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History’s Ambiguous Tide toward Divine Peace

Abstract: A long historical process has been religiously experienced and symbolically imaged as a spiritual tide of divine guidance through an ambiguous history toward a destiny of divine peace. Writing from a Christian perspective, it is recognized that Christianity shares with Judaism and Islam a Mosaic prophetic tradition that began with Abraham and culminated with Jesus for Christians, and with Muhammad for Muslims. The three Abrahamic religions share Isaiah’s messianic promise of eternal peace and Jeremiah’s lament that there ‘is no peace’ as they move between faithful confidence and political pessimism. Philosophical and theological interpretation of a divine tide of inspiration toward ecumenical peace, sustained through violent historical undertows, is illustrated with personal memoir and contemporary experience.

Our divine destiny

Living through partial periods of relative peace and intermittent episodes of widespread violence, believers carry out their witness to divine peace alternating between faithful confidence and political pessimism. Will our human history end in the biblically prophesied divine peace, when “God will wipe away every tear from our eyes” (Revelation 7:17) or in catastrophic destruction, perhaps by a nuclear ‘bang,’ followed by a radioactive ‘whimper.’

Seeking guidance in the Scripture, even there Christians find themselves moving between the prophetic confidence of Isaiah’s messianic promise, “Of the increase of God’s government and of peace there shall be no end” (9:7), and Jeremiah’s historically realistic lament, “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘peace, peace, when there is no peace’” (6:14).

Despite longer memories than Jeremiah’s of our too often unjust, sometimes violent, human history, Christian hope, despite intermittent lapses, has remained focused since its first century by St. Paul’s missionary preaching to his violent Roman (and our) world, “For Christ is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility… He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:14–16). Many Christians therefore believe that they are divinely guided through an ambiguous history to a destiny of ecumenical peace, which following Jesus may rightly be called ‘the Kingdom of God.’

An ambiguous spiritual tide

This divine destiny, however, is given only through a long historical process that we can religiously experience and symbolically envision as a spiritual tide guiding us toward divine peace. Our culture sometimes degrades this tidal image to a mere misdirected social tide, like Shakespeare’s Brutus, who senses “there is a tide in the affairs of men” but finds it an undertow carrying him toward yet another Roman war. Christians, unhappily, also sometimes so entirely miss or terribly misuse God’s ‘tidal’ energies as to create an undertow befitting Jeremiah’s lament: “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly…”