

A NATIONAL SHRINE TO SCAPEGOATING? THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL WASHINGTON, D.C.

Jon Pahl
Valparaiso University

In a recent survey I conducted of visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C, 92 percent agreed that "the memorial is a sacred place, and should be treated as such."¹ Clearly, this place, by some reports the most visited site in the U.S. capital, draws devotion. But how does a pilgrimage to this memorial function?² Does pilgrimage to "the wall" serve to "heal a nation," as its builders intended, or does pilgrimage to the memorial ironically legitimize structures of violence like those which led the United States into the Vietnamese conflict in the first place?³ My argument builds upon the work of René Girard to suggest that pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial *can* legitimize the violence of American culture by

¹The survey was of 185 pilgrims attending ceremonies during Veterans Day, November 11, 1993 and 1994. Several recent works explore the interface between civil religion and violence, notably John E. Bodnar, Karal Ann Marling, and Edward T. Linenthal. On sacred places, the pioneering work of Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, remains important but must be supplemented by Jonathan Z. Smith's *Imagining Religion*.

² Victor and Edith Turner argue cogently that "if a tourist is half pilgrim, a pilgrim is half tourist" (20). Many visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial understand themselves only as tourists, but their behavior appears to me to warrant treatment under the category of "pilgrimage."

³ I assume a "maximalist" definition of violence, which understands the word to refer not only to physical harm to individuals, but also to systemic, social structures of exclusion (such as racism), and ideological (or symbolic) justifications of violence (see Robert McAfee Brown; for a minimalist approach, see Gerald Runkle).

reinforcing scapegoating.⁴ At the same time, however, the established religious pluralism and voluntarism of American culture—evident in this pilgrimage process—diffuses violence. Furthermore, the democratic character of this pilgrimage empowers pilgrims to critique idolatrous worship of the nation, and to witness to authentic reverence for life.

Mimesis on the mall

A brief impressionistic portrait of the way visitors experience the Vietnam Veterans Memorial will demonstrate how the memorial draws pilgrims into a mimetic process—a key feature of Girard's theory. Many pilgrims stop at the

memorial as part of a National Park Service 'Tourmobile' circuit of museums and memorials, or as part of another bus tour (school and senior citizens groups are especially common). These busses disembark pilgrims at the base of the Lincoln Memorial, directly in front of the reflecting pool on the national mall, in sight of the Washington Monument and the Capitol. Pilgrims may, or may not, first climb the steps of the Lincoln Memorial (a powerful shrine with implications for understanding violence in its own right). Moving north, they eventually proceed along a sidewalk lined with several tents where veterans' organizations sell T-shirts, medals,



Fig. 1 "Three Men Statue"

bumper-stickers, books, and other memorabilia. The first stop for many pilgrims is the "Three Men Statue" (Fig. 1) located in a grove just past the tents.

This bronze statue (and the American flag which flies nearby) was not part of the original design for the memorial, and was dedicated in 1985, three years after the wall of names. It was the result of a compromise between founders of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund led by veteran Jan Scruggs and a group led by 1992 Presidential candidate H. Ross Perot which was dissatisfied with the wall and felt the need for a more 'heroic' representation of the survivors of the war.⁵ Most pilgrims understand little of the history behind the statue, or its intent to create a more heroic impression than the wall. The majority pause briefly (usually no more than a few minutes), take a snapshot or two, and move on. A few use the tree-ringed grove in which the statue is located as a transitional space to prepare themselves for the walk by the wall, or to absorb the entire effect of the 500 foot long wall of names. Others stop at a nearby directory of names to identify the specific panel and line on the wall where an individual name is located.

After leaving the "Three Men Statue," pilgrims gradually descend down a walkway along the mound into which are placed the reflective, black granite panels etched with the names—arranged chronologically, by year and day of death—of the more than 58,000 U.S. soldiers killed in Indochina. The wall (Fig. 3), designed by Chinese-American Maya Lin, and based upon a memorial in Thiepval, France, is the focus of most pilgrims' activities. Some stop to look at the first names, but most proceed part-way down the path before pausing. A few intentionally seek out one name. Sometime during their walk along the wall most people stop to touch it, and a few take a 'rubbing' of a name. This ritual prac-



Fig. 2 "The Wall"

⁵ See Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow. Perot had donated \$160,000 to the fund to support the design competition, and worked through his friendship with James Watt, then Secretary of the Interior, and Republican members of Congress to stall the granting of construction permits for the memorial until a compromise was reached.

tice is supported by the National Park Service, and during the day a Ranger or volunteer is on duty to assist pilgrims in this process. Most visitors stop to take pictures; some use video cameras; a few leave gifts, a practice about which I will have more to say later. Almost all are silent, or speak in whispers, but children and adolescents occasionally play and laugh without much censure. A few people kneel before the wall, or lean on it, and often these figures draw a group of spectators. Most visitors are dressed casually in civilian attire; a few are dressed in fatigues or uniforms. Some of these vets wear medals earned and other distinctive patches or insignia. Vets are more likely than the average pilgrim to engage in quiet conversation and extensive interactions at the wall. Some pose for pictures. Public displays of emotion are rare during peak daylight hours, but crying and an occasional shout or other displays of anger become more frequent as evening passes into night. Pilgrims visit the wall at all hours. A 'casual' pilgrim will proceed from one end of the wall to the other in about ten to twenty minutes.

The third stop on the pilgrimage circuit is the "Women's Statue" (Fig. 3), dedicated in November of 1993. This bronze statue of three women—

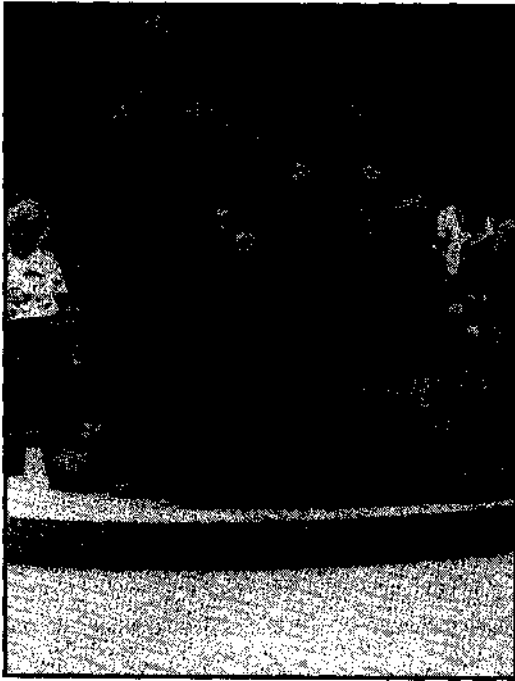


Fig. 3 "Women's Statue"

whom cradles a wounded soldier—is located in a grove to the South of the Wall and East of the men's statue. It was built after women (led by Diane Carlson Evans, R.N. and the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project) claimed that the memorial was incomplete following the addition of the men's statue in 1985. Pilgrims are more likely to touch this memorial than the statue of the Three Men. Most visitors pause briefly at the shrine for another snapshot; occasionally people leave wreaths or other gifts. Following a shaded path away from the statue leads the pilgrim back toward the Lincoln Memorial, and to the waiting tents with memorabilia and T-Shirts to purchase.

The pilgrim thus traverses a rough circle, or triangle, covering the 2.2. acre memorial site. The entire process is over, ordinarily, in well under an hour.

Now, the mimetic elements of this pilgrimage process are manifold. First, the pilgrims come, one after the other, by the millions, herding themselves like sheep through pathways into and out of a valley of the shadow of death. Second, rules of decorum are generally observed. People usually stay between the lines. Third, rivalry for space is implicit in the process. The images at the memorial multiplied amidst constant controversy involving a number of governmental agencies, including Congress. Most recently, the founders of the memorial have requested a National Park Service regulation to limit the memorabilia booths on the mall to purveyors of books and other educational materials. Fourth, the economic model behind the process is subtle, but obvious: the process is designed to be consumed (and has easily been adjusted by most pilgrims to fit their TV sit-com range attention span). Finally, the potential for this mimetic process to legitimize violence is vast: the wall may be creating a mob that can effectively be controlled, and organized, to remember the violence that caused the Vietnam conflict in a way that replaces the frustrated desire behind that violence—call it the desire for empire—onto a suitable scapegoat. It is this Girardian possibility that we must now examine.

The diffusion of scapegoating at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

At least four manifestations of scapegoating have been prevalent in American culture since the end of the military conflict in Indochina, and all four are potential targets for the violence of pilgrims to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Interestingly, however, none of these four seems at present to offer the unanimity necessary for the sacrificial process to work its effects.

1. The veterans as scapegoats. If, as Girard argues, the end result of a process of scapegoating is the "deification" of the victim, then the current status of Vietnam veterans in the United States would seem to qualify them as paradigmatic scapegoats. Veterans of Vietnam—most are now near or in their fifties—have traversed a long history. Initially victimized and torn out of American culture as youth by a classist and racist system of conscription,⁶ vets were indoctrinated to 'sacrifice' on the front lines of an undeclared war.⁷ Upon

⁶ The most notorious features of the class system used to conscript were the deferments granted to upper and middle-class males, and "Project 100,000," which lowered the usual mental and physical requirements for military service to admit and "rehabilitate" underprivileged youths, most of whom were from the lower-classes and/or minority groups such as African American and Hispanic communities (see Myra MacPherson 558-62).

⁷ For a fascinating study of this process, see Claudia Springer.

return to the United States, those who survived the shooting were execrated by protestors—often literally spat upon—and then symbolically excluded from the culture by the refusal of Americans to recognize publically or even discuss in private conversation their experience.⁸ Finally, since 1982, the veteran has undergone apotheosis, through the mimetic process of memorializing that holds up their sacrifice as the means to "heal (*salus* 'save') a nation" (see Scruggs). As Girard writes, at the end of a sacrificial crisis "the victim and not the lynchers themselves will be held responsible for the reconciliation" (1987, 116).

Writing autobiographically, vet Davidson Loehr concurs that "many of the veterans ... are still having a very hard time shedding the role of scapegoat. ... And our society... has often cast them in that role" (16). Loehr has come to understand the symbolic functioning of the scapegoat process, and therefore has been able to speak out against its imposition. Very different—by virtue of being unconscious of his adoption of the scapegoat role—is the following reflection of veteran Paul Sgroi, written in 1983:

The government and the citizens of this nation have done everything in their power to ignore the service of Vietnam Veterans. The memorials in Washington... were constructed with funds donated by Vietnam Vets. Activities to welcome home and honor Vietnam Vets have traditionally been sponsored by Vietnam Vets. The best counseling services for Vietnam Vets are provided by other vets. In short, Vietnam Vets have had to take care of themselves. We took care of ourselves in the bush, we continue to take care of ourselves today. (30)

Sgroi committed suicide in 1987.

That scapegoating destroys is recognized by therapists who have worked with veterans. Jeffrey Jay and David Harrington comment:

The veteran's experience encapsulates a societal process yet to be widely acknowledged or understood in which individuals involved in morally troublesome actions are *disowned* by society; in which the media controls the image of a minority and slowly alters it over time; in which psychic numbing and isolation become acceptable mechanisms for survival in complex emotional and moral conflicts;

⁸ Stories documenting how veterans were abused upon return to the United States are legion. Among the most poignant is Paul Sgroi's "To Vietnam and Back."

and, most importantly, in which subgroups are assigned *blame* for problems the larger society refuses to face. (MacPherson 196)

In fact, however, since the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, this process has entered a new phase—the apotheosis of the vet. The vet has become at least 'hero', if not god. In my survey of pilgrims to the wall, 80% agreed that "Vietnam veterans are heroes."⁹

Nevertheless, despite the way Girard's concept of the scapegoat illuminates the role of veterans, it also falls short of explaining the entire dynamic of pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. After all, 20 percent *disagreed* that the vets were heroes.¹⁰ One vet wrote on his survey, "I was just doing my duty." Many pilgrims resist the apotheosis of the veteran, including the vets themselves. Veteran Loehr concludes that:

It was [hard] to accept finally the fact that there was no one to blame, no adequate or effective scapegoat to take away the sins of the world, to make it all harmonize as it had once seemed to when life was so much simpler, so much less powerful. (23)

Furthermore, the very structure of the wall—with its 58,000 names of the *dead*—confronts the pilgrim with the fact of mortality; any 'resurrection' demands a private, or at least indirect, construction. If vets are scapegoats—and some do fulfill this role—many others are unwilling and actively resist it, and others do so only partially. In short, there exists no consensus on the role of the veteran, and there are also other potential—and contradictory—scapegoats among pilgrims.

2. *Opposers and protestors as scapegoats.* Individuals who opposed the Vietnam conflict, either overtly or covertly, have also been the target of blame by a society seeking to restore unanimity to its purposes. As Girard writes:

The victim... is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to

⁹ John Hellmann has traced the "hero myth" as a recurrent theme in the Vietnam era of American history.

¹⁰ An interesting sub-set of veterans—those who deserted or who received less than honorable discharges—would make an interesting study. These "hapless permanent scapegoats" from the era received no G.I. Bill benefits, and were excluded from the pardon offered evaders by Jimmy Carter in 1977 (see MacPherson 335).

protect the entire community from *its own* violence. . . . The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice. . . . The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. (1974,8)

Four different, and very interesting, opponents of the war have been targeted in this way in America and remain potential scapegoats for pilgrims: anti-war organizations, the media, Jane Fonda, and President Clinton.

General William Westmoreland—Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army from 1968-1972, and U.S. Commander in Vietnam from 1964-1968—outlined the typical argument of those who scapegoat opponents to the war:

The antiwar groups dedicated themselves to resisting national policy. They wanted to end the war. Who didn't? The sad thing was that those who were loudly dissenting were unwittingly encouraging the enemy to hang on. . . . Every practical measure designed to encourage him [the North Vietnamese] to change his aggressive strategy was undercut by expressions and actions reflecting a lack of resolve, a naive understanding of warfare, or blissful ignorance of the language that Communists understand—demonstrable resolve. (120)

Since the conclusion of the conflict, students, who made up the majority of the antiwar groups, have played little role in the on-going debate over Vietnam and violence.

Journalists were also frequently scapegoated as opponents to the war and, unlike students, continue to draw the suspicion and ire of significant segments of the American people. "For the first time in modern history," writes commentator Robert Elegant, "the outcome of a war was determined not on the battlefield but on the printed page (and via the broadcast image) (75)." Ironically, of course, pilgrims who are drawn to this explanation for the loss of the war are also likely to be enthusiastic consumers of selectively chosen media products.¹¹ During the Persian Gulf War, for instance, many Americans were glued to their televisions to catch 'the latest' on CNN from Kuwait and Iraq, and many critics of the war offered their critiques through forums such

¹¹ Vietnam has been a favorite topic for Hollywood and national television networks throughout the eighties (see Andrew Martin).

as PBS and National Public Radio. If 'the media' is thus to serve as scapegoat for the violence of American culture, it will do so at best selectively and for specialized groups, and alternatives to 'excluded' media are likely to emerge to fill the void in the market.¹²

Perhaps no protestor of the Vietnam conflict is better known than Jane Fonda. Daughter of a movie star, Academy award winning actress in her own right, current wife of TV mogul Ted Turner, and former wife of Student for a Democratic Society leader Tom Hayden, Fonda is vilified among Vets for her outspoken support of the North Vietnamese—the 'enemy'—during the conflict. At times the violence against Fonda becomes overt. During Veterans Day and Memorial Day activities in 1993 and 1994, for instance, I observed Fonda hung in effigy by one zealous group. "Jane Fonda remains the point-woman for the wrath of many veterans," summarizes MacPherson. "In any gathering of veterans there will always be an expletive for her " (466). As a woman who has benefitted greatly from the capitalist system she once criticized, Fonda also functions as a scapegoat because she represents how some protestors opposed conservative worship of America with equally uncritical idealization of the North Vietnamese.¹³ "Jane Fonda, American Traitor Bitch" reads the jacket patch and bumper sticker favored by a few pilgrims at the wall. Nevertheless, in the survey that I distributed to pilgrims, nearly two-thirds *disagreed* that "people who opposed the conflict"—including presumably Fonda—"should stay away from the Memorial."

The case of President Clinton, who both avoided the draft and protested against the war, is of course unique because of the office he holds, but is also representative of the way wrath vented at protestors as a group is likely to prove an ineffective process of scapegoating. In 1993, his first year in office, Clinton attempted to speak on Memorial Day at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and was heckled and booed by some vets in the audience. Others turned their backs and refused to listen to Clinton's speech. On Veterans Day in 1993, Clinton avoided the public gathering at the Memorial, but was still ritually 'court-martialed' by one Veterans group, and was the butt of countless slurs and threats by veterans. Of course, much of this attention to the President

¹² This analysis brackets, for now, the thorny symbolic (and Constitutional) question of the strategic control and censoring of the media by the military—one of the key features distinguishing reporting on the Persian Gulf War from reporting on Vietnam.

¹³ Among those who misplaced innocence were Christians such as James W. Douglass, who admits that although the NLF "is no community of saints," the North Vietnamese nevertheless "stand willingly in the midst of suffering, where Christ has always stood" (99).

may reflect patterns drawing upon ancient ritual humiliation of a king, or traditional American iconoclasm, but Clinton clearly focuses the violence of some pilgrims to the wall. Again, however, his behavior during Vietnam was well known prior to his election and obviously was not enough to prevent his assuming the most powerful office in the nation. If opposers of the Vietnam War are scapegoats, the symbolism appears so diffuse in its referent as to have little practical effect as a legitimizer of violence.

3. *The 'government' as scapegoat.* A third focus for scapegoating at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is 'the government' itself. In a democracy, of course, this critique is inherently self-referential, but by reifying authority many pilgrims find a target on whom to project their aggression. Girard recognized the likelihood of this approach to scapegoating when he wrote: "Rather than blame themselves, people inevitably blame either society as a whole, which costs them nothing, or other people who seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable reasons" (1974, 4).

This cost-free approach to scape-goating has taken several forms in post-sixties America. Perhaps typical of some pilgrims who blame the entire culture for the violence done to them is the following letter/poem left at the Wall by veteran Michael "Mad Mike" Sargent:

There was no welcome home for me when I came back from Hell./
No gratitude or appreciation from the ones who never helped out./
I just found out the hard way what life is all about./ Now I know
just who I am, the facts are plain to see./ There a price in life for
everything, and nothing comes for free./ I paid my dues, I earned
my stripes, I have the right to live./ Forever bitter, I won't forget,
and I never will forgive./ I'll never be taken in again, and used up
till I'm gone./ I'll do what's best for me and mine, and just keep
pushing on./ If the protected can't recognize these facts, at least I
know I can./ It doesn't matter what others think, I'm proud and I'm
a man. (53)

Here, all of human culture apart from "me and mine" is excluded, forever: "I never will forgive."

One motive for this global scapegoating, which is present in countless films, novels, and documentaries about Vietnam, is to preserve a belief traditionally dear to Americans—the innocence of the subject (see Mahedy 33; Hellmann). "By scapegoating the government," point out Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe,

pilgrims can emphasize again and again the inherent goodness of the American people, and their collective ability to achieve a moral consensus when presented the bare "facts." . . . Too often in the 1980s, "healing the wounds" meant patching up our conventional myths and values, rather than subjecting them to necessary criticism and revision. (9)

Berg and Rowe clearly point out the conservative illusion in this global scapegoating of the government. Ironically, however, they also scapegoat and stereotype popular culture in an equally global way, and implicitly assert the innocence of themselves—progressive academics—as subjects! This paradox suggests that globalized scapegoating inevitably cuts both ways; scapegoating an entire government or culture is possible from either left or right, and does nothing but reinforce the preferred 'myths and values' of the subject. Without *consensus*, scapegoating is inevitably ineffective.

4. *The Vietnamese or 'foreign other' as scapegoats.* Undoubtedly the most troubling of the potential outcomes created by pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the likelihood that the Vietnamese people will remain, in the words of Stephen Vlastos, "the absent presence" behind the memorial (52).

All wars dehumanize enemies, but as Robert Jay Lifton has written, dehumanization proceeded to new depths in Vietnam. "I am convinced," writes Lifton,

that the ethically sensitive historians of the future will select the phenomenon of the body count as the perfect symbol of America's descent into evil. The body count manages to distil the essence of the American numbing, brutalization, and illusion into a grotesque technical-ization: there is something to count, a statistic for accomplishment. I know of no greater corruption than this phenomenon: the amount of killing—any killing— becomes the total measure of achievement. And concerning that measure, one lies, to others as well as to oneself, about why, who, what, and how many one kills. (60)

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial can perpetuate this brutal dualism of "us pilgrims can emphasize versus them." After all, only the names of *American* dead are listed on the wall. Although an estimated 1.5 million Vietnamese lives were also lost during the conflict, nowhere at the memorial is this destruction (or the destruction of the Vietnamese land) remembered. The one symbolic

gesture that was proposed to include a Vietnamese presence in the memorial—the inclusion of a Vietnamese baby in the women's sculpture—was overruled by an adjudicatory commission which judged this imagery "too political" ("Women Vets' Memorial" 6). As Peter Ehrenhaus and Richard Morris put it: "The 'foreign other' [remains] expendable" in the national memory of Vietnam (227).

Behind this continued scapegoating of 'the enemy' are the intractable problems of racism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism in U.S. history. Several of my students, while surveying a group of vets during Veterans Day, 1993, asked the vets whether the U.S. should normalize relations with Vietnam and were answered that "we should have nothing to do with 'gooks.'" A similar attitude is evident in the rhetoric of revisionist historians of the Vietnam era, who flourished under the Reagan and Bush administrations. Stephen Vlastos has carefully studied several examples of revisionist history, including the work of the late President Richard M. Nixon, and has concluded that

Revisionist texts share a distinctive syntax of historical representation, one which marginalizes the historical experience of America's Vietnam "enemy": the millions of Vietnamese North and South who opposed U.S. intervention.... Ironically, in denying "enemy" Vietnamese subject [sic] status in their own history the revisionists recapitulate the fundamental intellectual error of the planners of the war: the utter failure to take measure of very historical forces in Vietnam whose life and death resistance would defeat America's imperial agenda. (54)

Those who seek to restore America's imperial agenda seek to perpetuate the scapegoating of an enemy.

One very interesting variant on this theme of scapegoating the 'foreign other' is the attempt by some Fundamentalist Christians to blame the problems faced by veterans on "paganism," a category under which they lump all non-Christian, and especially Asian, religions. Point Man Ministries, a Fundamentalist Christian organization run by veterans for veterans, claims that

in late 1989 [we] received a verbal report that an ex-Buddhist monk had shared some vital information with an American pastor regarding demonic curses being cast upon American troops during the Vietnam war.... According to this ex-Buddhist priest an entire sect of Vietnamese Buddhist monks spent years heaping specific curses upon all Americans that came to fight in their country. These specific curses were: 1) That the American soldiers would become

wandering men for the rest of their lives. 2) That they would never find peace. 3) That they would be angry men and women for the rest of their lives.¹⁴

"Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the malady that plagues hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans today," concludes the argument, "is a SPIRITUAL problem, and a bi-product [sic] of pagan curses." I suspect that this category of "paganism" is too diffuse in itself to serve as an effective cultural scapegoat, except for Christian Fundamentalists with little awareness of the distinctive teachings of the world's religions.

Along with the fact that there is at present a diffusion of 'foreign others' serving as scapegoats for pilgrims to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, I also find three other reasons to conclude that pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial does not at present legitimize violence. First, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, anti-Communism has eroded as a consensus ideology in the U.S. Pilgrims aware of the way anti-Communism led to the Indochinese conflict tend especially to be skeptical of the ideology: the survey I distributed to pilgrims asked whether they felt that "The Vietnam conflict was part of a larger, and ultimately successful, war on communism." A considerable number agreed (35 percent) but even more disagreed (43 percent, with 31 percent indicating very strong disagreement). One veteran summarized his reaction to this interpretation that turns Vietnam into a long-range victory over Communists with the succinct epithet: "bullshit."

Moreover, by the very nature of the military history it commemorates, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial resists any effort to glory in victory over the 'enemy'. Most notably, the names of the dead are *not* contrasted to the longer list of 'enemy' dead (this contrasts markedly with the imagery at the Iwo Jima memorial, where U.S. Marines triumphantly stab a flag into foreign soil). As Richard Morris writes,

[The wall] does not announce the triumph of the species over nature by piercing the sky or dominating its surroundings. It does not invite us to join the great atomized society. . . . It does not promise immortality through one's inherited membership in the species. It does not celebrate life as the triumph over nature, over

¹⁴ "Curses," mimeographed sheet from Point Man Ministries. I received this sheet at the booth set up by Point Man Ministries near the VVM during Memorial Day, 1994. Point Man Ministries is closely affiliated with Pat Robertson's CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network).

death. It does not tell us that only the strong survive, that the strong, the heroic, will press on into the future. (213)

The "Three Men Statue" comes closest to glorifying heroism, but it is, perhaps, balanced by the women's statue which intends to convey the wounds of war.

Finally, U.S. policies, and more significantly, the attitudes of Americans toward most Communist cultures, are changing. As the new immigrants (especially Asians and Latin Americans) continue to play greater roles in American public life, the potential for pilgrims to the wall, or Americans generally, to scapegoat 'foreign others' may also recede. As one veteran put it, speaking at the wall on Memorial Day, 1994, after returning from a visit to Vietnam: "I learned that Vietnam is a place; not a war." For this remark he received a standing ovation from the crowd. This is a modest, but significant advance in American understandings of a Communist culture. To be sure, the market motivates much of this openness, symbolized most obviously by the recent decision of Congress to end the trade embargo with the Republic of Vietnam and by our continued willingness to grant most favored nation status to the People's Republic of China. The prospect of neocolonialism through the spread of 'free' markets remains real. But the new pluralism in American culture may also contribute to a new era of economic cooperation, perhaps drawing upon and extending the model of religious freedom and voluntarism already exemplified in American public life.¹⁵

Remembering to live

Aside from the fact that pilgrims to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial demonstrate no consensus in their efforts to create scapegoats, I also have five positive reasons that I find this pilgrimage likely to encourage a critique of American idolatry and to support reverence for life.

¹⁵ Here, I extend considerably the sway of Weber's hypothesis about the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism to suggest that religious freedom and pluralism continue to alter the character and practice of capitalism in the West, to the point where capitalism has—like Protestantism itself—become able to coexist with alternative systems. In short, a global economic ecumenism may mark the twenty-first century, in the same way that a global religious ecumenism marked the twentieth. My hope, of course, is that both will progress markedly, and thereby reduce the likelihood of religiously or economically inspired violence.

1. *Pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is voluntary, allowing for self-determination and non-hierarchical differentiation of individuals and groups.* Despite the mimetic (and almost automatic) character of the pilgrimage process at the Memorial, all pilgrims undertake to visit the memorial by choice. There is also considerable freedom to tailor the pilgrimage to one's own needs and specifications. No rivalry of class, gender, or ideology is in overt evidence at the Memorial, and little hierarchical differentiation of pilgrims occurs (with the exception of holy days such as Veterans Day and Memorial Day, when elected officials, veterans, and prominent speakers are featured). At public ceremonies, and via an inscription on the wall, pilgrims are reminded that the memorial was "built by voluntary contributions" and is largely maintained by a staff of volunteers. Furthermore, the messages brought to and taken from the memorial are left up to the choice of the pilgrims. For instance, during the Veterans Day celebration in 1993, Chaplain Alice Farquhar Mayes (herself a vet) offered a pacifist invocation, which ended with her praying "to declare without equivocation that all war is appalling and abhorrent to You and to each of us here gathered." Her prayer was received with a long silence, broken only when the Air Force band struck up a rendition of "She's A Grand Old Flag," a musical interlude not listed on the program, and presumably inserted by the director at will. The juxtaposition of pacifist and patriotic symbols was jarring, on one level, but also typical of the extremes the memorial includes. No one blinked an eye at the paradox. In short, the Memorial was created by volunteers, is maintained by volunteers, and is visited by people who choose to do so. Pilgrimage to this place indicates a will to reconcile that allows differentiation of race, religion, and politics without scapegoating and blame.

2. *Pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial promotes authentic personal catharsis, remembering, and conversion.* Many have commented on the function of the wall as a place of catharsis, but more often than not this category is taken psychologically, rather than in its more proper context as religious narrative and ritual. Hubert Brucker, a former Army lieutenant, recalls one event that the Wall has resurfaced and allowed him to "cleanse":

We were [at Dak To] for three days [after heavy fighting], and couldn't get the helicopters in. The bodies were rotting in the sun. They got this cargo net. There must have been thirty bodies. As the cargo net swung back and forth, fluid and blood sprayed down from the sky. Arms and legs were falling out. . . . [The Memorial helps]

the guy who has been stigmatized and needs that cleansing.
(MacPherson 47)

On Veterans and Memorial Day, and on more private occasions throughout the year, similar stories are frequently 'borne away' by their retelling at the Memorial.

Among the most articulate of those who understand how the wall can promote catharsis by inviting pilgrims to remember and tell stories is veteran Tim O'Brien. O'Brien's novel *The Things They Carried* explicitly addresses the strength of narrative and the shortcomings of blaming as a method of catharsis. He writes,

Sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. . . . Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story. (40)

After telling one such story, about the death of a comrade he calls "Kiowa," O'Brien adds,

When a man died, there had to be blame.... You could blame the war. You could blame the idiots who made the war. You could blame [a soldier] for going to it. You could blame the rain. You could blame the river. You could blame the field, the mud, the climate. You could blame the enemy. You could blame the mortar rounds. You could blame people who were too lazy to read a newspaper, who were bored by the daily body counts, who switched channels at the mention of politics. You could blame whole nations. You could blame God. You could blame the munitions makers or Karl Marx or a trick of fate or an old man in Omaha who forgot to vote.

In the field, though, the causes were immediate. A moment of carelessness or bad judgment or plain stupidity carried consequences that lasted forever. (198-9)

The wall is at its simplest an eternal 'story' that cathartically exposes—even for those who know nothing of the history of the war—the consequences of violence. It may be that this catharsis—inspired in many cases by pilgrimage to the wall—may not lead primarily to unanimity *against* a common scapegoat, but rather to conversion where 'the Other' is recognized when one remembers one's authentic self (loving the neighbor as the self)-

This ability of memory to convert was the theme of the veteran Rev. Theodore H. Evans in an address he delivered at Washington National Cathedral on the night following the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. "Remembering is hard work," preached Evans:

It means reliving the pain, the alienation, the debate. It means recalling the dehumanization that is always, tragically, a part of war. . . . That kind of remembering has always been a part of our religious life too. That is why we read the Bible, to remember the old stories, to relive them in our own ways, to recognize ourselves in them, and to discover in ourselves that mixture of good and evil, that we know ourselves to be. . . . But in all the stories there is an affirmation that while we remember, there is also a God who remembers us, who loves us, who takes and judges our worst and brings it to life. . . . Of course, to discover God in the middle of chaos is no guarantee that we will live happily ever after. . . . It means that we are often called to take extraordinary risks, risks that make us terribly vulnerable. . . . Pray that in our remembering we may become a living memorial, bound in love with the living and the dead as ministers of peace. (250-2)

"Never forget" is, perhaps, the most frequently uttered *mantra* at the Memorial.

3. *By symbolically providing pilgrims with a reminder of the fragility and 'giftedness' of life, pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial also motivates people to leave gifts, and to live their lives for others.* A recent exhibition at the Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. collected a sample of the thousands of objects left at the wall by pilgrims. Letters, photos, cigarettes, medals, beer cans, flags, panties, crosses, coins, rings, arrows, shoes, and countless other personal items are gently placed by pilgrims at the base of the wall. Why?

One veteran explains: "There's power in the wall—it's in the crosses, pins, buttons, flags, pictures, medals, rings, coins, and all the gifts brought *by the living*. They weep. They touch. You [the Wall] start with death; I start with life and move toward death to move beyond to new life" ("Catalyst"). Another veteran, Elaine Niggemann, was invited by the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project to speak to the gathered crowd on Memorial Day, 1994. Niggemann recalled to the several thousand people sitting, standing, and reclining on the lawn near the Memorial how she served as a nurse in Vietnam, where she discovered "the fragility of human life, and the satisfaction of making a

difference by doing the best I can." "The Memorial signifies a willingness to give of oneself," she concluded her address. At the beginning, and end, of this Memorial Day service, the chosen melody was "Amazing Grace."

The choice of this melody might indicate nothing more than the sentimental piety so popular in America, if there were not also a clear logic behind its use. J. Robert Kerry, currently U.S. Senator from Nebraska, writes,

Everyone, whether in war or peace time . . . has a moment in which one makes a decision, and afterwards one feels as if one has fallen from grace. One receives not only one's own judgment, but the judgment of other human beings, and, in the end, the judgment of Almighty God. (313)

Kerry won the Congressional Medal of Honor for his service in Vietnam, during which time he had an explosive device go off close to his leg. Now, he limps:

I was different. I was unable to change it . . . I had to learn, and it was a wonderful thing to learn— that being different is good . . . Very closely connected with this recognition was the awareness that I had to . . . accept the consequences of the decisions that I would make . . . It is a terrifying and yet liberating moment, when instead of feeling the guilt that is attached when you do not live up to somebody else's expectations, you feel the remorse of conscience. . . . What I have found myself able to do is to remember. The memory that I carry with me most of all from the pain of the hospital is that the pain is still there for others. (313-5)

Amazing grace can do no more.

4. *Pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial can demonstrate the limits of American graven images, and the limitlessness of an eternal God.* The public use of 'God-talk' on the occasion of American civil religious gatherings is often derided as innocuous pandering to a least-common-denominator religiosity, or worse, as a trivialization or nationalist co-optation of the holy name akin to blasphemy. On the contrary, use of the holy name offers an explicit contrast to nationalistic faith.

William P. Mahedy, an Episcopal campus pastor and former chaplain in Vietnam has compared the veteran's experience and, implicitly, the experience of all who make pilgrimage to the wall, to the "dark night of the soul" described by medieval mystics. Mahedy writes,

In the name of innocent American and its god, the GIs performed their duty in the great cultic act of war. But the myth was shattered. Neither they nor their country and its god were innocent... . We were defeated.. .. [Therefore] the veterans who asked me, "Where was God, that son-of-a-bitch, when the rounds were coming in at Khe Sanh?," asked the right question. The mystery of iniquity is too profound for the American tribal god. . . . The only God who seems to make any sense is the one who refused to let Moses see his face, the God whose ways are not our ways.... All human words— even religious words—are frivolous in the face of evil and in the presence of the transcendent God. . . . [Only] with the God to whom a thousand years are as a day, [is] everything possible. (36-7)

For some, pilgrimage to the wall is surely an effort to restore the American tribal god; for others, such pilgrimage confronts them with the limits of that god.

The power of this recognition dawned very early on John Forbes Kerry, U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, and a widely-honored vet. Upon his discharge from the U.S. Navy, Kerry became a national coordinator of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, in which capacity he issued a famous speech before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee in 1971. Kerry wrote,

This country doesn't know it yet but it has created a monster, a monster in the form of millions of men who have been taught to deal and to trade in violence and who are given the chance to die for the biggest nothing in history. . . . We found . . . criminal hypocrisy... . We saw . . . how monies from American taxes were used for a corrupt dictatorial regime. . . . We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. . . . We wish that a merciful God could wipe away our own memories of that service.... [But] we must [instead] conquer the hate and the fear that have driven this country these last ten years and more, so when 30 years from now our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm, or a face, and small boys ask why, we will be able to say "Vietnam" and not mean a desert, nor a filthy obscene memory, but mean instead the place where America finally turned and where soldiers like us helped it in the turning. (152)

Pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial might indicate an America turning the monster of trading in violence into the amazing grace that recognizes a place. As the other Senator Kerry, Robert, put it,

In Vietnam, I believe, we did not have the requisite amount of respect for the place that the Vietnamese called home. . . . The Vietnamese people . . . had a reverence for place . . . [and] that reverence for place enables us to make good decisions—decisions about how we treat the place we call home, and decisions about how we treat the place that others call home. (315)

Pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial represents, if nothing else, reverence for place. At the wall, people pray.

5. *Pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial demonstrates that accepting the loss of life in faith is to find reverence for all of life.* Implicit at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a theology of the cross that conveys the central paradox of the Christian faith: that by losing one's life in faith one finds authentic life. Richard Morris describes how the wall invites "contemplation":

[The wall] invites us to contemplate, acknowledge, and express the individuality of the dead. It presses us neither into the past nor into the future.... The slight declivity leads viewers gradually into the earth, into nature, where they can be freed "from the noise and traffic of the surrounding city," from the species and the artifices of the species, to contemplate. But what are we to contemplate? The [memorial] is unequivocal: We are to contemplate death by confronting thousands of individual deaths. Each of the dead has a name and cannot be summarized by or compacted into an heroic symbol, an abstracted abstraction. Once inside, the conclusion is inescapable: We are among the dead. . . . Outside is the world of heroism, the competitive atmosphere that sustains heroic meritocracy, that requires youth, stamina, vitality, fortitude, courage. (213)

The paradox of the gospel is here—the narration of an individual life once and for all forsaken, through whom by grace and faith all might find eternal life.

And, of course, pilgrims do leave the memorial and go on with their lives. Mahedy discusses this step:

The next step requires the leap of faith, for the experience of evil is really the perception of God's absence from the world precisely in those situations which seem to demand a providential presence. . . . [This] is the death of the national god. For many veterans, this abyss is too deep. To survive they must rewrite the history of Vietnam [by] beating the drums of war. . . . For others, a life of service to fellow veterans and to society is the way. . . . What is lacking for most veterans, however, is the willingness of Job to be silent, or the committing of one's own life and death and of all things to the Father as Jesus did. (37-8)

What is lacking for most veterans, however, may not be lacking for most pilgrims to the wall. Overwhelmingly, *the* characteristic response of pilgrims to the wall is silence. This silence speaks, not of the desire to scapegoat, nor of the lack of desire, but of the desire *not* to violate, and of the desire that flows from *reverence* for all of life—even the lives of the dead.¹⁶

Caveats

I do not want to be misconstrued as an optimist. There exists a real possibility that a consensus will develop around some revisionist version of the Vietnam conflict that will impose a banal, and sacrificial, meaning of cultural superiority on the memorial. This would truly be the triumph of a cynical nihilism in America, and would provide Christians and other people of faith with a clear and unequivocal reason for confession and resistance. As Morris puts it,

The presumption that the perspective of any one individual or group can somehow paint a complete or even adequate portrait of how all ought to remember Vietnam implicitly issues forth a declaration and a threat to all those whose cultural values, whose sacred symbols are denied, ignored, marginalized, or repressed. As long as disparate American cultures view their experiences of Vietnam as central to their identity—past, present, and future—the cultural legacies of Vietnam cannot and will not be possessed singularly. (219)

¹⁶ Lisa M. Capps discusses the origin of the memorial under the category of a "desire to heal."

For this reason, the best hope for preventing the abuse of this memorial is to keep it free for people of faith, including Christians, to voluntarily invest the memorial with religious meaning beyond that of the sacrifice of a scapegoat for the nation.

Also, underneath and interwoven with the revisionist history that threatens to turn this pilgrimage toward violence is the lure of economic mimesis and metaphor in relationship to the memorial. Repeatedly, speakers at the wall refer to the fallen as "the price of freedom." This cliché buries the life of the individuals who were killed under the capitalist mechanism which fueled the napalm and Agent Orange free fire zones in the first place. People are not to be payment for anything. The potential exists for this memorial to legitimize the grossest sort of American capitalism. The alternative is for teachers, writers, and other public servants to convey clearly and persuasively the lessons the memorial has to offer to correct the classist, racist, and nationalist injustices in the practice of Capitalism.

Finally, as Mark Juergensmeyer suggests, there exists a danger that this pilgrimage, like those of the Middle Ages, can be turned into support for a crusade. Significant segments of American culture are drawn to the apocalyptic imagery of cosmic wars, and to the logic that we must "kill in order to save." But Vietnam explicitly taught us the failure of that logic. Those of us who are guardians of memory must not fail to point out the dangerous, and salutary, features of human pilgrimages through time, or we run the risk of reliving the horrors of an apocalypse again.*

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