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Justice, justification, and self-justification

Ted F. Peters

PLTS at GTU, Berkeley, CA

Abstract

In anticipation of 2017 commemorations of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, the time is ripe for a reconsideration of Reformation themes such as justification by faith. Because we are justified by God's grace as a free gift received in faith, the 16th-century Reformers argued, no human works or merits are required for salvation. Yet, our human proclivity is to self-justify, to obtain justice on our own apart from divine grace. This article advocates Christian realism while exploring the dynamics of self-justification and its accompanying violence in everyday gossip and political rhetoric.

Keywords

justice, justification by faith, self-justification, Reformation, gossip, military, violence

As we approach the year 2017 and the 500th anniversary of the day, October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther posted the *Ninety-Five Theses* on the chapel door of Wittenberg Castle, theologians are dusting off an old doctrine to put it on display once again: justification by faith. When we look in the museums of Reformation history, we are reminded of the 16th century battle line between justification by faith and its enemies: works righteousness and merit. Salvation is not a human accomplishment, trumpeted the Reformers; it is a gift of God's grace received in our faith. On account of Christ's work, said the Reformers, we are justified as a divine gift and not on account of our own virtues or moral achievements. Justification by faith was the candle that lit up the 16th century; and we can safely predict that this antique taper will get relit early in our 21st century.

Like trading in old candles for incandescent bulbs and now LEDs or CFLs, the doctrine of justification has been traded in for a new model: justice. Preachers, theologians, and activists both religious and secular in our era are passionate about racial justice, gender justice, economic justice, political justice, and even eco-justice in the wider society. Justice advocates are selfless in their passion; and they are actually having a salutary effect on our larger society. We can only applaud these

Corresponding author:

Ted F. Peters, PLTS at GTU, 2770 Marin Ave, Berkeley, CA 94708, United States.

Email: tpeters2ct@aol.com

efforts and thank our justice advocates. Here is my observation: our present generation of religious along with spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNR) leaders seek justice, not justification.

Nevertheless, as we retrieve the candle from the Reformation attic, I wonder if we could make it shine light on our contemporary situation. Could justification by faith shine light on the human condition universally or our contemporary situation specifically? Can we turn a Christian doctrine into a caudescant source for illuminating our internal thought processes and our social dynamics?

If we begin with the Reformation commitment to justification as a gift of God's grace, we may ask, What is the disease it is trying to cure? The disease is self-justification. Whether we refer to it as works or merit, self-justification is the human effort to define oneself or one's social network as just, righteous, good, and deserving. To self-justify is to define oneself as just. The message of the gospel, according to the 16th-century Reformers, is that God alone justifies so you and I don't need to. Yet, you and I are inclined to seek self-justification as a natural course of action.

So, what's the problem? The problem is this: when you or I are engaged in self-justification, we become dangerous. Our dedication to self-justification occasionally results in violence, either verbal violence or war or genocide or all of these together. Self-justification is the pursuit of justice which results in someone's death, either a figurative or literal death. In short, self-justification kills.

"Much as man desires to follow what is good, still he does not follow it," observed John Calvin.¹ What complicates our human nature is that we desire to be good so much that, when we miss the mark, we lie about it. This lie takes the form of self-justification. The Reformation message is this: we don't need to self-justify. Our justification comes to us as a gift of divine grace. Yet, despite the offer of God's grace, we persist in defining ourselves as just.

Self-justification in gossip

Since the Garden of Eden, we *Homo sapiens* exhibit a singular trait: we draw a line between good and evil—then we place ourselves on the good side of the line. This human proclivity becomes salient in gossip. In gossip, we draw the line between good and evil and place the target of our gossip on the evil side of the line. Through our verbal assassination, we tacitly declare ourselves just and the target of our gossip unjust.

Everyday gossip seems so innocent. It tickles, said Luther: "everyone enjoys hearing and telling the worst about his neighbor and it tickles him to see a fault in someone else."² But, let's look at gossip a bit more closely. As I have just

suggested, gossip is a form of verbal assassination. On some occasions, it readies us for actual assassination.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1866 novel *Crime and Punishment* the cursing phase of self-justification leads indirectly to murder. Imagine the novel's protagonist Rodion Raskolnikov, sitting alone in a tavern in St. Petersburg, Russia. His car is directed toward a conversation at the next table. At the next table sit a university student and a military officer, gossiping about a local pawnbroker, a woman named Alyona Ivanovna.

"She is first rate," he [the student] said. "You can always get money from her . . . she can give you five thousand rubles at a time . . . But she is an awful old harpy." And he began describing how spiteful and uncertain she was, how if you were only a day late with your interest the pledge was lost; how she gave a quarter of the value of an article and took five and even seven percent a month on it and so on . . .

"I'll tell you what. I could kill that damned old woman and make off with her money. I assure you, without the faintest conscience-prick," the student added with warmth. The officer laughed again while Raskolnikov shuddered. How strange it was!

[The student continued.] "On one side we have a stupid, senseless, worthless, spiteful, ailing, horrid old woman, not simply useless but doing actual mischief, who has not an idea why she is living for herself, and who will die in a day or two in any case. You understand? You understand?"

"Yes, yes, I understand," answered the officer, watching his excited companion attentively.

"Well, listen, then. On the other side, fresh young lives thrown away for want of help and by thousands on every side! A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped on that old woman's money . . . dozens of families saved from destitution, from ruin, from vice, from the Lock hospitals—and all with her money. Kill her, take her of all. What do you think, would not one tiny crime be wiped out by thousands of good deeds? . . . It's simple arithmetic! Besides, what value has the life of that sickly, stupid, ill-natured old woman in the balance of existence! No more than the life of a louse, of a black-beetle, less in fact because the old woman is doing harm . . ."

"Of course she does not deserve to live," remarked the officer . . . would you kill the old woman yourself?"

"Of course not! I was only arguing the justice of it."

The student and his officer friend were drawing a line between good and evil and placing Alyona Ivanovna on the evil side. Allegedly, the pawnbroker belongs on her business dealings. Listing her evil traits constitutes a form of cursing, of describing her as disposable. Murder of such a person becomes justifiable. The "justice of it" is that the old woman should die so that other people threatened with destitution might be saved. This is the structure of gossip. It is also the structure of murder.

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), edited by John T. McNeill, *Library of Christian Classics* XX, XXI (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960) 2.2.26, 286.

2. Martin Luther, "Sermon on the Mount," *Luther's Works: American Edition*, vols. 1-30, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1967), vols. 31-55, edited by Helmut T. Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1955-1986) [LW] 21-41.

The anonymous student said he would not actually go through with the murder. But, after hearing this conversation and this justification, Raskolnikov took an axe and brutally ended the life of pawnbroker Alyona Ivanovna.

Self-justification in military parlance

The average citizen among us does not want to kill another person like Raskolnikov did. Most days, it is easy to obey the 5th Commandment: Thou shalt not kill. It is easy until, of course, we become a soldier. How can the organized military overcome our natural inclination to avoid killing other people? Answer: self-justification. But, what form does self-justification take? Answer: distancing. The average citizen becoming a killer feels justified when establishing distance from the victim.

Distance can be accomplished in a number of ways, each of which treats the victim as a non-person. The best way to create distance is to dehumanize the enemy. The dehumanization process begins by ascribing a derogatory name to the potential victim in advance. In the 1960s, American soldiers called persons living in Vietnam "gooks." It's much easier to kill a gook than it is to kill Mr. or Mrs. Nguyen. During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, invading troops called the civilians and enemy combatants "lowel heads" and "rag heads." I dub this kind of language "cursing."

The naming process or cursing process which incorporates a dehumanizing dimension helps create psychological and moral distance between the killer and the victim. During the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s, the Hutus described the Tutsis as "vermin." The Hutus could justify killing nearly one million Tutsis because the whole world would be better off without vermin.

Distance comes in different forms. Mechanical distance begins in boot camp, when military recruits are given the opportunity to play video games to get used to killing by killing figures on a screen. To move from the video game to combat becomes a smaller step, a mere substitution of actual persons for virtual persons. Physical distance helps relieve the sense that one is killing actual persons. For example, a drone operator can sip on coffee while targeting a convoy or a house in another country, fire a missile, kill numerous individuals, and then go home to play with his or her kids. Drone killing is a small step beyond virtual killing. Cultural distance helps too. It helps to think of the enemy in terms of ethnic or racial differences, especially to think of the enemy as culturally backward or uncivilized. Moral distance is established when the soldier describes the enemy as immoral, dastardly, or dangerous. We gain moral distance when we blame the enemy for starting the conflict, making our invasion an act of retributive justice. Social distance is established when the soldiers think of their enemy as lower class, as beneath them. Distance, according to the analysis of Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, permits "the killer to dehumanize the victim."³

3. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, *On Killing* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2009) 160.

Most of us abhor the prospect that we would have to pull the trigger and take responsibility for snuffing out the life of another human person. In order for our conscience to permit it, we need to deny that the victim is another human person. Our conscience will permit us to kill other human beings as long as we can successfully justify it. Self-justification takes the form of distancing, distancing ourselves from the humanity we share with the one we are about to put to death.

Self-justification in political parlance

Self-justification through establishing moral distance dominates political parlance. "Moral distance involves legitimating oneself and one's cause" in two ways, says Grossman. First, we gain moral distance through the "determination and condemnation of the enemy's guilt, which, of course, must be punished or avenged. The other is an affirmation of the legality and legitimacy of one's own cause."⁴ Regardless of the political system, leaders know they need to look good for their constituencies and to the wider world. And nothing looks better than moral superiority.

When advocating socialism to replace capitalism, Adolph Hitler employed moral distance by describing laissez-faire capitalism as cruel to the Aryan people, *das Volk*. In order to rid Germany of cruel capitalism, Hitler established National Socialism, what we have come to know as Nazism. Because the Christian religion teaches compassion for the weak, Hitler sought an alternative morality that would support the strong against the weak. He invoked a supra-religious spirit to strengthen his nation. We see how this supra-religious self-justification is invoked in a speech he delivered on September 6, 1938, in Nuremberg.

National Socialism is not a cult-movement—a movement for worship; it is exclusively a *volkic* political doctrine based upon racial principles. In its purpose there is no mystic cult, only the care and leadership of a people defined by a common blood-relationship. Therefore we have no rooms for worship, but only halls for the people—no open spaces for worship, but spaces for assemblies and parades. We have no religious retreats, but arenas for sports and playing-fields, and the characteristic feebrightness and light of a room or hall which combines beauty with fitness for its purpose. . . . Our worship is exclusively the cultivation of the natural, and for that reason, because natural, therefore God-willed. Our humility is the unconditional submission before the divine laws of existence so far as they are known to us men.

Hitler is post-religious, appealing through hate-speech to a higher spirituality. Hitler's political policies draw a line between good and evil, then invoke what is good. The sunlight of the open playing-field is good, whereas the mystical gloom of

4. Ibid., 164. "The establishment of the enemy's guilt and the need to punish or avenge is a fundamental and widely accepted justification for violence." Ibid., 163.

the cathedral is bad. Aryan blood-relationship is good, whereas mystical contemplation is bad. Brightly lit halls and open arenas belong to everybody and are good, while church buildings attempt to privatize the divine exclusively for their members. Humility in obeying our natural inclinations is good, in contrast to the artificial doctrines of church religion. And, most importantly, the divine laws of existence are eternal. National Socialism, in short, is a faithful embodiment of the eternal divine laws of existence.

In his earlier manifesto book, *Mein Kampf*, the aspiring Hitler wrote, "I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by *defending myself against the Jews, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.*"⁵ Appeal to the divine is the ultimate appeal in the act of self-justification. Despite Hitler's own identification with the divine laws of existence and the work of the Lord, most of the rest of the world sees Hitler as an incarnation of evil. Intolerable and reprehensible were the devastation of World War II combined with the attempted genocide of Jews, mentally challenged, physically disabled, homosexuals, gypsies, and communists. Demonic is the only way Jürgen Moltmann can describe the entire episode. "This patriotic mysticism turned Germany into a terrible and fascinating sanctuary on whose altars the gas chambers of Auschwitz smoked, and more than twenty million people died a violent death. The most terrible demonism, and that in the twentieth century!"⁶

The nature with which Hitler identified his Nazism was the nature of blood, red in tooth and claw, the natural world of social Darwinism and eugenics. So horrendous was the global destruction he precipitated—the outright murder of six million persons in concentration camps with perhaps sixty million casualties in the war—the symbols of Satan and Hitler have become conflated in our public imaginations.

Subsequent political leaders have learned to draw a line between good and evil; and then they place themselves on one side with Hitler on the other. When in March 2014 US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton compared Russia's Vladimir Putin with "what Hitler did back in the '30s," the *Washington Post* offered a tally of American leaders engaging in Hitler-cursing.⁷ Just a couple examples will illustrate the principle of self-justification gained through scapegoating Adolf Hitler. "We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate, but there is no one else," President Lyndon B. Johnson said in a 1965 speech to justify escalating the Vietnam War:

Nor would surrender in Vietnam bring peace, because we learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression. The battle would be

5. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1943) 65, italics in original.

6. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, tr. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 44.

7. Adam Taylor, "Hillary Clinton's Hitler comparison and the troublesome tradition it fits into," *The Washington Post* (March 5, 2014) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/03/05/hillary-clintons-hitler-comparison-and-the-troublesome-tradition-it-fits-into/>

renewed in one country and then another country, bringing with it perhaps even larger and crueler conflict, as we have learned from the lessons of history.

By drawing a line between good and evil and by placing Hitler on the evil side, we on the good side of the line feel justified.

President Bill Clinton could not resist making the same analogy. "What if someone had listened to Winston Churchill and stood up to Adolf Hitler earlier?" Clinton said in 1999, justifying NATO bombing during the Kosovo conflict. How "many people's lives might have been saved? And how many American lives might have been saved?" Self-justification in politics consists of drawing a line between good and evil followed by placing oneself or one's nation on the good side of the line. It helps if the self-justifier can place Hitler or Satan on the evil side.

As it turns out, justice is a serial killer. Geopolitics demonstrates this daily. Hitler thought he was justified in killing the mentally retarded, physically handicapped, communists, Jews, and others less highly evolved right along with all enemies of the German nation. In the decades since, American political leaders have considered themselves to be justified when killing Hitler's equivalents again and again and again. As I write, adherents to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria pursue retributive justice when beheading American captives right along with Shiites, Christians, and whomever else stands in their way. In all these killings, justice is done. Justice has become a serial killer.

Perhaps it seems counter-intuitive to describe justice as a serial killer. Yet, when justice is defined in terms of exercising rights over against alleged oppressors who deny these rights, any attempt to secure such rights leads to conflict, retaliation, and the counter-pursuit of justice. "Justice as the guarantor of rights perpetuates the violence and prolongs the conflict that afflicts people," observes Daniel Bell.

This holds true even when it is successful in reasserting violated rights and reestablishing the volatile equilibrium between competing claims on the fruits of society. Even when successful it does not pave the way for new relations among peoples, relations that might transcend the truce of mutual advantage. Instead it keeps humanity trapped in an agonistic logic, where the mutual recognition of rights is constantly threatened by the pull of competing visions of the good.⁸

When the victim feels violated, then the pursuit of justice takes the form of retribution, of getting even, to use common parlance. Unless the pursuit of justice is allied to the common good, to restoration of the entire body politic rather than only those previously treated unjustly, it will only fuel the flames of competition and retribution. In short, when we hear the cry for justice we should prepare for someone's funeral.

8. Daniel M. Bell, Jr., "Sacrifice and Suffering: Beyond Justice, Human Rights, and Capitalism," *Modern Theology* 18.2 (2002): 333–59 (343).

Virtually no one pursues violence in the name of injustice. We love justice. So, if we plan to kill we paint our killing in the color of that which we love, namely, justice. This makes justice just as deadly as injustice. In order to prepare for killing in the name of justice, we engage in what I have been calling "cursing" the victim. Cursing consists of ascribing injustice to the victim and justice to ourselves. Cursing is a form of verbal self-justification.

Cursing as preparation to kill

Perhaps the term "curse" in today's parlance sounds odd. Perhaps it connotes a now outdated religious notion of supernatural evil forces. After all, in the Torah it was God who uttered curses; and God could appeal to the power of heaven to enforce them on earth. Deuteronomy 28:15, 20, 25:

But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you: Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field... The LORD will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me... The LORD will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you off the land that you are entering to possess... The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies.

Brian Britt comments: "Cursing here means the use of words to cause or invoke harm to someone through supernatural means, of the mention or threat of such a use."⁹ When the chosen people are unjust, God is justified in exacting a curse. That is what a curse looked like in ancient Israel.

What does it look like today? One counterpart to ancient cursing in today's secularized society is hate speech. Racial slurs, aspersions against women, anti-gay smears, and such function in our culture to repress and marginalize. Even without invoking a supernatural force, the victims of hate speech feel the discriminatory force of such utterances. Hate speech paves an avenue by which self-justification can travel the roads of culture. This applies to anti-hate speech as well. Both hate speech and anti-hate speech drive social self-justification. The entertainment industry has found a way to capitalize on it. When commenting on Ice Cube's gangsta rap which is anti-white, Brent Strawn worries that "what started, then, as righteous rage (and very well could have stopped with that) has run amok and become a revenge fantasy that is ultimately not beneficial for those who have suffered. Still further, if unchecked, the revenge fantasy could become a reality."¹⁰

9. Brian M. Britt, "Curses Left and Right: Hate Speech and the Biblical Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78.3 (2010): 633-61 (636).

10. Brent A. Strawn, "Sanctified and Successfully Successful: Curses On Gangsta Rap and the Canonization of Imperfectory Psalm," *Theology Today* 69.4 (2012): 403-17 (416).

Another counterpart is political rhetoric. Political cursing, like hate speech, is a form of social self-justification. It readies a nation for war.

Cursing in today's political liturgy

If we are to shine our justification by faith candle in such a way as to illuminate self-justification, I suggest we shine it on political liturgy. What some scholars refer to as "ceremonial deism" or "civic liturgy" or "civil religion" is what I am referring to here. I have tried to show so far how geopolitics since World War II has relied upon a civic liturgy that includes Hitler-cursing.

As we look still more carefully at the civic liturgy in American political life, I'll give a bit more attention to the relationship between Hitler-cursing and America's two invasions of Iraq. When the 41st president of the United States, George H. W. Bush, readied America for war against Iraq in 1991, he identified Iraq's Saddam Hussein with Germany's Adolf Hitler. Hussein was as evil as Hitler. To take a stand against Saddam Hussein would be tantamount to taking a stand against injustice, despotism, and cruelty. During a news conference on New Year's Day of 1991, the White House resident president identified with the higher values to which America is called.

Throughout our history we've been resolute in our support of justice, freedom, and human dignity. The current situation in the Persian Gulf demands no less of us and of the international community. We did not plan for war, nor do we seek war... Unfortunately, Iraq has thus far turned a deaf ear to the voices of peace and reason.¹¹

America is good. Iraq is bad. Americans are devoted to justice, freedom, and human dignity. Furthermore, Americans are devoted to avoiding war. Iraq, on the other hand, has turned a deaf ear to the voices of peace and reason. In the name of the good, so to speak, America is justified in making its plan for a military strike against Iraq.

A couple of weeks later, the president verbally described Saddam Hussein as evil, thereby, establishing moral distance.

While the world waited, Saddam Hussein systematically raped, pillaged, and plundered a tiny nation, no threat to his own. He subjected the people of Kuwait to unspeakable atrocities—and among those maimed and murdered, innocent children. While the world waited, Saddam sought to add to the chemical weapons arsenal he now possesses, an infinitely more dangerous weapon of mass destruction—a nuclear weapon.¹²

11. George H. W. Bush, "The President's News Conference," Jan. 12, 1991 http://bushlibrary.tamum.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2616&year=1991&month=01

12. President George H. W. Bush, "Address to the Nation Announcing Allied Military Action in the Persian Gulf," Jan. 16, 1991 http://bushlibrary.tamum.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2623&year=1991&month=01

of an ultimate concern."¹⁷ Because the interest of the nation replaces allegiance to a justice which transcends national interests and which includes the welfare of the enemy in its scope, these thinkers thought of nationalism as the treatment of something penultimate as if it were ultimate. To treat something as ultimate which is less than ultimate is to succumb to the demonic spirit. The result can only be damage and carnage.

Patriotism is a form of spirituality without religion or, perhaps more accurately, a substitute religion. "There is consequently a religious overtone in all political loyalties," wrote Niebuhr; "that is, conditioned, relative and partial human institutions tend to make unconditional claims upon the lives of individuals and to secure the acceptance of such claims."¹⁸ Or, as Randall put it,

Whatever its origin and its ultimate value, patriotism is beyond doubt the most widespread social ideal of the day; it is the modern religion, far stronger than mere Christianity in any of its forms, and to its tribal gods men give supreme allegiance. Nationalism is almost the one idea for which masses of men will still die.¹⁹

The patriot feels justified in his or her ultimate devotion to one country at the expense of others, because his or her nation is allegedly blessed by God.

These three scholars saw the demonic force reap destruction in German Nazism, Japanese Imperialism, Soviet Communism, and the rising red star over China. In the era immediately following World War II, they worried about the possibility that this demonic spirit might take over the allies. Might the United States ever succumb? Had these three lived into the second decade of the twenty-first century, they might have agreed with contemporary Roman Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh who observes, "In important ways, the United States has not really secularized at all. What has happened instead is that in the modern era the holy has migrated from the church to the state."²⁰ Americans are now engaging in "the age-old sin of idolatry."²¹

How might we avoid such idolatry? "Christian realism", a term coined by Niebuhr and adopted by Robert Bellah, attempts to provide an answer.

Though we are called to take politics seriously, we are also called to point beyond politics to that which is more ultimately serious. At a time when so many men are caught up in political causes and political ideologies as though demonically possessed

17. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957) 2.

18. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Do the State and Nation Belong to God or the Devil?" in *Faith and Politics*, ed. Ronald Stone (New York: George Braziller, 1968) 84.

19. John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind* (New York: Columbia, 1976) 668.

20. William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011) 112.

21. Ibid., 2.

by them, we must point out that which transcends politics. Both with our words and with our lives we need to show alternatives to ideological totalitarianism.²²

In short, avoid the totalitarianism of political rhetoric which substitutes American nationalism for universal justice.

Violence and more violence

When appeal to universal justice becomes subordinated to the spirituality of a single nation or a single people, it becomes dangerous. Justice justifies violence. In fact, justice becomes a serial killer. Despite all the spiritual rhetoric of our political liturgies, the national pursuit of justice leads to violence; and this violence leads to more violence in a never-ending cycle. Once let loose, justified violence races about chaotically and terrorizes everyone in its path. Violence might sound attractive in the rhetoric of our political leaders, but once unleashed it becomes unstoppable.

French theologian Jacques Ellul gives us five laws of violence. The first law: continuity. Once you initiate violence, you cannot put a stop to it. Like a grass fire, the path of violence continues to engulf more and more in its flames. The second law: reciprocity. "Violence creates violence, begets and procreates violence" in response. The third law: sameness. Violence is the same whether justified or unjustified. "It is impossible to distinguish between... violence that liberates and violence that enslaves." The fourth law: "violence begets violence—*nothing else*." Or, to say it another way, it would be unrealistic to think that violence is a means to a peaceful end. Realism tells us that the only end to our violence is more violence. (Curiously, all of these four laws seem to make the point: violence begets more violence.) Ellul's fifth law is of special interest to us here: "the man who uses violence always tries to justify both it and himself. Violence is so unappealing that every user of it has produced lengthy apologies to demonstrate to the people that it is just and morally warranted."²³ Like covering dog poo with powdered sugar, self-justification covers violence with sweet rhetoric.

A double conclusion must result from this discussion. First, we are inclined to justify ourselves when preparing to perpetrate violence. Second, we deceive ourselves in the process. Because we exert so much energy in the process of self-justification we overlook what history has taught us, namely, the validity of Ellul's five laws of violence. Once we have released the Sorcerer's Apprentice, we cannot return to a previous peaceful state. At that point, we can either apologize, or, we can continue the process of self-justification to the point of incredulity. In neither case does violence come to a final termination.

22. Robert Bellah, "Tribulation Reaching," *Theology Today* 26:4 (1970): 367-70 (370).

23. Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, tr. Cecilia Gaal Kings (New York: Seabury, 1969) 94-103.

Elul provides illumination for a phenomenon: US drone strikes. Presidents John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, and Gerald Ford had firmly stated that no one representing the US government is allowed to commit assassination or conspire to assassinate any human being. Shortly after the 9/11 event, President George W. Bush changed this rule. But he needed to justify it, to disguise the assassination component. He authorized the CIA to employ drone strikes anywhere in the world to kill leaders of Al Qaeda, but it would be called a "military" operation rather than "assassination." The CIA had previously been a strictly civilian arm of government, authorized to investigate even the military. Once the CIA became militarized, its critical leverage became compromised. More to the point here: America became an assassinating power everywhere in the world.

It was estimated at the beginning that perhaps twenty or so individuals would be considered "prime" or "senior" Al Qaeda leaders. Once the drone program was underway, the criteria changed. No longer would drone strikes be limited only to prime or senior leaders; drone strikes became authorized to kill anyone considered to be "supporters" of Al Qaeda. At this writing drone strikes under the Bush and Obama administrations have killed more than 3,000 people in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere, 300 of whom are designated by the CIA as "collateral damage." Ten percent are collateral damage. The drone strike rate as of this writing averages one every 16 days. What will happen next?

On December 11, 2013 an American drone destroyed an 11-vehicle convoy in al-Baidha province in Yemen, killing 14 people and injuring 22 others. The convoy had nothing to do with Al-Qaeda. It was a wedding party. The bride and groom and celebrants lived in the town of Radda. Among the dead were two local tribal leaders. "All those who were killed were supportive of the government's anti-terror campaign," said a Yemeni government spokesperson. "That will surely not be the case of their tribes and families if the government does not strongly intervene," he added.²⁴ The killing of innocent people in Yemen will turn friends into enemies. Violence begets violence.

US drone strikes have become inadvertent recruiting tools for Al Qaeda and ISIS. In Yemen in particular, as soon as a drone strike destroys a home, Al Qaeda representatives show up with money and a crew for rebuilding. Victims of drone strikes find shelter and consolation from America's enemies. As the support for Al Qaeda grows, will this justify more drone strikes? How long will this spiral of violence continue?

Elul's second law recognizes reciprocity: violence creates violence. It begets and procreates violence in response. While Americans feel justified in bombing targets in foreign lands, the laws of violence kick in and worsen the threat of alienation from peoples of other nations. One difficulty with such self-justification is that it

blinds Americans to what they themselves contribute to their own progressive self-destruction.

Subtle and not-so-subtle self-justification

Self-justification is the common thing to do. It's our default disposition. When challenged by either guilt or meaninglessness, a mechanism of self-justification clicks in. This applies to us both individually and collectively. "When someone kills in war there's a psychological triage that occurs," writes Kevin Sites. "The individual must find meaning in the act. Because killing is the ultimate refutation of our own humanity, there must be a justification to prevent the mind from defaulting to the judgment of murderer."²⁵ It is too much to think of oneself as a murderer. The killing must be just and right. The moral universe must somehow provide the criterion for judging the killer to be performing an act of justice. Would God approve? Just ask any of our political leaders.

Political self-justification is spiritual without necessarily being religious. "Both Hitler and Stalin had little sympathy with organized religion and viewed the churches of their countries as potential enemies," writes Wolfe. These two dictators "were offering a competing system of meaning preoccupied with eternal questions of salvation and sacrifice."²⁶ Whereas established religious groups pose a threat to totalitarian governments, vague spiritual sentiments can easily be inscribed into support for the state. Jingoistic fervor accompanied by military aggression is perhaps the most formidable form that SBNR sentiment can take.

One point Wolfe makes should not go by unnoticed: an SBNR agent has no leverage with which to render judgment against a rogue government justifying war. But, religion does. A religious tradition with its institutional organization intact can rally criticism, prophetic judgment, and resistance. It would be premature to disqualify a Christian church or another religious institution from providing a moral compass to measure the direction taken by a secular state. A realistic doctrine of human nature—a theological anthropology—provides religious critics with the analytical tools needed to expose the self-justificatory rhetoric among our political orators that leads to international violence.

Spiritual rhetoric on the tongue of a political leader is not particularly subtle. It is public and, to the critical eye, transparent. It is easy to expose. Nevertheless, we will be tempted to go along with this political self-justification without criticism. We will be tempted to be complicit, cooperative.²⁷ Why? Because this mechanism of self-justification is secretly at work in each of us every day. It is our first line of

²⁴ Sites, *The Things They Cannot Say*, xx.

²⁵ Wolfe, *Political Evil*, 35.

²⁷ Chaudhri of words in the service of truth telling. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, faults the listeners to the lies told us by our political leaders: "Indeed, we bear a heavy responsibility for allowing ourselves to be lied to. . . . The deceptions we particularly seem to want are those that comfort, inaudible, legitimate, and provide ready excuses for inaction." *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) 98–97.

24. Hakim Almasari, "Yemen says US drone struck a wedding convoy, 14 killed," CNN <http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/12/world/mena/yemen-u-s-drone-wedding/index.html>, accessed 12/21/2013.

self-defense. We invoke self-justification in our private moments as well as when interacting with family, friends, co-workers, and the public. Self-justification is as common as rain drops, burrowing into every nook and cranny until nearly everything is wet with it. We draw an imaginary line between good and evil, and we place ourselves on the good side.

The realist is aware that we want others to think well of us. The realist is also aware that we want to think well of ourselves. To be good, just, and true is to be eternal. Or, so we think. Even in moments when we might be feeling guilt or shame, we fish for reasons to declare ourselves right. To be right is to be attuned, as Hitler says, to the "divine laws of existence."²⁷ But, the Christian realist knows it is all a lie. The spin-off from justification by faith illuminates how the lie of self-justification works. It uncovers the truth about ourselves.

Mere rhetoric?

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates asked about the relationship between political rhetoric and true justice. If the speech maker only wants to persuade us to vote or support the politician's party or policies, this is disingenuous. Authentic rhetoric should make us hunger and thirst after truth, and truth will demand absolute justice. "Will not the true rhetorician... aim... to implant justice in the souls of his citizens?"²⁸ Socrates asks this rhetorically, ironically.²⁸ We might copy Socrates with reference to God: will not the true rhetorician aim to implant faith in the true God in the souls of our citizens? Whether we appeal to true justice or the true God, the rhetorician stands as much under that judgment as those listening to the speech.

When we reflect back on Hitler or the American presidents—who were whipping up patriotic spirit to support their war plans—we should be suspicious. Were they actually attempting to plant justice in the souls of us citizens? Or were they simply trying to appear to be pursuers of justice in our eyes? It could be the case that what appears to be oratorical justice is in fact less than actual justice. Rhetorical justice justifies the speech maker, but it falls short of establishing or maintaining genuine justice in community.

One of the points I wish to press here is this: when political or personal rhetoric appeals directly to ethereal justice or to Almighty God for justification, it appeals to something less than true justice or the true God. The true God transcends our image of God; and the true God even transcends the concept of justice structuring our moral universe, no matter how we might place our trust in either the divine image or our concept of justice. When we self-justify in the name of God or in the name of justice, usually the concept of the divine or the just has been shaved and trimmed and minimized so as to fit our proposed program. In short, the Christian realist says, Don't believe dictators or presidents when they justify their policies by appeal to a downsized moral universe.

What we need, argued Niebuhr on the eve of World War II, is a prophetic critique of government. We cannot rely upon Plato or the Greeks here, because they assumed falsely that the human species is oriented toward a just society ruled by unselfish monarchs. Only the prophets of ancient Israel could discern the true character of human nature, and this is reflected in the persistent critique of the prophets against Israel's king and people on behalf of the God who transcends the nation. "The challenge of the Hebrew prophets to both state and nation came from the vantage point of faith in a God in whom power and goodness were truly one because he was the creative source of life."²⁹ The prophetic attitude of the Christian Church today should look like this: an "unrelenting critical attitude toward all government."³⁰

Even Satanists engage in self-justification

We have been observing our human propensity to draw a line between good and evil and, then, to place ourselves on the good side of the line. We have been calling this self-justification. Self-justification is the invisible structure of everyday gossip. Self-justification is the slightly more visible structure of political rhetoric. It seems universal. Niebuhr remarked, "the basic characteristic of all natural religion is self-justification."³¹ So, we might ask: would this apply to Satanists as well?

As shocking as it might sound, even worshippers of Satan justify their faith by identifying with what is good. One would think that veneration of the Prince of Darkness would affirm evil for the sake of evil. But, even citizens in the kingdom of Satan may engage in self-justification. Here's a case in point. In January 2014 the New York-based Satanic Temple submitted an application to the Oklahoma Capitol Preservation Commission. For what? To erect a monument on the (Oklahoma state Capitol grounds. A monument? Yes. What kind of monument? The proposed monument would be a seven-foot-tall statue of Satan, depicted as Baphomet: the goat-headed figure with wings and horns sitting on a pentagram. The statue would include adoring children at Satan's side.

Why? In order to counter the influence of the Ten Commandments. At the time of the application, a monument to the Ten Commandments sat on Capitol property, an inspiration to legislators. The satanic monument application was facilitated by the Oklahoma chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, which was suing the state of Oklahoma to remove the Ten Commandments monument because "the state needs to get out of the business of endorsing religion." As a symbolic act in opposition to state support of the Ten Commandments, the ACLU facilitated the application of Satan worshippers to erect an alternative memorial.

Now, just what justifies the erection of a state-sponsored monument to Satan? Here is what a spokesperson for the Satanic Temple said: "More than anything, we

²⁹ Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, 87.

³⁰ Ibid., 90.

³¹ Ibid., 95.

feel our monument is meant to be a historical marker celebrating the scapegoats, marginalized and demonized minority.³² Look at this justification carefully. Satanic Temple supporters support defense of victims, defense of those who have been victimized by scapegoating, or by marginalization, or by demonization. If there is an ethical message to our treatment of "justice, justification, and self-justification," it is this: we should embrace such an ethic of caring for those who have been treated unjustly. We should cultivate a sensitivity to—and defense of—those who are victims of distancing, scapegoating, marginalization, and demonization. This motivation for action is just what Jesus sought in his teaching to inculcate in you and my conscience. In short, these Satanists are justifying the erection of the monument on the grounds that it would garner support for the teachings of Jesus. Satanists are good. Paradoxically, just as Jesus is good.

What is happening here? Some kind of inversion is taking place. Satan is a symbol of evil. Evil for the sake of evil. But, the line between good and evil has been redrawn by the Satanists. Accordingly, indirectly, those who sponsor the Ten Commandments are now identified with evil; and the satanic challengers identify themselves with the very virtues that most followers of the Ten Commandments embrace. The line between good and evil has been redrawn, and supporters of the Ten Commandments have been placed on the evil side while supporters of Satan are placed on the good side.

At minimum, this is curious. At maximum, it reminds us that self-justification serves the forces of evil. Evil dresses in clothes of virtue; and we need to sharpen our vision so we can perceive the Pharisaic hypocrisy in self-justification. Hitler, American presidents, along with the New York Satanists share something in common: they justify themselves because they stand on the good side of the line. Each of us is tempted to join this chorus, the chorus which sings of virtue on the good side of the line.

The New York Satanists are members of a club to which we all belong. Human beings, writes Luther, "have been carrying on their mischief and violence under the lovely and excellent pretext and cover of doing it for the sake of righteousness... They put up such a good front and use such beautiful words that they think even God himself will not know any better."³³

Conclusion

What has been our theological method here? We have been illuminating everyday human experience by a candle, the Reformation doctrine of

justification by faith. This is a method I learned from one of my teachers, Langdon Gilkey.

Christian theology is the enterprise of understanding the totality of contemporary experience... through the forms of or in the terms of Christian symbols, as Christian faith is the effort to live one's life in the illumination and power of those symbols and the presence of deity they mediate. Thus at once theology is driven critically to examine and constructively to reinterpret the traditional symbols of its faith in order to interpret experience in their terms.³⁴

In the light of justification by faith, we can see more clearly a characteristic of our human nature, namely, our proclivity to self-justify. If Karl Barth is correct—"Our anthropology can and must be based on Christology"—then our human nature comes into sharper focus when we examine ourselves in the light of Jesus Christ's saving work.³⁵

The good news is that we human beings are inclined toward the good. What we want is the good. We justify virtually all that we do by appeal to what is good. It is rare that any of us will choose evil just because it's evil. Evil is a byproduct of the good. When Augustine sought to describe the inner workings of his soul, he recognized his yearning for what is good. His sin consisted of choosing the wrong good, choosing a lesser good than the ultimate good. "My sin consisted in this, that I sought pleasure, sublimity, and truth not in God but in his creatures, in myself, and other created beings."³⁶ If we choose any good that is less than God, we choose division, conflict, violence, and destruction. That's the nature of sin.

The bad news is that we deny our sin. We think of our violence and destruction as good, not evil, because it is in the service of justice. No matter how much havoc we wreak, it is justified. Perhaps the word "hypocrite" comes to mind here. Jesus, recall, thundered judgment against the Pharisees of his time, using the term "hypocrite." Matthew 23:27: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth." Jesus contrasts the outside with the inside. The outside looks moral and just and enviable. The inside, in contrast, reeks of death. The hinge on which everything in this treatment swings is the contrast between your or my self-justification, on the one hand, and God's gracious justification of us, on the other. The hinge verse is Romans 8:33b: "God is the one who justifies" (*Theos ho dikaios*).

Marcus Barth suggested that even God engages in self-justification; but when God self-justifies we creatures become the beneficiaries. Despite the Deuteronomic curses,

32. Sama Hamedy, "Proposed Satan Monument Heats Up Debate in Oklahoma," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 8, 2014 <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-in-satanic-monument-oklahoma-20140107.04198928.story#ixzz2pqcMC9jc>, accessed Aug. 8, 2014.

33. Luther, "Sermon on the Mount," *LW* 21:30.

14. Langdon Gilkey, *Recovering the Wholeness: A Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Seabury/Concord, 1970) 134.

15. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1936, 1962) III/2: §47, 512.

16. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.30.33-35.

God acts to justify us, not Godself. God's act of justifying us is the act of giving us new life.

God justifies his work of creation and salvation... by showing that he is pleased with the man he has created anew. Resurrection, glorification, clothing over, renewal, changing a fleshly into a spiritual body—all these are designations for one and the same event: the public, glorious, incontestable, and irrevocable justification of man through God's grace.³⁷

Despite this unsurpassable and eternal gift, we follow the path of the fool and try to justify ourselves anyhow.

The thesis of this article is that we human beings engage in self-justification in our daily lives. Declaring ourselves just is the default position taken by our psyche. Our spirituality—whether a religious or SBNR spirituality—consists in forming our soul according to what standards we believe justice requires. We conscript our conscience into providing standards we can attain; and this provides us with the self-satisfaction that comes with our moral embodiments and achievements. No longer do we use 16th-century vocabulary such as “works righteousness” or “merit,” but our psyches today function in exactly the same fashion. The problem is that frequently somebody gets hurt when we self-justify. When drone strikes kill terrorists and their families, justice is done. Then, a counter-movement for justice is spawned. The pursuit of the rights of the victim through retribution extends the violence to one more turn in the cycle.

Justice is a dangerous thing. It maims and kills and destroys. Yet, under every circumstance, we want to think of ourselves as justified by justice. That is what the light shining from the Reformation principle of justification by faith reveals about our human condition.

It is all too human to draw a line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side of the line. What would we think in the special case where we draw the line between good and evil and God places Godself on the evil side? We would declare ourselves good, and in the process separate ourselves from God. What then?

Author biography

Ted Peters is Emeritus Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. He co-edits the journal *Theology and Science*. He is author of *Sin Boldly: Justifying Faith for Fragile and Broken Souls* (Fortress, 2015) and *God—The World's Future* (Fortress, 3rd ed., 2015).

37. Marcus Barth, *Justification*, tr. A.M. Woodhuff III (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1971) 82.