

# Nonviolent God: Critical Analysis of a Contemporary Argument<sup>1</sup>

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## **1 Introduction**

This essay analyzes and assesses a contemporary argument in favor of a nonviolent God.<sup>2</sup> The subject of God's violence or nonviolence has lately received significant attention by Mennonite theologians, and diverse views have been articulated by various authors.<sup>3</sup> For several years, some Mennonite theologians have promoted a certain argument for a nonviolent God that draws a direct inference from what we affirm in faith as true of Jesus to what we ought therefore also affirm in faith as true of God. My aim is to examine this "nonviolent God" argument, addressing its assumptions, implications, and limitations: What assumptions does the argument's logic presuppose? What qualifications do its premises require to be true? What can the argument conclusively prove? What collateral commitments does it presume in order to persuade? In all, my hope is to bring clarity and offer guidance to the ongoing discussion of this important issue within the church.<sup>4</sup>

## **2 The Argument**

The "nonviolent God" argument has been recently restated by J. Denny Weaver:

We believe God is fully revealed in the story of Jesus Christ, in his life, teaching, death and resurrection. Jesus rejected violence. If God is fully revealed in Jesus, then God also refuses to use or sanction violence. If God is fully revealed in Jesus, then God is nonviolent.<sup>5</sup>

Three observations. First, this is a *deductive* argument in the standard form "if ..., then ...." The logical force of a deductive argument is this: *if* we agree with the argument's premises *and* the argument's logic is correct, *then* we must also agree with the argument's conclusion – that is, we can disagree with the conclusion only on pain of self-contradiction. Weaver thus succinctly restates the argument: "if we truly accept the confession that God

is fully revealed in Jesus, it should be obvious that God is not a God who sanctions violence or who kills.”<sup>6</sup> Second, this is a *confessional* argument, grounded on the Christian faith concerning God: “We believe....” Any confessional claim prompts two questions: *Who* is this “we”? And on what *basis* does this “we” believe? This “we” is the church; and while addressed to an Anabaptist audience, “we” here extends beyond the peace church to all Christians.<sup>7</sup> As Weaver emphasizes, the argument is grounded not on a peculiar Anabaptist faith but on the common Christian faith: “that the God of Israel is fully revealed in the story of Jesus is a bedrock tenet of Christian faith.”<sup>8</sup> Appealing to the one faith of all Christians, the argument thus implicitly invokes the ecumenical authority of the creedal tradition (by which the church has defined and transmitted the “bedrock tenets” of Christian faith).<sup>9</sup> Third, this is a *biblical* argument, based on the revelation of God in the story of Jesus; it thus assumes also the canonical authority of the scriptural text. The upshot, then, is that fidelity to Scripture and creed requires Christians to confess that God is nonviolent.

Now, Weaver himself is openly suspicious of the creedal formulations of Christian faith. He denies that the ecumenical councils have universal authority for the church, and so denies that the ecumenical creeds are authentic sources for Christian doctrine.<sup>10</sup> His appeal to the creedal tradition is thus a rhetorical tactic to persuade others. Nonetheless, the argument he presents is premised on a confessional claim (“We believe ...”), which is assumed without argument on behalf of the church catholic (all “we” Christians) as if it were a true symbol of the catholic faith (what all Christians believe). Because this confessional claim appeals to the faith of the church, we can address the argument premised on that claim apart from Weaver’s own view of the tradition behind the claim. The argument itself stands or falls on the church’s common confession, independently of Weaver’s individual beliefs.

Insofar as the “nonviolent God” argument seeks to persuade the church on the grounds of its common confessional commitment, then, it is fair to take it on its own terms and to evaluate it on its own merits. We are free to judge the argument according to the Scriptures and creeds of the church, the very authorities on which the argument makes its appeal. My task is thus to test it against scriptural witness and ecumenical creed.<sup>11</sup> In testing

it against the creeds, the relevant criterion is the minimum requirement of logical consistency.<sup>12</sup>

### **3 The Logic of the Argument**

The analysis of a deductive argument asks two questions: Is the logic valid – does the conclusion follow logically from the conjunction of the premises? Are the premises themselves true? These are independent questions that must be addressed in turn. I will thus examine first the validity of the logic and then the truth of the premises.

The “nonviolent God” argument can be summed up in a syllogism: God is fully revealed in Jesus; Jesus is nonviolent; therefore, God is nonviolent.<sup>13</sup> This argument seems logically valid, but is it? The major premise states that Jesus “fully reveals” God and the minor premise states that Jesus is nonviolent, but the logical link is unclear. How does the conclusion follow? How does the notion “fully reveals” connect to what is, or is not, so of Jesus? This notion must be clarified. To say that God is “fully revealed” in Jesus is to say that all that God is Jesus is also; for if Jesus were in any way not what God is, then not all of God would be present in him. With the major premise thus clarified, the argument must be augmented with this premise: if God is fully revealed in Jesus, then whatever is true of God is true of Jesus. This is no arbitrary addition that alters the argument. It is logically necessary; without it, the conclusion cannot be derived from the premises.

We can now recast the full argument in valid form, making explicit the logical inferences by which the conclusion is derived:

- (1) God is fully revealed in Jesus;
- (2) If God is fully revealed in Jesus, then whatever is true of God is true of Jesus;
- (3) Therefore, whatever is true of God is true of Jesus.
- (4) Jesus is not violent;
- (5) Therefore, God is not violent.<sup>14</sup>

Such exercises in logic can be tedious, but this analysis has been necessary and useful. Necessary, because were the argument invalid, there would be no point in proceeding. Useful, because we have elucidated a proposition – whatever is true of God is true of Jesus – that was implicit in the argument but, as we will see, requires careful examination.

#### 4 The Theology of the Argument

We turn now to evaluating the truth of the argument's premises. As these premises are theological claims founded on Christian faith, the appropriate measure of truth is "true to Scripture and creed." The task is thus to assess in what sense and to what extent these claims are congruent with Scripture and consistent with creed.

##### 4.1 "God is fully revealed in Jesus"

Premise (1), that God is fully revealed in Jesus, does not appear as such in any of the ecumenical creeds. It is, nonetheless, a reasonable reading of what the creedal tradition intends and implies.<sup>15</sup>

The orthodox formula of the Trinity – one essence (*ousia*) in three persons (*hypostases*) – affirms that the one essence of God exists equally and undivided in each of the three persons of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – such that the Son is "of the same essence (*homoousion*)" with the Father (Nicene Creed). What is true of God's being is equally and fully true of the Father's being, the Son's being, and the Holy Spirit's being, which are one in being. That this was the understanding among the Patristic theologians is confirmed by a statement from Gregory of Nyssa: "All that the Father is we see revealed in the Son; all that is the Son's is the Father's also; for the whole Son dwells in the Father, and he has the whole Father dwelling in himself."<sup>16</sup>

The Nicene Creed thus implies that God the Father is fully revealed in God the Son. To show that God is fully revealed in Jesus, we need a logical bridge from "Son" to "Jesus," which is provided by the Definition of Chalcedon. According to Chalcedon, God the Son is incarnate in Jesus such that Jesus is a single, undivided person comprising two essences (substances or natures), the divine essence that the Son shares undivided with the Father and the human essence that Jesus shares with all humanity. Jesus is co-essential (or con-substantial) with both the Father ("according to the Godhead") and humanity ("according to the Manhood"). Thus, the Definition states, Jesus is "perfect in Godhead and perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man."<sup>17</sup> The Definition is careful to state that this union of divine and human natures does not confuse the two natures or diminish either nature but preserves what belongs properly to each. What is divine in Jesus remains divine and fully so, and what is human in him remains human

and fully so; the divinity shared equally and undivided by Father and Son is present fully and perfectly in Jesus. Therefore, as God the Father is fully revealed in God the Son, both of whom are “of the same essence” (Nicaea), so God the Father is fully revealed in Jesus, who is “fully God and fully human” (Chalcedon).

#### 4.2 “Whatever is true of God is true of Jesus”

Premise (2), that if God is fully revealed in Jesus, then whatever is true of God is true of Jesus, is logically necessary for the argument’s validity. On closer examination, however, we see that the latter proposition in this premise, that whatever is true of God is true of Jesus, is theologically incompatible with the creedal tradition.

According to the Nicene Creed, God is of one essence existing in three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). According to the Definition of Chalcedon, Jesus is the union of the divine essence (in the person of the Son) and human essence, co-existing within a single divine-human person. Taking these two statements together, we have that God is one essence and three persons (Nicaea) but Jesus is two essences and one person (Chalcedon). Thus, what is true of God is *not* true of Jesus in this case. It is precisely because of this difference between God and Jesus that the creedal tradition does not say simply that Jesus is equal to God: there is more of God than Jesus (God is three persons) and more of Jesus than God (Jesus has two natures). Accordingly, the Athanasian Creed affirms Jesus’ equality with the Father only in respect of his divinity and, to the point here, correspondingly denies Jesus’ equality with the Father in respect of his humanity: Jesus the incarnate Son is “equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood.”

The proposition that whatever is true of God is true of Jesus is thus theologically incompatible with Nicaea and Chalcedon. Further counterexamples to it can be generated from the creedal tradition.<sup>18</sup>

First, God has existed from eternity but Jesus has not. God the Son, while “begotten of the Father,” is “begotten not made,” such that the Son is equally uncreated with the Father and so has existed from eternity with the Father – the Son is “begotten of the Father before all ages” (Nicene Creed). But Jesus, as the union of divine essence and human essence, came to be in history. The union of divine essence and human essence cannot have existed

from eternity because, although divine essence is uncreated, human essence is created by God. The Word was with God in the beginning, but the Word through whom the world was made was made flesh in history (John 1:1, 10, 14).

The Definition of Chalcedon makes this very distinction between the Son's existence as God from eternity and Jesus' coming to be as human in history: the Son was "begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the Manhood." While the Son co-existed with the Father "before all ages," the union of Godhead and Manhood in Jesus did not exist "before all ages" but came to be "in these latter days." The Athanasian Creed follows suit: "our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man; God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of the substance of his mother, born in the world." By affirming that Jesus' humanity derived from that of his mother, the Athanasian Creed implies that Jesus the divine-human person did not exist as such prior to the creation any more than did Mary.

Second, and similarly, God created the world but Jesus did not. From the Trinitarian perspective, we say that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were co-present and cooperative in the creation of the world.<sup>19</sup> Scripture witnesses that God created the world through the eternal Son (John 1:10; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2). But Jesus, the incarnate Son, who is the union of uncreated (divine) essence and created (human) essence, could not have existed prior to the creation, through which human essence came into existence, and thus could not have been co-present or cooperative in the creation.

Again, third, God exists absolutely, independently of any reality other than God; and all other realities ("all things visible and invisible") exist only by having been created by God (Nicene Creed). That is, God *is* even if nothing else exists. Although the Son is "very God from very God" (Nicene Creed), Jesus does not exist in the same way. Insofar as Jesus is the union of uncreated (divine) essence and created (human) essence, his existence is dependent upon created reality. That is, Jesus the divine-human person exists only if the creation exists: no creation, no human essence, no Jesus.

According to the creeds, then, we cannot say simply that whatever is true of God is true of Jesus. In effect, this proposition collapses the "immanent Trinity" (God as an essential unity of distinct persons) into the

“economic Trinity” (God in manifold relation to the creation). As James Reimer has observed, “There is a historicity to the economic Trinity that is not there in the immanent Trinity.”<sup>20</sup> Judging by the creedal tradition, therefore, premise (2) is false.<sup>21</sup> If the argument is to be defended on the grounds of the church’s common confession, then premise (2) – and, hence, premise (1) – must be qualified.

### 4.3 *Qualifying the Premises*

To see how we might qualify the premises in a manner appropriate to the original argument, I think it would be helpful to inquire what we might mean by saying that God is nonviolent. There are several possibilities, including:

- (a) God *is* (essentially) nonviolent.
- (b) God can not (has no capacity/potential to) do violence.
- (c) God may not (has no right to) do violence.
- (d) God has promised (covenanted) not to do violence.
- (e) God does not (characteristically) do violence.<sup>22</sup>

By considering these as candidates for the conclusion of the argument, we can work backwards to determine possible qualified forms for the premises. We can begin by eliminating the obviously problematic candidates.

It seems that (b), (c), and (d) are non-starters. Proposition (b) says that there is something God can’t do, that God lacks the capacity or potential to do something, and thus that God is not omnipotent, contrary to the Nicene Creed (“We believe in one God ... the Almighty”). Proposition (c) implies that there is a moral law independent of God-self, a law of right/wrong that God has not willed but that binds God’s will, permitting some actions while forbidding other actions.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, (c) runs contrary to the biblical declaration that the right of vengeance belongs to God (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). This right is empty, I would argue, if it does not inherently contain the right to violence. Proposition (d) is simply not compelling, in my view, for there are no pronouncements in Scripture where God promises never to use violence. God does covenant with Noah and all creatures for all generations that he will never again destroy the earth and all living things by flood (Gen. 9:11), but that falls well short of a promise never to use violence. This leaves propositions (a) and (e) as candidates for the conclusion of the argument.

We will thus examine both propositions and their respective corresponding arguments in turn.

#### 4.4 *God is essentially nonviolent*

If the conclusion is to be that God is *essentially* nonviolent on the ground that Father and Son are “of the same essence” (Nicene Creed), then the argument would run:

- (1) God’s essence is fully revealed in Jesus;
- (2) If God’s essence is fully revealed in Jesus, then whatever is true essentially of God is true essentially of Jesus;
- (3) Therefore, whatever is true essentially of God is true essentially of Jesus.
- (4) Jesus is essentially not violent;
- (5) Therefore, God is essentially not violent.

The qualified premises (1) and (2) still must be clarified. Keeping both Nicaea and Chalcedon in mind, when we speak of Jesus’ essence being the same as God’s essence, we are referring specifically and only to Jesus’ divine essence: whatever belongs essentially to God belongs equally and essentially to each Person of the Trinity – thus to the essence of God the Son and thus to the divine essence of Jesus. So, this proposition does follow logically from the creedal tradition: whatever is true essentially of God is true of Jesus’ divine essence.

What, though, is meant by “essence”? The essence (*ousia*) of a thing (as used in the creedal tradition) signifies what is true of that thing in virtue of its being a thing of a certain kind – the general qualities or properties that define something to be the kind of thing it is. These essential properties are necessary properties: if a thing lacks a property essential to being a thing of a certain kind, then it is not a thing of that kind. Now, God is not a being of a certain kind but rather is *sui generis* – “We believe in *one* God . . .” (Nicene Creed, emphasis added).<sup>24</sup> Thus, God’s essence signifies what is true of God simply in virtue of being God; God’s essence defines God as God, what it is to be the one being who is God.

It is in reference to the divine essence that the Athanasian Creed makes a series of statements affirming the equality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that each *is* God:



Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal . . . . So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Spirit Almighty. . . . So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.

These statements elaborate the essence of God, what belongs to God as such: God *is* uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, and almighty; any being who is otherwise (created, comprehensible, temporal, etc.) is *not* God. And because the divine essence exists undivided in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each Person is essentially the same, such that these attributes belong equally to each Person – and thus to the Son and thus to Jesus’ divine essence (per Chalcedon). To say that God is *essentially* nonviolent, then, is to say that nonviolence belongs to God in the same way that being uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, and almighty belong to God: nonviolence is essential to God’s being, a necessary element of what defines God to be God, so that any being who is violent is not God.

In order for the argument to work in this form – Jesus is essentially nonviolent, therefore nonviolence belongs to God’s essential being – one or more of the essential divine attributes that Jesus shares with God in virtue of being the incarnate Son must necessarily be incompatible with violence. However, none of the essential divine attributes named in the Athanasian Creed – being uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, and almighty – is, *prima facie*, necessarily incompatible with violence. A being can be any or all these things and be either violent or nonviolent.<sup>25</sup> So, we must identify some other essential attribute of God revealed in Jesus that is necessarily incompatible with violence.

I propose to consider two such attributes, both of which are witnessed in the Old and New Testaments, are closely associated with God’s very being, and are directly connected to divine actions and ethical imperatives: holiness and love.

First, holiness. The Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26) is anchored in a divine declaration: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev.

19:2). This divine calling to a holy life is repeated by the Apostle Peter to those chosen by God in Christ and sanctified by the Spirit: “as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15-16, citing Lev. 11:44-45). Holiness is thus an essential attribute of God that grounds the ethical mandate of God’s people: we *ought* to be holy as God-self *is* holy.

So, is holiness, as revealed by Scripture, incompatible with violence? One might well argue that the ethical imperative of holiness in all conduct does entail renouncing violence: Christian warfare after the pattern of Christ is spiritual warfare, characterized by purity of heart and holiness of spirit; it relies solely on the power of God, pursues only the way of righteousness and peace, and thus rejects the weapons of the flesh and the violence done with them (cf. 2 Cor. 6:6-7, 10:3-4; Eph. 6:10-18). As the holy life of the Christian is to be imitative of the holiness of God revealed in Jesus, one might then infer that God’s holiness is itself incompatible with violence.

The full witness of Scripture is more complicated, however. Indeed, God’s holiness is portrayed in the OT as dangerous -- and deadly. Inappropriate, even inadvertent, contact with the holy, as well as the presumptuous profaning of the holy, kills. When Aaron’s sons offer “unholy fire” on the altar “before the LORD,” they are promptly consumed by fire that comes “from the presence of the LORD” (Lev. 10:1-3). While the previously captured and recently recovered ark of the covenant, divinely designated for the “holy of holies,” was being returned to Jerusalem, the cart transporting it was shaken by the oxen pulling it; one of the attendants steadied the ark with his hand, such that “the anger of the LORD was kindled” and he was immediately struck dead by God (2 Sam. 6:6-7). Unless we discount these stories, we cannot conclude that God’s holiness is incompatible with violence.

Second, love. When God reveals his very being on the holy mountain, he proclaims the holy name in terms that identify God with love: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Exod. 34:6). This refrain, repeated throughout the Psalms and Prophets, tells us who and what God really is. Echoing this divine declaration, John identifies God with love and love with God: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for

God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). As with holiness, love is an essential attribute of God that grounds the ethical mandate of God’s people: we *ought* to love because God *is* love.

Is love, then, as witnessed by Scripture, incompatible with violence? God’s love is revealed in God’s voluntarily offering his own life through the Son for the sake of salvation: “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10). Far from destroying life, God’s love saves life, even that of sinners, even at the cost of God’s own life sacrificed through the Son. It is precisely the sacrifice of one’s own life for the other’s sake, rather than violating the life of the other, that characterizes God’s love demonstrated in Christ and that Christians are mandated to imitate: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). So, the divine love revealed in Jesus’ self-sacrifice seems irreconcilable with violence.

But, again, things are more subtle than they appear. On the one hand, it seems inconceivable that a God of self-sacrificial love could be violent. On the other, it seems equally inconceivable that a self-sacrificing God “abounding in steadfast love” could allow innocent suffering. Yet the world witnesses the incalculable suffering of innocent life; and the Bible testifies to the plight of the righteous who suffer. Unless we either deny the evidence of suffering or assert the nonexistence of innocence (by, say, Augustine’s doctrine of “original sin” or Calvin’s doctrine of “total depravity”), we must affirm that innocent suffering is compatible with a loving God. Moreover, unless we deny God’s sovereignty over, and freedom, in all things, we must affirm that innocent suffering exists by God’s choice (even if not by God’s intention or action). If God’s love can let innocents suffer, then there is apparently something that a loving God is *not* willing to sacrifice in order to prevent or end such suffering.<sup>26</sup>

The problem of suffering, then, complicates an inference from divine love to divine nonviolence. At least, God’s love is compatible with not only the actual existence of innocent suffering but also the divine choice to allow it. This divine choice, one might argue, implies a “passive violence” on God’s part – the violence of the onlooker or bystander who might intervene

to prevent or end suffering but deliberately delays in doing so.<sup>27</sup> And if God's love does not necessarily save the innocent from suffering, then it need not save the wicked from death and could even destroy the wicked to avenge the innocent (a theme repeated throughout the Psalms). It thus might be that, as Reimer put it, "God is love but not a pacifist."

Now, the "nonviolent God" apologist might want to dispute the traditional view of divine power – that God is "almighty" and all things happen only by either God's action or God's permission. Thus, Denny Weaver redefines God's power as "the ability to restore life where there is currently no life, and the ability to carry out the divine will in spite of human violence and disobedience."<sup>28</sup> In this view, God can reverse but not prevent evil, and God's power cannot do all that God's love would want.<sup>29</sup>

#### *4.5 God is characteristically nonviolent*

If the conclusion is to be that God is *characteristically* nonviolent, then the argument would be: what is characteristic of God is also characteristic of Jesus; Jesus is characteristically nonviolent; therefore, God is characteristically nonviolent. In full form:

- (1) God's character is fully revealed in Jesus;
- (2) If God's character is fully revealed in Jesus, then whatever is true of God's character is true of Jesus' character;
- (3) Therefore, whatever is true of God's character is true of Jesus' character.
- (4) Jesus' character is not violent;
- (5) Therefore, God's character is not violent.

Like the previous form of the argument, this version requires some clarification. First, we must distinguish character from essence. Although a being's essence (*ousia*) determines what is normative for a being of that kind, a being having freedom of choice can develop a character contrary to its essence; that is, essence is normative for, but not necessarily determinative of, character. So, while rationality is essential to being human – the human being is "the rational animal" (per Aristotle) – humans are capable of choosing irrationally. And, through the habit of making choices and taking actions contrary to reason, they can develop a character unbecoming their rational nature. Now, God, being perfect (in contrast with humans), cannot act in ways incongruent with his essence. But, as we have seen, God's

essence neither requires nor precludes that God act with violence; thus, concerning violence, God's character is not determined by his essence. If God is nonviolent, therefore, it is not by necessity but by *choice*.

Second, we must distinguish God's character from God's sovereignty. God holds the exclusive right of vengeance (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19); and this right is empty if it does not contain an inherent right to violence. Still, that God holds this right tells us only about God's status – God is Sovereign Lord -- and nothing about God's character. God's character is revealed by how God in sovereign freedom chooses to exercise that right of vengeance, whether punitively or mercifully, retributively or redemptively, violently or nonviolently. To know God's character we must look to God's actions.<sup>30</sup>

Premise (1) of this version of the argument is that God's character is fully revealed in Jesus. Because character is distinct from and underdetermined by essence, from the fact that the Father and the Son are "of the same essence" (Nicaea) it does not follow that Father and Son are of the same character. Thus, while compatible with the creed, premise (1) must find direct support elsewhere. Can this claim be grounded in Scripture? I think that one can make a plausible case.

Hebrews 1:3 states that the Son is "the exact imprint of God's very being" (NRSV) or "the representation of [God's] essence" (NET). The Greek text here does not speak of God's being or essence (*ousia*) as in the creeds; rather, it says the Son is "the representation (*charaktēr*) of [God's] being (*hypostasis*)." The Greek word *hypostasis* is the same term later used by the Cappadocian fathers to make the key distinction of Trinitarian orthodoxy, that God is one essence (*ousia*) in three persons (*hypostases*). If we were to interpret this text in continuity with the development of doctrine, then we could say: Jesus, because he incarnates the Son, is the exact representation (or full reproduction) of divine personhood – and thus the revelation of God's personal character. Moreover, Jesus declares that the Son says and does only what is according to the Father's will, so that Jesus' words and works testify to the Father;<sup>31</sup> we may thus infer that Jesus' choices are consistent with the Father's will and revelatory of the Father's character.

We now consider the minor premise of the argument. Is Jesus, according to Scripture, characteristically nonviolent? Let us review the evidence and infer his character from his choices and actions.<sup>32</sup> The (canonical) Gospels tell us that Jesus forgives sins, heals diseases, and raises the dead;

he teaches his followers to renounce retaliation, love enemies, and accept suffering; he chooses not to resist arrest or retaliate against his enemies; he chooses to submit to unjust death on the cross; and post-resurrection he reconciles to himself the disciples who deserted, denied, and doubted him. The Gospel tradition of Jesus' practice of non-resistance and non-retaliation, especially in suffering and death, is paralleled in the Petrine tradition (1 Pet. 2:21-23). By consciously and consistently choosing non-resistance and non-retaliation, Jesus effectively renounced violence, which is evidence of a nonviolent character.

From the Gospel evidence, therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that it was God's will to renounce violence in Jesus' life and teaching, death, and resurrection. This idea, that God wills not to use violent means to accomplish redemption in Christ, is attested in the writings of the early church. In the *Epistle to Diognetus*, we read: ". . . violence does not belong to God" (7:4). The context there concerns the incarnation, how God worked through Christ to save humanity by persuasion rather than by compulsion. This same idea is elaborated by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*:

. . . the Word of God, powerful in all things, and not defective with regard to His own justice, did righteously turn against that apostasy, and redeem from it His own property, not by violent means . . . but by means of persuasion, as became a God of counsel, who does not use violent means to obtain what He desires; so that neither should justice be infringed upon, nor the ancient handiwork of God go to destruction. (5.1.1)<sup>33</sup>

God *voluntarily* renounces violence in redemption through the incarnation, for two reasons: to redeem creation from violent dominion by divine violence would only add to the injustice of the captivity of creation to sin; and redemption by force would be destructive of the creation God intends to redeem. God thus rejects violent means to accomplish redemption.

Does all this entail that Jesus, and so God, is characteristically nonviolent? No, for two reasons. First, the most we can infer from the narrative is that nonviolence is consistent with Jesus *as far as we know* – that is, as far as the Gospels go. Even the Bible believer who confesses Jesus as Lord faces a problem of induction here; the textual evidence underdetermines confessional commitment: Jesus has been nonviolent thus

far, but it does not necessarily follow that he must always be so. To be conclusive, the argument must assume also that the divine character of Jesus is revealed exhaustively by the Gospel story. This assumption requires an independent argument.

Second, and more important, from the fact that God-in-Christ willed to renounce violence for the sake of redemption, it does *not* follow that God has renounced violence *in all things*. It thus appears that the “nonviolent God” argument is premised on a false dichotomy: Jesus/God rejects violence either absolutely or not at all. The argument assumes that, because Jesus foregoes violence for himself and forbids violence to humans, God has simply rejected violence. It fails to consider that Jesus might forego violence for himself and forbid violence to humans while God nonetheless retains the prerogative as God. In Trinitarian terms, one could say that the Son, by his self-emptying for our sake, relinquishes the prerogative of God, which the Father retains in heaven and which the Son reclaims at his ascension (Phil. 2:6-11). Preserving the distinction between divine right and human right and recognizing the *kenosis* of the incarnation, one could thus maintain that the Gospel story of Jesus, while revelatory of God and normative for human ethics, is neither exhaustive of God nor restrictive of the divine prerogative.<sup>34</sup> Insofar as God retains sovereign prerogative, therefore, the divine character revealed in Jesus may be compatible with both violence and nonviolence concerning different matters at different times. This leaves open the possibility of *both* a nonviolent redemption *and* a violent judgment (which, in fact, was the view of Irenaeus<sup>35</sup>).

Not only does the Gospel story of Jesus not necessarily entail a nonviolent God, there is more of Jesus to consider. Jesus himself says that the Father has entrusted to him as Son all authority to judge (John 5:16-30). And the Apostles testify that Jesus is God’s appointed “judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42; cf. 2 Tim. 4:1). This faith affirmation grounds the eschatological expectation of the creedal tradition: “He will come again to judge the living and the dead” (Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed).

The NT includes various texts of Jesus the divine judge. Jesus himself warns explicitly of coming judgment in two parables: at the end of the age, he will direct his angels to gather “all causes of sin and all evildoers,” who are to be consigned to fiery destruction (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43); and when the kingdom comes he will judge “all the nations” and dispatch those

who neglect the poor and needy to “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:31-46). Paul affirms that Jesus is coming with fiery vengeance to dispense “the punishment of eternal destruction” to “those who do not obey the gospel” (2 Thes. 1:5-10). The evangelists and apostles frequently cite Psalms 2 and 110 in reference to Jesus as God’s messiah;<sup>36</sup> both affirm the right of God’s anointed ruler to judge and expect he will do so with violence (cf. Psalms 2:1-2, 7-9; 110:1, 5-6). And in John’s vision, Jesus “judges and makes war with justice” to defeat the beast and the armies of the nations, who are “killed with the sword of his mouth” (Rev. 19:11-21). Jesus the divine judge is thus attested in multiple texts, several premised explicitly on either the potential for, or the promise of, violence. Not only can we not conclude with certainty that Jesus is characteristically nonviolent, we must allow for the possibility of his doing violence in the service of divine judgment.

Is that the end of the argument? Not quite. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). The Jesus who comes to judge will be the same Jesus who has already come to give his life for us and ever lives to make intercession for us. One can thus plausibly argue that we may expect a final judgment congruent with Jesus’ ministry. At the very least, God’s final judgment to be executed by Jesus need not be violent any more than God’s work of redemption through the incarnation was violent. Nonetheless, this does not rule out a violent final judgment.

## **5 The Hermeneutics of the Argument**

Two hermeneutical issues have emerged in our analysis. How should we interpret the OT revelation of God? How should we interpret the NT witness to Jesus?

When considering whether God is nonviolent, I cited certain stories from the OT portraying God as acting violently. The “nonviolent God” apologist would want to dispute these texts: Do they actually reveal the true God? These stories portray God as both peaceable and violent, one might say; but we cannot make a simple inference from the textual evidence to the divine nature. Instead, we must view the OT through the prism of Jesus, which refracts the text into a spectrum, revealing both the true nature of God and false projections about God. For his part, Denny Weaver



distinguishes between the “textual God” and the “actual God”: the textual God is variable and sometimes violent, but the actual God is consistent and strictly nonviolent. To know the actual God in the biblical text, we need an extra-textual criterion of truth – Jesus. Because Jesus reveals God and Jesus is nonviolent, we know that the true God is revealed by the peaceable stories.<sup>37</sup>

Such a hermeneutical maneuver – drawing a distinction between the God of the OT and the God revealed in Jesus – is not surprising, but it is problematic. First, it exhibits the tendency toward Marcionism that Reimer diagnosed as a perennial problem in the Anabaptist tradition.<sup>38</sup> Second, it begs the question. Jesus is *not* an extra-textual criterion, for we know him from the Gospel stories. Thus we could, as historical-critical scholars do, apply this distinction to Jesus himself: How do we know that the “textual Jesus” is the “actual Jesus”? The “nonviolent God” view assumes a simple identity between the Gospel Jesus and the real Jesus, effectively an affirmation of faith in the truth of the text. So, if we can know by faith the actual Jesus from the textual Jesus, why can’t we know by faith the actual God from the textual God? Here, the two problems converge: the distinction between truth and text, insofar as it is applied to God and the OT but not to Jesus and the Gospels, effectively treats the OT and the NT as qualitatively different kinds of revelation. The “nonviolent God” argument, if it is to convince, thus requires a rationale for this difference (other than the fact that the OT includes violent stories of God!).

At least, then, the “nonviolent God” argument presupposes that we read the Bible through the prism of Jesus. This is a standard claim of the Anabaptist tradition – Jesus the incarnate Word is the “interpretive center” of Scripture.<sup>39</sup> Insofar as the argument requires a collateral commitment to an Anabaptist hermeneutic, let us agree that Jesus is the “canon of the canon.” But, *which* Jesus? The “nonviolent God” argument requires a strictly nonviolent Jesus. Is *that* Jesus strictly biblical?

When considering whether Jesus is nonviolent, I cited textual traditions in the NT that portray him as executing judgment with vengeance and violence. In light of this evidence, the conclusion of the argument reduces from certainty to probability. The degree of probability depends on the relative weights assigned to the various traditions of textual evidence.

One can conclude with certainty that God is nonviolent because Jesus is nonviolent only if one gives absolute weight to the Gospel traditions of a healing, forgiving, non-resisting, non-retaliating Jesus and zero weight to the multiple traditions of a judging, punishing, destroying, and killing Jesus – an obviously biased weighing of the evidence. If one assigns a non-zero weight to the latter traditions of textual evidence, the upshot is that any argument inferring a nonviolent God from a nonviolent Jesus will be only as convincing as one’s interpretation of the scriptural traditions of Jesus the divine judge.

The “nonviolent God” apologist would presumably maintain a metaphorical reading of the biblical texts of divine judgment. For his part, Weaver argues elsewhere that the apocalyptic account of divine warfare (Rev. 19) is a story, not of divine violence against evildoers but of nonviolent victory over evil.<sup>40</sup> Even so, this leaves multiple independent textual traditions pointing to a violent final judgment to be executed by Jesus himself. If, as the “nonviolent God” view maintains, Jesus/God is strictly nonviolent, then this inter-textual concurrence demands explanation and the individual texts themselves beg for a non-question begging interpretation.<sup>41</sup>

This demand points to a serious shortcoming of the “nonviolent God” argument. The argument is premised on the claim that “God is fully revealed in the story of Jesus Christ, in his life, teaching, death and resurrection.” This implies that God’s revelation in Jesus ends at the end of the Gospels. According to Scripture and creed, however, God’s revelation in Jesus is not confined to the historical past but continues in the living present and extends to the eschatological future. The argument conveniently excludes those future chapters in “the story of Jesus” that are evidently incompatible with the conclusion: the nonviolent God is “fully revealed” by less than the full Jesus.<sup>42</sup>

## **6 Conclusion**

The “nonviolent God” argument, to be conclusive and convincing, requires more than the stated premises. At least, it presupposes a peace church hermeneutic. In addition, it must make one (or more) auxiliary assumptions:

- no difference between “immanent Trinity” and “economic Trinity”
- God’s power is something less than actual omnipotence
- no distinction between divine right and human right
- OT and NT are distinct kinds of revelation
- the divine revelation in Jesus is limited to the Jesus of history past.

In the end I concur with Reimer: “Some Mennonite theologians have implied that if we take Jesus to be the full revelation of God, and if we understand the gospel of Jesus as essentially the rejection of all violence, then it follows that God is a pacifist. This, in my view, has dire consequences.”<sup>43</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dedicated to the memory of A. James Reimer.

<sup>2</sup> This essay is a much elaborated, more detailed version of “God, Jesus, and nonviolence: A response to J. Denny Weaver,” published online by *The Mennonite* (July 2010). My thanks to Mary Schertz and Willard Swartley for commenting on the original essay, and to Stephen Dintaman, Gerald Mast, Elmer Thiessen, and three anonymous reviewers for commenting on previous drafts of the present essay. My thanks also to André Gingerich Stoner for personal conversation and to J. Denny Weaver for extensive correspondence, respectively, in response to the original essay.

<sup>3</sup> See the collection of papers from a Mennonite symposium in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21.1 (Winter 2003).

<sup>4</sup> My aim is thus to function as an “agent of linguistic self-consciousness” for the faith community. See John Howard Yoder, “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood,” in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 15-45.

<sup>5</sup> J. Denny Weaver, “The peace church as worship of God,” *The Mennonite* 13 (July 2010) 17-22, 19. The “nonviolent God” view is defended with a similar argument by Ted Grimsrud, “Is God Nonviolent?” in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21.1 (Winter 2003), 13-17. A. James Reimer critiqued essentially the same argument: see “God is Love but Not a Pacifist” in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 486-92.

<sup>6</sup> Weaver, “The peace church as worship of God,” 21.

<sup>7</sup> Weaver initially addresses fellow Mennonites: “We are a peace church” (“The peace church as worship of God,” 17). But in his correspondence with me, he confirmed that he does intend the “we” of the “nonviolent God” argument to include all Christians and thus that the statement “We believe...” is intended to state what all (or most) Christians would recognize as their common confession of faith.

<sup>8</sup> Weaver, “The peace church as worship of God,” 21.

<sup>9</sup> Lest the reader think that the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and the ecumenical-creedal tradition are inherently incompatible, see Howard J. Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> See J. Denny Weaver, “Christology in Historical Perspective,” in *Jesus Christ and the Mission of the Church: Contemporary Anabaptist Perspectives*, ed. Erland Waltner (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1990). For a critical examination of Weaver’s view and a positive assessment of creedal orthodoxy from an Anabaptist perspective, see A. James Reimer, “Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Radical Protestant Theology,” in *Faith to Creed: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Affirmation of the Apostolic Faith in the Fourth Century*, ed. Mark Heim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 129-61.

<sup>11</sup> We will consider the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed, and the Definition of Chalcedon. I use the common shorthand “Nicene Creed” to refer to the creed originating with the Council of Nicaea (325) and finalized by the First Council of Constantinople (381). Concerning the biblical basis, historical development, and practical implications of the Nicene Creed, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Weaver himself, of course, rejects the ontological categories of the creedal tradition in favor of narrative categories. While one need not express the catholic faith using the conceptual categories of Nicaea and Chalcedon, statements that plainly contradict Nicaea or Chalcedon do not truly represent the catholic faith.

<sup>13</sup> In this bare-bones version, I have bracketed the argument’s confessional aspect to exhibit its basic logic. We should not forget that the argument’s premises are prefaced by “We believe...”.

<sup>14</sup> Note that (1), (2), and (4) are the premises of the argument, (3) is derived from the conjunction of (1) and (2), and the conclusion (5) is derived from the conjunction of (3) and (4). The logical validity of the argument is verified by observing that (1) - (3) comprise the valid form *modus ponens* (if P then Q; P; therefore Q) while (3) - (5) comprise the valid form *modus tollens* (if P then Q; not-Q; therefore not-P).

<sup>15</sup> In his correspondence with me, Weaver confirmed that he thinks premise (1) is directly supported both by the Nicene formula that the Father and the Son are “of the same substance” (*homoousion*) and by several statements in the Athanasian Creed.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Difference between Essence and Hypostasis*, quoted from Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 31.

<sup>17</sup> I trust the reader will be neither offended nor misled by this traditional masculine language, which I keep here to preserve the intended precision of the original statements.

<sup>18</sup> How are such ontological matters relevant to the ethical matter at hand? The relevance is indirect: the argument seeks to derive the conclusion that God is nonviolent from premise (2); if that premise does not hold true in general, then it cannot be assumed as true in particular. The counterexamples show the premise does not hold true in general (i.e., it is false in some cases). To proceed with the argument on premise (2) as originally stated would require

an independent argument that premise (2), while false as pertains to ontological matters, is nonetheless true as pertains to ethical matters. Otherwise, the argument would beg the question.

<sup>19</sup> So Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, in Phillip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Volume III: On the Holy Trinity; Doctrinal Treatises; Moral Treatises* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002), writes: "...the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as they are indivisible, so work indivisibly" (I, 4); "...together both the Father and the Son, and the Spirit of both, work all things equally and harmoniously" (XIII, 11).

<sup>20</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 487.

<sup>21</sup> Here I use the standard truth table from propositional logic for compound propositions of the form "if P then Q" – if P is true but Q is false, then the compound proposition is false. In premise (2), P = "God is fully revealed in Jesus" is true, but Q = "whatever is true of God is true of Jesus" is false.

<sup>22</sup> In his article, Weaver writes of "the character of God" as the intended subject of the argument.

<sup>23</sup> The long philosophical-theological debates over both the extent of God's power and the relation between God and morality cannot be discussed here.

<sup>24</sup> The necessary uniqueness of the divine essence – that there can be only one being who is God – has also been the subject of logical demonstration. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Weaver would say this is precisely the point concerning the role he claims the creeds played in enabling the sanctioning of violence in the theology and ethics of the medieval church: the ontological categories of the creeds do not bear any ethical content, and thus the creeds separate Christology from ethics, allowing the accommodation of Christ and empire, cross and sword (J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 92-96). To the contrary, as Reimer has observed ("Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Radical Protestant Theology"), insofar as the ontological claims of the Nicene Creed – the Son is "True God from True God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father" – are explicitly anti-Arian, they are also effectively anti-"Constantinian."

<sup>26</sup> The standard answer is that this "something" is free will. The long philosophical-theological debate concerning the "free will" theodicy cannot be discussed here.

<sup>27</sup> Regarding God's delay to deliver the oppressed and avenge the righteous, see Exod. 2:23-3:10, Psalm 13, and Rev. 6:9-11.

<sup>28</sup> Weaver, "The peace church as worship of God," 22.

<sup>29</sup> This was the implication of "nonviolent God" that most troubled Reimer: "It implies that all violence (such as the death of children or even the suicide of a distraught mother) is ultimately meaningless and outside the providence of God. It also suggests that evil will not be punished and judged" ("God is Love but Not a Pacifist," 491).

<sup>30</sup> For a survey and assessment of recent scholarly discussion of God's moral character and violence, see Chapter 14 of Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> John 5:19, 30, 36; 6:38; 7:16; 12:45, 49; 14:9-10.

<sup>32</sup> Here one might think that the nature of the argument has shifted, from deductive to

inductive. We must not confuse the main argument with a sub-argument for one of the premises. That the minor premise (nonviolent Jesus) of the main argument (nonviolent God) rests on inductive evidence does not alter the deductive form of the main argument, for deductive arguments can employ inductive premises.

<sup>33</sup> Phillip Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002), 884.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Mary Schertz, "Is God Nonviolent?" *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21 (Winter 2003), 33-36.

<sup>35</sup> So Andrew Klager writes: "Where Irenaeus makes an important contribution is with respect to the Incarnate Christ's nonviolence and its implications for the Father's capacity for violence *at the time of the atonement*" (479, original emphasis). See Andrew Klager, "Retaining and Reclaiming the Divine: Identification and the Recapitulation of Peace in St. Irenaeus of Lyons' Atonement Narrative," in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 422-80. As stated in his "rule of faith," Irenaeus expected Jesus to return in judgment to execute divine vengeance by imposing the punishment of "everlasting fire" upon "the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked" (*Against Heresies* 1.10.1).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Matt. 22:41-44; Acts 2:34-36; 4:25-26; 13:33-34; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Eph. 1:20-21; Heb. 1:2-13.

<sup>37</sup> Weaver, "The peace church as worship of God," 20-21. Similarly, Grimsrud: "Our conviction that God is nonviolent...simply affirms that we read Scripture...through the lens of Jesus' life and teaching...we have an interpretive key allowing us to see the consistent nonviolence of God..." ("Is God Nonviolent?" 17).

<sup>38</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 490-91.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 82-86, and *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995), Art. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 20-33.

<sup>41</sup> I thus concur with Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, "Response 3," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21.1 (Winter 2003), 45-49, that the "nonviolent God" argument effectively grants nonviolence "hermeneutical priority."

<sup>42</sup> This deficiency is not peculiar to Weaver's presentation. Grimsrud likewise narrows the "lens" for reading Scripture to "Jesus' life and teaching" ("Is God Nonviolent?" 17). Thus, he claims "the consistent nonviolence of God" based on a selective appeal to Jesus.

<sup>43</sup> Reimer, "God is Love but Not a Pacifist," 491.

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