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Toward an Ontology of Peace I

Ricœur on Peace and Violence in Creation

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This is the first of two essays that develop an ontology of peace by drawing from Paul Ricœur's thought. This first essay argues that Ricœur's hermeneutics of creation provides a good starting point because of its insistence on the goodness of created being. Ricœur develops this conviction from his reading of the biblical creation accounts, which I trace through three texts from three periods of Ricœur's work. In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricœur shows that peace rather than violence is most fundamental to creation. In his essay "On the Exegesis of Gen 1:1–2:4a", he expands his interpretation to consider the combat imagery in the Psalms, showing how the text interprets the separation and ordering of creation as a work of providential wisdom rather than violence. In *Thinking Biblically*, Ricœur complicates his earlier hermeneutics of creation by bringing in themes of mastery, chaos, and fragility—three themes that need careful interpretation to preserve Ricœur's earlier emphasis on the goodness and peacefulness of creation. This preservation is possible, I argue, by recovering Ricœur's early Christological reflections in *The Symbolism of Evil*, which point to the hope of an ultimate, eschatological victory over violence. I conclude by arguing that Ricœur's hermeneutics can help us to imagine peace, and this imagining is vital to the practice of peace.

Introduction

Given the theme of this special issue, I would like to consider how Ricœur can help us envision an ontology of peace rather than an ontology of violence. The idea of an "ontology of peace" has been cited by numerous thinkers, most notably John Milbank, who describes it as a "peace coterminous with all Being whatsoever" (Milbank 1990, 394). In short, it is the conviction that reality is "of itself peaceful" (Milbank 1990, 297). Peace belongs to a more fundamental level of being than violence. Even though peace often feels like an exception to the rule, violence—not peace—is the aberration. Instead of speaking of peace as *non*-violence, then, we should speak of violence as "non-peace", since "there is more to peace than non-violence" (Watkin 2022, 172–73). Peace is not merely the absence of war or conflict. Peace is the biblical image of *shalom*, which means "harmonious plenitude" as well as "positive justice, harmony, and affinity" (Milbank 2003, 26). This peace is grounded in creation, as both its origin and its end.[1]

1 "Christians … believe perfect peace to be the ultimate ontological reality and so to be attainable. But in that case, peace names the *eschaton*, the final goal … In the penultimate, which both peace and conflict now sometimes anticipate, there will be fought the unthinkable and for us aporetic 'conflict

While Ricœur himself does not write in terms of an ontology of peace, there is much in his thought that can contribute to such a vision. In this pair of essays, I propose to draw out some of these resources and develop them in a more fully theological direction than Ricœur does.[2] In this first essay, I examine Ricœur's reading of biblical imagery of creation, showing how he handles the mythic imagery of cosmic violence, the so-called *Chaoskampf*, and creation by combat. Ricœur interprets this biblical imagery differently in different periods of his work, but I argue that taken together these interpretations can nourish an imagination capable of seeing peace as the ultimate end and fulfilment of creation.

Creation is a vital theme in Ricœur's work, starting with his early writings. In an article from 1946, he proposes that the vocation of the Christian thinker is "to rediscover the lost meaning of creation. I am in God's creation—that is the assurance that the smallest truth must discuss, confirm, acclaim" (Aspray 2022, 210). Ricœur continues to affirm the importance of creation in his late works. In his 1989 lecture "Love and Justice", he writes of the sense of creation as "an originary giving of existence" (Ricœur 1995, 325). Part of this symbolism is the goodness of "all created things". "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good" (Gen 1:31). In Ricœur's 1999 talk "Ethics and Human Capability", he affirms "the orientation to the good as being rooted in the ontological structure of the human being, or in biblical terms: creation, createdness" (Ricœur 2002, 284). As creatures made in the image of God, goodness is fundamental to our being, both in our origin and in our end (Ricœur 1967, 251). In my second essay, I will argue that this ontological orientation to the good entails an ontological orientation towards peace. As Saint Augustine argues in Book XIX of the *City of God*, peace is a created good for this life, as well as the ultimate eschatological end of the human being. Peace is not contrary to our being; it is grounded in the ontological structure of the human creature. With that in mind, let us look at three texts where Ricœur develops his biblical hermeneutics of creation.

The Symbolism of Evil

First, *The Symbolism of Evil*. Given its title, this book may not seem like the place to look for insight on peace, but in it Ricœur unpacks not merely the symbolism of evil, but also the symbolism of creation as *good*. Although this goodness is marred by sin and evil, it is not erased. Ricœur contrasts the biblical vision of Genesis with the drama of creation recounted in the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian epic of creation. The *Enuma Elish* tells a story of three primordial events of creation by violence.

At the beginning of things, there were two waters: Apsu and Tiamat. When they mix, the generations of gods begin. But so

against conflict'. However, in the ultimate, beyond the last battle, even the refusal of evil will be redundant: then there will be only peace" (Milbank 2003, 42–43).

2 In much of his work Ricœur attempted to maintain boundaries between philosophy and theology, as well as his academic philosophical work and his personal confession of faith. I do not share Ricœur's scruples in this regard, since I think these boundaries prove to be more porous than Ricœur (and many Ricœur scholars) will admit. For my arguments on this point, see my *Ricœur's Hermeneutics of Religion: Rebirth of the Capable Self* (Gregor 2019).

does the conflict. The youngest generation of gods is raucous and noisy, so Apsu prepares to do violence against the younger gods to restore peace and quiet. Except that one of those gods, Ea, discovers the plan and kills Apsu. He then establishes a dwelling on Apsu's corpse, and Ea and his wife Damkina have a son, Marduk, the mightiest of all gods.

Tiamat, who has been patient up to this point, is goaded into war by Qingu, who urges her to restore peace now that Marduk is making a racket, and to avenge the killing of Apsu. Marduk goes to face Tiamat as the champion of the younger gods. He kills Tiamat, then cuts her body in two and divides it to separate the sky from the waters, thereby creating the cosmos. Marduk is established as king, and he in turn establishes the kingdom of Babylon.

Marduk proposes to create humans, primeval creatures of blood and bone, so they can work and let the gods be at leisure. But *whose* blood? Marduk says, "Let the one who started the war be given up to me. And he shall bear the penalty for his crime, that you may dwell in peace".[3] The gods take Qingu, bind him, cut him, and create humankind from his blood.

On Ricœur's interpretation, the *Enuma Elish* presents creation as cosmic drama. In this story, "evil is not an accident that upsets a previous order; it belongs constitutionally to the foundation of order". Evil is original in enemies, who embody the forces of chaos, as well as in the king who establishes order through violence (Ricœur 1967, 198). The implication is that creation requires violent victory over an enemy—Tiamat—who is prior to the creator, Marduk. And if creation comes about through violence, then "violence is inscribed in the origin of things, in the principle that establishes while it destroys" (Ricœur 1967, 182–83). Likewise, "if evil is coextensive with the origin of things, as primeval chaos and theogonic strife, then the elimination of evil and of the wicked must belong to the creative act as such" (Ricœur 1967, 191). These acts of divine violence provide a model and justification for historical human violence. The historical enemies of the king are images of the primordial enemy of the god, just as "the historical violence of the king imitates the primordial violence of the god". The creation myth provides the ideological basis for a theology of Holy War. The king wields the sword that restrains chaos in the kingdom (Ricœur 1967, 196–97).

The *Enuma Elish* is not unique in providing an ideological justification for violence. Myth often provides the origins of legal order in "the arbitrary limitation of violence by violence", in "victory over rivals" and in "the usurpation of fathers by sons", such as we see in the story of Ouranos, Cronus, and Zeus (Milbank 1990, 393–94). Likewise in Rome, as both Jupiter, the supreme god, and Romulus, Rome's founder, rise up to limit "a preceding disorder". The *Pax Romana* follows this model, but as Augustine argues in the *City of God*, this is a counterfeit peace because it is merely an arbitrary use of force to limit conflict and disorder.[4]

3 From the *Enuma Elish* in Dalley (2000, 261).

4 "In the story which Rome tells about its own foundations, the principle of a prior violence 'stayed' and limited by a single violent hand is firmly enshrined" (Milbank 1990, 393). As Christopher Watkin argues,

By contrast, the biblical account of creation in Genesis is not a drama. There is no struggle between gods or cosmic forces; there is no theogony in which gods come to be or are vanquished. Implicit in Genesis is a radical critique of "myths of chaos" as well as the "wicked god" of tragedy. As Ricœur writes, "Conflicts and crimes, trickery and adultery are expelled from the sphere of the divine: animal-headed gods, demigods, titans, giants, and heroes are ruthlessly excluded from the field of religious consciousness. Creation is no longer by conflict, but 'word'" (Ricœur 1967, 239–40).

But if "creation is good from the first" (Ricœur 1967, 203), whence evil? Ricœur argues that in Genesis, evil is no longer "a prior and resurgent chaos". Evil is not primordial but historical. The drama takes place in history, not in the primeval events of creation (Ricœur 1967, 203). This is the point of the Adamic myth, which "is the most extreme attempt to separate the origin of evil from the origin of the good. Its intention is to set up a *radical* origin of evil distinct from the more primordial origin of the goodness of things" (Ricœur 1967, 233). Sin is not originally rooted in human ontology, so there is no call to repent of being (Ricœur 1967, 242–43). Instead, sin enters as an *event* that is discontinuous with created being.

The consequences of this discontinuity are major. First, Genesis gives a basis to critique evil and violence as a deviation from the goodness of creation. Second, one's enemies no longer "represent primeval chaos", but are instead "historical, nothing but historical". The event of sin, recounted in Genesis 3, is the root of subsequent sin and evil. The eating of the forbidden fruit breaks the human relation to God, and this leads to all other sin (Ricœur 1967, 249n.8). The history of violence then unfolds, starting with Cain's murder of Abel. But violence is not original; it begins with Cain and then proliferates. That is why creation revolts against this violence. After Cain has killed Abel, the Lord says to Cain,

> "Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength…" (Gen 4:10b–12a)

William Brown comments: "More than just the scene of the crime, the ground actively bears witness to this fratricide by serving as the receptacle of Abel's blood. It opens its mouth to receive the blood of the victim, not to 'swallow' the evidence, but to 'take it in', preserve it, and give it voice" (Brown 1999, 167). Creation revolts against Cain's violence, and so the ground will no longer yield fruit for him. Violence, while ubiquitous, runs against the grain of creation.

"On the Exegesis of Genesis 1:1–2:4a"

Ricœur returns to the theme of creation in his 1971 essay, "On the Exegesis of Genesis 1:1–2:4a". There his approach is less comparative mythology, more biblical studies. He addresses the numerous passages in the Hebrew scripture where we find the sym-

the illusion of the *Pax Romana* is founded on "Rome's relentless military and political suppression of its rivals", and it is, as such, "a parody of God's creative power" (Watkin 2022, 534).

bolism of primordial combat, with God defeating monsters like Leviathan[5] and Rahab.[6] In most cases, these images do not symbolize cosmic violence but rather YHWH's historical judgment of Israel's enemies—i.e., "foreign military or political powers" (Middleton 2005, 239). There are, however, a few passages that link the motif of combat with creation. Ricœur mentions two in particular: Psalm 74 and Psalm 89.[7] As Gerhard von Rad puts it, these Psalms evoke the mythological "struggle against the dragon of chaos"—the sea monsters Leviathan and Rahab—and link the combat myth with salvation history (Ricœur 1995, 131).

Consider Psalm 74:

> Yet God my King is from of old,
> working salvation in the earth.
> You divided the sea by your might;
> you broke the heads of the dragons
> in the waters.
> You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
> you gave him as food for the
> creatures of the wilderness.

5 Isaiah 27:1: "On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea".

6 Isaiah 51:9–10: "Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?" There was a time that scholars took this as evidence of Babylonian influence, but as JoAnn Scurlock points out, "monster bashing" was a common pastime of Ancient Near Eastern gods (Scurlock 2013a, ix; Scurlock 2013b, 259). Most scholars now think these images reflect engagement with Canaanite myth.

7 We might also add Job 26:7–14.

The Psalmist then proceeds to the theme of creation (Psalm 74:12–17):

> You cut openings for springs and
> torrents;
> you dried up ever-flowing streams.
> Yours is the day, yours also the night;
> you established the luminaries and
> the sun.
> You have fixed all the bounds of the
> earth;
> you made summer and winter.

Similarly, Psalm 89:

> Let the heavens praise your wonders,
> O Lord,
> your faithfulness in the assembly of
> the holy ones.
> For who in the skies can be compared
> to the Lord?
> Who among the heavenly beings is
> like the Lord,
> a God feared in the council of the
> holy ones,
> great and awesome above all that
> are around him?
> O Lord God of hosts,
> who is as mighty as you, O Lord?
> Your faithfulness surrounds you.
> You rule the raging of the sea;
> when its waves rise, you still them.
> You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
> you scattered your enemies with
> your mighty arm.

Once again, the text proceeds to the theme of creation (Psalm 89:5–14):

> The heavens are yours, the earth also
> is yours;
> the world and all that is in it—you

have founded them.
The north and the south—you created them;
  Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name.
You have a mighty arm;
  strong is your hand, high your right hand.
Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
  steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

In both Psalms, creation appears to be tied to the violent defeat of monsters.

Given Ricœur's earlier interpretation of the creation account in Genesis, it is surprising that he now suggests there is a thematic continuity between Genesis 1 and these Psalms (Ricœur 1995, 131). This is debatable, since there is no mention of conflict in Genesis 1 (Middleton 2005, 251n.48, 263ff). It is worth noting how Genesis 1:21 describes God's creation of sea monsters, or dragons (*tannîn*). These monsters are not hostile enemies; they are "delightfully non-hostile. They're among the good creatures that God made for the sea", and they are even encouraged to be fruitful and multiply, "as if to say, 'Let there be more sea monsters!'" (Lynch 2023, 44–45).

Ricœur is on a better footing, however, when he argues that Genesis 1 reconceives the myth of primordial combat according to the motif of "temporal separation" (Ricœur 1995, 137). The older theme of chaos "is submitted to the act of separating", and the "warlike theme" of creation by combat is reinterpreted cosmologically (Ricœur 1995, 139). Ricœur then identifies a trajectory, from this mythic theme of the struggle against chaos monsters to the theme of creation according to a rational, intelligible order, a "cosmic vision" of divine providence such as one finds in Hebrew wisdom literature like Proverbs and Psalms 8, 19, 104, 136. The cosmos is set in order, and there is a shift from a "bellicose soteriology", in which separation is an act of violence, a "violent separation of the elements" (such as Marduk dividing the corpse of Tiamat into earth and sky) to "a kind of meditative wisdom", in which separation is a "verbal, dividing gesture"—for instance, in the differentiation involved in lists and catalogues of creatures, and in "the distribution of the elements of the cosmos, the division of social roles, as well as the other mysteries of distribution having to do with social and cultural life" (Ricœur 1995, 142–43). In sum, in this essay Ricœur sees Genesis 1 as moving beyond the older symbolism of creation by violent combat towards creation as an ordering by providential wisdom.

"Thinking Creation"

Given Ricœur's efforts to distinguish the Genesis account of creation from the combat myths, it is surprising to see what he does in his later essay, "Thinking Creation". Ricœur argues that if we think of creation as order, we must also recognize the contingency and dynamism of creation, as well as its fragility. If order is reassuring, creation also contains a "threatening element", which exposes the fragility or vulnerability that is "intrinsic to order itself" (Ricœur 1998, 57–58). In Genesis 2, fragility is evident in the prohibition against the forbidden fruit. The prohibition is a call to obedience, but this also entails the possibility of *dis*obedience. In this regard fragility is

similar to fallibility,[8] a central theme from Ricœur's early philosophy of the will, which I will discuss in my second essay.

Here Ricœur makes a few surprising moves. Fragility suggests the possibility that evil might be, in his words, "inscribed in the ethical structure of Creation". This leads Ricœur to wonder whether this fragility might be most consistent with the motif of creation by "battle with adverse forces" (Ricœur 1995, 58). Ricœur also writes of creation itself having a "dramatic aspect", something he previously saw in the *Enuma Elish* but not in Genesis, where drama begins with history, not in the primordial events of creation.

Ricœur makes these moves following Jon Levenson's book *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*: *The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*. Levenson advances a dramatic interpretation of creation, and he challenges Ricœur's reading of Genesis in *The Symbolism of Evil*, according to which creation is originally good and evil is not primordial. Levenson objects that Ricœur is making "a gross overgeneralization from the conventional optimistic reading of Genesis 1" (Levenson 1994, 50). Ricœur does not address Levenson's criticism directly, but he does incorporate aspects of Levenson's position within his own reading of Genesis. This opens some new possibilities in Ricœur's hermeneutics of creation, but I am not convinced they are all beneficial. I will highlight three difficulties with Levenson's reading and their potential influence on Ricœur's approach.

8 Fragility is comparable to fallibility insofar as it denotes the possibility of evil. See, for instance, the claim that fault transforms fragility into "actual misdeeds" (Ricœur 1998, 58).

Mastery

The first concerns Levenson's account of creation as *mastery*. Ricœur mentions this definition, and while he does not employ it in his own interpretation, it is worth discussing for the issues it raises. Levenson interprets creation as God's mastery of adversarial forces of chaos and evil. Such mastery is not that of an "unchallenged sovereign ruling from all eternity in splendid solitude" (Levenson 1994, 7), but a mastery won through the struggle to bring order out of chaos. God's mastery remains incomplete, however, because these adversarial forces continue to threaten the peace and order of creation. Chaos is not eliminated but restrained and "subjugated against its will" (Levenson 1994, 17, 26). Creation is fragile and evil persists. For Levenson, mastery is not a forgone conclusion, even for God. Mastery requires struggle, and God requires a worthy adversary for his victory to mean something (Levenson 1994, 27). Without chaos or cosmic evil to overcome, creation is "trivialized". Divine omnipotence is therefore not a static attribute but a "dramatic enactment" (Levenson 1994, xvi).

One of the merits of Levenson's interpretation of this violent imagery is that it takes evil seriously. Writing in another context, Robert Miller argues that such violent imagery "is a sign of a suprahuman will opposed to God's. The rhetoric of violence helps us to articulate the size of the problem", and indeed "the reality of evil" (Miller 2018, 277). The problem, however, is the way Levenson suggests that creation is inherently conflictual. In fact, he explicitly ties creation as mastery to Hegel's master–slave dialectic, arguing that Hegelian dialectic "unlocks the inner religious meaning

of the combat myth in the Hebrew Bible" (Levenson, 160n.1). But if God needs a worthy adversary, then God's identity depends on opposition and struggle, and this locates conflict at the heart of being. Rooting recognition in combat fails to distinguish the fundamental ontological need for recognition from the fallen struggle for recognition through violent struggle. Another problem is that the master–slave dialectic is inherently unstable, and mastery *vis-à-vis* a slave is self-defeating. The goal of the dialectic is not mastery but mutual recognition, reconciliation, and ultimately, love. For Hegel, love occurs at the end of the struggle. Better than the heterodox Hegel, orthodox Christian theology locates love at the origin of creation, and indeed the heart of being, in the Trinity. In the Trinity we see difference without violence, conflict, or opposition, but mutual love (Watkin 2017, 35).[9] To follow Hegel would undermine the idea of creation as gift. Hegel renders creation as necessary rather than free because God requires it for self-actualization. It is also difficult to see Hegelian creation as entirely good, since creation cannot be strictly separated from the fall (Westphal 2004, 303).

Chaos

The second point concerns the imagery of chaos. Levenson uses the term, as does Ricœur. It is common in discussions of Ancient Near Eastern creation myths ever since Hermann Gunkel's influential book, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton*. After Gunkel it is customary to find chaos in Genesis 1, with its description of the elements of creation—the formless and void (*tohu wabohu*), darkness, and the deep (*tehom*). One instance of this is the supposed etymological connection between *tehom* and Tiamat (Spieckermann 2016, 275). This connection is debatable, as is the suitability of the term "chaos" in discussing these terms. It comes from the Greek *kaos*, and it is does not appear in the Hebrew, nor in any Ancient Near Eastern texts, nor in the Septuagint.[10] In what sense, then, can we speak of creation from chaos?

If we want to use the term *chaos* to describe the context of Genesis 1, we should recognize that this is not a hostile, adversarial kind of chaos. It is fragile and fallible, but not fallen. There is formlessness, homogeneity, and timelessness of Genesis 1 (Niditch 1985, 12; Brown 1999, 58), but no hostile or adversarial forces at work.[11] The phrase *tohu wabohu* simply refers to earth's 'not yet' condition, rather than to any primeval chaos or violence. The watery sea is unformed, not yet ready to sustain life". Yet like the sea monsters, it is no threat to him (Lynch 2023, 42–43). There is no suggestion of the adversarial, nothing "inimical to God's purposes" (Brown 1999, 58n.68). Moreover, "an initial state of formlessness is not an inherently bad thing" (Lynch 2023, 42).

9 Milbank argues that in the Trinity we see "a multiple which is not set dialectically over against the one, but itself manifests unity". Consequently, "intra-Trinitarian relations are consistently characterized not by discord, competition, or rivalry, but by love" (Milbank 1990, 381).

10 See the discussion in Tsumura (2020, 963–68); Lambert (2013, 44–47).

11 To his credit, Levenson recognizes that the Priestly account in Genesis 1 is a model of creation "without resistance" (Levenson 1994, 90).

Does this mean God creates out of pre-existing chaos, rather than from nothing? Ricœur thinks it is anachronistic to read creation *ex nihilo* into Genesis, since the doctrine first arose with Hellenistic Judaism.[12] That does not mean that God therefore created from *an uncreated, primordial chaos.* The text simply does not discuss the origin of the formless void or the deep. I do, however, think Ricœur's own hermeneutic of creation as the free and good gift of God suggests we should think of creation as *ex nihilo*. Creation from chaos threatens both the goodness of creation and its character as gift. As Barnabas Aspray puts it, "Creation *ex nihilo* seems implied in everything Ricœur said about the goodness of creation" (Aspray 2022, 203). This matters, he continues, because "without creation *ex nihilo*, there is no reason to suppose that all of creation is good. If God created out of pre-existent material, then some of it might be at best morally neutral" (ibid). Or it might suggest a cosmic dualism (Middleton 2005, 178).[13] Moreover, to treat chaos as primordial undermines the gift-character of creation, making it necessary rather than a free, contingent gift.[14] Like the concept of mastery, creation from chaos also threatens the ontology of creation as peace, since it makes war necessary to bring creation into being.

Fragility

Third, we should also think carefully about the fragility of creation. As Levenson puts it, "The world is not inherently safe; it is inherently unsafe" (Levenson 1994, 17). That may be true—at least in part, since the opposition of *safe* and *unsafe* seems unnecessarily stark—but what does this fragility mean for the goodness of creation, and indeed for peace?

Ricœur clearly states that fragility is not the same as evil, just as finitude is not the same as guilt. The origin of evil should not be conflated with the constitutive fragility of creation. This is in keeping with Ricœur's

12 The biblical idea of creation "is never a question of Creation *ex nihilo* before the speculations inspired by Hellenism" (Ricœur 1998, 38, 49). In Genesis 1, "the deep is there, as is the darkness and the primordial waters. God's word does not create out of nothing"—it separates, gives form, shape, and consistency (Ricœur 1998, 34). Creation *ex nihilo* first appears in scripture in 2 Maccabees 7:28 (Spieckermann 2016, 275).

13 See also Basil of Caesarea's *On the Hexaemeron*: "The deep, then, is not a mass of opposing powers, as some have imagined, nor is darkness some sovereign and wicked force let loose against good. For, two equal powers in opposition to each other will be entirely and mutually destructive of their own nature, and they will continuously have and unceasingly provide troubles for each other when engaged in war. But, if one of the opponents excels the other in power, he altogether annihilates the conquered one. So, if they say that the opposition of evil against good is equally balanced, they introduce a ceaseless war and a continuous destruction, since in turn they conquer and are conquered. But, if the good exceeds in power, what reason is there that the nature of evil is not completely destroyed? If it is otherwise, however, which it is impious to say, I wonder how those falling into such unlawful blasphemy do not endeavor to flee from themselves" (Basil 1963, 27–28).

14 As David Bentley Hart argues, "the peril of the image" of chaos "is that it can veil the freedom and unconstrained joy of the God who expresses himself in creating and in loving what he creates. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* speaks of a God who gives of his bounty, not a God at war with darkness" (Hart 2003, 258).

efforts in *Freedom and Nature* to resist the existentialist tendency to ontologize the Fall. In "Thinking Creation", Ricœur argues that despite the fall into sin, our created goodness remains, and our creaturely capacities "combine with the infirmities bound to the fall and together make up the ambivalence of the human condition".[15] The image of fragility expresses the "ambivalence" of our being in the world, and recognizing this can be helpful for understanding peace.

In his essay "Love and Justice", Ricœur argues that this "very goodness" of creation reveals a "hyperethical" dimension of creaturely existence. The goodness of creation is hyperethical because it extends beyond mere moral goodness. Beyond the goodness of moral duty, we discover the goodness of the free gift (Ricœur 1995, 325). This extends to all creatures. As creatures, "we find ourselves summoned". We experience a sense of "radical dependence", not only *vis-à-vis* God, but as situated within nature "as an object of solicitude, of respect and admiration", à la St Francis of Assisi.

To see creation as God's good gift transforms the way we see other people. Recognizing our radical dependence on this gift opens a larger economy of the gift, the hyperethical logic of super-abundance that makes possible the love of the neighbour, and even the love of one's enemies (Ricœur 1995, 325). By mediating between us, the good gift of creation can thereby show us the possibility of peace. Shared dependence can be an occasion for shared enjoyment; eating together, for instance, is a setting for mutual recognition—or better, love and forgiveness. Freely we have received, so freely we can give.

Of course, this kind of encounter is fragile. There is ambiguity, even ambivalence here. Shared dependence exposes our shared fragility, the vulnerability we have in common. Vulnerability can summon up ethical responsibility, as well as the "hyperethical" response of love. But the perception of vulnerability can also incite violence by suggesting it as a possibility. This fills us with dread, in the Kierkegaardian sense of sympathetic antipathy and antipathetic sympathy. To live in a world where horrific things are possible—to be free to commit such deeds—can feel unbearable. As Ricœur writes in *The Symbolism of Evil*, the "spectacle of things", the bloodbath of history, the "cruelty of nature and men", can lead to "a feeling of universal absurdity which invites man to doubt his destination. The world is ambivalent. One side of it "confronts us as chaos", and this presents itself as "a structure of the universe". This chaos presents itself as "an invitation to betray" (Marcel) (Ricœur 1967, 258). To betray what? The goodness of being. To lose hope and conclude that violence, not peace, is the true logic of being. To resign ourselves to the thought that "chaos reigns".[16]

Therein lies one of the dangers of the myth of creation by combat and the consequent fragility of creation. Levenson argues that creation is fragile and evil persists, but that God's covenant is a commitment to preserve creation in its precarious state and ultimately to defeat it eschatologically (Levenson 1994, 12, 22, 50). This covenant is the basis for liturgy. Liturgy "realizes and

15 Ricœur 1998, 44, also quoting Frank Crüsemann, 44 n. 24.

16 To borrow a line from Lars von Trier's 2009 film *AntiChrist*.

extends creation though human reenactment of cosmogonic events", and through acts of repentance, lament, and sacrifice it "renews creation" by goading a "catastrophically dormant" God into acting. Liturgy is therefore a kind of theurgy, insofar as it induces God to act, and to dramatically enact his omnipotence (Levenson 1994, xxvi). God will wipe out evil and injustice, not in history but in the eschaton. The combat myth of creation is thereby directed forward to an eschatological victory (Levenson 1994, 90).

As Richard Middleton observes, however, while this sense of fragility can motivate liturgy and gratitude, there is also a danger that it can lead "to profound anxiety and a sense of constant threat. The tragic result of this anxiety and sense of threat is interhuman and intrahuman violence, whether overt or systemic … life lived according to the chaos-cosmos scheme tends to consist in ideological and political warfare against those regarded as one's enemies, who are demonized and stripped of their humanity" (Middleton 2005, 255–56). This struggle can go both ways: down from above by those seeking to protect their power, and up from below by those seeking recompense, often in the name of "justice". The Venezuelan theologian Pedro Trigo observes that "the combat myth is a pervasive temptation for marginalized groups seeking liberation from oppression".[17] One simply assumes the "chaos-versus-cosmos" schema" and takes the side of the excluded, "chaotic" party. There is a danger of legitimating "perpetual revolution and continued violence, indeed terror, in the name of the never-ending liberation struggle" (Middleton 2005, 258). This tendency is as true today as it ever was.

17 Middleton, paraphrasing Trigo in Middleton (2005, 258).

Tragedy or Christology?

How, then, does it stand with chaos? One view is that the mythic symbolism of chaos has no place in Christian theology, because chaos has no place in being—much as evil has no being or positive nature of its own. This view is particularly prominent in the tradition of Christian Platonism from Augustine to Milbank. Writing in a similarly Platonic (albeit Eastern rather than Western) perspective, David Bentley Hart asserts: "The myth of chaos is the mythos of the sublime, the legend of Dionysus, the cultic legitimation of every warlike state … There is no chaos, but only a will toward chaos, and the violence it inflicts upon being" (Hart 2003, 259). Although there is no chaos, Hart recognizes that there is still "the oscillating play of finitude's forms and forces within creation (especially fallen creation)" (Hart 2003, 257). We might call this fragility without chaos.

Ricœur, by contrast, continues to use the language of chaos in his hermeneutics of creation. In fact, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricœur proposes a kind of critical appropriation of the myth of chaos. He considers two alternative interpretations of chaos. The first follows the logic of tragedy. The theogonies of Babylon and archaic Greece, as well as more refined onto-theologies of modern philosophy, depict evil as an "original element of being" (Ricœur 1967, 327). Heraclitus, German mysticism, German idealism, all hold that "evil has its roots in the pain of being, in a tragedy that is the tragedy of being itself" (Ricœur 1967, 327). This tragic logic is seductive and very

difficult to defeat. Ricœur confesses that he is unable to "exorcize its spell" in *The Symbolism of Evil*, since the answer requires a fuller Poetics of Freedom, Ricœur's proposed (and unrealized) third volume in his *Philosophy of the Will*.

According to Ricœur, the other alternative, and the only way out of the logic of tragedy, would be Christology (Ricœur 1967, 328). Christology completes tragedy because it takes up both suffering and fate into the divine life: "the Son of Man must be delivered up" (Ricœur 1967, 328). Yet Christology also inverts and suppresses tragedy. Whereas "Kronos mutilates his Father and Marduk cuts to pieces the monstrous power of Tiamat", Christ is glorified not as the agent of violence but as its "absolute *Victim*". This is how Christ is glorified, or "elevated in being". The Son of Man *must* be glorified, but in the cross, Fate becomes gift.

I must confess, I am not persuaded that Fate is at work in the crucifixion. As Jesus says in John 10:18, no one takes his life; he gives it freely, and he has the authority from the Father to lay it down and to take it back up again. But whatever one makes of Ricœur's reference to Fate, he is correct to emphasize the gift quality of Christ's death. Ricœur draws this from the prophet Isaiah's figure of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53: 4–5):

> He was pierced for our sins,
> Crushed for our crimes.
> The chastisement that bring us peace
> is upon him
> And it is owing to his wounds that we
> are healed.

This gift breaks the schema of retribution and the logic of tragedy, since suffering becomes "a gift that expiates the sins of the people" (Ricœur 1967, 324–25). It also points towards peace. Ricœur quotes Isaiah 9:6–7:

> For unto us a child is born,
> Unto us a son is given:
> And the government shall be upon
> his shoulder:
> And his name shall be called
> Wonderful Counsellor, The mighty
> God,
> The everlasting Father, The Prince of
> Peace.
> Of the increase of his government
> and peace
> There shall be no end,
> Upon the throne of David,
> And upon his kingdom,
> To order it, and to establish it
> With judgment and with justice
> From henceforth even for ever.

These are images of eschatological peace—as Ricœur puts it, "a reconciled cosmos" (Ricœur 1967, 265). Eschatology in this sense "does not mean transcendent, heavenly, but final". It is not a "regret for a lost golden age, but the expectation of a perfection the like of which will not have been seen before" (Ricœur 1967, 265). Eschatology is the repetition of the symbolism of creation—repeated forward, towards new, unforeseen possibilities.[18] "The God of beginnings is the God of hope. And because God is the God of hope, the goodness of creation becomes the sense of a direction" (Ricœur 1967, 299). This

18 It is a symbol of the beginning, turned toward the future (Ricœur 1967, 260; cf. Aspray 2022, 152).

direction is *shalom*. As Matthew Lynch writes, "The prophetic vision of a peaceful end *exceeds* the glory of God's original creation. … A surprising superabundance of shalom marks the surpassing restoration of Israel's, and ultimately creation's, fortunes" (Lynch 2023, 87). *Shalom* is the eschatological fulfilment of the symbolism of creation. The aim of the biblical story is *shalom*—from Isaiah to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God (Mt 4:23), which is a message of peace (Acts 10:36; Eph 6:15—see Lynch 2023, 86).

Ricœur observes that the basis for this eschatology is Christological, since Christ is the new human being, the second Adam who inaugurates "a second creation which will surpass the first creation by completing it" (Ricœur 1967, 268–69). Ricœur's early writings on this theme are beautiful, especially where he is reading the Church Fathers. Beyond the limited, atomistic view of salvation, the story of God's dealing with human beings in creation is an epic, a "panoramic fresco" (Ricœur 1965, 112). And the heart of this vision is peace.

As Christology points towards this eschatological vision of peace, it also takes up and transforms the mythic imagery of divine combat. Ricœur emphasizes the imagery of Christ as the suffering servant, the victim of violence. But Christ also comes to creation as Lord. We see this in the Gospels, with the calming of the storm. Unlike Marduk, Jesus does not need violence to defeat the raging sea. He rebukes it and commands it to be calm, and it obeys. Jesus establishes peace by his word because he comes with authority (Mt 8:26, Mk 4:39, Lk 8:24).

Jesus resumes his confrontation with the raging sea later in the Gospels (Mt 14:22–33, Mk 6:45–52, Jn 6:16–21) when we see him walking on the sea, amidst a violent storm. By walking on the sea, Jesus recapitulates several passages from the Hebrew scriptures, which recount God trampling on the waves of the sea (Job 9:8); breaking the heads of the sea dragons (*tanninim*) (Ps 74:13); confronting the sea with flashing arrows and dividing it for Moses to lead the Israelites through (Ps 77:17); ruling the raging sea, crushing Rahab "like a carcass" and scattering enemies (Ps 89:9–10). This recurring theme is recapitulated in Jesus' "triumphant trampling of the corpse of his slain enemy", such that Jesus is figured as the dragon-slayer (Miller 2018, 261).

The calming of the storm is not, however, the final defeat of the monsters of chaos. Christ has already inaugurated the new creation, but it is not yet fully manifest. Evil has been decisively defeated by the resurrection of Christ, but the historical reality of evil and violence is still evident. As Ricœur puts it, we find ourselves in "this *ambiguous* situation" in which the hostile forces—in Pauline language, the Powers, Thrones, and Dominions—are "*already* conquered, crucified, but *not yet* suppressed" (Ricœur 1965, 239). The symbolism of divine combat with monsters returns in the book of Revelation, where the battle is not to bring creation into being, but to defeat once and for all the forces hostile to God's creation. Hence the return in Revelation 12–13 of the dragon, the beast from the sea (Leviathan) and the beast from the earth (Behemoth) (Bauckham 1993, 89; Bauckham 2005, 186–98). One wishes Ricœur had explored this apocalyptic symbolism, which suggests the new creation requires the ultimate judgment and defeat of evil. These images need to be tied to the cross and resurrection, since this is

how evil is defeated, not by raw power or sheer violence. We see this in Revelation 5, which brings together two strikingly different images: the slaughtered lamb of Isaiah 53:7 and the Lion of Judah. This semantic impertinence, to use Ricœurian terms, shows that the Messiah has won the victory by his sacrificial death (Bauckham 1993, 73–74).

Eschatological peace requires that violence and destruction be removed for good. In Revelation, the imagery of this judgment is very violent, but crucially, the text does not give license to humans to enact violence (Volf 1996, 296; cf. Watkin 2022, 541). That prerogative belongs solely to God. This is a crucial point, lest the triumphant imagery of Christ the dragon-slayer motivate a triumphalist Christianity. Consider Romans 16:20: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet". Here we see the faithful trampling the ancient serpent, or dragon, but their participation is passive, since God is the sole active agent. This is not a peaceful crushing, of course, but it is how the God of peace establishes peace (Miller 2018, 278). This is the God who "makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire" (Ps 46:9).

Conclusion: imagining peace

Earlier I quoted Ricœur's mission statement to "rediscover the lost meaning of creation". Creation means peace, not violence. But Ricœur also writes of a readiness to "fight" for the original goodness of creation. This is a fight not only for truth against idols of falsehood, "but a fight for *signs*, for the signs of creation in every creature". As we have seen, Ricœur spent a lot of time trying to uncover "the signs of original creation".[19] How does this help us with the practical questions of fighting for peace? How is it helpful to spend so much time on the level of *theoria*, of myth and metaphysics? What help can this be to real-world problems of violence and war, and to the real-world desire for peace and flourishing?

Ricœur, if anyone, helps us to see why signs, symbols, and stories matter. Myth shows us the world—a new world, a world which we might inhabit, a world in which we might act. It addresses fundamental questions: Who are we? What are we doing here? Why is the world the way it is? What is more real: peace or violence? In a world of undeniable, often inescapable violence, we need to have our imaginations renewed. If we imagine violence to be primordial, fundamental, original, the best we can hope for is to restrain it, to hold it back, often with further violence. Yet the biblical symbolism of creation can help us to "unthink the necessity of violence" (Milbank 1990, 416) and envision the possibility of peace. ■

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19 Quoted in Aspray 2022, 220.

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