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Review of: J. Denny Weaver, God Without Violence: Following a Nonviolent God in a Violent World

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J. Denny Weaver, *God Without Violence: Following a Nonviolent God in a Violent World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016). x + 220 pp. £22.00. ISBN 978-1-4982-9412-6 (pbk)

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In *God Without Violence*, Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver ‘proposes new motifs for Christology and atonement’ and ‘highlights new versions of Christian practice’ based in ‘the nonviolence of God who is revealed in the life and work of Jesus’ (pp. 197–98). Weaver wrote this book to be a popular version of his previous books on atonement theology, accessible to church study groups and college classes. The first thing to say is that the author succeeds in this aim. The book is a useful guide for Christians who want to think through a very tricky topic: Why did Jesus die, and what does that mean for us?

Weaver opens the book with this problem, in the voice of Zach, a five-year-old ‘intuitive theologian’ who asked his mother after Sunday school one week, ‘A parent would never put their child to death on the cross, right?’ Weaver finds in this little boy’s question the skepticism and fear that many Christians have—or ought to have—with their inherited theology. ‘If God did this to God’s son, Zach wondered, would human parents perhaps do it to their son. The unstated implication is that... the Christian God is a violent God, a God who would have the Son, Jesus, killed for God’s purposes’ (p. 1). Against this default theology, Weaver professes the nonviolent God, who did not require Jesus to be killed and who does not employ aggression.

In *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Eerdmans, 2001; revised ed., 2011), Weaver critiqued Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement with support from black, feminist, and womanist theologies. He argued that Anselm’s substitutionary account of Christus Victor needs to be thoroughly recast into a narrative version that honors the whole scope of the biblical story. This recasting, inspired by Gustav Aulén’s Christology, yields a nonviolent atonement theory. In *The Nonviolent God* (Eerdmans, 2013), Weaver further developed the biblical foundations for nonviolent atonement and spelled out some general implications for Christian life. Those books are written in accessible prose, but Weaver wanted to go further with this publication, keeping footnotes, technical terminology, and theologians’ names to a bare minimum, and providing discussion questions for each chapter. Though *God Without Violence* may not break any new ground, it is likely the best of the author’s books for non-specialists and introductory-level college students.

The book consists of an introduction and eighteen chapters, each approximately ten pages long. Weaver begins by emphasizing the importance of story in theology (introduction) and presenting the story of Jesus as one who lived, ministered, died, and rose as the nonviolent incarnate God (chap. 1). This story of Jesus is held up against the theories of atonement that flourished in church history—the ransom, penal, substitutionary, and moral influence models (chap. 2–4). Weaver agreeably suggests that these excessively stress the death of Jesus, while an adequate theology must emphasize the resurrection. In the nonviolent atonement model, ‘with

the resurrection Jesus has triumphed over the death-dealing forces of evil, and the reign of God is displayed as the ultimate power in the cosmos' (p. 33). Weaver continues to explore New Testament stories to show how Jesus taught about forgiveness, economics, race/ethnicity, and gender, with implications for Christians in today's world (chap. 5–7).

With chapter 8, Weaver turns the focus from Jesus to the Father: What kind of God is the God of Jesus? Must an omnipotent God be violent? God's omnipotence means the ability and power to restore life. God is ultimately in control, but it is humans, in their freedom, who are responsible for violence. Weaver then launches into several chapters that widen the biblical focus to locate nonviolent motifs from beginning to end: from the nonviolent creation pictured in Genesis (chap. 9); to texts throughout the Hebrew scriptures that portray God as nonviolent (a 'counterweight' to texts of violence, chaps. 10–12); to an historically situated reading of the book of Revelation (chaps. 14–16). A transitional chapter in the midst of this, chapter 13, says that the Bible has always been interpreted; thus, it always needs to be *re*-interpreted in response to the context in which the story is being heard and in light of new scholarship. For an example of the latter, Weaver affirms David Brondos's interpretation in *Paul on the Cross* (Fortress, 2006), which holds that, for Paul, 'the death of Jesus has no saving impact in and of itself... Jesus' death does not impact God... [and] does not change God's attitude toward sinful humans' (pp. 193-94). Rather, 'it is the whole event of Jesus that saves, the whole of his ministry, death, and resurrection through which God saves' (p. 194). Jesus' death results from him taking his message into a violent world. Jesus died for us in the sense that 'he was willing to carry out his mission of witness to God's salvation for all people, even when it cost him his life' (p. 194).

Finally, Weaver carries the theme of necessary theological change into the culminating two chapters on Christology and atonement (chapters 17–18). 'Theology in our time can change, just as there was change visible in the New Testament itself, and then more change in the centuries after the New Testament' (p. 185). Weaver is recommending at least three theological changes. The first is seeing Jesus in terms of narrative, as a corrective to the 'received or inherited [abstract] way of defining Jesus since the fourth or fifth century' (p. 185). A second change is to rethink atonement completely, because we no longer inhabit the feudal world in which Anselm's motifs made sense. The medieval picture of Jesus death 'poses an unhealthy model of passive submission to abuse and violence that impacts God' (p. 192). Finally, the contemporary popular attitude toward truth should be accepted, or at least reckoned with. 'Today, for the most part, we have abandoned the idea that there is universal truth that can be determined and then imposed on others' (p. 186). Weaver does not mean there is no truth, but that the truth about Jesus is not something that other religions or cultures can be talked into believing. Moreover, it is not a truth that can or should be forced on others, which would be an act of violence. So the only way for Christians to demonstrate the truth of their beliefs is to 'live by the story of Jesus, even when it is costly or dangerous' (p. 186).

As mentioned above, this book is explicitly intended to present the arguments in *The Nonviolent Atonement* and *The Nonviolent God* for a wider audience, and so it should be appraised in the context of this purpose. Its strengths are notable. Weaver provides a down-to-earth overview of the purpose of theology and the role of story within it. He accessibly relates biblical stories and theological concepts. He reasons very well with difficult texts and motifs. He took on the concerns of some reviewers of the earlier books by widening the scope of his

attention to cover texts from all parts of the Bible. The applications to issues of economics, race/ethnicity, and gender are highly relevant to pressing concerns in church and society. Finally, the approach cannot be pigeonholed into a denomination niche; Weaver writes in a way that makes the topics of interest to Christians broadly, not just to those in the peace church tradition. The weakness of the book is really just the necessary limitation of its purpose: it argues broadly rather than deeply. For instance, the feudal context of classical atonement theologies is an intriguing claim, but the historical support is not developed. The most in-depth investigation on any one topic is the thirty pages devoted to the Book of Revelation.

For Christian ethicists, particularly those teaching courses on war-and-peace ethics and religion-and-violence topics, *God Without Violence* is well worth reading. It brings readers' attention to the thorny history and enduring legacy of atonement motifs, which continue to influence Christians' ethical language. These motifs should be brought into the open. A lot of Christians have the same question that young Zach did, but they don't know how to ask it. The book addresses beliefs about God and texts of terror from the Bible that are stumbling blocks for modern people raised in the church but whose reasons for falling away include the belief that Christianity promotes an intolerance that can become violent. These same beliefs and texts are also potential stumbling blocks to those in other religions and cultures who dialogue with Christians. Therefore, Weaver's book, despite its broad strokes and precisely because of its provocative challenge to the whole mainstream history of atonement theology, can help Christian readers engage in the critical self-reflection that discipleship requires. At the same time, more mixed audiences, such as pluralist college classes, will find the book to be a readable, informative, and discussable statement of a Christian peace ethic.