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# Violence in the Religious Language of Christianity: Historical Analysis of Christian Religious Language Containing Violence as a Source of Critical Theology

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## Abstract

*Historical fact indicates that the religious language of Christianity is rife with violence. The spiritual language is echoed in such bloody tragedies as war, murder, and punishment. This study aimed to encourage Christianity to understand violent religious language by viewing it in a reflective frame. The study uses qualitative methods to analyze history, so the literature that records the incidents of Christianity's involvement in violence is used. Analysis of the various literature produced two essential things as critical reflections on Christian theology. Based on historical facts of Christianity's involvement in violence, Christianity was at one time in a phase creating its doctrine (violence is not God's will), and Christianity played God (God did not engage in violence). That discovery is supposed to be part of a critical vehement from a violent point of view.*

**Keywords:**

Christianity, Historical, Religious Language, Violence.

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## Introduction

Religion has no doubt its role in various conflicts, not only scriptural texts but also specific languages or words of a religious nature, which significantly influence a conflict. Gopin, however, said that religion's role in perpetuating conflict hardly requires a description of cases or events, as it happens blatantly. For example, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Jews as murderers, and religious-nationalist parties engaged in aggressive land grab in the name of God, mass murder, and suicide in the name of God.<sup>1</sup> Some of these images should be enough to say that religious violence has been plundered. As motivation, it is not uncommon for acts of violence to be carried out accompanied by religious language. Religious language has enormous *power* in bringing about violence. In a more open-minded sense, the blame is not placed on religion as an institution but on adherents who "use" religion as the validity of violence.

Long before entering the modern world, religious language existed and was used to describe an act considered noble. For example, the label *martyr* echoed in the early days of Christianity and referred to in Islamic history as *martyrdom*, through war or suicide using an explosive device that began to be assembled, was understood as a noble goal of obtaining paradise.<sup>2</sup> In his book, *Inside Terrorism: Revised and Expanded Edition*, Hoffman, quoting Rapoport, says that religion is the only justification for acts of terrorism.<sup>3</sup> In line with Rapoport, Kimball, in his book *When Religion Becomes Evil*, says that ideology and religious commitment are undeniably significant factors in the rise in violence around the world.<sup>4</sup> This opinion cannot be refuted, considering that it is based on historical facts that record acts of

violence in the name of religion. Therefore, through the study of literature, various historical facts about violent acts will be raised again to see the extent to which the religious language of Christianity is perpetuated to commit violent crimes.

Research that has been conducted by Loba, Nainggolan, Gale, and Tanureja raises three dimensions of violence: human violence, violence of God, and violence in prayer.<sup>5</sup> The research is good because it delves into violent texts in the Old Testament, contributing to a correct understanding, especially looking at violence in the context of the text. Exploring violence from the biblical perspective or context of violence is at least one attempt to describe the phenomenon of violence that has occurred in Old Testament times or before Christ. What about the violent events after the time of Jesus Christ? Is it possible that God, who worked in Old Testament times with various laws, commandments, and even His presence in certain forms colored by violence, would have worked similarly after Jesus Christ? And how did the violence happen? These questions require further research, so this research will focus on violent events in Christianity that occurred after the time of Jesus Christ to modern world times.

Another study conducted by Seibert also raised violence in Old Testament times. What is interesting in Seibert's research is his attempt to expose the two poles of view: defending or criticizing God's violent behavior in Old Testament times. The research opens up a variety of argumental bases in defending or criticizing God's violence. Seibert's partiality is quite evident that the God of the Old Testament was a Divine Warrior (God did violence for the right reasons) for His people.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the Old Testament times live in a different context. However, in the age after Jesus Christ, belief in God's involvement in Christian violence is still

<sup>1</sup> Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism: Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 84.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Wake Forest University, 2008), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Klementius Anselmus Loba et al., "Trilogi Kekerasan Dalam Perjanjian Lama," *KAMASEAN: Jurnal Teologi Kristen* 4, no. 2 (2023): 167-86, <https://doi.org/10.34307/kamasean.v4i2.253>.

<sup>6</sup> Eric A. Seibert, "Recent Research on Divine Violence in the Old Testament (with Special Attention to Christian Theological Perspectives)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 15, no. 1 (2016): 8-40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993x15600588>.

echoed, especially seen in religious language that links violence to God. In this research, the author will show that the history of violence involving Christians continues from the time after Jesus Christ to the modern world with the echo of the religious language of Christianity that contains and perpetuates violence against humanity. Thus, the spiritual language of Christianity is a source of humanitarian conflict.

In many acts of violence, it is often based on religious language. The spiritual language in question is theological words and sentences that link violent acts with God. In this situation, Christianity should create a correct understanding of what is reasonable and appropriate according to Bible-based Christian ethics. Not the other way around, developing a sense of what is good and proper according to the rationality of the individual or group in understanding God. This effort is a form of criticism of Christians who misunderstand and live Christian religiosity and criticism of Christianity, who are not vocal in voicing what is wrong because they are confined to God's commission and love. Thus, this study aims to encourage Christianity to understand violent religious language by looking at it in terms of reflection. This activity of understanding is a form of critical reflection in Christian theology.

## Method

After explaining the problem or background central to a study, this section will convey research methods. Following Zaluchu's opinion, research must depart from the root of the problem to determine the suitable method to use, of course, to conduct systematic research.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the method used in this study is qualitative, with a literature study. Its exploratory nature supports exploring the history of violent acts involving Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Exploring past events through various literature will show historical evidence that religious language has played a role in events of humanitarian conflict. Starting from events,

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<sup>7</sup> Sonny Eli Zaluchu, "Qualitative and Quantitative Research Strategies in Religious Research," *Evangelical: Journal of Evangelical Theology and Community Formation* 4, no. 1 (2020): 28-38.

<sup>8</sup> W John Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods*

the meaning of language and how language is used to validate violence will be revealed. This research can contribute to critical theology in Christianity, which states that the various religious languages of Christianity contain human violence. Therefore, Christianity requires deep reflection on the qualities of faith that should ground goodness. Through literature study, it will show the problem that causes the need for research, namely the existence of violence in the religious language of Christianity. It will involve dialogue with figures who explain the situation and have diverse views. Not only discussing the problem but also showing the importance or benefit of this research.<sup>9</sup> To answer the purpose of the study, three segments or subheadings will be presented in the discussion: first, religious language that contains violence in the history of Christianity; second, humans create their teachings; and finally, humans play the role of God.

## Result & Discussion

### Violent Religious Language in the History of Christianity

At the time of early Christianity, in 532 C.E. in Rome, Christianity was not the same Christians at the time of Jesus. They became very passionate, manifested in acts of violence that signified their intolerance towards worshippers of other gods. With stone and iron, fanatical Christians attacked the temples. Statues were torn down and destroyed, pagans were killed, 700,000 ancient books were burned and neatly stored in libraries, and even Greek philosophers were targeted for assassination. They claim that God did the destruction and removal of all idols, "our Savior has trampled on all," and to bring all people into "holy

*Approaches*, Fifth Edit. (California: SAGE Publications, 2018), 67.

<sup>9</sup> Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 68.

churches" to be baptized.<sup>10</sup> The historical reality of violence in Christianity provides awareness of the gap between the image of Jesus as a peacemaker exemplified. Peace not only brings reconciliation between God and man but also among fellow men. However, what Jesus did was not in line with the Christian way of life and behavior.

A series of Crusade events in the history of Christianity is enough to show how these events were colored by religious language used as a source of motivation. The first crusade was around 1095-1099, attempting to retake Jerusalem from the Muslims; the call was *Deus Volt* (God wills it). The call was echoed in a bloody tragedy: beheading enemies, shooting with arrows, torture in embers. They claim that such an act is God's just and extraordinary judgment and that as a result of blasphemy against the unbeliever, the place must be filled with the blood of unbelievers or non-believers.<sup>11</sup> *Deus Volt, the call uttered, meant God's command, and Christians at the time viewed violence as the right way, following God's command to retake Jerusalem.*

The history of Christianity in Europe, especially Spain, cannot be separated from the acts of violence committed during the Inquisition, where the church took over the punishment, especially the punishment of heretics, or people considered heretics and deviated from church teachings around 1250-1800. Heretics were imprisoned, chained, burned without mercy, and baked in the oven. "Most Holy of God" was the motto that Christianity lived by at that time; even the words "Most Holy of God" were found on various instruments of torture and murder. The violence was not only directed against heretics but also against Jews who were considered not to follow the rules of the church.<sup>12</sup> Acts of violence are based on religious language, that God is holy; could God's holiness legalize violence?

In 1517, efforts to reform church rules that did not prioritize biblical teaching, perhaps also from 95 propositions, including protesting punitive rules at the time of the

Inquisition. However, reform efforts did not necessarily improve the Christian order, mainly Catholic and Protestant relations. The Protestant Reformation caused a bloody tragedy with Catholicism. This bloody tragedy is referred to as a civil war involving Western and European countries for approximately 30 years. By Catholics, Protestants are called poor heretics, where on August 24, 1572, in the massacre of St. Bartholomew, approximately 10,000 Protestants were massacred in France. Pope Gregory, however, attributed the success of the slayers to "God's help."<sup>13</sup>

In the context of violence, since the Reformation, Christianity has not quickly abandoned punishment in the form of violence. The government of the United States, as a Christian country, shows a dark history of inhuman punishment, especially the oppression of blacks. The Punishment of the Cross and lynching was an untried sentence imposed around 1880-1940, especially on blacks. Not without reason, "divine right," they believe that America is a white country called by God to bear witness to the superiority of "white people over black people."<sup>14</sup>

The spirit of reform, at least on the one hand, brought Christianity to a better doctrinal order by relying entirely on the Bible. Many changes have occurred, not only from the doctrinal dimension but also from the mission of Christianity, which should be seen as an effort to reform evangelism that was previously carried out with complete political and violent elements. In doing missions, Christians go out to reach out to the world, where they are no longer perpetrators of violence but victims of violence. Missionaries who went to Japan in 1616 were killed by beheading for supposedly opposing the three major religions in Japan: Buddhism, Sinto, and Confucianism.<sup>15</sup> In Christian missionary groups, it may be challenging to obtain a history of violent evangelism. More are found in Christian countries that spread Christianity by violent means.

Entering the beginning of the modern world, in addition to pursuing missions, the

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Nixey, *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World*, First edit. (New York: Macmillan, 2017), 2-7.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Harms and Todd M. Ferry, *The Palestine-Israel Conflict; A Basic Introduction*, Second edi. (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 35-37 .

<sup>12</sup> Helen Ellerbe, "The Dark Side of Christian History," *Cross and Cosmos*, 2019, 76-84.

<sup>13</sup> Ellerbe, "The Dark Side of Christian History," 95.

<sup>14</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 2-5.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 87-88.

dynamics of Christianity are colored by radical Christian groups. "We want peace, but if cleansing must precede peace, then let the cleansing begin."<sup>16</sup> This phrase was expressed by a very religious Christian terrorist named Kerry Noble in an interview with Jessica Stern. The "purification" that Noble refers to is the extermination, murder, or elimination of Jews, blacks, and sinners for the world to end soon to witness the return of the Messiah. They hoped that the violence would hasten the return of the Messiah and considered that they were carrying out "God's judgment."<sup>17</sup> Since entering the early 19th century, the motivation for religious violence has emerged as the modern world changes. Tragically, religious views have gone so deep as to dehumanize one's conscience. Baumaster, however, said that in achieving a particular goal, evil is no longer seen as a crime. On the other hand, Baumaster also affirms that it is paradoxical to do evil but consider themselves to be doing good.<sup>18</sup>

In 1984, a pastor named Michael Bray and the people who followed him, especially his association with the *Army of God*, were a group of Christians who opposed abortion in the United States. Their resistance was demonstrated through burning down abortion clinics and killing doctors identified as being involved in the practice. This uprising resulted in them being considered a Christian terrorist group.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, many Christians disagree with such acts of violence, citing morality, that what they do does not demonstrate morality as human beings. The Christian group refers to themselves as "saints of Christ," especially those arrested for involvement in burning clinics and killing abortion doctors. In addition to the "saint of Christ," one of the young men involved in the rebellion, 19-year-old Jonathan O'Toole, claimed to be a member of the *Army of God*, and God was the supreme general. Therefore, they believe that the act is justifiable

murder.<sup>20</sup>

In 2013, *Human Rights Watch* conducted research on abuses against religious minorities in Indonesia. The results showed that several incidents of violence in the name of religion in Indonesia also involved Christianity as the second-largest religion. In Maluku and Poso, Christians committed violence against Muslim minorities. In other parts of Eastern Indonesia, Christians are also often involved in hindering the construction of mosques.<sup>21</sup> The study did not convey the use of Christian religious language in acts of violence. Still, the involvement of Christianity in violence in Indonesia provides awareness that Christian violence does not only occur in the age after Jesus Christ and the beginning of the modern world.

### Man Creates His Teachings

Could God, who worked in Old Testament times with various laws, commandments, and His presence in certain forms, have worked similarly after Jesus Christ? This question cannot be separated from the violent phenomenon of Christianity that occurred after Jesus Christ, even in modern times. The use of religious language that links acts of violence to God seems to validate or justify the violence. Is violence then willed by God and at God's command? Violence comes from a choice in his freedom as a human being! Belousek, says that in the context of creation, man has inappropriately used his God-given capacity of choice to pervert what God created; that sound is theological creation, while violence or evil in creation is dysteleological.<sup>22</sup> Through acts of violence, man has deviated from the essence of God's creation, that all that is created is good. Underlying violence with religious language that links such acts of violence to God, man not only deviates from the essence of God's creation as good, but man has lost

<sup>16</sup> Jessica Stern, *Terror In the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Stern, *Terror In the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Roy F Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (New York: Holt Paperback, 1996), 38.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror In The Mind Of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2000), 136-137.

<sup>20</sup> Stern, *Terror In the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, 150.

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, *In the Name of Religion: Abuses Against Religious Minorities in Indonesia* (HRW: USA, 2013), 21.

<sup>22</sup> Darrin W Snyder Belousek, "God, Evil, and (Non)Violence: Creation Theology, Creativity Theology, and Christian Ethics," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 2 (2016): 155-179.

consciousness of what is good and of God being reincarnated into man to create a state of goodness between God and man and the eternal goodness that is the promise of salvation for man. The discrepancy between the goodness of God's creation and man's violent behavior, according to Belousek, in this case, the violence of Christianity, gives an awareness that man has created his teachings. *Deus Volt (God's will)* is historical evidence of the use of religious language that places man's free will as God's will, meaning that violence is not God's will but man's will.

Old Testament times are known for various works of God, including saving people and especially acts of violence. Therefore, violence and bloodshed in wars waged in God's name are significant themes in the Old Testament.<sup>23</sup> The violent phenomenon of Christianity after the time of Jesus Christ is not a repetition of the history of violence, similar to what happened in Old Testament times. Old Testament times need to be viewed from the context of the state of the people and God's authority as Father to the people, not freely interpret the phenomenon of Christian violence as a continuation of Old Testament times, especially in seeing God as the root of violence. Research conducted by Waruwu explains that the Bible is a revelation to know God and His will for humans.<sup>24</sup> In an attempt to know God, the dynamics of violent events involving God in the Bible cannot be read literally and then easily define who God is, especially as a cruel God.

In the context of Old Testament violence, Salim's research explains that God's involvement in violence was not arbitrary. Man's disobedience to God is the main factor in God's judgment of man, whether through direct punishment or war between peoples and is marked as a warning. Then, was the bloody tragedy of the Crusades God's will? Where does

that knowledge come from? At that time, was God involved in a particular form, like Fire? So killing 10,000 people is "God's help?" The context of Old Testament times and after Jesus Christ is different. The context of violence in those ages was different, but the God of both ages was the same: a loving God.<sup>25</sup> Fangidae's research shows that God's problematic image, good or evil, is based on texts in Old Testament times dominated by violence. The study reviewed texts containing violence and produced at least two critical points; first, everything God did in Old Testament times, including warnings through violence, was for good. Second, God does not commit violence against His people.<sup>26</sup> Prianto's research also delves into the violence in the Old Testament. It conveys that wars involving the Israelites constitute the Holy War as a sacred covenant between the Israelites and God.<sup>27</sup> Again, this discussion deals with the context of the text recounting the Israelites' experience with God. Prianto also conveys that the Holy War has changed, both in form and function, with the times.<sup>28</sup> In the age after Jesus Christ, the wars waged by Christianity speak not only about their form and function but also about the motivations of those wars. Violent religious language is an instrument of such violence.

The dark side of Christianity through religious language, which contains violence, is an indisputable historical fact. For Flood, violent events are a "legacy" of Christianity that should not be ignored. The meaning of "legacy" does not mean that Christian violence needs to be preserved.<sup>29</sup> At least, looking at it in terms of reflection, Christianity has a dark history of death. Losing awareness of what is good, Christianity creates its teachings through violent religious language.

<sup>23</sup> Derek Flood, *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives, and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did* (San Francisco: Metanoia Books, 2014), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Anwar Three Millenium Waruwu, "Knowing God Through Revelation," *POST : Journal of Theology and Christian Education* 19, no. 1 (2023): 59–70.

<sup>25</sup> Ali Salim, "Is God's Attitude Different in the Old Testament than in the New Testament?," *Journal of Theology Aletheia* 17, no. 9 (2015): 79–92.

<sup>26</sup> Tony Wiyaret Fangidae, "The Problematic Image of God: Revisiting the Image of God in Hebrew

Scripture," *BIA: Journal of Contextual Christian Theology and Education* 5, no. 1 (2022): 172–196.

<sup>27</sup> Robi Prianto, "The Tradition of Holy War in the Old Testament," *TE DEUM (Journal of Theology and Ministry Development)* 5, no. 1 (2021): 117–135.

<sup>28</sup> Prianto, "The Tradition of Holy War in the Old Testament."

<sup>29</sup> Flood, *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives, and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did*, 5.

## Man Plays the Role of God

The violence after the time of Jesus Christ not only shows the role of Christianity in creating its teachings, positioning itself, or playing God as the next face of Christianity. Performing "cleansing and purification" to hasten the coming of the Messiah by killing Jews, blacks, and sinners is challenging to accept logically. People can demand and rule God, a way of faith that immediately begs the question, who do they call God? Or are "we" taking on the role of "God," who has authority as judges? The claim of "carrying out God's judgment" is language that hints at the assignment of man from God, including the duty of violence. This is an endeavor in which man no longer places God as the judge of man, but man becomes the judge of other human beings.

The right of superiority of white people in America is believed to be a "Divine right," or a privilege that comes from the Divine, or God. The right of white superiority over black people is a form of racism. If it is a "divine right," is God racist? It is possible that Christians in America at that time forgot the work of God's creation of man, that the creation of man was in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, if God's people are racist toward others, then it is blasphemy against God as creator.<sup>30</sup> Christianity not only blasphemes God as the Creator through racism but insults to God's holiness are also found in the religious language of Christianity. The spiritual language, "Most Holy of God," engraved on a bloody sword, is a form of insult to God's holiness, as if the bloodshed was sacrificed to God. Wasn't it God Himself who sacrificed Himself through Jesus Christ's death on the Cross? Then, to whom did the blood sacrifice be made? If so, then Christianity at that time did not represent a Holy God because even though the history of the Bible, especially the Old Testament times, was full of bloody tragedies, it does not mean that the same God justified blood, much less that it was reserved for Him

as a Holy God. Thus, the violence of Christianity is not the violence of God.

If war is interpreted as a good deed, a form of devotion and obedience to God to obtain salvation, then the action is wrong. The results of Nathaniel's research in studying Paul's epistles can provide theological awareness that good works are the most critical part of receiving God's saving work and should continue to do good until He welcomes Parousia (the second coming of Jesus Christ).<sup>31</sup> Good deeds do not refer to any form of violence, especially war. The effort to do good in welcoming *Parousia*, according to Nataniel, is supported by research conducted by Pato that examines a moral way of life in waiting for the Lord's coming. Pato focused the results of his research on the obligation of people to understand God's will; God's will is related to human morality, one of which is love.<sup>32</sup> In anticipation of the Lord's coming, "love" is not limited to some people or limited to one religion but without barriers and restrictions to all. This attitude is one of man's ways of honoring other humans as God's creation and a form of reverence for God the Creator.

The violence from early Christianity until the modern world shows the incompatibility of the morality of waiting for *Parousia*, that is, waiting for good works and showing love. It is not the other way around that violence against other human beings is a way to bring God or the Messiah. Belousek, however, argues that God's power and glory have been revealed in His creation, so by refusing to honor creation, he also refuses to praise God.<sup>33</sup> In the freedom of violence, people have raised themselves equal to God.

In the above explanation, the series of acts attributing violence to God is part of the religious truth claim. This severe threat terrorizes peace in history and today. Kimbal, however, said that narratives and rejections of other groups often accompany these truth claims.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the claim of truth can be witnessed in the history of Christianity through

<sup>30</sup> David T. Lamb, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?* (USA: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 39.

<sup>31</sup> Demianus Nataniel, "PAROUSIA, THE JUSTIFICATION OF GOD, AND THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD: GOOD WORKS IN ATTAINING SALVATION ACCORDING TO PAUL'S EPISTLES," *ABDIEL Journal: Treasures of Theological*

*Thought, Christian Education, and Church Music* 2, no. 1 (2018): 33–47.

<sup>32</sup> Hantrini Pato, "Moral Attitudes in Waiting for the Lord's Coming," *FILADELFIA: Journal of Theology and Christian Education* 4, no. 1 (2023): 452–463.

<sup>33</sup> Belousek, "God, Evil, and (Non)Violence: Creation Theology, Creativity Theology, and Christian Ethics."

<sup>34</sup> Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 49.

violent religious language.

## Conclusion

Several religious languages have perpetuated acts of violence throughout the history of Christianity and become a collective memory that needs to be used as a critical reflection in Christian theology. Through historical facts, this research produces a crucial reflection on Christian theology that Christianity was once at a phase where they created its teachings, which means that violence is neither a will nor a command of God, and Christianity plays the role of God, which also means that Christian violence is not God's violence.

Based on research findings, the attitude of being a Christian should be characterized by submission to God's purpose in creating humans, namely "goodness." Submission means living goodness in the relationship between fellow creatures and God as the Creator. In such submission, man not only accepts the purpose of his creation into the world but also lives in God's command order and places the authority of power on God. Thus, violence no longer has a place within Christianity.

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