Preface

The July 24, 2006 issue of *Time Magazine* featured this cover headline: "Why They Fight, And Why It's Different This Time." They were referring to an outbreak of violence between the Israeli army and Hezbollah militants. As I read the articles, however, two thoughts ran through my head: (1) why human beings fight is not actually being explained, and (2) it isn't different this time; this is another example of the same reciprocal violence that has plagued the Middle East for decades.

Why human beings are violent is not a question that is asked very often in the journalistic world, at least not in a way that has substance and depth. I do not mean to pick on journalists; they are simply representatives of society in general. We human beings are not usually interested in asking why we human beings are violent. The question is too emotionally charged and dangerous to be asked. Notice the way the *Time* headline was worded: "Why *They* Fight." If it had read "Why *We* Fight," with the *we* understood as referring to the whole human race, then the paradigm of thought would have shifted dramatically, but such a shift is not on the agenda of journalists or politicians or military leaders or educators or religious leaders. (This blanket statement is generally true, although there are a few exceptions.) Hunger to understand violence at a deep level is simply not a part of normal everyday discourse, or of our educational system that produces the discourse. Both the journalists and the public for which they write manifest a lack of curiosity, which in less mild terms can be described as intellectual sloth and apathy.

Developing a psychological comprehension of violent behavior is an ethical imperative in our age. The luxury of ignorance is no longer possible. It is not acceptable for people to think that developing such a comprehension is the task only of social scientists. We all must become social scientists to a certain degree by reflecting on the roots of violence. If we refuse to do so we are resisting our ethical calling. To express this idea more sharply: if we do not strive to understand violence, we are

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supporting the atmosphere of ignorance from which violence draws its energy, like a hurricane draws energy from warm water.

This book presents a paradigm for understanding human violence. That is its central argument and purpose. I suggest that if we do develop a deep comprehension of the psychological roots of violence, and spread this comprehension throughout society through education, then we will be accomplishing something of immense historical significance. We will be bringing about what can be called a New Copernican Revolution. For the human race to move from not understanding its own violence to understanding it is not only similar to the first Copernican Revolution, which gave us an accurate conception of the solar system, but it is in fact of much greater importance than that first revolution. Modern science has given us an understanding of the external world of physical things, but understanding our internal, psychological world as human beings is much more important in the long run.

The problem, however, is that to understand the roots of violence is not simply another piece of knowledge, like learning how a frog develops from a tadpole or how an internal combustion engine works. This understanding requires changes in the knower that make the reception of the knowledge possible. Unlike many other forms of knowledge, this comprehension can come to fruition only in the wake of a spiritual and intellectual conversion. This explains why this form of understanding is so rare in our world (because real conversion is rare), and it explains why there is not simply a lack of interest in developing an understanding of violence, but actually resistance to it.

The paradigm for comprehending violence that is articulated in this book takes the form of an anthropology that uses theological ideas to interpret specific observable behaviors. I am suggesting that theological anthropology could actually compete with "secular social science" in the task of making sense of the actions of Hitler, Stalin, and the 9/11 hijackers. I argue that while it may be difficult for there to be a theological mathematics or chemistry, there most certainly can and ought to be a theological political science and psychology. Such a science is not simply a possibility; I argue that it is already an actuality if we have eyes to see it. In the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Eric Voegelin, and René Girard, for example, we find the components of a theological anthropology that does actually comprehend human behaviors better than the secular alternatives that the Enlightenment has offered to us.

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I know that some readers will question my use of the word "better" in the last sentence. They will say: "You are a religious person, so of course you will think that a religious interpretation of phenomena is better *from your point of view*. But that is simply a sign of your subjectivity. There is no neutral place from which we can say that one interpretation is better than another." I am aware of this criticism but I do not find it compelling. Imagine nineteenth-century abolitionists being told that their truth is only valid for them because it is *their point of view*. For the abolitionist to see that all human beings need to be treated with dignity because they are created in the image of God is not a private opinion, it is actually a key piece of theological science that is valid for all of humanity. That there can be a *theological science* is my presupposition in this book, and I believe that history will vindicate me on that point, just as it vindicated the abolitionists.

The idea that is missing from my interlocutor's critique is an awareness that there is a moral component to knowledge. Some forms of knowledge lead humanity down the path of moral development and others do not. The theological science that I am positing is not only more effective in interpreting the empirical data of human behavior, it is also more helpful in pointing toward the pathway of ethical development for the human race. Put differently, a form of understanding that is ethically constructive has that power because it interprets the phenomena more accurately.

Relativism maintains that the human condition has no definite structure. There are only varied opinions, but there is nothing substantive to be figured out. I maintain, on the contrary, that there is a structure of human existence that can actually be figured out. And when that comprehension is achieved it participates in the structure it has understood, which is human life as it has been created and is being created by God, the source of our being.

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Part I of this book begins with an Introduction that outlines the three dimensions of existence: the vertical axis of God and nature, the horizontal plane of social existence, and the temporal trajectory of individual selfhood. This outline forms a foundation for understanding three key thinkers who have given us the basic tools we need to understand violence: Søren Kierkegaard, Eric Voegelin, and René Girard. This part

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is written primarily for students who are not already familiar with these authors; it introduces philosophical concepts that will be essential for understanding the second part of the book, which expresses the core of the argument.

In Part II I extensively develop the concept of the three dimensions of existence and use it as a lens through which our contemporary world can be interpreted. This section is headed by the Greek term *perichoresis* which means "mutual interrelations." This term is most commonly used in the context of the Christian doctrine of God's triune nature. The three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, are described in Christian theology as present within each other's being and work. The Father begets the Son and breathes the Spirit. The Son communicates the Father's love in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit opens up human spirits to the Father by bearing witness to the work of the Son. In the context of this book, the term *perichoresis* indicates arguments that draw on Kierkegaard, Voegelin, and Girard, coordinating and weaving together their ideas in various ways. The Trinitarian resonance of the term is not mere window-dressing; it constitutes the heart of the argument, in that Voegelin helps us to understand our relation to the Father, Kierkegaard helps us to understand our relation to the Son, and Girard helps us to understand our relation to the Spirit.

I argue that the three dimensions of reality are a lens through which we *can* and in fact *must* interpret human behavior if we seek to comprehend violence. As a slight foretaste of my argument, I will mention here that the clashes between different personality patterns seen in the modern world are illuminated by awareness of the dimensions. "Fundamentalists" try to reside in the upper reaches of the vertical axis, living in God's back pocket; their rivalrous brothers the atheistic scientists dismiss transcendence and say that materiality is the only reality; egocentric individualists focus on the Self in defiance of the possibility of a more complex way of inhabiting the dimensions; revolutionaries such as Karl Marx tout the social, horizontal plane as the key to all of reality and as the solution to all human problems. In other words, I paint a picture of the dimensions as constituting limbs that people can climb out on when they seek to over-simplify the task of living in a complex world. But these limbs break off under the weight of unbalanced personalities. Our developmental task as human beings is to live

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in the Center, at the intersection of the dimensions, with an openness to the complexity that God calls us to participate in.

Another way of expressing this is to note that many authors work with some sort of dichotomy, such as: "*earlier* forms of thought are bad, *modern* forms of thought are good," or, "*the Bible* holds all truth, everything else is *vain philosophy*," or, "*we* are defenders of freedom, *they* are evildoers," or, as Nietzsche famously put it, "Christianity has replaced (and reversed) the dichotomy *the strong rule over the weak* with *the good rule over the evil*."[1] The dichotomy that I work with in this book is consciously intended to break down such dichotomies by suggesting that *simplistic* ways of thinking need to be replaced with *complex* ways of thinking. To refer to the somewhat long-in-the-tooth Wesleyan quadrilateral, for example, I would suggest that a person who has one primary source of knowledge, whether it is the Bible or tradition or reason or experience, is not as advanced intellectually as the person who seeks to hold these in creative tension: the Bible *and* tradition *and* reason *and* experience. These four terms are pointing to different aspects of the complexity of human life, and when this is not appreciated, the result is a stunted perception of reality.

As the text unfolds, I show how the concept of the three dimensions is refracted in many different ways in Christian thought: love of God, self, and neighbor; faith, hope, and love; Christ as king, prophet, and priest; Kierkegaard's "three spheres of existence"; Martin Luther King Jr.'s "three dimensions of a complete life," and so forth. In this sense, what I am arguing is not at all original. But the element of originality in my argument is seen in the tenacity with which I carry through this process of noticing and gathering refractions of the dimensions, and the way I apply this model of understanding to phenomena such as fundamentalism, modern individualism, and Marxism. I quote, for example, a psychologist who has analyzed the 9/11 hijackers as having a "vertically" oriented fundamentalist mindset. This fits my analysis perfectly and strengthens it, but the author I quote does not appear to have worked out the concept of the vertical, the individual, and the horizontal into a comprehensive anthropological vision. Many authors are seeing parts of the puzzle; my task is to put the pieces together so that an image begins to appear more clearly.

1. This is a paraphrase, rather than a quotation.

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I can point to two items that are quite similar to my argument here: Mark Heim's *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, and an essay by H. Richard Niebuhr. Heim argues that the major world religions, Buddhism, Islam, etc., are relating to various aspects of the triune God (without being consciously aware that this is what they are doing). His argument is very subtle and multi-faceted, and I cannot begin to summarize it here. His vision is similar to mine, but he is interpreting a different set of phenomena, and he is speaking in positive terms about human relations with the divine. My focus is negative; I am seeking to comprehend human psychopathologies as varying forms of rebellion against the persons of the Trinity.

H. Richard Niebuhr's essay "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church" is another close parallel to my argument. Niebuhr argues that the history of Christian thought demonstrates that Christians often gravitate toward worship of the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit, in such a manner that they end up with a "Unitarianism" of the Father, Son, or Spirit. One aspect of God is focused on and used as the primary orientation and the other aspects are downgraded or ignored. My argument proceeds along similar lines in that I am also noticing a contraction of thought when expansion and complexity are called for. A key difference between Niebuhr's argument and mine is that he is concerned primarily with Christian thought, whereas I venture farther afield in my comments on Islamist terrorists or Marxism or atheistic science, etc.

In addition to the topics already referred to, Part II also contains reflections on the relationship between theology, anthropology, and ethics; differing forms of time—cosmic, psychological, and cultural; the choices that we make without necessarily being aware that we are making them, which lead to different patterns of thought and action; theories of atonement; and the argument between the just war theory and pacifism. The reader who is thinking that these large topics cannot possibly be dealt with thoroughly in such a short book is exactly correct. My goal is not comprehensiveness and exhaustive analysis but intellectual stimulation. Nothing would make me happier than to have a reader take up a topic treated sketchily in this book and analyze it at greater depth.

Part III of the book consists of three essays that are rhetorical applications of insights from the second part. Chapter 6 focuses on

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interpreting the 9/11 attacks as a chief example of unbalanced fundamentalism in action. An essay by Kierkegaard, in which he critiques martyrdom, frames the discussion. Kierkegaard argues that we can distinguish between true and false forms of martyrdom by considering the deepest motivations of the martyr. Christ allowed himself to be killed to redeem others, to release them from the crushing weight of sin and accusation. He was a true martyr because he was not entangled in the mendacity of violent human culture. False martyrs die in order to accuse and condemn others and to "save" themselves by "obeying" an idolatrous god that they have themselves created.

Chapter 7 is a thought-experiment. What if President George W. Bush and his speech writers had been saturating themselves in the writings of those authors who have reflected most deeply on the roots of human violence (authors such as Kierkegaard, Voegelin, and Girard)? How would the speech he gave to Congress after the 9/11 attacks have been different if it were less of an example of unreflective nationalism and more of an example of seizing the moment to teach humanity about the psychology of violence?

Chapter 8 focuses on the anti-hypocrisy message of Christianity. Hypocrisy is accusing others of doing wrong when you yourself are doing wrong. It is thus the bedrock phenomenon that makes violence possible. Its plainly observable presence throughout human history enables us to see that hypocrisy is the human condition. It is the air we breathe. But we don't usually see it; we are hypocritical unconsciously. It is always possible that we could become more conscious; if we did, the ethical texture of human relationships would be transformed. Reflection on the long history of human corruption is depressing, but there is always more that can be said; there is always hope, which is the fruit of divine grace.

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