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THE NONVIOLENCE OF JESUS: A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

From an interpretive standpoint, the nonviolence of Jesus of Nazareth is thought of by many as relatively unambiguous. Still, across the last two millennia a great many instances of “interpretive gymnastics” have distorted the nonviolent teachings of Jesus. These distortions have been invoked as justification for social oppression, geopolitical warfare, and interpersonal violence, among other things. This essay employs the hermeneutical methodology of Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Biblical criticism of Walter Wink in order to argue that such interpretations constitute erroneous violations of the New Testament texts containing Jesus’ words on nonviolence. The author suggests that any interpretive action with the words of Jesus that results in the admissibility of violence is not only flawed but is catalyzed by ulterior interpretive pre-commitments. Such pre-commitments, rather than the words of Jesus themselves, are what enable the “misinterpretation” of Jesus as a condoner of violence.

Opening Reflections

To think is to interpret. It may be argued that the human faculty of cognition is firmly rooted in the ability and propensity to make sense of the world. By and large, human beings are in a constant state of interpretation, of sense-making. We interpret the behavior of others, the importance or value of certain objects and experiences, and even the very meaning of our own existence. In essence, one’s cognitive encounter with the world is inextricably connected with the notion of interpretation in a way that is virtually inevitable. Beliefs, principles, religious convictions, and worldviews are all concepts that are in some way shaped by this interpretive tendency. With respect to particular Judeo-Christian expressions of such concepts, the Bible and its interpretation is of obvious and paramount importance. Bible believers must detect the meanings of Biblical texts as they pertain to their own conceptions of truth and God. This ventures into the realm of textual interpretation which is a task that falls under the umbrella of philosophical hermeneutics.

Overview

Perhaps no one was as keen in the analysis of textual hermeneutics as the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer's magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, lays out a thorough and eloquent treatment of the exercise of textual interpretation. In spite of what may be assumed given the book's title, Gadamer does not actually offer a formal method with respect to interpreting texts. Instead, his work emphasizes a sort of observational commentary regarding his theory of what human beings tend to do when they read texts. That is, Gadamer is not concerned with recommending how people *ought* to interpret so much as he is with diagnosing the method by which they *do* interpret (Westphal, 2009, p. 70). In this sense, his work is more descriptive than prescriptive. There is a hermeneutical process that takes place when texts are read and Gadamer unpacks the philosophical components of that process. Still, his book is not entirely without at least some leanings toward caution and recommendation. He does, after all, have an agenda underlying his book and thus he provides some admonitions. To reiterate, however, Gadamer's larger emphasis and priority is to identify what occurs as people interpret text, rather than posit a system through which to interpret. Gadamer's book offers a magnificent overview of textual interpretation which can in turn be philosophically applied toward an examination of how certain Biblical principles and/or ethics are established.

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The Principle

In this essay, I will examine through the lens of Gadamer's work the Biblical basis for an ethic of nonviolence. My discussion will revolve solely around New Testament conceptions of Jesus' teachings regarding the matter. I will begin with a short section on Jesus, nonviolence, and the Bible from a theoretical perspective. From there, I will explore important themes raised in Gadamer's book and subsequently place them in conversation with issues of neutrality and tradition (and culture) as they pertain to the issue of nonviolence. Moreover, the discussions will be interspersed with my reflections on the work of Walter Wink in his book, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*. I will argue that nonviolence is the ethical approach that is most responsibly in line with Jesus' way. With use of Gadamer's framework and Wink's commentaries, I will suggest that those who adopt a worldview which allows for violence are engaging in a hermeneutical task of textual interpretation which is not in line with Jesus' teachings, but rather is born out of alternative interpretive commitments. While I will offer no singular or particular hermeneutical interpretation of Jesus' teachings on violence, I will suggest that the interpretive meanings of such texts have certain bounds which exclude

violence as a reasonably rendered ethic.

Jesus, Nonviolence, and The Bible

It may come as no surprise that Christians often disagree on certain areas of doctrine. Still, certain components of Christian faith and Christian living are not so much a matter of doctrine as they are a matter of principle and conviction. That is, certain fundamental beliefs stem not necessarily from a deep systematic theology but rather from a deep, personal sense of Biblical truth. Christians are often equipped with certain principles and convictions that are informed more by interpretations of Biblical texts and narratives than by general doctrine alone. The issue of nonviolence is one example of such principles and convictions. Nonviolence is rarely mentioned in churches' or institutions' statements of faith or systematic theological declarations. Perhaps this is because the issue is too complex. Statements such as "The Old Testament is riddled with violence," or "Jesus was peaceful, but he would have drawn the line somewhere," may become too complex to sift through and as a result people, churches, and institutions often drop the issue altogether and leave it to personal preference. Believers may conclude that the issue of nonviolence and where they stand on it is nonessential to the "overall package" of their Christian faith. Hence, the lack of attention to violence with respect to doctrine arises.

It seems that the issue of nonviolence escapes the doctrinal discussion and instead often gets placed into an infrequently visited realm of New Testament exegesis—especially with respect to the words of Jesus. Rather than challenge this paradigm, I intend to operate out of it. In other words, I will take aim at Jesus' words rather than doctrinal issues with respect to violence. By assuming Jesus as God incarnate and the peak of Biblical revelation who speaks God's will, the necessary task at hand becomes interpreting his words. What Jesus has to say regarding violence is of utmost importance because he speaks with and by the power and authority of God. Thus, I will not argue that a nonviolent ethic needs to find fruition by becoming systematically or doctrinally grounded, but rather that it may be gleaned through interpreting the teachings of Jesus himself. In order to further develop this I will, in the coming sections of this essay, explore Jesus' teachings on the matter of violence in conversation with Gadamer's hermeneutical reflections as well as Wink's Biblical commentaries.

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Hermeneutics and the Myth of Neutrality

In modern psychology, the debate of nature versus nurture takes form in various theoretical models. Are people born with certain characteristics and personality tendencies, or do they become conditioned to behave in

particular ways? In psychology, answers to this question are aplenty on both sides of the coin. Can the same be said, however, regarding textual interpretation? Are people ever simply encountering a text with an innate (as in natural) way of interpreting it, or are they susceptible to at least some level of external influence and subjectivity (as in nurture) whereby the interpretive task becomes slightly more subjective? Can we ever act as neutral readers who decipher textual meanings unbiasedly in a wholly objective manner?

E. D. Hirsch suggests that through “severe discipline” and “philological effort” readers may employ strategies which will render at least the *most accurate* reading of a text’s single meaning (Westphal, 2009, pp. 46-47). Thus, while Hirsch may not delve too directly into discussion about the infallibility or neutrality of the reader, he does seem to claim that there is *one* meaning which should be aimed at in the midst of textual analysis. However, Hirsch overlooks certain inevitabilities by making this assertion. He presumes that readers have both the consciousness of their own biases and the ability to employ “severe discipline” in order to diminish these biases when engaged with a text. Gadamer understands, though, that most readers are not capable of abandoning their traditional lenses of presupposition for the sake of extracting a “less subjective” interpretation (Westphal, 2009, p. 72). Moreover, Hirsch assumes that text by its very nature is complete upon its composition, leaving little to no room for the audience (reader) to enter into the meaning-making task. Hirsch’s own bias (namely, assuming that texts contain meaning only in themselves independent of readership and subsequent interpretation) is evident in the way that he implicitly calls for a neutrality on the part of the reader. This neutrality ultimately seems problematic at best and nonexistent at worst.

To return to the psychological language, there are no “natural” readers but only “nurtured” ones who arrive at texts with inextinguishable flames of interpretive subjectivity. It is for reasons like this that Hirsch is of little use with respect to the interpretation of texts because he actually calls for an absence of interpretation. Rather than interpretation, he calls for extraction. To put it another way, Hirsch is not interested in interpretative meaning since he prefers recognitory meaning. However, since human readers are not robots who merely *recognize* the meanings of texts, the hermeneutical philosophy of Gadamer is much more helpful and realistic to our task.

Gadamer acknowledges the subjectivity that each reader brings to the text. No matter how self-aware or disciplined readers may be, they always encounter texts with preconceptions that drive the interpretive task. There is always an element of subjectivity to the way in which someone

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interprets a particular text. But this, in spite of Hirsch's worrisome proclamations to the contrary (Westphal, 2009, pp. 48-49), does not open the door for just any interpretation to make its way in. In fact, Gadamer is far from admitting such a haphazard form of relativity. He insists that ideally a reader "will not resign himself (sic) from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text ... rather, a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 271). It is helpful here to appeal to the old adage of "jamming a circle into a square" or vice versa. In this sense, Gadamer is ardently refusing to affirm the interpretive method of readers who insist on jamming circles into texts whose meanings are clearly square-like by maintaining certain interpretive biases. Gadamer's position is one that recognizes and allows for subjectivity, but within reasonable means. Therefore, readers can never be neutral interpreters because of their inevitable subjectivity. They can, however, be wrong interpreters by steadfastly relying on "accidental fore-meanings" which prevent deeper (and more correct) meanings of texts from emerging.

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Hermeneutics and the Bible

With respect to Biblical interpretation of Jesus' teachings on nonviolence, Gadamer's analysis is quite useful. The Bible, after all, is read and interpreted by people (which renders Hirsch's "reader-phobic" method problematic). Often times though, Bible believers have a "my way or the highway" attitude with respect to Scriptural interpretation. Westphal points out how one-dimensional meaning-making with regard to the Bible can lead to arrogance on the part of certain interpreters as well as a castigation of alternative interpretations as mistaken or misguided (Westphal, 2009, p. 47). It is important here to strike a balance between Gadamer's warning against extreme subjectivity (which, again, is like the reader who insists on jamming a circle into a square-like text) and Westphal's reflection on interpretive behavior. The two bits of insight are not at odds with one another and together call for a healthy middle-ground. Faithful readers of the Bible must be careful not to become too complacent and prideful regarding their interpretations while also realizing that not just any Biblical takeaway is appropriate. Some readings of Scripture are just plain unfounded and biased by wrongheaded "accidental fore-meanings" while others line up more consistently with Christ-like virtues. The task of the Christian is to engage in Biblical interpretation in such a way that is both humble and fervently committed to the pursuit of truth. In other words, subjective readers of the Bible must understand through a posture of grace, respect, sensitivity, and openness,

that not just anything goes when it comes to interpretation of their Holy Book.

In order to achieve this balanced, Gadamerian-hermeneutical truth from Jesus' teachings regarding nonviolence, naturally one must turn to the Biblical texts which speak to the issue. Perhaps nowhere is Jesus speaking more directly to the issue of violence than in The Sermon on the Mount as portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5. Thus, the interpretive task must be taken toward these texts in order to pull away some level of meaning and substance.

The Hermeneutics of Walter Wink

In *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, Walter Wink engages in biblical interpretation while also reflecting on what the Christian response to such reflections ought to be. Wink, a pacifist, outlines three potential reactions to the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament: 1) passivity, 2) violent opposition, and 3) militant, resistant nonviolence (Wink, 2003, p. 12). Wink emphasizes that the third way is what is most faithful to what Jesus teaches. He does this by delving directly into the New Testament stories and attempting to understand their contextual meaning. While Christian advocates for violence and just-war typically emphasize natural law, political science, and utilitarianism in their reasoning approaches, Wink emphasizes Jesus, proper exegesis, and appropriate subsequent action. This is Wink's hermeneutical frame.

Wink is aware, however, that detractors may invoke interpretive tactics that are at odds with this nonviolent approach. In particular, the Matthew 5:39 teaching where Jesus proclaims "do not resist evildoers" is discussed by Wink. Some non-pacifists have argued that Jesus' teaching to not *resist* evildoers is an invitation to not only *confront* them, but confront them violently. Instead of weighing in on this dichotomy, Wink instead questions the translation of the very passage itself. The Greek word used for "resist" in this passage is "antistenai." "Antistenai" is a word used to describe violent military revolts or strikes (Wink, 2003, p. 11). So, when Jesus says do not resist, he is actually saying do not "antistenai," or "do not violently strike back" (Wink, 2003, p. 11). This interpretation sheds light on the method that Jesus expects from his followers – nonviolence. Wink argues that this method of reasoning, while biblical, is nonetheless counterintuitive and unnatural with respect to human instincts (Wink, 2003, p. 88). However, he places a higher emphasis on Jesus' teachings than he does on natural law in his interpretive reasoning. Thus, his interpretive method is one that places aside "accidental fore-meanings" and looks at the Greek language carefully so as not to jam a circle into a square.

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Gadamer's warning against readers closing themselves off from the "actual meaning" of texts speaks volumes here. One may carefully and responsibly interpret (as seen in Wink's treatment of the passage) or one may force their preconceived agenda onto the text (as seen in claiming "do not resist" means to "violently confront"). Gadamer's method calls for the former route and thus renders a reading of Jesus' Sermon teaching which clearly calls for nonviolence.

Gadamer on Tradition and Culture

Gadamer argues for a hermeneutical method of textual analysis that is neither subjective nor objective in that it is grounded in and informed by common denominators that arise out of tradition (Gadamer, 2004, p. 293). This said, readers are never autonomous in their interpretations. Instead, they are embedded in a tradition or culture which guides the ways in which meanings may be derived from particular texts. Still, Gadamer is again careful not to venture too far into the realm of subjectivity so as to deem relativity admissible. He writes, "the hermeneutically trained mind will also include historical consciousness. It will make conscious the prejudices governing our own understanding, so that the text, as another's meaning, can be isolated and valued on its own" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 298). Gadamer acknowledges the prejudices that form individuals' hermeneutical lenses (tradition and culture) while also speaking against a type of conscious complacency which may perpetuate textual misinterpretation. Gadamer calls for readers, to the extent that it is possible, to become aware of the powers guiding their interpretive activity so that they may become more attuned to the text's meaning apart from (and within) the historical effects of such powers. That is, Gadamer calls for an awareness of historical, traditional, and cultural biases, but he does not presume that individuals may ever be fully divorced from them. Still, Gadamer claims that underneath this are certain interpretive behaviors that are out of bounds and others that are not.

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Wink's Hermeneutic: The Political Jesus

John Howard Yoder's groundbreaking book *The Politics of Jesus* contained this as its central thesis: To be a follower of Christ is to inherit a social-political-ethical stance of nonviolence (Yoder, 1972; 1994). If Yoder is right, interpreting Jesus as sociopolitically disengaged or passive is problematic. It is in this vein that we may return to the work of Wink which also illustrates the depth of Jesus' nonviolent sociopolitical lesson in Matthew 5:39 where followers are urged to "turn the other cheek." Too often, Wink argues, these words are misinterpreted as an act of passivity and not one of militant, nonviolent defiance (Wink, 2003, p. 16). Wink

describes how in the ancient near-East, being struck on the right cheek would have been seen as a method of humiliating the victim because the strike would have been a right-handed backhand to a victim's right cheek. Thus, when the victim turns the other cheek, the oppressor is forced to then strike with the right fist onto the left cheek instead of backhanding again. This exposes the oppressor for who they are (an assaultive bully) and shows that their method of humiliation has not proven effective (Wink, 2003, p. 16). This is a nonviolent confrontation that stands up to injustice as opposed to being passive toward it. It is also a sociopolitical tactic. Therefore, according to Wink, Jesus does not teach passivity but nonviolent confrontation. In this vein, war or violence would need to be averted in favor of exposing injustice through some other means.

The issue is, however, that misreading Jesus' words as passive is an act of interpretation that is likely formed entirely out of particular nationalistic, political, and cultural mentalities. In other words, passivity may get read into this passage of Scripture as a sort of fear-response in backing down to oppressors. Geopolitical powers that be (e.g., governments, militaries, etc.) serve as sources of power that may instill within persons a sense of powerlessness. The result may be a type of complacency that precludes the possibility of nonviolent defiance toward oppressors. Thus, readers of the Bible who are impacted by such prejudices may interpret this utterance by Jesus (Matthew 5:39) as being entirely too idealistic and apolitical. Turning the other cheek is altogether unacceptable from within such a mentality. But it is a mentality that informs such readings and subsequent interpretations in the first place. Under the influence of political and nationalistic powers, modern Christians may be predisposed toward reading and interpreting Jesus' words as "weak" or "passive." "If someone hits you, let them hit you again...be a doormat," such interpretations of Jesus' words would suggest. Would the socio-political circumstances that led to these sorts of readings make them correct? The answer is no. A more critical, contextualized, and historically oriented reading of Jesus' words (such as Wink's) renders an interpretation that is neither violent in its nature nor weak or passive.

Glen Stassen and David Gushee argue that nonviolence and pacifism was the stance that the church took for the first several centuries after Jesus' time (Stassen & Gushee, 2003, p. 165). Given this, it is peculiar to consider that subsequent, and more modern, interpretations of Jesus' teachings on violence have given rise to a more violent (or an altogether more "weak" or "passive") hermeneutical meaning. In accordance with Gadamer's method, the more traditionally grounded and culturally aware move is to interpret Jesus' words as calling for non-passive, unconditional nonviolence.

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Concluding Thoughts

In this essay, I have argued that the way of nonviolence is the most responsible and accurate interpretation of Jesus' words. By placing the hermeneutical method of Hans-Georg Gadamer over the reflections of Walter Wink, I have suggested that readings of Jesus' words which promote violence are misled and unnecessarily influenced by fore-meanings falling outside of the text. Through the use of Gadamer's intricate balance of subjectivity and objectivity, I have demonstrated that Scriptural interpretations of Jesus' teachings that allow for violence are either flatly ignorant of crucial language issues, culturally embedded products of distorted tradition, or are born out of alternative interpretive commitments altogether.

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