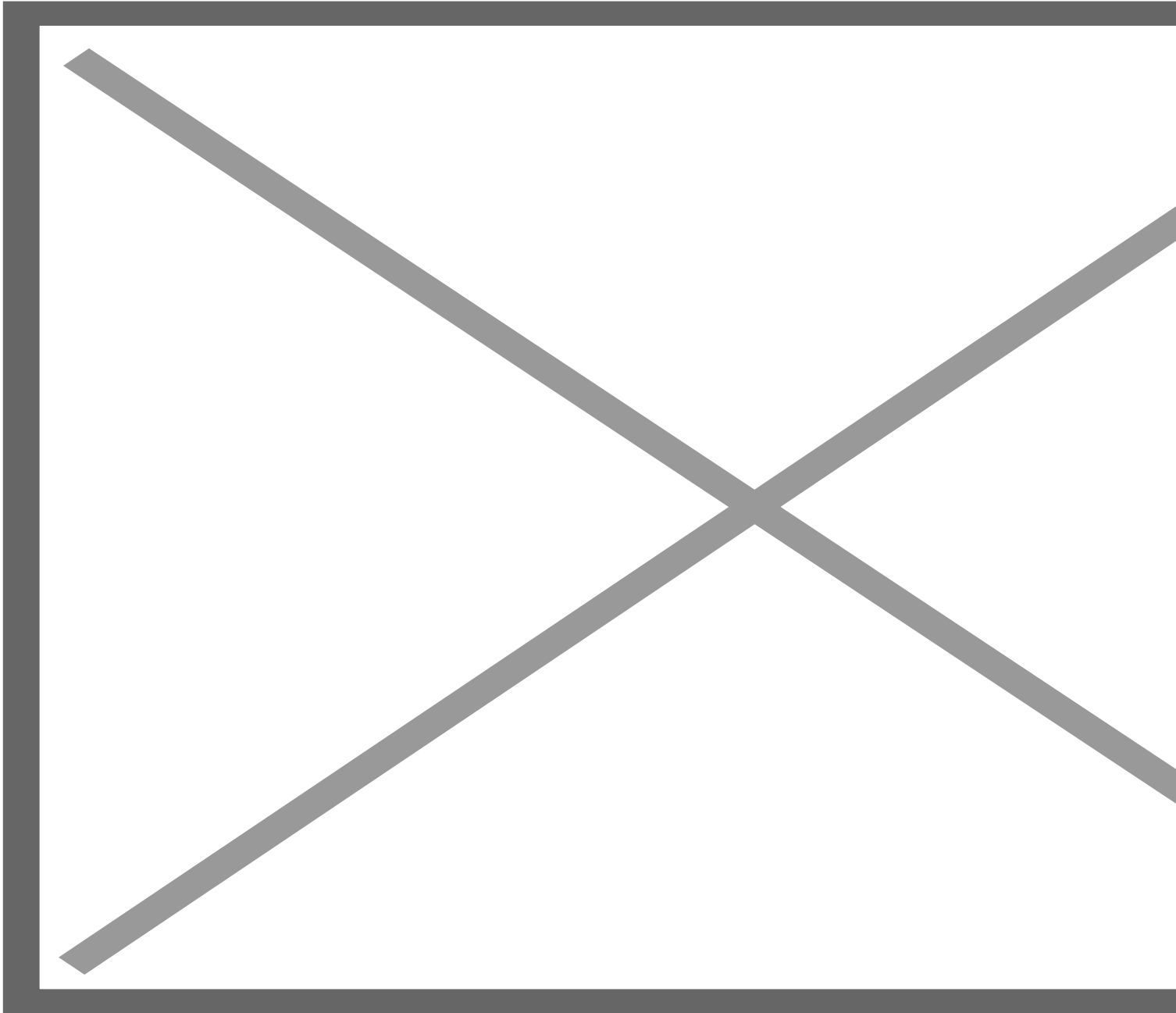


The massacre that never ends

The brief biblical account of Herod's slaughter of the innocents raises the question of what faith demands when politics fails to stop the killing.

by [Mac Loftin](#)
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Schoolgirls in Iran (Photo by Paul Keller via Creative Commons license, edits by the Century)

The massacre of the innocents is told in only two sentences in only one of the gospels.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.

Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, ‘In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.’ (Matthew 2:16-18)

We have an irrational and petty king lashing out and killing children for no reason, and then the mention of prophecy fulfilled, giving the whole thing a feeling of inevitability. There’s a whiplash effect: an utterly senseless act of violence that seems to come out of nowhere, yet this act was always going to happen. It has always been happening. The grammar of the Jeremiah quote, at least in the King James Version, gives it all a slippery temporality: In Rama *was* there a voice heard, Rachel’s children *are* not, and Rachel’s weeping is happening in the future of the gospel’s present.

When we say the Bible is the word of God, one of the things we’re talking about is just this strange temporality. This is not quite a narration of a historical event, not quite a prediction of the future, but instead a revelation of the truth of the world, a description of how the world was and is and will be. There’s always a Herod; there’s always a Rachel.

This latest war on Iran, which none of its perpetrators have even attempted to justify or explain, began with the bombing of a girl’s elementary school in southern Iran. 165 people were killed, most of them children between the ages of 7 and 12. It was a fitting beginning: the unjustifiable and inexplicable killing of children is the truth of war, as the gospel writer knew, so at least this war had the decency to begin honestly. (Not entirely honestly: both the US and Israel refuse to take responsibility for the attack, which an Al Jazeera investigation has determined was [likely deliberate](#) as the school primarily serves the children of IRGC Navy officers. One is reminded of former ambassador to Israel Jacob Lew’s [comment](#) that Gaza’s casualty count should be “much lower” because many of those counted as civilians were in fact “children of Hamas fighters.” From Little St. James to Gaza to Iran, perhaps the bedrock value of American power is the disposability of children.) Everything that follows for however long this lasts—and already there are [reports](#) of bombed hospitals, bombed schools, bombed apartment buildings, double-tap strikes on rescue efforts, parents watering down baby formula, the elderly rationing medication—will only be variations on this initial crime.

What is the role of theology in a time of war? I’m a theologian, but I don’t ask this question out of a desire for professional relevance. It’s a question of last resort, driven by an unavoidable feeling that *political* opposition to this war is a dead end.

The GOP has dutifully fallen in line behind the bombing of Iran, just as it did for the bombings of Gaza, Venezuela, and the Caribbean. Meanwhile the Democrats, ostensibly the opposition party, seem to understand their role as opposing not war itself but Trump’s procedural missteps in prosecuting it. In the days since this war began, congressional Democrats have limited themselves to whining that they were not properly consulted before the killing started. Before the bombings last summer, Chuck Schumer mocked “TACO Trump” for [“folding on Iran,”](#) demanding he take a more confrontational approach. The Senate Democrats’ leader’s position seems to be that war can be a wonderful thing provided the paperwork checks out. Outside electoral politics, meanwhile, our national labor unions seem more concerned with fighting for the rights of the Americans who build bombs than fighting for the people on whom those bombs fall. Politically speaking, things look hopeless.

There is no way out. As [Trump himself said](#), “Wars can be fought ‘forever.’”

If political avenues for resistance are closed, might there remain religious avenues? Many in the media have pointed out the complete lack of political or military reasons given for attacking Iran, but they tend to miss the proliferation of religious reasons. Our newly-christened Secretary of War understands his role as “[protecting](#)” Christianity “from godless ideologies and pagan religions.” Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee uses his perch to [advocate](#) for Israel’s hypothetical conquest—divinely led— of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Egypt. And according to [complaints](#) from over 100 members of the US military, troops are being told by their commanders that the present war will kick off the battle of Armageddon and usher in Christ’s return. Given the absence of political justifications for this war, these theological justifications might be the closest things to an explanation we’re going to get. And if this is a religious war, as the American side seems to want to present it, perhaps religious resistance is not only possible but necessary.

I don’t know what such religious resistance to war looks like in practice. I suspect that while we can (we must) learn from religious antiwar movements in the past, we will have to forge new practices of resistance for our own moment. Ours is a moment that strangely combines total global war (against South America, against the Middle East, the New Cold War against China) with a numbing pseudo-peace at home: war is always somewhere else, and if you just put down your phone it’s like it’s not happening at all. (Some light is perhaps shed on this by the gospel of Matthew: Herod’s act of mass murder is never mentioned again, and the narrative never returns to a Bethlehem bereft of its children. The nagging feeling of “What are they going through in Bethlehem?” that tugs at you as you read the rest of the gospel pulls us to ask the same question of our own world.)

This is the season of Lent, a season for the inner work of penance, reflection, and spiritual discipline. It might be that, in a situation in which political resistance to war has been rendered impossible, the seemingly apolitical realm of spiritual exercise is where resistance must begin. This war’s prosecutors are determined to make it a religious war, and we should understand their slipshod propaganda as sophisticated spiritual discipline—working to make us numb, disconnected, pliant, as in awe of their violence as they are of their false god’s. This work will succeed if we let it. We must undertake arduous spiritual work of our own, making ourselves into people capable of resisting the seductions of violence and acquiescence.

Doing so begins, Matthew reminds us in his oblique way, with fixing our attention on the massacred long after the narrative has moved on. The children of the Shajareh Tayyebah school are no more. Those who killed them, the Herods who rule our world, want us to move on, they want these deaths to be buried by other spectacular acts of war and be forgotten. We must make of ourselves people who will not move on. We must not be comforted.