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# Thomas Buford's *In Search of a Calling: The College's Role in Shaping Identity*

Karla Bohmbach

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**A RESPONSE TO GREGORY CLARK**  
**A God of Peace and Love? - -**  
**Reflections From a Biblical Scholar**  
*Karla G. Bohmbach*

As a member of this journal's editorial board, one of my duties is to read and evaluate articles submitted for publication as they are sent my way by the editor, Tom Christenson. When I read Gregory Clark's article, I thought definitely that we should publish it. My main comment to Tom was that it would be greatly desirable to solicit respondents who might interrogate further the practicality of Clark's proposal for church-related colleges. In the back of my mind, as I made that comment to Tom, I thought of how much I was looking forward to reading such responses when the issue came out. Tom had other ideas. He requested a response from me. What has resulted is actually some questions, derived mainly from my work as a scholar of biblical studies. I hope such questions prompt further comment — and further questions! — from readers.

Gregory Clark affirms the stance taken by John Milbank — that all philosophies and institutions, whether ancient, modern, or postmodern, are built on an ontology of violence. In this way a critique is made of Alasdair MacIntyre's position concerning the postmodern liberal university, which, for MacIntyre, would be a place of constrained agreement (and so, presumably, non-violent). The problem for Clark, who is following Milbank here, is that such a university, insofar as it engaged with other “institutionalized versions of moral enquiry” would remain within an ontology of violence. For these engagements would be managed dialectically, and dialectics can never lead to harmony but, at most, only a sort of managed conflict which, in the end, is still violent.

Instead of an ontology of violence, Clark desires an ontology of peace. He argues that such an ontology of peace is to be found in the person of Jesus, the person who preeminently reveals “the God who is love and peace.” As a biblical scholar, my reaction is to interrogate the ways in which Jesus did, and did not, reveal such a God.

Jesus lived in a violent world. And far from shying away from that world and its violence, he seems to have deliberately opened himself up to it. Although his message was greeted frequently with suspicion, skepticism, and

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Karla G. Bohmbach is Assistant Professor of Religion at Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, Pa.

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vilification, he did not back down or retreat from it, even when, as one account has it, the people of his own hometown attempted to kill him (Luke 4: 14 - 30). Eventually he set his face toward Jerusalem, even though he knew the sharp opposition facing him there from the religious authorities. And, once in Jerusalem, he engaged in an act that most see as the precipitating event of his final suffering: the overturning of the moneychangers' tables in the Temple itself. Although it may not have been as physically violent as has been depicted in such movies as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the act at least had overtones of violence. Not only, then, does Jesus receive violence onto himself, here, at least, he actually imposes it on others. Jesus' violence begets further violence, now enacted against him, as he is arrested, tried, scourged, and crucified — a sequence of events which, by all accounts, was horrifically violent.

Not only was violence a part of Jesus' life, he also warned his followers that such would be their fate: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household” (Matt. 10: 34-36; cf. Luke 12: 51-53).

If, indeed, the God who is found in Jesus is a God of love and peace, it seems that the love and peace comes about in and through the acceptance of violence — and the suffering that often accompanies such violence. The events of the Passions, which lie at the very center of Jesus' life and mission, are an overwhelming witness to Jesus' ready acceptance of, and patient bearing of, the violence being inflicted upon him. Followers of Jesus forget this at their own peril, for the message to them, too, is that if love and peace will be constitutive of their lives, such will not occur unaccompanied by, or exclusive of, violence.

If we do as Gregory Clark urges us to do, and proclaim Jesus on our campuses, what would that look like? In particular, what would it mean if we took to heart the Jesus who made himself vulnerable to the violence of his world? We, too, live in a violent world. Dare we look unblinkingly

into the face of such violence, take it upon ourselves, and even, if called upon to do so, bear up and suffer in some way because of it? As staff, administrators, and teachers on

college campuses related to the church, how might our tasks be affected, even altered, by a serious living out of the words.

## WHAT I HAVE LEARNED: MAYBE PLATO WAS RIGHT

*Richard Yivisaker*

A popular view of Plato holds that his world view has had a great and largely detrimental influence while being transparently false. I have not been immune to this oddly dismissive attitude. It is with no little surprise, in fact, that I have gradually come to see that Plato may have been right. About everything? No. About some important things, however, clearly yes. I want to fix on one point in particular, a point which reverberates in a special way for those who inhabit the academic world. But first a brief consideration of some other points where Plato had an insight that merits preserving.

### PRELIMINARY EXAMPLES

#### **(1) Communities Are Not Necessarily Better Off By Becoming More Diverse.**

We do not have to accept the vision of social differentiation and hierarchy idealized in the Republic to see the truth in Plato's view that a good society requires unity in diversity. Diversity may be necessary, but it is not sufficient. It contains the seeds of discord and disintegration along with the potential for enriched life, as homogeneity brings unity while threatening loss of vitality and decay. Everything depends on the wedding of diversity to some unity of purpose. We may accept Charles Taylor's notion that a "presumption" of value is owed to any deeply rooted culture, but this presumption has to be tested in an encounter of cultures whose outcome is uncertain.<sup>1</sup> This requires a commitment to such encounter on the part of the community, and this commitment is the unity of purpose which constitutes the community. If we were to turn our attention to the call for increased diversity at colleges of the church, creating the necessary unity in diversity would be a major task. It is not a matter of simple addition.

#### **(2) If Politics Is To Be More Than A Struggle For**

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Richard Yivisaker is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Luther College.

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#### **Power By Competing Interests, It Has To Be Assumed That There Is A Moral Basis For Politics Which Transcends Special Interests.**

Indeed, even the rightful pursuit of power on behalf of a particular interest assumes this. In our commitment to democratic politics we may reject some or all of the extreme measures to which Plato is led by this assumption. But the challenge of constructing a democratic process consistent with it is great. This may not mean, as it did for Plato, that the challenge is unmeetable. But the reduction of democracy to a naked or thinly disguised struggle for power parades itself daily.<sup>2</sup> Plato knew a difficult problem when he saw one.

#### **(3) The Much-Derided Dualism of Body And Soul Contains A Measure Of Truth.**

Even if we take the radical dualism in Phaedo at face value, there is more to be said for it than fashionable criticism allows. We want to say, of course, that the very idea of disembodied existence is both unappealing and barely conceivable (if conceivable at all). But this does not remove the problems of embodied life which rightly concerned Plato.

Of particular interest is his worry about the impact of embodiment on our cognitive life. For embodied creatures awareness of the world is mediated by organs which register and transmit sensory data. This leads to diverse points of view, depending on species nature, on individual physiology and psychology, on space-time location, and on cultural factors carried by language. The hope of liberating rational consciousness from such dependence may strike us as fanciful if not preposterous. As may the idea that we can aspire to a form of consciousness which is without any point of view and thus god-like. But bridging differences in point of view is a cognitive (and moral) imperative for us. So also, then, is discovering a process which in some way makes this possible. Plato saw all of this with great clarity. The point here is related to the earlier ones about morality