

Wars and Rumors of Wars

Telford Work, Westmont College

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The past few weeks have brought us much information about the political strategy of Osama bin Laden, now assumed to have masterminded Tuesday's attacks. We know even more about America's counterstrategy. I have heard little so far about the strategy of the Church – even in Church. There is a good reason for this – and a bad reason.

The twenty-first century has begun as a continuation of the twentieth. The twentieth century's first world war began with an assassination that unmasked fundamental instabilities in a superficially peaceful Europe. Its military campaigns were between ideologies, none particularly Christian, that competed for world domination: Colonialism, communism, fascism, representative democracy. When communism collapsed, some called it “the end of history.” But reports of the Last Day have turned out once again to be premature. September 11 unmasked what has turned out to be another false peace, and ignited a long-brewing war between two ideologies – global democratic capitalism, and modern political “Islamism.” Both Americans and bin Laden have agreed that these are the two opponents. Both are formidable. Neither will quickly defeat the other (though my money is on global democratic capitalism).

Global democratic capitalism is rooted in Enlightenment Christianity, and is generally tolerant of Christian communities, but it is not fundamentally Christian (colonialism and communism are rooted in the Christian tradition too). Islamism, shorthand for a family of post-colonial movements resembling Christian Reconstructionism, hopes that a return to Islamic law will enable modern Muslim societies to regain the former glory of Islamic civilization, when its intellectual, cultural, and political achievements were unparalleled. (Only a few Islamists engage in violence, let alone terrorism, toward that end. Most wage their war nonviolently, through

social service.) So the sidelining of the Church is right, in a way. The Church is a third party – not neutral, not uninvolved, but not one of the main contenders.

With so much attention being given to the two main parties in the conflict, the Church in America faces two risks. First, it may be subsumed into the American cause. It might measure its faithfulness by its willingness to do whatever its government asks (or by its reflexive opposition to whatever its government asks), rather than by its qualified thankfulness for, critical support of, and appropriate participation in the protective authorities God has provided it. Second, the Church may walk (or be pushed) offstage to mind its own business while the two sides engage. It might measure its faithfulness by the extent of its withdrawal from “the world” to assure itself of God’s preserving love for it.

When the Church abdicates its specific public responsibilities in either of these ways, it ironically endangers the integrity of its civil communities as well. They depend on it for their ultimate welfare even more radically than it depends on them. No civil community can do what the Church alone is called and equipped to do. (The specifics of Christian support of, participation in, and distance from civil authorities in times of war and peace are important questions, for another essay.)

A healthier Church would not need the last two paragraphs. The American Church has succumbed to both these risks so often that in order not to mislead readers, one must first address both the proper scope of civil authority and the proper relationships between Church and states before going on to suggest a strategy for the Church as such. What a pity!

The apocalyptic words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark prescribe a strategy for his community in the face of wars among messianic ideologies. “Many will come in my name,

saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet” (Mark 13:6-7).

I’m not talking about the next installment of the *Left Behind* series, or the next edition of *Oil, Armageddon, and the Middle East Crisis*. The last days had already begun when Jesus rose from the dead, and they may continue for days, decades, or millennia. I’m talking about how Jesus told his disciples to read the signs of their times, which two thousand years later are still the signs of our own.

Jesus’ response is striking in its apparent disregard for the breaking news that fascinate us. Conflicts that shake the world, stories that dominate the headlines, warrant all of two sentences in Jesus’ narrative. September’s horrors, and the two thousand years of horrors that have preceded them, and the horrors that will surely follow, are simply “wars and rumors of wars ... earthquakes ... famines.” The apocalyptic Jesus is nothing if not concise.

Even more striking is Jesus’ apparent passivity. Like more than a few modern-day millennials, the disciples seem more concerned about the timing of the trials than how to survive them. Jesus honors their non-question with a non-answer. When they persecute you, *don’t* worry, and *don’t* prepare your remarks beforehand (Mark 13:11). When the unspeakable happens, and it is the hour to flee, *don’t* stop for supplies (Mark 13:15-16). Until you see me come, *don’t* believe the assurances of the world’s would-be saviors (Mark 13:21-22). What stuns the careful reader is everything Jesus passes over: instructions on what the Church is to *do* – not only once the persecutors arrive, but also while it waits for them.

The answer is missing because it has been there all along. *The Church is to do everything it has always done*. Jesus has told his disciples all things beforehand (Mark 13:23). Between the ascension and the fall of the heavens, the master has gone on a journey, putting his servants in

charge, each with his work, and has commanded the doorkeeper to be on the watch (Mark 13:34). There is nothing passive about Christian life in the end-times – not because the end-times are special, but because they are business as usual.

So much for the good reason. Now comes the bad one. Jesus' instructions make a key assumption: that the household has *stayed awake* (Mark 13:35-36). A few days later, the disciples face their first test. It is the real thing, not a drill, and they fail miserably. They are dozing when the hour arrives (Mark 14:41).

Tuesday was a wake-up call for an America made complacent by her own power. And the sleeping giant woke up.

Tuesday was *also* a wake-up call for a Church lulled into passivity by the lullabies of global democratic capitalism. Our political economies have done an impressive (if still uneven) job of feeding mushrooming populations, bringing prosperity to an unprecedented level for an unprecedented share of their societies, saving and prolonging lives, and knitting nation-states into trading relationships that rewarded peace rather than conquest. They have been so successful that the Western Church has found itself accepting a smaller and smaller sphere of operation – sometimes no more than reflecting the values of private consciences. (The political left is inclined to judge America for doing too little to save the world. I am inclined to judge the Church for letting America do too much.)

America has awakened with a jolt, and its adrenaline and suddenly revived memories have given it a program for responding to the attacks. Furthermore, it has rapidly come to an impressive consensus on what it must do next. My country's heroism amazes, inspires, encourages, and dismays me all at the same time. By contrast, in our Christian communities, I

sense a different sort of wakefulness: grogginess, disorientation, confusion. It was such a nice dream we were having! The wars and rumors of wars have ended the dream, but they have not made us fully conscious.

Will we go back to sleep? The disciples did, twice (Mark 14:37-40).

And what if the spectacle does awaken us? Like the shocked bystander in Gethsemane, we seem inclined to overcompensate for our earlier inaction by imitating the aggressors, drawing on our puny metal swords rather than our invincible verbal ones (Mark 14:47-49). Perhaps we will accept a fight on the enemy's terms. If so, we will soon be fleeing, naked and afraid (Mark 14:51-52). And it will only get worse. Perhaps the whole debacle will play again: The authorities will intimidate us into giving precisely the testimony that the Spirit *cannot* author (Mark 14:66-72). When the sacrilege is raised and the heavens darken, we will *stop* fleeing, and rubberneck instead (Mark 15:40-41). And we will fall silent only when the time comes finally to proclaim the message that can only come from us (Mark 16:8). It wouldn't be the first time, would it?

If we *don't* find all these ways to fail the master of our household, it will only be because we have retaken charge of the household. This is much more than denouncing the atrocities, donating blood, praying for our secular leaders, pointing fingers, and rebuilding our country's buildings. Even the "Gentiles" are doing that (and in my city, they are doing a better job of it). This is about (if my academic colleagues will forgive me for citing the Longer Ending of Mark) preaching the gospel *to the whole creation*, even when it means leaving our homelands and learning new tongues. It is about casting out the structural and personal powers that fear only Jesus' name and come out only with prayer. It is about picking up the serpents that once terrified us; drinking and passing a now harmless death when it is poured into our cups; and bringing recovery to a sick world through our own hands (Mark 16:15-18).

Let the reader understand: This is a political program in allegory. Mark 16:9-20 rehearses the signs of the secret kingdom (Mark 4:11). Connect the dots: The nourishment of our word goes to the daughters of even rogue nations, for they too know their hunger (Mark 7:24-30). Our Lord's name exorcises the powers that pollute the nations and alienate their peoples, whether they want it or not (Mark 5:1-20). Our rebukes domesticate an unruly creation that intimidates its own stewards (Mark 4:35-41). Our hearts are impervious to the poisons that kindle hate (Mark 7:17-23). Our chiefs shepherd the leaderless (Ex. 18:21-22 in Mark 6:30-34) and satisfy those who have ingested Herod's leavened bread (Mark 6:35-44, 8:15). The healing of our unwashed hands blesses synagogues, their rulers, and their neighborhoods (Mark 5:21-43, 6:53-7:8). Our fellowship with the citizens and outcasts of every kingdom (Mark 2:13-17) binds the strong men who turn nation-states, international networks, and brotherhoods against their common King (Mark 3:26-27). God exalts the lowly kingdom of God into a shelter for every bird of every feather (Ez. 17:22-24 in Mark 4:30-32).

Before September 11, such a program looked fantastic, delusional, dangerously naïve, even to the Church itself. Maybe it still does, more than ever. To those with closed eyes, none of these parables and wonders signifies anything (Mark 8:12). But we, not the first disciples, are the ones caught in a dream. Those with eyes open (Mark 7:31-37) see a world dawning in which the world's kingdoms will no longer be at each other's throats, because they will no longer be setting themselves in the Messiah's place.

After such a sound sleep, after such a vivid dream, the Church's sensibilities will return only through massive reorientation. Only when we return to Galilee, retracing our steps with liturgies of Christ's remembrance, will we see Jesus (Mark 16:7). Only when the Church beats a retreat back onto the way of Jesus Christ can it truly make advances in the war to which *it* is

called. The Markan disciples tried repeatedly, and failed repeatedly. But not forever (Mark 16:9-20).

After hearing so many Christians swallow, stutter, and sabre-rattle in the last few weeks, I can see why a scribe found Mark's original inference of a chronically incompetent Church too depressing to leave unanswered. His postscript, inspired even if not canonical, shows the Church finally doing what only the Church can do (Mark 16:20), now that the disciples have seen the Son of Man come (Mark 16:14). If we manage to do it too, if we wake up and come to our right minds while our master is still away, we messengers will bring a whole new set of signs into the imagery of our wretched age. These signs will prove the Lord has come after all, confirm his work among us – and free those captive to the mesmerizing countersigns of the news cycle.

Telford Work is assistant professor of Religious Studies at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California.