacifism makes the world unsafe for everyone

A final criticism of *CWG* is narrowly theological, although theology is the source of all manner of ethical error. It concerns the doctrine that is lodged at the heart of divine revelation (and not only the Christian Gospel). I refer to the doctrine of the atonement. Our desperate attempts to bleach not only the OT “texts of terror” but in fact all of scripture have pernicious effects, not least of all in our understanding of the nature of divine sacrifice, which Boyd is so concerned to protect and defend. Boyd’s position inexorably leads to a bloodless atonement, and it ignores virtually the entire history of Israel as the people of God for whom the self-revealing God continually made atonement—from the Passover lamb in Egypt to the paschal lamb of Christ. This method of divine provision, alas, was not “non-violent.” Nor was it bloodless. As the Levitical code graphically demonstrates and as God’s ultimate sacrifice confirms, atonement required “violence” on God’s part, for “without

the shedding of blood there is *no* forgiveness of sin” (Heb. 9:22; italics added). While this particular notion of atonement is a huge stumbling block for many, especially for religious pacifists who prefer a bloodless and “non-violent” sacrifice, there is simply no getting around the biblical witness. Here Boyd’s failed determination to “re-interpret” the OT is perhaps most notable—and most serious.

In another era, this 1,445-page project would have been called heresy. Today, however, such is not the case, for in a post-traditional, “post-consensus” age—an age in which lay persons, pastors, even theologians and ethicists are loath to acknowledge *traditio* (literally, that which has been handed down)—what is at its core heterodox easily passes muster in the Christian community—and, in fact, is often celebrated. In some ways, then, Marcion’s position is to be preferred over Boyd’s, for at least Marcion was more forthcoming about his rejection of certain OT texts.

Boyd wishes to caution the reader that “this present work cannot be justly charged with lacking precedent in the ancient church tradition” (269) insofar as he is professing to stand within a “short-lived Anabaptist hermeneutical tradition.” Whether his pacifistic views existed in church history is *per se* not at issue, irrespective of this reviewer’s negative appraisal. What is argued in the present critique is simply that (1) Boyd’s pacifism does not represent historical Christian belief, and (2) Boyd’s revisionist reading of the OT finds no place in the historical Christian tradition (and the exhaustive, near-1,500-page attempt to locate it therein fails). Boyd finds it “remarkable” that others do not share his position (137-38), but could it be that neither Jesus nor the apostles read the OT as Boyd? Wisdom and humility might cause Boyd to do some soul-searching; after all, his is a “cruciform *reinterpretation*.”

Wholly absent from the argument set forth in *CWG* is the question—indeed, the very *possibility*—that divine aggression *might* in fact communicate moral and theological truth about God that is enduring. The reader is left to conclude that what matters in religious faith today is that we moderns and ultra-moderns *not be offended* by the God of the OT. We are best simply to ignore St. Paul’s explicit warning, recorded in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth

Now these things occurred as examples, to

keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did... We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.⁶

Contrary to the argument of *CWG*, however, we must insist that the God of the OT, referred to by Moses as “Lord Sabaoth” (Exod. 15:3), can be exalted and praised by Christians *precisely* for who he is:

I will sing to the Lord
For he is highly exalted.
The horse and its rider
He has hurled into the sea.
The Lord is my strength and my song;
He has become my salvation
He is my God and I will praise him;
My father's God, and I will
exalt him.
The Lord is a warrior;
The Lord is his name.
Pharaoh's chariots and his army
He has hurled into the sea.⁷

This two-volume project is a useful reminder of the role of presuppositions and starting points, not to mention the sheer lengths the ideological pacifist must employ in order to justify the “non-violent” position. For just as a set of train tracks guarantees where the cargo must go, so the “warrior God” *must* be crucified—in Boyd's theology and in his reinterpretation of the biblical tradition. Jesus simply *may not* be permitted to be the Lion of Judah, whose claws are now effectively shorn and whose character is rendered meek and mild so as not to offend our contemporary sensibilities. Throughout the history of salvation, the truth is that this is *precisely* the reason why the saints worship at the altar of God: the crucified Lamb is the warrior God. And for this very reason, all of history bows down, even when that history is yet to be consummated.

It is for this reason—and more—that the principal argument found in *CWG* stands outside the bounds of the historic Christian tradition. The “Lamb of God”? Most certainly. And just as assuredly, the “Lion of Judah.” Consider, there-

fore, the kindness and the severity of God.⁸ ■

J. Daryl Charles, a contributing editor of *Providence*, is the Acton Institute Affiliate Scholar in Theology & Ethics. He is author of 17 books, including *Between Pacifism and Jihad: Just War and Christian Tradition* (InterVarsity Press, 2005), (with Timothy J. Demy) *War, Peace, and Christianity* (Crossway, 2010), *Natural Law and Religious Freedom* (Routledge, 2018), and most recently (with Mark David Hall) *America and the Just War Tradition: A History of U.S. Conflict* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), and (with Timothy J. Demy and Mark Larson) *The Protestant Reformers on War, Peace, and Justice* (Wipf & Stock, 2019). Before entering the university classroom, Charles did public policy research in criminal justice in Washington, DC. He can be reached at dcharles@acton.org.

Endnotes

1. The initial reaction of this reader in encountering Boyd's use of the term “cruciformity” was to expect the author to state his debt to the two theologians, the Lutheran Eric Gritsch in the 1970s and the Roman Catholic Michael Gorman in the early 2000s, who seem to have coined the term in their treatments of NT theology. Strangely, expression of that debt is never forthcoming in *CWG*. Gorman's name appears in passing in several footnotes, though without recognition of his role in normalizing “cruciformity” in theological discourse. Gritsch's name does not even appear in 1,445 pages of print.
2. Earlier in 2017, Fortress Press published *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence*, a more popular and far shorter version (252 pages) of Boyd's argument. Given the similar manner in which the two volumes are structured, it goes without saying that the shorter version is far more accessible.
3. Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder coined a term for this supposed compromise, coopting, and collaboration: he called it “Constantinianism.” While his principal arguments are most popularly developed in *The Politics of Jesus* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), they can also be found in *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1971); *What Would You Do?* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983); *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (2nd ed.; Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1992); and *When War Is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking* (2nd ed.; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).
4. Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17; cf. Matt. 5:21-22; Rom. 13:9; and James 2:11. The commandment not to kill implies a discrimination between guilt or innocence, as the Hebrew verb *ratsach* suggests.
5. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).
6. I Cor. 10:6, 8-11.
7. Exod. 15:1-4a.
8. Rom. 11:22.