

Perspectives



Aliens in Meshech

“WOE IS ME, THAT I AM AN ALIEN IN MESHECH, THAT I MUST LIVE AMONG the tents of Kedar. Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace. I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war” (Ps 120:5-7).

The psalm is as remarkable as it is obscure. An Israelite believer experiences real or metaphorical exile because, whereas the whole culture in which he lives speaks for war, he speaks for peace. Now there’s a cross-cultural experience worth reporting! A believer who is ostracized and out of place because he maintains a vision of peace and pursues the possibility of harmony.

There is little harmony in the striking dissonances of Thomas Tomkins’ (1572-1656) anthem based on the words of Psalm 120. The clashing, woeful, and enigmatic lament is all we hear: “Woe is me, that I am constrained to dwell with Meshech, and to have my habitation among the tents of Kedar.” The cause of the psalmist’s alienation, the distress of this advocate of peace caught in a world of war, remains a mystery. But the haunting music makes us check the reference, and our imaginations soar. What would happen, we wonder, if Christian believers were as alienated from a culture of war as this psalmist, or as the music of Thomas Tomkins? What if, when “they” spoke of war, “we” spoke of peace?

It will not help to be naive here, as though the Christian message is: Let’s just be nice, and then everything will be nice. There are no doubt times when national self-defense or the protection of the innocent requires force. Even the psalmist seems to call for vengeance upon the “lying lips” of his hostile neighbors. Purge them, he suggests, “with glowing coals of the broom tree!” (v. 4). But maybe the psalmist sings more than he knows. Isaiah, too, got his unclean lips burned, in what turned out to have been not an act of punishment and death, but one of life and renewal (Isa 6:1-8). What would happen if Christians called for that kind of terrible, transforming renewal for themselves and their world, all the while singing dissonance in the human choir that celebrates violence and war as the solution to violence and war? One can only wonder—for the psalmist has rarely served the church as model. We have blessed more wars than we have denounced, started as many as we have ended. Of late, the voices on the political stage most often calling themselves “Christian” have hardly surprised the warring culture with their cries for peace.

It was Isaiah, the one of the burned lips, who named the messianic king the “Prince of Peace” (9:6). Would that more of us followers of the Prince felt ourselves to be “aliens in Meshech”—slightly, even precariously out of balance because our vision of the world differs so sharply from that of the surrounding culture, because “we are for peace.” We could give a worse account of ourselves during this 50th

anniversary of the end of World War II, the bomb, and the birth of the United Nations – the occasion for this issue of *Word & World*.

In an opening Perspective, *Gary Dorrien* examines three dominant positions regarding America's place in world affairs: liberal internationalism, balance-of-power realism, and anti-interventionism. He considers how Christian theology can relate to these while also moving beyond them to a biblical ethic of social justice.

Susan Niditch provides the first of two biblical articles, offering a helpful overview of ideologies of war in the Hebrew Bible. She uses the historical data to comment on contemporary views and practices of war. *Richard W. Nysse* considers the prophetic oracles against the nations, suggesting that only reading them *as scripture* will be able to move beyond our modern embarrassment of finding them hopelessly xenophobic and politically incorrect.

Gary M. Simpson proposes that congregations promote a civil society, thus fulfilling an important God-given vocation in the realm of creation, by serving their people as "public moral companions."

Paul R. Sponheim addresses the role of religion in the task of peace-making. While recognizing religion's terrible link to violence, he refuses to allow this to be the last word.

John R. Stumme speaks of our work for peace from a realistic view of the human condition but also from the hope that God continues to work in the world with and through God's human creatures.

Richard E. Wentz offers a provocative perspective: the nations rage in the name of religion because religion defines who they are, and they see themselves, so defined, to be under attack. Who would not rage?

Kent L. Johnson interviews five military veterans from a single Lutheran congregation. Their stories provide a fascinating account of what is probably a fairly typical picture of the place of faith and church in the life of the twentieth-century mid-American warrior.

This year also marks the 25th anniversary of those Vietnam-era days of rage that included the killing of four people on the campus of Kent State University. *George W. Gaiser*, Lutheran campus pastor at Kent State, reflects both as a human being and as a Christian theologian on the significance of that watershed event in recent American history.

Jack Schwandt opens the Resources section with a timely review of Winston Churchill's account of the overtures to World War II. In *Face to Face*, *D. Stephen Long* and *Paul T. Nelson* attempt to answer the question of when and how Christians might legitimately understand themselves called to armed conflict. Finally, in *Texts in Context*, a group of pastors and teachers invites readers to join their conversation about coming Epiphany-season texts from First Corinthians.

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