

John Wayne, and the Prophetic  
Post-Eschatological Vision

Often I found myself leaning back in my roommate's chair, watching television during the weekdays. I got back to the dorm before my roommate, adjusted the thermostat, and flipped through channels. That Fall was the first time in my life I had the luxury of completely disinterested TV watching. Slowly I made my way through the limited school-provided cable, never fully removing my thumb from the channel-up button. I sat close enough that I could manually change the station, and I felt on my face the static from the screen.

After making a full circuit, I arrived back at the news. If I can't entertain myself, I might as well be well-informed. With the volume turned low, I stared blankly at the screen, watching the news until my roommate returned and we could leave for the cafeteria.

Early in the semester, the news looked back at the event from a few weeks earlier in the summer, the mass shooting in Aurora, Colorado. I listened to the recounting of the story I had heard countless times already, curious if any of the talking heads would share some new insight on the tragedy.

*...during the midnight screening of the film The Dark Knight Rises...*

*...sole assailant, James Eagan Holmes, killed twelve people and injured seventy others...*

*...the deadliest shooting in Colorado since the Columbine High School massacre.*

There was never anything new, but I stared anyway.

I heard the knob on the door begin to jiggle, signaling my roommate's return from his afternoon classes. When he finally managed to infiltrate the room, he dropped his bag by his bunk, the books landing with a thud. His eyes were drawn to the screen, and neither of us spoke. He pulled up my chair and watched.

He was an english-major and I a student of religion; our homework mostly consisted of long reading assignments. To put off our work, scenes like this had become common. We often watched television for a half-hour or so before heading to dinner. It was a quiet break in the day between classes and evening activities. We both sat there silently, watching the familiar footage of Aurora and the Century 16 theater.

*...Jonathan Blunk is among four victims who died while protecting their girlfriends...*

*...despite the tragedy, The Dark Knight Rises still managed six and half million at the weekend box-office...*

The anchors continued to reiterate familiar details, punctuated by teasers for updates regarding the fate of Holmes.

"Did I tell you we started another book in my lit class." My roommate did not divert his eyes as he spoke. "That professor is getting on my nerves."

"What are y'all reading now."

*"All Quiet on the Western Front."* The television hummed.

Though daylight came through the window, the lights were out and the room was gray, a faint glow radiating from the TV screen. The newsman listed the names of the twelve dead before leading into a commercial break, promising information on what we could expect out of the penal process when he returned.

Remaining seated, my roommate stretched over to his backpack and dragged it over to him. He rummaged through it and lifted out his crinkled copy of the Erich Maria Remarque classic. “I read this section this morning: ‘I become faint, all at once I cannot do any more. I won’t revile any more, it is senseless, I could drop down and never rise up again.’ I thought it was pretty interesting.” He slipped the book back into his bag.

I looked over at my friend, “What’s the context? What’s he talking about there?”

The news returned, and the anchor’s voice muttered out of the old TV set.

Like the old religions of the east, those of the Sumerians and Egyptians, the Persians and Indo-Aryans, those today buried under sand and mysticism—like those—the Judeo-Christian faith holds at its primeval core a *tradition*. With ritual that stretches back beyond time immemorial at its base, the Abrahamic religion is perceived as static or constant, like laws carved into stone. But as is the case in any system, when you look close enough, there is progress.

The ancient faith begins with the rising of a nation. Having spent 400 years under the thumb of the Egyptians, the Israelites are freed by their savior Moses, who under the name of Yahweh marches them out across the Red Sea into the wilderness to receive a revelation at Sinai. There in the desolate wastes, a generation joins their fathers in the earth, and a nation refined by the desert heat advances on Canaan.

Captaining an ominous campaign accompanied by biblical plagues and divine fury, Joshua takes up the mantle of Moses and leads the Israelites across the land promised to them. Along his way, he crushes a coalition of five kingdoms whose rulers have fled to a cave for hiding. When they are found, the kings are dragged from their cave, shouting for mercy. They are

quieted as they are thrown down at Joshua's feet, each receiving a mouthful of dust. The kings look up from their bellies at their enemy, scratches on their faces unsightly for such leaders. Joshua looks down at them. Without averting his gaze, he calls out to his captains, "Come near; put your feet on the necks of these kings." His men quickly oblige with spartan sobriety. "Do not be afraid or dismayed; be strong and courageous. For thus the LORD will do to all your enemies against whom you fight." Joshua pulls his ragged sword from its sheath. And with strained hacks, he separates the head of each of the five kings from its body. The corpses are hung on trees until sundown, and the next morning Israel continues their conquest.

As the nation grows, settles, formalizes, as they adopt a monarchy, they continue to exercise their strength. Their most celebrated ruler, King David, the man after God's heart, leads them as a conquering hero, going out to battle each spring. He is a warrior prince, claiming fame from the head of Goliath. To him, the chosen people always look back.

Israel, throughout their time, assumes an ideology of might. They live by the sword to push back the stronger nations that would have them as slaves. But throughout their legacy, there are whispers, voices calling out from the desert, from the graves of their father, calling for something new. In each of their rites and rituals, they are developing a theology. It is organic, growing outward like an olive branch. Within their received revelation, there is room for change.

In the bitter cold of January 1525, high up in the Swiss Alps, a small contingent gathered in the home of Felix Manz. In the corner near the door was a pile of hooded robes and capes for the covert trek to and from the house, and in the center of Manz's home knelt those who had bravely come that night. With their eyes shut, they all moved their lips in hushed tones.

Conrad Grebel was their outspoken leader who had suggested they go to the Father in prayer, but it would not be Grebel who would begin their movement. Instead when George Blaurock, an ex-Catholic priest, arose from his prayers, it was he who demanded baptism. He asked Grebel if he would perform the sacrament. As Grebel obliged, a gasp spread out among the secret meeting, for those who were gathered knew what this meant. Infant baptism marked a person for the state church, making re-baptism both treason and apostasy. Thus were born the Anabaptists.

The early 16th century saw more than its fair share of upheaval and change. It was the time of men like Martin Luther and John Calvin, launching the Protestant Reformation and forever changing the face of Europe and Christianity. It was in this context that the Radical Reformation occurred and the Anabaptist Movement spread.

The hope of the Anabaptists was to return to the Holy Scriptures, to be as “biblical” as possible. Their theology focused on believer’s baptism and simple communion, and rejected civil governments, oath-taking, and violence. They were staunch pacifists.

It is hard to tell if the movement produced a certain kind of individual or simply attracted them. Regardless, the Anabaptists were uncannily zealous, and countless stories of their unwavering faith are recorded in the *Martyrs Mirror* (also known as *The Bloody Theater*). They were sincere in their beliefs and particularly pious. They were—and *are*, for those who remain—a peculiar brand of Christian.

The passion of the Anabaptists led to unswerving persecution and unnumbered deaths. Because of their radical doctrine, they were persecuted by the Catholic Church as well as

Protestant, those who themselves had split off from the state church. They were forsaken on all sides.

And yet, when they were arrested and mocked and murdered and burned at the stake, they did not resist.

Mirroring the generations of slavery, for 400 years the Israelites rely on their monarchy to sustain them. But as the kingship crumbles, prophets are sent to the people. The message of these heralds comprises the largest portion of the Holy Scriptures.

The prophets of Israel are those with a unique task. Shaken in their sleep, their eyes follow an outstretched arm pointing toward the mountain city of Jerusalem. There they will proclaim their vision:

*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD / To the house of the God of Jacob!  
That He may teach us concerning His ways / And that we may walk in His paths.  
For the law will go forth from Zion / And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  
And He will judge between the nations, / And will render decisions for many peoples;  
And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation will not lift up sword against nation, / And never again will they learn war.  
Come, house of Jacob, and let us walk in the light of the LORD!*

Some are applauded for their message, others are imprisoned; some privately plead with a king, others proclaim their message wrapped in animal skins with a staff in their hands from a riverbank far from the city-center. These wandering souls, though varied and unique to their time, carry with them a commonality: the Post-Eschatological Vision.

The prophetic vision, hailed at God's children, describes what the end of days—the *eschaton*—will look like, how the Israelites can expect to be redeemed. Scholars divide the Post-

Eschatological Vision into seven elements: King, Land, Temple, Unity, Covenant, Purpose, and Shalom. In all these God will redeem his people—restoring the line of David, reuniting the tribes, and so on—but it is in the idea of *Shalom* that the prophets find the fullest representation of their vision.

Shalom, the Hebrew word for “peace,” has a wide range of connotations, including wholeness, prosperity, and welfare. But at its core, it is *peace*. Peace that swallows up the voices of violence.

Asperen, Netherlands was and is a small village, never giving rise to anyone of note but producing an abundance of snow in the winter, as is common in northern Europe.

Dirk Willems was a young man of Asperen, and a sympathizer for the Anabaptist Movement. Boldly, he chose to be re-baptized as an adult, though he believed his secret to have never left the shadows.

By his actions he rejected the infant baptism ordained by both Catholics and established Protestants in the Netherlands. It was a choice that he often thought back to, lying awake in his cot late at night when the only sounds to hear were the crows outside his window. His deed, though an act of faith, was treason. Only a few other sympathizers had been present when he was submerged in the watery grave, but he could not be certain if his secret had spread. When he saw the faces of the citizens of Asperen, he could not be certain whose allegiance lay with the Church and State.

Willems would occasionally go through town, minding his affairs, and hear whispers. The Church has turned a blind eye to these re-baptizers in the past, he would hear someone say, but now anyone known to fraternize with the Anabaptists will be condemnable.

But the Catholic Church had no reason to come to Asperen, he reminded himself.

Willems appreciated those who had also joined with the movement, but avoided seeing them during the day. When he would encounter them, they would inform him of another soul saved, another person re-baptized. Our numbers are growing, Dirk! they would say with such enthusiasm. Their numbers were growing, and the Church would know.

The last day of autumn, just before the first snowfall, Willems went into town to attend to some business. As he walked down the street passing from one shop to another, he was stopped. A man with sturdy arms placed a heavy hand on Willem's shoulder. A small man standing beside him asked, Are you Dirk Willems? He said, I am. The little man sneered, All those practicing re-baptism are hereby condemned by the Holy Roman Church; you are under arrest, Dirk Willems.

With little effort, the strong man turned Willems around and tied his wrists together.

We watched the news maunder on about the shooting, describing every angle of the attack as recreated by the investigators and witnesses. They talked about the bullets used and where the guns were bought, how many times the trigger was pulled. We changed the channel.

Flipping to the 1939 Western classic, *Stagecoach*, we found that we hadn't missed much of the movie. The picture quality of the film was a perfect match for our television set, so we thought we were in luck. We watched as U.S. cavalry Lieutenant Blanchard (played by the youthful Tim Holt) informs the titular stagecoach team that Geronimo and his Apaches are on the



warpath. In perfect 30s dramatic flair, dread flashes across the face of the coach driver, but when Blanchard assures him that a small contingent will provide an escort, the driver denies any need for one.

We both stared at the screen, neither of us having seen the film. My roommate leaned back in his chair, and I mirrored him.

“So are you liking *All Quiet on the Western Front*?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think so—of course, I’m not far into it. It’s all about war—pillaging, killing, PTSD, all that. It’s pretty dark.” He brought his chair back to level ground and leaned forward in it, not taking his eyes off the black and white screen. “I don’t know why, it just keeps bothering me.”

Without turning, I nodded my head in reply.

As they make their way across the rugged terrain, the stagecoach comes across a lone man sitting on his horse. The coach draws near, and we see that it is John Wayne—not yet a cinematic legend—spinning his shotgun with ease. With Monument Valley in the background, the camera zooms in on his unimpressed expression. It is soon revealed that he’s the fugitive Ringo Kid, and his horse has become lame. Even though he is friends with one of the coachmen, they are obliged to take him into custody.

“I’ve always liked Westerns,” my roommate said. “I grew up watching them with my dad. I liked that they were simple—white hats for the good guys, black for the bad. There was never anything to worry about at the end of the movie, no confusion, nothing a good gunfight couldn’t solve.”

I nodded. I liked them too.

We sat there, letting the movie play. The light from the window dimmed and the glow from the television grew more pronounced on our faces. We let the supper hour slip by us. The film suspended us, fearing the approaching Apaches.

“I don’t get why they have us read this stuff,” he started again, “It’s depressing. Not that there’s anything wrong with that—I love *Where the Red Fern Grows*. It’s just that these World War stories gets me down for no reason. There’s no such thing as trench warfare anymore.”

“I totally agree—but depressing? I just wish we’d stop reading them because I’ve heard it before. I’ve read *Catch 22*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, I get it. It’s bad. I just don’t really care anymore.”

On the screen, action roars. In one of the most famous scenes in cinematic history, the stagecoach crashes through the desert with Geronimo and his Apaches descending upon it. The Ringo Kid is given a shotgun. He takes aim at a nearing Indian—the savage. He fires.

The Apache falls from his horse, dead.

The stagecoach is able to hold the attackers off, and just as bullets begin to run low and hope begins to fade, the cavalry arrives, trumpets blaring—hope in martial form.

I faced the screen, almost sad that the adventure was ending. I added, “There’s a reason people stopped writing books like that.”

He kept his eyes on the screen, as all the loose ends were being tied up for the stagecoach travelers. He nodded his head.

\*\*\*

“Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” After saying these words, Jesus of Nazareth was arrested and taken to trial. In a few short hours, he would submit himself to death, the culmination of his divine mission.

These words that are spoken at the end of Christ’s life are foreshadowed earlier in his ministry, during his renowned Sermon on the Mount. Jesus takes his disciples, the crowds that had been following him, up on a hillside. Walking up to soldier that had joined his disciples, he says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Next, kneeling beside a widow and her son, he says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” As the sun slides across the sky, Jesus and his disciples enjoy an intimate discussion. He sits among them; he tells stories, makes them laugh. A man sitting near the back, calls out, What do you mean peacemaker? What do we do if someone attacks us? Jesus looks at the man, tilting his head. Compassion is clear in his eyes. “Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” When he says these words, there is no sarcasm, no sense of hyperbole—only truth.

The Son of God adopts and reiterates the prophetic vision in order to call his disciples to a new way of living. He is the figure, waking men in their sleep. With an outstretched arm, he points the way to the New Jerusalem—Zion, they call it. He claims that those living in the Kingdom of God do not seek authority, control, or hierarchy. They are not consumed by power struggles. Instead, they take on humility, submission, slavery to righteousness, death to self, unconditional Shalom.

And after his ascension, Christ’s followers continue in this tradition. St. Paul exhorts the Roman church to not return evil for evil, pleading, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you,

live at peace with everyone.” He will not speak for the pain and hurt that will inevitably come out of the fisted hands of the world, but he can direct in the ways of Christian living: live at peace.

The whole of the Christian message is a gospel of Love. In his writings, St. John explains that the Trinitarian God is, in his nature, love. Christ teaches the scribes of Judea that the greatest and truest laws of their Torah are to love. And what love is, St. Paul describes in his Corinthian poem. Love leaves no room for violence. Like Christ on the *Via Dolorosa*, we return violence with peace, even to the point of death.

Though its former beauty as a residential palace was unmistakable, the despair of what had become a prison was unescapable. The furniture had been removed and the paint stripped. In a room on the highest floor with a single window, Willems was kept, looking out onto the frozen field and woods below.

As days passed, he did not give up hope, though he did grow familiar with his trappings. Two meager meals a day, his waste bucket emptied, and a guard change at dawn and at dusk. The evening guard was far from friendly, but he insisted on talking. How was the bread today? Still stale? he would ask. I hear Asperen is nice this time of year. Willems sometimes responded but most often remained silent, wishing the guard to fall asleep and leave him alone while he did his moonlight work. During the day, he curled up by the chilled window and looked out. He muttered to himself the tenets of the faith to which he was baptized: death to sin and resurrection through baptism, partaking in the Lord’s supper as remembrance, forsaking civil government, and forsaking violence, never killing, always showing mercy.

Like a snake, winter coiled tighter on the Netherlands, and Willems was reminded by the diminishing size of his rations. In the short time he was there, he grew thin and unseemly to look at. His face was hollow and his eyes sunken in. He yearned to catch the rats that kept him up at night for some meat to fill his belly, but he could not capture one.

But on a particular night, when the evening guard had again fallen asleep, Willems put into use the project he had so stealthily toiled for. He tied his rope of knotted rags to a column in his room, broke his window, and flung the rope out into the free air.

The guard was awoken by the shattering of glass, but by the time he had unlocked the door, Willems was out the window. The guard called down the hallway for backup before descending the rope himself. He moved as quickly as possible and soon reached the end of the rags, falling down onto the frozen moat below. He picked himself up and looked outward, away from the prison, and saw Willems running into the distant forest.

Anyone familiar with a history book knows the blemished past of Christianity, with the stories of crusades and inquisitions and many more instances where innocent blood has been spilt in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Undeniably, Christianity has a history of violence. However, Christianity, that mighty religion, also has a peculiar history of pacifism.

From its earliest days, pacifism was there. Tertullian, the father of Latin Christianity, wrote that even though Moses carried his rod and Joshua led Israelites in formation, that even though centurions were welcomed in the church, that Jesus—the Lord—in “disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier.” In keeping with this peaceful orthodoxy, the bishop Cyprian of Carthage taught,

*Consider the roads blocked up by robbers, the seas beset with pirates, wars scattered all over the earth with the bloody horror of camps. The whole world is wet with mutual blood; and murder, which in the case of an individual is admitted to be a crime, is called a virtue when it is committed wholesale.*

There was never a doubt, never a thought otherwise. But just as God's people hadn't always known his ways, so they would soon forget them. As the Roman empire consumed all in its path, including the Judean upstart religion of Christianity, debates began to flower. Pacifism or the enigmatic Just-War?

The humble tradition was lost. For 1,500 more years, it would not be properly reclaimed.

But the Church, in all of her divine mystery, would not let it die. The greats: Leo Tolstoy, John Howard Yoder, Menno Simmons (of Anabaptist notoriety), Ammon Hennacy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bartholomeus de Ligt—those who sought to reclaim the precious doctrine, that which separates their faith from the religions of the world—would not let it die. Though they found pacifism gathering dust, they acknowledge within Christ's teachings a demand for peace—never a preference for peace, as some would have. They stand by the adamant truth that violence is incompatible with Christianity, and the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Distinctive non-violence is a staple of the church. It has not always been that way for God's people. He had to show them; through the slow passage of time, over millennia, he showed them. It was a development, outside of the rites and rituals. But eventually it took hold, and like yeast, it spread.

Each vine and branch that stretched across Willems's path was an added obstacle in his fretful flight. He tore through them just as their briars tore through his skin. His chest heaved and

despite the cold piercing his bare feet, he was flush and his skin burned. He could hear the shouts of his pursuers and did not relent.

The trees broke and Willems found himself standing before the Hondegat, a wide frozen pond. The forest continued on the other side, but he dared not cross—the ice was too thin. He looked to his right and to his left; the pond stretched out in both directions.

Again, shouts rang behind him. They were getting closer, and he knew he didn't have time. He peered down at the ice, and then across the pond at the trees. He looked back down. Then he stretched out his leg and placed one foot on the ice. It held. He placed the other. It held.

Willems rushed out on the ice and hurried to safety on the other side. Whether by providence or by starvation, the ice held firmly beneath him. When he reached the middle of the frozen pond, he heard again the shouts of his evening guard unhindered by trees. He turned back to see the guard stepping out on the ice in pursuit. Willems faced away and continued his flight towards the forest. When he reached the other side, he stopped, whispering prayers of thankfulness. He turned to see if his pursuer had gained.

There in the middle of the pond, Willem's guard stood, his knees wobbling and his arms outstretched for balance. Willems knew what was happening, but he could not move. Without warning, the ice broke beneath the prison guard. He fell straight down into the blue pool below. Willems looked at the man, flailing in the ice water, like knived-fingers dragging him down. He turned around and looked out at the woods, lovely, dark and deep. He turned around and looked again at the broken ice.

The escapee ran out onto the frozen pond from which he had just come. He arrived in the center and stood at the hole in the layer of ice. The guard screamed and swatted the air. Willems

grabbed his hand and dragged him out of the water. The ice cut at the man's belly, but he would live. Willems dragged him over to safety, and upon reaching land, collapsed in exhaustion.

No sooner had the guard been rescued than other soldiers from the prison arrived. With their swords in hand, they pointed at the sighted fugitive lying down in the snow. They rushed over to him and bound him. They dragged him back to the prison.

Stocks were added to Dirk Willems's room, and in them he was kept. On May 16, 1569, he was led to a stake and pyre outside of Asperen, and on them he was burned.

With the movie over and supper missed, we decided to order pizza. And as long as we were waiting, we might as well see what else was on television. We flipped channels for a moment and came back to the news station. They were still talking about the Aurora shooting.

They covered a lot of material that they'd covered an hour and half earlier. The place, the people, the planning. For a moment, we considered changing the channel.

“That line you read earlier—from *All Quiet on the Western Front*—can you read it again?”

“Why?” my roommate asked with his arms crossed.

“Just read it.”

He groaned as he leaned to grab the book from his backpack. He flipped to the page: “I become faint, all at once I cannot do any more. I won't revile any more, it is senseless, I could drop down and never rise up again.” He crossed his arms again.

*...Prior to the shooting, Holmes rigged his apartment with homemade explosives. Fortunately the bomb squad was able to diffuse them...*



Though I had the remote in my hands, I leaned forward to use the buttons on the face of the television. I lowered the volume to a whisper, and I looked at the screen for a moment. “See, I just don’t get it.”

“What do you mean?” My roommate began to use his hands to talk. “I feel like it’s pretty clear. He’s saying that war and death and stuff, it’s so awful that he feels defeated by it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I seriously doubt that,” I said with some bite. “If anything, he’s making the point that he’s tired of it. He feels bogged down by it all; he wants to move on in his life.”

My friend adjusted to look squarely at me, and I turned to face him. “How do you get that? People aren’t numbed to the—sin, can I say sin?—of death. The constant death he sees is effecting him.”

“Perhaps—but that doesn’t mean that he’s *so* consumed with the horrors of war.”

*...The event has led to a spike in gun purchases in weeks since and has spurred others to debate the issue of gun control...*

He leaned forward and pressed the power button on the set. “That’s exactly what he’s saying. He can’t go on—he wants to drop dead.”

“He sounds like a middle school girl. Are we reading the same line?”

For a short time, I looked at the floor, and he looked at a wall. I grabbed the remote and set it next to the television.

“It doesn’t matter. At least we can agree that this stuff doesn’t matter anymore...” I trailed off.

He looked back at me, “If only you could convince my teacher of that.”

After that we talked about intramural sports and if my high school days were too far gone for me to be able to compete in soccer. We forgot all about our discussion and about the news story. I forgot that earlier that summer, I had explained to a group of teenagers that we couldn't go see a movie as planned because of a shooting in Aurora, Colorado that night.

I wouldn't remember until a few years later on August 26, 2015, when James Eagan Holmes would be given 12 life sentences, one for every person he killed, and 3,318 years for the attempted murders of those he wounded and for rigging his apartment with explosives—not quite the *lex talionis* we thought he deserved. We forgot, and we got ready for bed.