

Conflict and Concord: Meandering on Biblical Visions of Social Relations

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Abstract: History is often written by war more than peace, and human society conditioned by tension and conflict rather than amity and unity between races, nations, classes, and genders. So, social harmony often represents a utopian dream, desirable but not realizable. As religious scripture and cultural canon, the Bible has formed and shaped Christian values and visions in profound ways. What does the Bible have to say about social relations? This essay examines biblical traditions on conflict and concord and evaluates their appropriations by major Western and Chinese interpreters who have evoked the Bible to critique social evil and promote the common good resulting in different consequences. It is my hope that a macroscopic review and critical reflection on the impact of biblical visions on social relations may yield some helpful religious insights on the advancement of social harmony.

Key words: conflict, harmony, social relations, biblical interpretation, Christian vision

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Civilization, one may argue, has been shaped much more profoundly and profusely by destructive wars than the transitory peace sporadically found in human history, and sadly social relations in every society are often marked by suspicion and hostility among groups of people rather than amity or trust. Precisely because tension and conflict between races, nations, classes and genders, for cultural, political, economic or personal reasons, are so common and rampant in human life, “building a harmonious society”^① may sound like Sir Thomas More’s imagination of the Utopia or Confucius’ ideal of *Datong* world (a commonwealth state), desirable indeed but elusive and unreachable. No one would dispute, however, that it is a deep human longing to live in harmony with one another, as aptly reflected in the Jewish greeting of “*shalom*,” the Muslims’ “*salaam*,” the Christian “peace,” and the Chinese “*nin hao*.” There is no quarrel,

① * This essay was first read at the International Conference on “Ancient Wisdom and Harmonious Society,” held at the College of Foreign Languages, Peking University, Beijing, China, May 31-June 3, 2010. On February 19, 2005, Chinese President Hu Jintao, who is also general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), instructed his leading officials and Party cadres to place “building a harmonious society” top on their agenda at the opening ceremony of a training seminar for provincial and ministerial leaders: “The CPC [Communist Party of China] and the central government have made it an important task to build a harmonious society, as China is facing thorny domestic issues, as well as complicated and volatile international situations.” The full text of Hu’s speech was released on June 26, 2005. Accessed 2013-09-30 from http://english.people.com.cn/200506/27/eng20050627_192495.html

furthermore, that people living in a harmonious society will develop a proud sense of identity and a strong bond of solidarity with fellow citizens, and will be better motivated to pursue the common good for their society and build a stable and prosperous nation. Idealistic notwithstanding, therefore, harmony is an important and worthy goal for any progressive society to promote and pursue.

What is harmony? Can it serve as a motivating vision or political goal to resolve social conflict that often wreaks havoc in nation building? Is it viable and feasible in light of human instinct for self-interest and aggression? One can approach these questions from the perspectives of philosophy, sociology or political science. For sure, the answers will be different among competing schools of thought and between the cultural views of the East and the West; the implications for their practical implementations will be widely different, too. Regarding such questions, this essay has a humble purpose. It offers a critical reflection on major visions of conflict and concord in the Bible and evaluates their appropriations by Western and Chinese interpreters. The final goal is to make a contribution toward a religious understanding of social harmony from a Christian point of view.

Why do we focus on biblical visions? As the scripture of authority for Christianity, the Bible has provided its believers with religious insights to construct a symbolic universe, in which God is believed to be the almighty Creator and compassionate Redeemer who is holy, merciful and just, and God's people are expected to live in righteousness in accordance with the law of their covenant with their Lord God. As an influential cultural canon in the Christian West, the Bible has also formed a distinctive worldview and offered moral principles to norm their way of life and transform their communities. In this globalized age, the Bible, with its time-tested wisdom and deep influence in the West, for good or for ill, can serve as a valuable intellectual text for reflection on the important topic of social harmony for the East, and indeed for the whole world. It is particularly urgent in a time when domestic violence and divorces are not considered headline news anymore and senseless killings of the innocent are happening in every continent, such as the massacre of the summer campers on the Island of Utøya, Norway in July 2011, the carnage of school children at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, USA in December 2012, and the butchery of mall shoppers in Nairobi, Kenya in September 2013. In addition to domestic abuses and gun violence, the "clash of civilizations"^② which Samuel Huntington defined as the cultural rather than ideological or economic divide between the West and the rest of the world, has been horrifically manifested in the terrorist attacks in New York and London, let alone the constant trading of missile strikes and helicopter shootings that brutalizes the inhabitants of Israel and Gaza. We have also seen the raging wars of fury that continue to destroy lives and infrastructures in Islamic countries, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt and Syria. On economic side, even when a few big corporations are reaping obscene profits and their CEO's becoming billionaires, so much more ordinary hard-working people are plunging into the bottomless pit of poverty without any hope to find a better life, as the great depression of 2008 and the "Occupy Wall Street" movement have made so obvious. The huge gap between the top one percent of the population and the ninety-nine percenters is unbridgeable and the resentment is deep. A storm of social revolution seems looming in the horizon. Is there any wonder that everybody yearns for peace and harmony? What then does the Christian Bible have to say

^② Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 207 - 245. James Hodge and Samuel Huntington eds., *The Clash of Civilizations: The Debate*, 2nd ed. (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2010), *passim*.

about the broken human relationship and the threat of social mayhem? What advice can it offer to the world to promote social harmony? We will review a few visions of conflict and concord beginning with the Old Testament.

I . Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament)

The authors of the Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament) share a fundamental belief in Yahweh as the Creator of the universe, the Savior of Israel and the Lord of human history.^③ They observe and address the complex issues of human life-moral character, personal behavior and social relationship—from a monotheistic point of view, with the conviction that Yahweh their God takes serious interest in human affairs and gives Abraham and his offspring special favors as a chosen people (Genesis 12 – 36 and Exodus 1 – 24).^④ The Pentateuch is bluntly honest in showing how often the people of God fail to maintain their covenant with God and show no mercy to others; as a result they repeatedly crash their societies with exploitation and violence. The Prophets are particularly outspoken in condemning the brutal kings, the selfish elders, and the greedy rich who take advantage of the poor, and in advocating the cases for the widows and the orphans. As we survey the OT, several themes on human relationship are noteworthy.

1. Conflict and Concord

First to be noted is the repeated conflict in the Pentateuch that takes place at different levels of human relationship. In the sagas of the patriarchs in Genesis, for instance, we witness several tragedies of family feud that rips apart the most intimate relationship in human life: the first spousal tension in Adam's hasty accusation of his wife Eve, the first case of fratricide in Cain's brutal murder of his brother Abel, and the dysfunctional families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in which members cheating, tricking, and betraying each other.^⑤ In the liberation epic of Exodus, we see the legalized apartheid system and systematic racial discrimination in Egypt in the enslavement of the Hebrews and the killing of their baby boys (Exod 1:8 – 16). In the so – called conquest narrative of Joshua, we are confronted with a series of horrific genocides (Joshua 10:28 – 40) perpetrated by the newly liberated Hebrews who became violent aggressors plundering the land of the Canaanites, raiding their properties, and massacring their people. Worse yet, they used divine decree to justify their holy war (Joshua 10:8 – 14; 11:6, 20; Judges 1:1 – 2; 4:16, 24)! In History books and the Psalms, we also see the atrocities of conflict among nations played out gruesomely by the Assyrian invasion of Israel and the Babylonian conquest of Judea. The looting and burning of the Temple and the raping and killing of the people of Israel are inhumanely ruthless (e. g. 2 Kings 25). The life as prisoners of war in exile is certainly hard and humiliating, as a psalmist

③ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament; Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 145 – 228.

④ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament; Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 105 – 146.

⑤ Norman Cohen, *Self, Struggle & Change; Family Conflict Stories in Genesis and Their Healing Insights for Our Lives* (Woodstock, VT. : Jewish Lights, 1995).

sitting by the river of Babylon wrote: "For there our captors asked us for songs and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psa 137:3 - 4). Thirsty for retribution, the same psalmist continued, "Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!" O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" (Psa 137:7 - 9). In numerous prayers and lamentations in the Psalms, we also hear constant requests for God's protection from personal enemies and persistent pleadings for bloody vengeance (e. g. Psa 5:8; 7:1; 17:8 - 9; 58:10; 94:1).^⑥ All these conflicts are caused by fear, anger, greed or hatred, but ultimately by the human drive for self-preservation and self-aggrandizement, called "sin" in theological term.

While critiquing the destructive power of sin that damages relationships and causes conflicts, however, the OT authors also provide clear visions of concord and harmony as divinely ordained and worthy of pursuing. Let us take the first human couple in the creation story of Genesis again for example. Adam and Eve share the same flesh, so they are supposed to love each other in perfect union, and it is declared that marriage should be honored as sacred because husband and wife are joined together by God and no one should tear it apart (Gen 2:24). The author of Genesis also claims that all racial and ethnic groups of people originated from Adam and Eve and lived in peace with one another. It was not until they conspired to build the Tower of Babel in defiance of God when God divided them into different language groups (Gen 11:6 - 8). In that story, it appears that God was jealous of and may be afraid of what human cooperation might achieve, so God separated them and broke their concord. God's purpose, however, was exactly the opposite. In light of the fact that God regarded everything in the creation, including humans, as "good" (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), God was concerned that their ambition and defiance against the Creator, if not contained, would inevitably result in aggression against each other and domination over the nature. In other words, God used separation as a time-out measure to teach them an important lesson: human collaboration to excel should be based on a reverence to God their Creator and respect for God's creation. It is also important to note that, subsequently in the narrative, God promised that all nations on earth shall one day be blessed through Abraham, at the moment when Abraham was elected and called out of his land and family (Gen 12:3). The fact that the particular election of Abraham and the universal blessing of all nations are tied together suggests that God is impartial and God wishes all nations to enjoy peace and harmony with one another. It is no accident that the dramatic sagas of Jacob and Joseph both end with a touching scene of brotherly reconciliation, the tragedies of sibling rivalry finally turned into the happy ending of family reunion (reconciliation between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 33; reunion of the twelve brothers in Genesis 45). The stories of patriarchs in Genesis demonstrate that hurtful conflicts in family life - the most basic unit of human

^⑥ Sung-Hun Lee, "Lament and the Joy of Salvation in the Lament Psalms," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* (Peter Flint and Patrick Miller, ed.; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 224 - 247.

relationships – should and can be resolved into a loving harmony. Conflict may be dominant in our lives, but we should strive for concord.

2. People of the Covenant

As Moses led the Hebrews, also called the Israelites, out of Egypt and traveled through the desert to worship Yahweh on Mount Sinai, the former slaves became people of the covenant. Before sending Moses to Egypt, God had said this to him:

⁶ Say therefore to the Israelites, ‘I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.’⁷ I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.⁸ I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.’ (Exod 6:6 – 8)

In keeping with his covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:4 – 11), Yahweh will liberate the Israelites from slavery, adopt them as his people, and give them a land to call their own. And so he did, outstretching his powerful arm to rescue his oppressed people from slavery and performing mighty miracles to punish their Egyptian overlords. God also fed, protected, and guided them as they wandered through the desert. Up on Mount Sinai, the Israelites were then given a new identity as the people of covenant, who can be called God’s own. The faithfulness of God demonstrated in the Exodus event was so powerful and the sacred memory of the Sinai covenant so embedded in the minds of the Israelites that, from then on, the OT understanding of human relationship began to model on Yahweh, the Lord God who kept his covenant with Abraham and rescued his suffering people. The idea of covenant does not simply reveal the character of God, but carries with it a proposal for the organization of society for the people of Israel. ^⑦Social relations in the OT were therefore defined by the principles of faithfulness/loyalty (*ds, x, , ḥ esed*), compassion/tender mercy (*- x; r; ra ḥ am*) and righteousness/justice (*hq’ d’ e. tdaqah*), which their ancestors had experienced in God’s mighty acts of liberation in the dramatic events of the Exodus. To remind the Israelites of God’s faithfulness and their covenant with God, the whole congregation was taught to profess a credo in unison at the annual offering of the first fruit, as a liturgical response to the priest:

⁹ A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.¹⁰ When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us,¹¹ we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.¹² The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders;¹³ and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.¹⁴ So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me. (Deut 26:5 – 10)

^⑦ Walter Bruggemann, “Covenant and Social Possibility,” in *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel’s Communal Life* (Patrick Miller ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 54 – 69, esp. 57.

It is noteworthy that, right after reciting this credo at the annual thanksgiving ritual, the Israelites were instructed to celebrate, with all the bounty that the Lord gave them, “together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among them.” (Deut 26:11). Their ancestors’ experience as sojourners in strange lands should make them empathetic to the anxiety of the foreigners residing among them and motivate them to extend hospitality to all travelers and immigrant workers. The way God cared for their ancestors should be the way they treated the strangers among them. Thus, the resident aliens in their society should be included in the corporate celebration of the harvest festival. When people of different birth background can sit at the same table for feast, the racial boundary is broken and ethnic tension lowered. As such, this thanksgiving festival was meant not only to strengthen the bond of love among the Israelites but also to improve their relationship with outsiders and enhance harmony among the ethnic groups in their society.

One disturbing question regarding the conquest narrative of Joshua 10 – 12 and Judges 1 – 2 cannot be glossed over. Joshua’s victories over the Canaanite people in various cities do show that God’s promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1; 15:18 – 19; Exod 3:17) was fulfilled when the Israelites took possession of the land of Canaan (Josh 21:43 – 45; 23:14). In that narrative, however, Yahweh as a Warrior God to fight for Israel (Josh 10:14) is theologically problematic. Does it show a “dark side of God”?^⑧ Is Yahweh merely a patron god of Israel or the Lord of all people? How can Yahweh who punishes the Egyptians for their oppression of Hebrew slaves condone, let alone command, the Israelites to commit the heinous crime of genocide? Can the Bible still assert God’s mercy and justice? The conquest narrative is also ethically problematic. It is true that the dispossessed Israelites had suffered as slaves in Egypt and lived a homeless life in the desert, but does their misery make it right to slaughter the Canaanites and raid their land? If divine decree can be used as an excuse for ethnic cleansing, how can the Bible be trusted and used for ethical deliberation for anyone but the people of Israel? It is sad to acknowledge that the conquest narrative has been used over and over again by believers to justify atrocities against other people, such as the Dutch settlers in South Africa and the English pioneers in America. Some Jewish and Christian Zionists continue to cite it as divine warrant to expel Palestinians out of the land they have inhabited for thousands of years.^⑨ In these cases, religious scripture has been grossly abused for political and economic gains.

In light of the grave consequences of biblical interpretation, how should we understand the conquest narrative in an ethical manner? I offer a brief reflection in three points. First, God did promise to give Abraham and his offspring a land of milk and honey they may call their home. The key point of the conquest narrative is thus to demonstrate that the faithful God cares for the displaced refugees who need a land in which to settle. In ancient times, the almighty and merciful God rescued the Hebrew slaves from their torturers and led them to the promised land of Canaan. In the sixth – century BCE, when the Israelites were suffering in exile losing land and faith, God’s promise of land was formulated in the Torah canon to sustain

⑧ Walter Dietrich and Christian Link, *Die dunklen Seiten Gottes*, 2 vols. (Neukirchen – Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1997, 2000). John Barton, “The Dark Side of God in the Old Testament,” in *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue* (Katharine Dell, ed.; New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 122 – 134.

⑨ For political contexts of the land issue, see Jimmy Carter, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006). Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2006). For interpretations of biblical texts on the land issue, see L. Loden, P. Walker, and M. Wood eds., *The Bible and the Land: An Encounter* (Jerusalem: Masalaha, 2000). Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002). Gary Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland: Pilgrim; London: Paternoster, 2003).

the life and hope of the exilic community. ⑩Today, if we believe that God is the Creator and Redeemer of all people, not only of Israelites, we can argue that the almighty and merciful God will also take care of the landless refugees in similar needs regardless of their race or ethnicity. That means, then, true people of God cannot use the conquest narrative as an excuse to practice xenophobia or endorse aggression. Susan Niditch rightly calls for an “ideology of nonparticipation” in war except for self – defense. ⑪Second, massacre is not the only way to acquire the land of promise. In fact, Abraham made allies with the Amorites, Mamre, Eshcol and Aner, to fight against the four kings who looted his nephew Lot (Gen 14:13) and purchased a piece of land from his neighbor the Hittites in Hebron (Gen 23:17 – 18). People who claim to be the children of Abraham by blood or by faith should learn from their ancestor Abraham. True believers of God should not allow egoism and genocentrism dictate their way of life, even in the name of national security or national interest. Instead, they should always strive to find an ethical way to fulfill God’s word. Finally, in terms of biblical hermeneutics, even if the divine order to exterminate the Canaanites was a divine decree, it should be considered a special case in a particular context, not to be used as permission for aggression or pretext for violence, because the approach to the war in the OT is “deliberately *complex, ambivalent, conditional and incomplete.*” ⑫There are other texts in the Bible that demand peace rather than war in dealing with conflicts. To all people God is impartial and to the wicked God will judge. Too many so-called holy wars have been waged to perpetuate human conflicts and dishonor God’s name!

3. Children of the Law

As people of the covenant, the Israelites were expected to become children of the law. God’s salvation obliged them to learn and obey God’s will prescribed in the Ten Commandments, as Moses said to them:

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites. (Exodus 19:4 – 6)

By rescuing the Hebrew slaves, God demonstrated his faithfulness to Abraham, and revealed his compassion for the oppressed and his judgment on the oppressors. If the Israelites keep their obligations to obey God’s voice, they shall be treasured by God and become a priestly nation and holy society serving God. In other words, the people of God are expected to emulate God’s actions, to obey God’s bidding, and to display God’s character of faithfulness, compassion, and justice in dealing with one another.

What is the voice of God to be obeyed? First and foremost are the Ten Commandments given through Moses. The first four commandments regulate the Israelites’ relationship with God (“You shall have no other gods before me ... etc.” Exod 20:1 – 11) and the latter six govern their relations with other members of the society (“Honor your father and your mother ... etc.” Exod 20:12 – 17). ⑬On the basis of this

⑩ Bruce Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim and David Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 178.

⑪ Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 134 – 149.

⑫ P. P. Jenson, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Grove, 2002), 5.

⑬ Patrick Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 415 – 432.

"*Foundational Covenant Document*,"^④ a grand legal system including religious laws and civil laws was developed over time. Besides religious rules on holy days, sacrifices, and temple services, civil laws adjudicating social relationship such as marriage, property, criminal cases, penalties, retribution and compensation were meticulously and comprehensively scripted by priestly leaders into legal codes. Interpretations and appropriations of these legal codes continued to be multiplied after the Hebrew Scripture was canonized by the Pharisaic rabbis in Yavneh at the end of the first century. Generations of rabbis studied, taught, and expanded their biblical laws into a grand "oral Torah" preserved in *mishnah*, *halakoth* and *midrashim*.^⑤ This wide - ranging and complicated legal system became an institutional tool used by political, religious, and civil leaders to maintain order and keep peace in Jewish society. Regarding social relations, the basic assumption of biblical laws is justice based on the principles of fairness and reciprocity (*lex talionis*; "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" Deut 19:21), and it is patterned after the way God rendered justice to all, liberating the Hebrew slaves and punishing their Egyptian overlords.

OT prophets also issued exhortations and admonitions to teach the people of Israel how to obey the law of God and live their lives properly with other people. Speaking to a nation trying to live out their identity as the people of the covenant and children of the law, the prophets' main concern, interestingly, was the sin of idolatry. Their logic is simple but compelling. If the people could forget Yahweh their Lord who had gifted them with liberty, identity, the land and the law, what constraint was there for them not to commit transgressions against other people for selfish gains? What moral strength might exist in them to defuse social conflicts when tensions erupt? Idolatry was the principal sin for theological and social reasons.

Besides idolatry, the most frequently-mentioned sin in the mouths of the prophets was social injustice perpetrated by corrupted rulers who abused their authority and the greedy rich who exploited the poor. In the eyes of the prophets who spoke with the authority of God's inspired words, political corruption and economic exploitation were two major causes of social injustice and social conflict. When political authorities abuse their power and economic elites take advantage of the poor, relations between social classes will of course be broken and social conflict hard to avoid. Thus, OT prophets often censured greedy leaders with divine judgment. For instance, Isaiah declared:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes,² to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!³ What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth,⁴ so as not to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain? For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still. (Isaiah 10:1-4).

Jeremiah also reprimanded the powerful and the wealthy with a sarcastic diatribe:

^④ Daniel Block, "The Decalogue in the Hebrew Scriptures," in *The Decalogue through the Centuries: From the Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI* (Jeffrey Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 1-28.

^⑤ Jacob Neusner, *Scripture and Midrashim in Judaism*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1994-1995). Idem., *Jewish Law from Moses to the Mishnah* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998).

³² Can a girl forget her ornaments or a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number. ³³ How well you direct your course to seek lovers! So that even to wicked women you have taught your ways. ³⁴ Also on your skirts is found the lifeblood of the innocent poor, though you did not catch them breaking in. Yet in spite of all these things ³⁵ you say, "I am innocent; surely his anger has turned from me." Now I am bringing you to judgment for saying, "I have not sinned." (Jeremiah 2:32 – 35)

God demands justice from his people, because "the Lord is a God of justice" (Isa 3. 18; 61. 8). Without compassion for the down trodden, there can be no social harmony either, so the prophets often urged people to "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." (Isa 1:17).

In the Prophets, there is a distinct emphasis on God's concerns for the poor, the widows and the orphans. Bruce Birch calls it "God's partiality to the dispossessed."³⁶ This prophetic emphasis reflects the crisis of economic disparity in the society of their time. Greed and self-interest led the powerful and the wealthy to exploit their citizens, and created a chasm between the haves and the have-nots.³⁷ If there is no kindness or mercy shown to the less fortunate, how can there be true harmony in the society? The prophet Micah summarized very well what God wants his people to do; "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8; see also Isa 61:8; Jer 21:12).

Compared to the priests who institutionalized and administrated the laws as a legal system with official authority, the prophets often operated individually outside the system. But they were authorized by God through their calling, their wisdom, and the extraordinary ability to speak prophecy and perform miracles. For the priests and ruling class, social harmony mostly meant to maintain a stable order and keep the status quo, which was good for the privileged. For the prophets who were critics and reformers of the society, however, harmony meant to render justice for all, especially the defenseless, and to show compassion to the poor. These two groups of leaders held opposing views on what harmony entailed and on how best to attain it for the society, but both enrich the meaning of social harmony and both are relevant to our effort to build a harmonious society today.

4. Light to the Nations

Besides condemning corrupted leaders and defending the poor, some OT prophets also issued a grand vision of peace for all nations. Having witnessed the Assyrian Empire's ruthless conquest and brutal aggression against other peoples, Isaiah declared that God's will was to see all peoples in the world live peacefully with one another, because all were his children. No one deserves to be violated, hurt, subjugated or oppressed. One day God will send his anointed one to execute judgment against the wicked nations that instigate international conflict and then every nation will show goodwill to others. In visionary and symbolic language, Isaiah declared;

³⁶ Bruce Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville; Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 121 – 123.

³⁷ Norman Gottwald, "A Hypothesis about Social Class in Monarchic Israel in the Light of Contemporary Studies of Social Class and Social Stratification," in *The Hebrew Bible in Its Social World and in Ours* (Atlanta; Scholars, 1993), 139 – 164.

⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isa 11:6-9)

How can this grand vision of peace be realized in the world? God will make it happen by sending his anointed one to judge all people by the power of the Spirit (Isa 11:1-5). Meanwhile, the people of Israel are given a mission to be the light to all nations, as Isaiah said on behalf of God:

"I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." (Isa 42:6-7).

To remind the people of Israel of their mandate as a witness to the God of compassion and justice among all nations, Isaiah again spoke:

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose: to loosen the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. (Isa 58:6-8)

To summarize what we have observed in the OT, (1) the tragic stories of family feud from Adam to Joseph in Genesis are an archetype of human conflict at other levels frequently seen in human history. They demonstrate the weakness of human nature and the destructive power of sin. The surprising endings of those stories also show that there is still hope for reconciliation even in the thickness of hostility. (2) The Israelites started as a small group of wandering people, without land and struggling for survival. But they were chosen and liberated from slavery by Yahweh to become a people of the covenant and were taught to live their lives as children of the law. As evident in the Pentateuch and the Prophets, the way they related to one another and interacted with other peoples was expected to reflect the good character of their God as revealed in the saving event of Exodus, namely, faithfulness, compassion, and justice, with an emphasis on justice. (3) They were chosen for redemption and given the law, because God wanted them to enjoy social harmony. But that is not the final goal. They have been commissioned to serve as a light to all nations showing them how conflict can be avoided and harmony can be achieved if justice is given to the victims and the poor. (4) In the OT, we also see a tendency in the priestly tradition to regard harmony as a stabilizing force for social order that supports the status quo. The prophetic tradition, on the other hand, tends to see harmony as a final goal for which the status quo – social injustice, political corruption and economic exploitation – needs to be subverted and reformed. Justice for all and kindness to the poor are essential

conditions for the establishment of a social harmony sanctioned by God.

II. New Testament

Like their counterparts in the OT, NT authors are also keenly aware of human conflicts and still offer visions of harmony for their readers. Just as OT authors base their teachings of human relations on God's actions of creation and salvation and God's character of mercy and justice, NT authors pattern their teachings after Jesus who befriends sinners and loves enemies.

1. Order or Harmony

Living under the iron rule of the Roman Empire in the first century, Jesus and NT authors were familiar with various forms of social injustice and political oppression. It was a society with a pyramid structure of power from top down; the Emperor owned and ruled all; the senators and generals possessed resources and control management; bureaucracy maintained imperial system; free citizens tried to make a living; freed slaves struggled to survive, and slaves sacrificed their lives to make everything running. Upper social classes acquired privileges and prosperity through conquest or bequeath. Slaves, about one third of the population in Roman society, ^⑧ were caught or bought and were forced to labor in dangerous places. The Empire was built by military force and maintained by heavy taxation and ruthless suppression. *Pax Romana* was the top priority, by law if possible and by sword when necessary. The social harmony was coerced and imposed, and thus a kind of peace and order, good for the rulers who benefited from the status quo. Numerous robberies and frequent civil wars proved that the Roman style of social harmony was neither fair nor just to the commoners and slaves who constitute the majority of the society. So, protests, riots, and rebellions never cease.

The Jewish society in Palestine in the NT time was also full of tensions and conflicts. ^⑨ There was mutual contempt between inhabitants of Jerusalem and Galilee, big cities and little villages. "No prophet is to arise from Galilee," the Pharisees in Jerusalem once said this about Jesus (John 7:52). There were also tensions between social classes (civil leaders, merchants and peasants) and between religious groups (Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes). The Pharisees called the peasants in Galilee "*ham - ha - aretz*" (people of the dirt) with scorn, because they did not study the law seriously. The scribes considered themselves religious elites and nosed down on the unclean, sinners, prostitutes, and workers in some professions. Then, there were religious ranks. The Temple service system gave priestly class authorities and privileges so they profited politically and economically. When the high priest Caiaphas said that it was better to have Jesus killed than to

^⑧ M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking, 1980), 80. J. Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (Tübingen; J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1995), 44.

^⑨ Richard Horsley, *Jews and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 1 - 58.

have the whole nation destroyed (John 11:50), it was clear that many Jewish leaders considered social harmony as peace and order for the status quo from which they benefited, but not necessarily the justice for all or compassion for the poor, which the OT prophets have taught.

2. Kingdom of God

Jesus' central message was the imminence of the kingdom of God that calls for repentance (Mark 1:15). How are human relations envisioned in his kingdom of God?

As reflected in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shared similar visions of social relations with many OT authors. He charged his disciples to serve as "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt 5:13, 14), and declared that he had come not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets (Matt 5:17). Those who obey and teach his commandments shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:19). His commandments have a high standard, higher than that of the Ten Commandments as traditionally understood. For instance, getting angry with brothers is equivalent to committing murder (Matt 5:21 - 22), reconciling with brothers is more important than offering gifts to God (Matt 5:23 - 24), looking at a woman with lust means committing the sin of adultery (Matt 5:27 - 28), and plucking out one's eye that causes him to sin is better than entering hell with the whole body (Matt 5:29). Jesus' radical teaching is most strikingly seen in his commandments to resist no evildoer, turn the other cheek, give up the cloak, walk the second mile, love enemies, and pray for persecutors (Matt 5:38 - 44). Unreasonable these teachings may seem, Jesus insists that good relations are worth sacrificing everything else to keep. These radical measures, if followed, may indeed eliminate hostility and create goodwill among people. But why are they so important? Jesus offered his disciples a special reason:

⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5:45 - 48)

In the kingdom of God, the almighty God is our heavenly Father (Matt 6:9), and because of that relationship we become brothers and sisters to each other, sharing an intimate relationship of family. Hence, (1) loving others as oneself should be the first principle of human relationship, as embodied in the Golden Rule, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matt 7:12). There is no wonder that Jesus also declared that loving God with all heart, all soul and all mind is the first and greatest commandment and loving neighbors as oneself is the second; on these two commandments hang the law and the prophets (Matt 22:37 - 40). (2) *Imitatio Dei* is another important principle. The children of God should imitate their heavenly Father who cares for all people indiscriminately, giving the sun and the rain to both good and bad people. If believers model their lives after the perfect God, the world will have much more kindness and less violence. (3) Witnessing to Jesus is yet another principle. Loving undeserving people will distinguish Jesus' disciples from other people such

as tax collectors and Gentiles, who were regarded as greedy and selfish but knew to reciprocate. Most remarkably, Jesus' teaching of loving enemies exceeds the OT prophets' teaching of finding justice for all and showing kindness to the poor. Loving enemies is indeed counter – intuitive and may not be simplistically applied to complicated political or social issues, as the long debates between pacifism and just war theory have shown. ③ If practiced, however, it may enable us to reconcile with those who hurt us, to cut off the cycle of vengeance and to rebuild harmony for a better future, as remarkably demonstrated by the Amish community in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, USA, who readily forgave the killer who shot dead ten of their schoolgirls in October, 2006. ④

Humility is also essential. When the disciples got angry with one another because they wanted to be leaders of the group, Jesus taught them a concept of “servant leadership” saying:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⑤ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⑥ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⑦ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42 – 45).

In Jesus' view, humble service rather than manipulative domination is the hallmark of leadership befitting the kingdom of God. Hypocrisy and greed, on the other hand, are the most damnable sins that could discredit community leaders and damage their relationship with colleagues or followers. Thus, he issued harsh woes to denounce those false leaders and promised them God's judgment (Matt 23: 13 – 39).

Jesus did not simply talk the talk, but walked the walk putting his teaching into practice. He did not look down upon those who were considered “unclean” but often associated himself with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners. For those outrageous relationships, he was criticized by the Pharisees (Mark 2:16), but he defended his action saying only those who are sick need the physicians (Mark 2:17). He also welcome Gentiles and granted them healing and truth, such as the Centurion in Capernaum (Matt 8: 13), the Canaanite woman in Tyre and Sidon (Matt 15:22), and the Greeks in Jerusalem (John 12:20). Most remarkable of all, when he faced betrayal, suffering and death on the cross (Mark 10:45), he asked God to forgive his executioners: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). He loved his enemies and prayed for them!

If love is at the heart of his teaching, why did Jesus say: “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)? This statement does sound provocative and even violent, but there will be no misunderstanding if one realizes that Jesus used the images of sword

③ Lisa Cahill, *Love Your Enemies; Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), *passim*. John Yieh, *Making Sense of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Grove, 2007), 19 – 22.

④ Donald Kraybill, Steven Nolt, and David Weaver – Zercher, *Amish Grace; How Forgiveness Transcend Tragedy* (San Francisco: Jossey – Bass, 2007), 125 – 140.

and fighting here as literary metaphors and he made the statement as a hyperbole to challenge his audience to change their minds (repentance) and make up their minds (believing) to accept his gospel of the kingdom of God, even if their family members objected it. It is significant that early Christians confess Jesus to be the “prince of peace” that Isaiah has proclaimed (Isa 9:6; Luke 2:14; John 14:27; Acts 10:36; Eph 2:14).

3. Body of Christ

Jesus promised to leave his disciples with a “peace” that overcomes the turmoil of the world (John 14:27; 16:33) and NT authors often called God “the God of peace” (Rom 15:33; 16:20; Phil 4:9; 1Thess 5:23; Heb 13:20) who grants peace to believers (e. g. Rom 1:7; 1Cor 1:3). Unfortunately, early Christians did not always enjoy harmony in their communities. As evident in Paul’s letters, many NT communities were torn apart by the passionate debates on doctrinal issues and the tension between Jewish – and Gentile – Christians (e. g. the “agitators” in Gal 5:12). They suffered from faction rivalry (1Cor 1:11 – 12, Rom 15:5 – 6), social – economic classism (1Cor 10:31 – 33), leadership competition (1Cor 12:27 – 31), and furious schism (1 – 3 John).^② They did not find peace in their societies, either. They were constantly harassed by the synagogues as reflected in Matthew, John, and Acts, and were persecuted by Roman authorities as evident in Revelation. Loyalty to God or Caesar was a live – or – die challenge and each author responded to the authority of the government with a different attitude; Romans 13 espouses submission and obedience, while Revelation urges the willingness to defy with endurance.^③ But one fact is clear to all: real peace and genuine harmony is nowhere to be found in the present world. Where can one find the peace on earth and goodwill among people that God promised at the birth of Jesus Christ (Luke 2:14)?

Meeting the challenges of internal strife, Paul issued in his letter several messages worth noticing. (1) To the members vying for the position of leadership in Corinth, he reminded them that “there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (1Cor 12:4 – 6). Moreover, the church was the “body of Christ” and they were all necessary members (1Cor 12:12). To the squabbling Philippians he urged them to be humble like Jesus and to regard others as better than themselves, with the “kenotic hymn” that shows how Christ emptied himself to become an obedient servant even dying on the cross and as a result was exalted to the highest place of honor (Phil 2:5 – 11). (2) To the Galatians who thought less of Gentile converts, he presented a grand vision saying: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27 – 28). The eschatological vision that transcends racial – ethnic discrimination, social – economic disparity, and sex – gender injustice can be realized in the church when all the baptized receive a new life in Christ and love one another as Christ does all. There is hope for the world to find that equality, peace, and unity. (3) Last

^② Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 121 – 144. Abraham Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (2nd ed. ; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 92 – 112.

^③ Bruno Blumfeld, *The Political Paul: Justice, Democracy and Kingship in a Hellenistic Framework* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 378 – 414. N. T. Wright, “Revelation and Christian Hope: Political Implications of the Revelation of John,” in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation* (Richard Hays and Stefan Alkier eds. ; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 105 – 124.

but not least, to all believers, Paul advised them to beware of their social life beyond the walls of the church. They should pursue the most excellent way of life, the enduring love (1Cor 12:31 – 13:13), and live in harmony with outsiders, behave well to command respect, and leave grievance to God.

¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:16 – 21; see also Rom 15. 5; Col 3. 14 “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony”)

For Paul, living in harmony with others is of primary importance to Christian witness, because it will command respect from outsiders. It is important for believers to follow Jesus’ teaching to love their enemies without seeking vengeance, because it will make their enemies think twice about the power of the gospel that changes life. He also believed that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians can overcome evil with good, and they can trust in God’s power to execute justice in the end. As such, Paul’s teaching on social relations was a confluence of the law, the prophets, and Jesus’ teaching.

Some may ask, if keeping harmony in the church and peace in the society is so important, why did Paul sound so angry when he refuted his opponents (Galatians and 2 Corinthians)? Can the use of polemic language be justified by the passion to defend truth? Indeed, truth needs to be discerned and insisted in order to maintain the identity and integrity of faith, but as is often seen in religious wars – Christian Crusade and Islamic Jihad – angry language could lead to violent acts. The best way is certainly to talk over the differences before the red line of collision is crossed. Is there then a proper religious discourse to attain understanding, respect and peace among dissenters? This is a serious question today, because the world has been saturated with the rhetoric of hatred and cacophony of vengeance. How to debate is as important as what to debate, if harmony is to be attained in a multi – cultural and multi – religious society. In this regard, the recent “scriptural reasoning” movement, which several noted scholars of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in the American Academy of Religion have started, may provide a welcome model for friendly and honest inter – faith dialogue. ²⁹ These scholars understand that major religions respect their own scriptures and use their time – honored traditions to construct a coherent belief system in which they explain their beliefs and decide on their behaviors, so they come together to form a circle of friends, striving to make their reasoning public, listen to each other’s arguments and make sense of each other’s convictions with the best intention. This model, if emulated by religious and political leaders, could go a long way to prevent misunderstanding, remove mistrust, and defuse crises.

4. Faithful Martyr

One may also ask, why did Paul advise the Christians in Rome to subject themselves to the governing authorities (Rom 13:1 – 7)? Did he really want the church to uphold harmony with the state even at the

²⁹ David Ford and C. C. Pecknold eds., *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 1 – 76.

expense of religious freedom? In Rom13: 1, he gave a theological rationale saying that governing authorities are instituted by God to execute justice, so Christians should subject to its authority for the sake of conscience. Here we see the importance of justice for a divinely sanctioned society. Governing authorities are meant to serve the cause of justice protecting the righteous and punishing the evil. It is for that purpose, they deserve respect and obedience from the citizens. Why, then, did John the seer choose to defy the Roman authorities in Revelation even at the price of exile or martyrdom? Is there a contradiction between Paul and John regarding the relationship between the state and the church? This is a complicated question in terms of exegesis and theology, and much has been discussed.^⑤ However one may interpret it, one historical fact needs to be considered; the Roman Empire as reflected in Revelation was not an agent of social justice but a brutal power machine that oppressed and exploited its people. Living under its arrogant tyrants and ruthless proxies, most people were suffering from religious discrimination, economic exploitation and dehumanized oppression. Christians in west Asia Minor in particular were pressured to conform to the society with regard to the worship of imperial cult. It is understandable then why John took a different response than Paul's. Even so, it should be emphasized that there was no call of arms to revolt, but an earnest appeal to endure with patient hope and bear faithful witness (*Zeugenschaft*) even as Christians faced persecution and martyrdom.^⑥ Like Paul, John followed Jesus' teaching on loving enemies and entrusted vengeance to the hands of God who will execute justice in the end. It is to the God of faithfulness, compassion, and justice, and Jesus Christ their Lord that both Paul and John pledged their ultimate loyalty.

To summarize, the NT shows that, while Roman rulers and Jewish leaders wanted to maintain peace in the sense of social order and stability to monopolize power and privilege, Jesus offered a grand vision of the kingdom of God in which all people are children of God and sibling to one another. Because the almighty God is their heavenly Father who cares for all, they should imitate God to love neighbors and even enemies as the gratuitous God has done to sinners through Jesus and his cross. Peace among all people is understood as social harmony and reconciliation in loving relationship. It is true that Jesus' grand vision had not been fully fulfilled in the life of the early Christian communities, but Paul continued to emphasize the mandate of the gospel of peace for believers to strive for unity in the church because they were all members of the same body of Christ, equally worthy and mutually needed. Christians should also live in peace with outsiders to win their respect. In Paul's view, governing authorities are given authority not to benefit the leaders but to serve justice, so Christians should be law-abiding citizens and make contributions to the building of a harmonious society. If governing authorities have become corrupted and coercive, however, John advises the believers to persist in their faith in the God of justice and to take actions of civil disobedience without resulting to violence. All these visions on human relations are grounded

^⑤ J. P. M. Sweet, "Maintaining the Testimony of Jesus: The Suffering of Christians in the Revelation of John," in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament* (W. Horbury and B. McNeil eds.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 101-117. B. Latagan, "Reception: Theory and Practice in Reading Romans 13," in *Text and Interpretation: New Approaches in the Criticism of the New Testament* (P. Hartin and J. Petzer, eds.; Leiden: Brill, 1991), 145-170. Christopher Bryan, *Rend to Caesar, Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77-112.

^⑥ Stefan Alkier, "Witness or Warrior? How the Book of Revelation Can Help Christian Live Their Political Lives," in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation* (Richard Hays and Stefan Alkier eds.; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 125-141; esp. 140-141.

in a deep trust in the God of justice who desires mercy and wants all people to live in peace in the kingdom of God. Leaders of the church and rulers of the government are to be duly respected for using their authority to maintain peace as harmony not simply as order, so that all people may enjoy the relationship with one another as a loving family that God has intended.

III. Christian West

The Bible has provided visions of conflict and concord, as discussed above, to reveal a Christian view on human relations. How have these visions been appropriated in the West when believers try to resolve conflict and promote harmony?

Soon after the first church was established in Jerusalem, Christianity expanded steadily into the urban centers of the Roman Empire, such as Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome, but it was considered a heretical sect by Jewish synagogues and an illicit religion by the Roman authorities. Besides its unusual faith in a savior who was executed as an insurrectionist by the Empire, it was considered a suspicious group with members from various ethnic backgrounds and social classes. Without political or social standing, it is little wonder that Christians were easily harassed or persecuted. To defend themselves and explain their beliefs, well – educated Greek speaking apologists began to explain the doctrines of the church to the intellectual elites. To testify to the gospel and show their benevolence, believers tried to live a respectable life of faith, hope, and charity. As a minority group originated from the periphery of the Empire, their relationship with other social or religious groups were often stretched and tested. By following Jesus’ teaching to love God, neighbors, and enemies, however, they grew into different social ranks and expanded from cities to the villages and the country even when they were subject to persecution, as evident in the Governor of Bithynia Pliny’s Letter to the Emperor Trajan. ^②

After Emperor Constantine was converted, Christianity became a favored religion of the Empire and began to acquire political privileges and social status. The church’s view of social relations underwent a paradigm shift. In civil discourse with the society, the church changed its attitude from the passive submission to dominant custom to the active creation of new culture. As the church increased its social influence, the earlier Christian practice of personal virtue following Jesus’ radical love gave way to the exercise of institutional authority to administer justice much the same way as the priests did in the OT times in developing a legal system. Enforcing justice for the public rather than showing compassion to the poor became the primary mode of thinking. Over time, the Scholastic tradition developed a comprehensive system of theology and ethics following the pattern of Greek philosophy and culminating in the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas. Clerical hierarchy was also firmly established to minister the laity and manage the church. The bishops and priests garnered so much political power and social privilege that, unfortunately,

^② Pliny, Epistles X. 96. For an English translation, see J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, New Edition revised by W. H. C. Frend (London: SPCK, 1987), 18 – 19.

moral decay and financial abuse began to infect the leadership of the church. In Medieval time, power struggle and money grabbing had corrupted the clergy so much that some bishops and priests became religious exploiters, not unlike the wicked kings chastised by the prophets in the OT and the hypocritical Pharisees condemned by Jesus in the NT. They preyed on the piety of the laity for personal gain and launched several Crusades to fight the Muslims for political reasons. The biblical ideal of God's people showing mercy and justice to strangers and as Christ's body serving each other and loving enemies was very far from being practiced.

During the Reformation period, the Roman Catholic Church tried to suppress Reformers, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, with inquisitions and executions. In the name of the Church, some Popes did not hesitate to use violence to impose law and order within the Christendom. Kings and princes were coerced to choose sides and were dragged into religious wars. As tension and conflict arose between the Catholics and the Reformers, Anabaptists were determined to follow Jesus' teaching to resist no evildoer and turn the other cheek, so they refused to take up arms to fight even for self-defense. They turned into robust pacifists to remind people that all people are equal and should live in peace with one another. Following the non-violence principle of Jesus' teaching, as they did, several civil leaders such as Tolstoy, Gandhi, and M. L. King have rectified unjust social relations in remarkable ways, upholding the poor peasants in Russia, winning national independence for India, and acquiring civil rights for African Americans in the US. It is noteworthy that, while Luther was fighting the doctrinal mistakes and moral decay of the Roman Catholic Church, he also denounced the Anabaptists' radical pacifism that led to the damages and chaos of the Peasants' War. Luther took Paul's position to entrust the governing authorities to Christian princes who supported his efforts to reform the church. Keeping order and justice for the society was considered as important as supporting individual believers' right to exercise freedom and love. With the so-called "two kingdoms" theory, therefore, Luther allocated to the church and the state separate authorities to regulate social relations in spiritual sphere and civil sphere. ③

In recent times, Liberation theologians reminded us another vision from the Bible that is also vital for sustaining social harmony, namely, the prophetic. They shared the pain of the suffering people—the peasant, the poor, the uneducated, and the oppressed—especially those living in South America, as the state and the church refused to hear the groaning of the poor, because they wanted to uphold the status quo in the name of stability and prosperity. Like biblical prophets, therefore, Liberation theologians criticized the structural evil of the society that enslaved and exploited the underprivileged, condemned the selfish and greedy social elites who looked out only for self-interest, and tried to empower the poor and the oppressed to find their voice and seat at the table. For them, justice for all and compassion to the poor are not only prophetic vision but also gospel mandate. When there is disparity between social classes, there can be no harmony in

③ William Wright, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Scepticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 113-146.

the society. In order to create a new society, the church should stand in solidarity with the poor in protest against their exploiters.^②

In the USA, there are two schools of thought on social relations. In rough comparison, the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr argues for the need of law to maintain justice in the society, because only individuals can make moral choices to sacrifice their personal interest and love their enemies as Jesus did.^③ A society needs a fair legal system with law enforcement to ensure the equal distribution of justice to all, to prevent crimes from happening, and to protect innocent people. Law and order are therefore the responsibilities of civil authorities, not of church leaders, an idea similar to Luther's. The Christian pacifism of Stanley Hauerwas, on the other hand, insisted on the validity of the Anabaptist tradition and the influence of Jesus' radical love.^④ Christians should and can overcome evil by good as God did through Christ. That is indeed a moral point of the theology of resurrection. Evil engenders evil, so only the radical love that is willing to forgive enemies can sever the vicious cycle of vengeance and violence. To be a pacifist, however, one needs to be willing to suffer hurtful consequences. It takes a brave person with moral character to make that conscious decision. So, cultivation of Christian character in a community of faith is essential for such a virtue ethics.^⑤ *Imitatio Christi* is the key.

This broad-brushed sketch of major approaches to social relations in the Christian West shows that Christianity continues to experience and suffer from a variety of conflict inside the church and in the world. It has witnessed the damage and hurt that the many conflicts in family, in leadership, and among nations have caused for the church and the society. The church itself is far from perfection. On each bad turn, however, the biblical visions of peace and harmony, mercy and justice, reconciliation and unity that God has promised and Jesus Christ has embodied have given the people of God new hope and renewed strength to continue pursuing that high call of harmony. This quick sketch also shows that the biblical vision of concord for the society is not merely a religious dream to offer believers some sort of psychological compensation. Rather, it has started a steady stream of efforts by the faithful, each turn gathering more wisdom from experience, to make real peace in their lives, in their communities, and in their world.

IV. Chinese Christians

Taiping Tianguo (太平天国 The Great Peace Heavenly Kingdom) is an interesting case that shows how a biblical vision of social relations was once experimented on China's soil in the nineteenth century. Sun Yatsen and Mao Zedong both respected Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全 1814 –

② Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll; Orbis, 1973), 299–306.

③ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York; Scribner's, 1960).

④ Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame; University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

⑤ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame; University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

1864), the leader of the Taiping Rebellion in Qing Dynasty, as a pioneer of peasant revolution that gave poor people a chance to share social resources with the ruling class and land owners.^③As a self-taught quasi-Christian, Hong implemented some biblical views in his famous land reform (天国田亩制度 *Tianguo tianmu zhidu* [*The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty*]), property redistribution and public fund (holy treasury), gender equality (women can fight as soldier and serve as officials), and social support system (neighborhood unit of 25 families).^④The principles of justice for all and compassion to the poor in his movement are similar to the ideas of the prophets in the OT, which attracted numerous followers to establish the Taiping Tianguo in Nanjing.^⑤He also instituted civil laws based on the Ten Commandments and other biblical laws for his people to follow. Unfortunately, his personal corruption by power and sex resulted in the catastrophic failure of an incredibly promising social experiment. This historical case demonstrates the importance of virtue ethics and moral character that political, social, and religious leaders need to have. No one can build a harmonious society by fantastic visions and campaign slogans. Hypocrisy can ruin the trusting relationship among people and hurt social harmony.

Wu Leichuan (吴雷川 1870 - 1944), the Chinese Chancellor of Yenching University, believed that Christianity was side-lined by Chinese intellectual leaders, because it emphasized exclusively the gospel of individual salvation. In reality, he contended, old and flawed social systems had caused so much suffering to the people in China that Christianity, if it was to show any relevance or usefulness to the life of the people, should make a tangible contribution by reforming the Chinese society. To do so, Jesus in the Gospels can serve as a good paradigm and the Lord's Prayer provides the best blueprint to materialize his social ideals in China. In Wu Leichuan's view, Jesus' kingdom of God is an ideal society in which the loving God who cares for all people shall rule. In this society, the perfect character of God is the ethical standard for all people to emulate, the economic system should be communitarian in which everybody shares what they have, and the political system should be democratic without the traditional nepotism and favoritism.^⑥Clearly, it was Jesus the moral teacher and his wise teaching of love for all that inspired Wu Leichuan to envisage a brave new world for China, a society in which the boundary of social classes are broken and every member lives in equality, charity, and harmony as brothers and sisters. Transforming human hearts is the beginning step to changing a social system, and moral motivation is as essential as political policy in building a harmonious society.

Also to be noted is Wu Yaorong (吴耀宗 1893 - 1979), leader of the Three Self Patriotic

^③ Paul Cohen, *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past* (London: RoutledgeCurson, 2003), 212.

^④ 谢興堯 Xie Xinyao 编,《太平天國的社會政治思想》*Taiping tianguo de shehui zhengzhi sixiang* [*The Social - Political Thoughts of Taiping Tianguo*], (上海 Shanghai: 商務印書館 Shanghai Yinchubuguan [Shanghai Printing House], 1935), Jonathan Spence, *The Taiping Vision of a Christian China 1836 - 1864: The Eighteenth Charles Edmondson Historical Lectures of Baylor University* (Waco: Markham, 1998).

^⑤ Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 110 - 139.

^⑥ 吴雷川 Wu Leichuan,《耶穌的理想社會》*Yesu de lixiang shehui* [*Jesus' Social Ideal*], (上海 Shanghai: 青年團主協會, Qingnian quzhu xiehui [Youth Association], 1934).

Movement, who in his early career, actively participated in the Society of Reconciliation, which was established after WWI to promote peace and reconciliation in the world.^⑤ A pacifist, Wu took the position of non-violence when Japan began to invade China, and proposed to bring the case of Japan's invasion to the International Court for mediation and arbitration and, if necessary, organize an economic boycott to Japanese products to avoid a war. Eventually, the horrific violence of the Japanese army perpetrated on Chinese people changed his mind. He decided to join the war to fight Japanese. His painful spiritual struggle shows how challenging it is to implement a moral vision in a world where the survival of the nation takes the center stage and overrides moral choice of the individuals. Both biblical vision and social reality need to be critically considered and wisely matched for a proper appropriation.

Conservative Christians hold an ambivalent view on the pursuit of social harmony. On the one hand, they believe that human nature is so depraved and the world so corrupted that no true harmony can be achieved in the present world even with the best intention and the best policy. On the other hand, they also believe in the conversion of hearts, minds, and lives; and to testify to the gospel, they certainly want to live in harmony with their neighbors. Even though it is not their theological conviction to build a kingdom of God on earth, they believe it is their mission to live a holy life as honest citizens for the glory of God. It should be noted that, with a sincere motivation to love God and neighbors, they can be sincere and important contributors to the construction of a harmonious society.

V. Conclusion

The Bible contains inspiring resources and rich traditions on human relations that may help us reflect on what social harmony means and how it may be achieved in reality. First to be noted is that all major biblical visions—the law, the prophets, Jesus and Paul—affirm the importance of harmonious relationship for the people of the covenant and the children of God. God as Redeemer of Hebrew slaves in Exodus has left his people with a good example of faithfulness, compassion, and justice. God as heavenly Father in Jesus' teaching has served as the perfect model for his children to relate to others in the kingdom of God.

In the Bible, we also see harmonious relations are encouraged and demanded through legal requirement, moral persuasion, radical discipleship, and eschatological hope. (1) The legal system reminds people of God's actions of mercy and justice in the Exodus event and provides clear guidance for them to properly relate to one another. As an institutionalized standard with enforced penalties, it is also intended to deter improper or hurtful behaviors toward others. The *modus operandi* of this system is justice in the sense of reciprocity and retribution. (2) Since no law can regulate personal motivations, the prophets tended to rely on moral persuasion to

^⑤ 姚西伊 Yao Xiyi,《中國基督教唯愛主義運動》Zhongguo jidujiao weilai zhuyi yundong [The Protestant Pacifist Movement in China],(香港 Hong Kong:基道 Jidao [Logos],2008),121-188.

encourage harmony between social classes by pointing out the hazard of conflict and the value of concord. They emphasized God's preferential love for the poor.^③In addition to justice, therefore, compassion is considered essential for a social ethic that seeks to transform the status quo of the society for the common good. (3) Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God calls for repentance and believing, the willingness to change one's life and the trust in God's power to create everything anew, including social relations. To follow Jesus' commandment to love the invisible God, the suffering neighbors, and the despicable enemies, and to imitate his self-sacrifice and forgiveness for his persecutors, one needs to have a new value and new attitude toward other people. Only when a person is totally converted by the teaching and life of Jesus can he find the courage and strength to treat others with altruistic love as Jesus did. Thus, a virtue ethics focusing on character formation is vital. (4) Finally, Paul's vision of all baptized people being one in Christ gives us an eschatological hope to see racial-ethnic, national, social, and gender boundaries be dismantled and a new society that transcends harmony to become unity be established. A church that displays unity in love is the best preview to this ideal society. When a society is harmonious, world peace becomes attainable.

In our brief survey of biblical interpretation in the West and in China, we have seen how biblical visions of conflict and concord are appropriated in different social-historical settings. To apply the wisdom of the Bible to the construction of a harmonious society, we will do well to combine several sets of ideas: (1) to remember God's amazing grace to us and imitate his faithfulness, compassion, and justice in all our dealings with other people; (2) to obey the biblical law of justice, adhere to the prophets' teaching of kindness, follow Jesus' example of self-sacrificial love, and take Paul's advice of love in unity; (3) to cultivate personal moral character and as a society to develop a fair and just legal system; and (4) to consider political, social, and cultural realities and to pursue biblical ideals to ensure justice for all and practice kindness to the poor. From a biblical point of view, a long-lasting harmonious society can be built, if every citizen practices virtue ethics in their individual lives and national leaders apply social ethics to their making of policies and laws.

^③ Daniel Groody, *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007), 194-197.

中文题目:

冲突与和谐:冥思圣经对于社会关系的愿景

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摘要:历史多是由战争而非和平写成的,而人类社会受制于种族,国家,阶级与性别之间的紧张与冲突远大于和睦与团结。因此,社会和谐常是一个乌托邦式的梦想,可欲不可得。圣经作为宗教经典与文化规范,对于型塑基督教文明的价值与愿景有极为深刻的影响。那麽,圣经对于社会关系有什么特别的看法呢?这篇论文检验圣经文本几个主要传统对于冲突与和谐这个主题的看法,并评价中西方几位有代表性的释经家,看他们如何使用圣经来抑恶扬善改造社会。本文针对圣经对于社会关系的愿景与影响作一个宏观的评论与深刻的反省,希望对于促进社会和谐这个命题能提出一些有益的宗教看法。

关键词:冲突、和谐、社会关系、经典诠释、基督宗教愿景