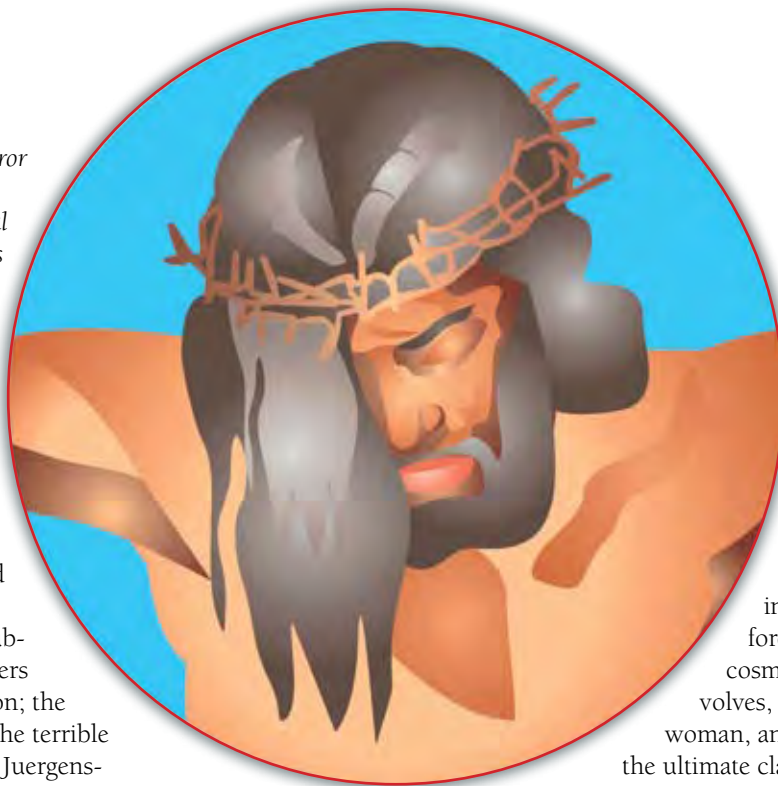


PEACEMAKING *and the*

BY KENDRA HALOVIK

In his work *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*,¹ Mark Juergensmeyer reports on his studies of religious groups that advocate violence. The first half of his book looks at Belfast, Jerusalem, the World Trade Center, Gaza, India's Punjab state, and a Tokyo subway. At each stop, he considers the particulars of the situation; the perpetrators and victims of the terrible violence. The second half of Juergensmeyer's book is titled "The Logic of Religious Violence," which suggests some common characteristics of religious individuals and groups that advocate violence.

One shared characteristic is the concept of war. Juergensmeyer observed that all of the people involved in acts of violence believed they were at war. Rationalizing that "War provides a reason to be violent,"² they rejected typical moral restraints. For those who embrace such a view, theirs is a war of cosmic dimensions, where deeply held principles and ways of life are at



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stake. It is a war where the "soldiers" ("martyrs") must sacrifice to achieve victory in their fight against demonic forces and evil empires.³ The cosmic nature of their war involves, at some level, every man, woman, and child. It is a war of ideals, the ultimate clash of worldviews. And, of course, they all believe that God is on their side.⁴

As I read Juergensmeyer's book, I kept thinking of "The Great Controversy" from my Seventh-day Adventist upbringing. As early as elementary school, we were taught to see ourselves as part of a cosmic war, in which our most treasured principles were at stake. In Pathfinders, we learned how to pitch a tent and to identify wild edible plants in preparation for the time when we would have to sacrifice our homes and material possessions (and perhaps our families and very lives) in order to be faithful to

APOCALYPSE



God. During the “last days,” the activities of Earth would mirror the spiritual battles already taking place in the cosmos.

While some of our teachers could identify “The Great Controversy” throughout Scripture, most focused on the books of Daniel and Revelation in order to remind us of the seriousness of our situation. In these apocalyptic texts, we saw the drama of world history played out between forces of good and evil. There was no “middle” position, no “sitting-on-the-fence.” Each of us was presented with a choice: Join Jesus (and win, even if you die), or join Satan (and die for sure).

If Juergensmeyer’s observations are accurate, if religious violence in our contemporary global village finds (at least partial) justification in a cosmic war, how should Adventist teachers who are committed to peacemaking teach the Apocalypse? Is it morally responsible to do so while Western nations are engaged in a never-ending global “war on terror”? Can we teach peace using what some have called “texts of terror”?⁵

Before giving three reasons why I believe the answer is “yes,”

when it comes to the Book of Revelation, two preliminary observations seem critical:

Asking the Tough Questions

First, it is vital that, as teachers, we constantly ask the tough questions. What do we mean when we say a “spiritual war” is going on in the world? Our concept of a cosmic “great controversy” calls us to the difficult task of resisting the unjust systems and institutions in our own nation, as well as the other nations of our world. How do we faithfully and prayerfully

challenge the “principalities and powers” whose work we witness each day?⁶ In the tradition of Scripture itself, we need to wrestle with the difficult passages, “refusing to let go until we have been blessed, even if it means leaving with a limp.”⁷

The Christ Story and Apocalyptic Themes

Second, if our students do not already know the Jesus story, when we begin reading Revelation 1:1, we should imagine a sign: “Stop! Read no further! Return to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John!” The Book of Revelation assumes that its readers already know the story of Jesus the Christ. Revelation expands the work of



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the healer in Galilee to the resurrected Lamb who is able to heal the hurting of all nations. Revelation assumes an embrace of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as disciples around the globe “follow the Lamb wherever he goes.”⁸ Jesus’ victory in life and death is the starting point of Revelation’s visions. If our students do not know the story of Jesus, we must share it with them before discussing biblical apocalyptic themes.⁹

An Anti-War Document

If we are serious about peacemaking, we need to teach the Book of Revelation because the “war” in Revelation is a challenge to all wars. It is the ultimate Christian anti-war document. In this book, the Bible’s

only book-length Apocalypse, swords are words, body armor consists of white robes,

and the leader of the redeemed is a lamb. The call to the Lamb’s followers is for wisdom and endurance. They are to be witnesses, willing to sacrifice themselves, but not through acts of violence. When the battlefield is described, with the armies of evil lined up to wreak havoc, the redeemed never enter the battle! In fact, unlike most Jewish apocalypses, the battle scene takes up less than one verse.

When I was young, I remember creating the Christian “soldier” with the “whole armor of God” by putting the proper felts on the little boy: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit.¹⁰ When we finished, the boy looked like

a soldier. For us kids, the words on the objects were not nearly as exciting as the military gear. I now believe that the felts missed the point. When we were finished, the boy should have looked like a boy. For those who lack the eyes of faith, the boy looks vulnerable going into battle. But the things he possesses—truth and righteousness, faith, salvation, and the Spirit—allow him to enter into the cosmic war, the Great Controversy, in a way that is a critique of all wars. It is for these reasons that no Christian school that takes seriously the Book of Revelation should encourage students to wear camouflage clothing or military fatigues as part of “dress-up days.” According to the New Testament Apocalypse, we enter the cosmic war realizing that *might does not make right*. It is just the opposite. The Lamb wins through self-sacrifice. On our knees, a most vulnerable posi-

tion, we witness to a new way, an alternative to the violent way of the world.

A Counter-Vision

If we are serious about peacemaking, we need to teach the Book of Revelation because it takes a vision to counter a vision. Those advocating violence in the name of religion are able to express a vision that stirs the imaginations of their youth. Teachers who are serious about peacemaking need a counter-vision to stir the imaginations of young people to work for peace. Revelation provides such a vision. In its pages, we discover images of a just world, a place for all people to live peaceably. In this new world are people from “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.”¹¹ They enter a city whose gates are never closed, where it is never night,¹² and where the leaves of the tree of life provide “healing for the nations.”¹³ Such a vision can shape moral imaginations, helping us see new possibilities, changing old perceptions, and compelling action.¹⁴ The language of Revelation—expressed in a multitude of metaphors, images, and symbols—enables readers to reconsider God and the world. Throughout Scripture, images of hope—a land flowing with milk and honey, a new Jerusalem—create an alternative to stories of injustice and terror. Scripture’s imaginative literature (found in liturgy, poetry, prophetic literature, and apocalyptic writings) moves us to embrace a moral vision with which to consider our world.

Responding With Singing and Engagement

If we are serious about peacemaking, we need to teach the Book of Revelation because it invites us to respond to a world of terror



with singing. This does not suggest a disengaged, “pie-in-the-sky” attitude to the very real horrors of our world—genocide, child sex slaves, domestic violence, and on and on. No, such singing is deeply committed engagement with the world. For the Book of Revelation’s choir members, singing is an act of active, non-violent resistance. To sing in the face of such horrors is to proclaim that “we shall overcome, someday.”¹⁵ To sing is to challenge violence at its very core. It is to critique the way things are, and to begin the process of stirring the imagination to what can be. The Book of Revelation contains 16 hymns.¹⁶ Although contemporary readers may expect these hymns only at the end of the book, at the time of victory and a renewed Earth, they show up throughout the narrative. In the midst of all that makes up life on Earth, the redeemed sing.

Each year, on the last day of my undergraduate “Book of Revelation” class at La Sierra University in Riverside, California, my students participate in a creative reading of Revelation from beginning to end. At different points in the narrative, students incorporate dramatic actions that include audience participation (reading in unison, taking a white stone, tasting something sweet), PowerPoint visuals, trumpet blasts, incense, and original artwork and music. The experience helps us notice the many different voices in the Book of Revelation. As our own voices join those of the choirs, we imagine and reflect a new world, a place of peace. ✍



Kendra Haloviak, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of New Testament Studies at La Sierra University in Riverside, California. She previously taught religion at Columbia Union College, and worked as a pastor at churches in Ohio, Maryland,



and Michigan. Her doctoral dissertation at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, was entitled “Worlds at War, Nations in Song: Dialogic Imagination and Moral Vision in the Hymns of the Book of Revelation.”

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd edition (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 228, summarizes these ideas with the following observation: “The syndrome begins with the perception that the public world has gone awry, and the suspicion that behind this social confusion lies a great spiritual and moral conflict, a cosmic battle between the forces of order and chaos, good and evil. Such a conflict is understandably violent, and this violence is often felt by the victimized activist as powerlessness, either individually or in association with others of his gender, race, or ethnicity. The government—already delegitimized—is perceived to be in league with the forces of chaos and evil.”
4. *Ibid.*, p. 219, states that those who commit acts of terrorism today “would do virtually anything if they thought it had been sanctioned by divine mandate or conceived in the mind of God. The power of this idea has been enormous. It has surpassed all ordinary claims of political authority and elevated religious ideologies to supernatural heights.”
5. This phrase is the title of a book by Phyllis

Trible. See *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Although Tribble examines passages from the Hebrew Bible, the phrase seems appropriate for at least some sections of the Book of Revelation.

6. The following two books are particularly helpful when reflecting on these questions: Allan A. Boesak’s *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse From a South African Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), and Eugene H. Peterson’s *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988).

7. In her introduction to *Texts of Terror*, pages 4 and 5, Tribble uses this imagery from the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32:22-32) to describe the human experience when encountering some of the “texts of terror” in Scripture.

8. Revelation 14:4.

9. This caution has been argued in an excellent paper by La Sierra University graduate student G. Vaughn Nelson, “Who’s Reading Revelation? Toward an Implied Reader in John’s Apocalypse” (March 2006). Unpublished manuscript.

10. See Ephesians 6:10-17.

11. Revelation 7:9.

12. Revelation 21:25.

13. Revelation 22:2.

14. The literature on this topic is vast. A particularly helpful work by William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1999), pages 50-71, considers the imagination as a “bridge” between the stories of Scripture and contemporary situations requiring moral discernment. For Spohn, Jesus’ imperative in the Gospel of Luke to “go and do likewise” continues to call Christians to moral action in a manner similar to the way of Jesus. The imagination moves from the past context, to a new one, without neglecting the particulars of each. Through the imagination, new realities are possible, therefore new actions are possible. In the context of the Book of Revelation, visions of peace and justice move the imagination from the first-century context of the book’s original setting to our contemporary social, political, and economic situations.

15. “We Shall Overcome,” by Z. Horton, F. Hamilton, G. Carawan, and P. Seeger, recorded and released, 1962. From *Pete Seeger’s Greatest Hits*, 2002 Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.

16. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52a, ed. Bruce M. Metzger (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1997), pages 314-317, identifies 16 hymnic utterances within the narrative of the Book of Revelation: 4:8c, 11; 5:9b-10, 12b, 13b; 7:10b, 12; 11:15b, 17-18; 12:10b-12; 15:3b-4; 16:5b-7b; 19:1b-2, 3, 5b, 6b-8. See also Michael A. Harris, *The Literary Function of Hymns in the Apocalypse of John* (Ph.D. dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989), pp. 4-16.