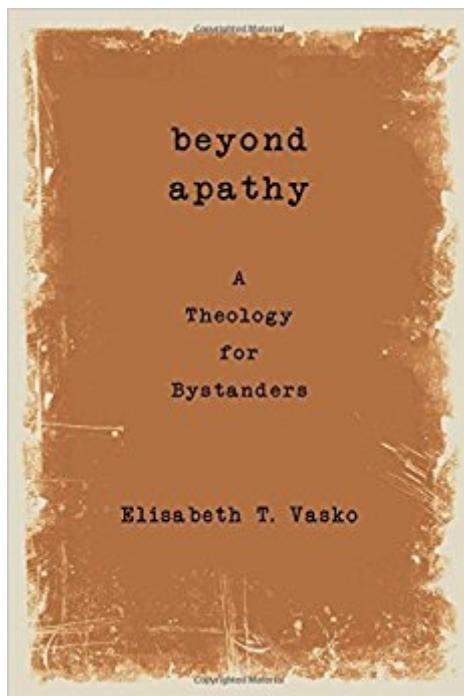


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# Beyond Apathy: A Theology For Bystanders



## **Synopsis**

Theological conversations about violence have typically framed the discussion in terms of victim and perpetrator. Such work, while important, only addresses part of the problem. Comprehensive theological and pastoral responses to violence must also address the role of collective passivity in the face of human denigration. Given the pervasiveness of inaction—whether in the form of denial, willful ignorance, or silent complicity—a theological reflection on violence that holds bystanders accountable, especially those who occupy social sites of privilege, is long overdue. In *Beyond Apathy*, Elisabeth T. Vasko utilizes resources within the Christian tradition to examine the theological significance of bystander participation in patterns of violence and violation within contemporary Western culture, giving particular attention to the social issues of bullying, white racism, and sexual violence. In doing so, she constructs a theology of redeeming grace for bystanders to violence that foregrounds the significance of social action in bringing about God's basileia.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Elisabeth T. Vasko is assistant professor of theology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Puts into context the need for people to be involved. We live in an apathetic time

Fortunately this was a book which we held a class on. I have gotten a great deal from the class and

her premise is good. However, it is a difficult book for the lay-person to read. I gave it up after about 3 chapters. The class on her writing, however, was beneficial. She needs to learn to write for people who are not academics.

Very good and interesting read

What a fantastic book. I will absolutely be using this for undergraduate and Ph.D. classes. Beyond Apathy is an excellent survey of historical and contemporary Christologies, as well as a constructive and creative proposal for how to do better in our thinking and action toward vulnerable populations. This book takes Jesus's humanity seriously in a way that may threaten arch conservatives, but of course Christology--in order to be orthodox--must always incorporate both Christology from above and Christology from below. Councils like Nicea and Chalcedon had to reckon with this tension, yet many fear-filled Christians today with an axe to grind forget this balance in favor of touting solely abstract metaphysical claims. That is the kind of theology that is killing our churches and driving students away from theology. Theology has to be relevant. It has to be burning. It has to inspire people to passionate engagement with the world as the presence of God who inspires love, not just the locus of sin. This book makes Jesus relevant to today's real issues and as such will be threatening to people with privilege, which--of course--the Jesus of the Gospels called us to give up by his own example. Trained theologians will know that this book is written with the history of Christian social teaching in mind, a recent history which is beginning to turn privilege on its head. There is no "moral equivalency" here, as the agenda-driven negative review below suggests. Rather, the whole point of this book is that by not concretely working for justice, persons with privilege (and not just white, male, hetero persons, that is an oversimplification of epic proportions) participate in structural sin. Not being racist is not enough. Not actively hurting LGBTQIA persons is not enough. What are we actually doing to help? Fear of losing one's own meager status may cause persons not to hear or understand this message, but for those with ears to hear, this book is a Godsend.

This is an excellent text: challenging, compelling, accessible. Every reader will learn something, and every reader will be moved in some way. I plan to use it in an undergraduate course on Catholic Sexual Ethics. I'm using chapter 1 this semester to test the waters, and already I can see the way that students are drawn into the analysis and able to think critically about their own social location, life experiences, values, and faith commitments. I do not share the concern of reviewer P.A. Mastin.

In particular, I believe he has taken some pieces of the argument out of context and misrepresents Vasko's argument. Vasko explains that bystanders are complicit in violence, but she does not place "moral equivalency on those who swing the fist and those who stay in the shadows for their own safety." Her argument is more nuanced than that. See pg 59 for an example: "Bullying is much more complicated than an altercation between an innocent victim and a guilty perpetrator. We tend to view bullying, and violence more generally, as black and white realities wherein one party is completely innocent and the other does all the harm. Not only does this fail to reflect the complex ways in which power is enacted, but it also creates a dynamic wherein undue attention is given to punitive justice." Here, and elsewhere, Vasko argues that we need a cultural shift. And this is a hopeful message. She is not deterministic or fatalistic. Culture is maleable, people can experience conversion. In Vasko's words: "A theology of redemption that acknowledges human complicity in sin and, at the same time, bespeaks of the power of human agency to cooperate with God in the transformation of the world is sorely needed." (63). Amen, sister. I also dispute the claim that Vasko presents a christology that is "outside of Christian orthodoxy." Nothing could be further from the truth. Vasko picks a hard passage to analyze, but the payoff is worth it. If you want to dig into a difficult text as a resource for bystander intervention today, Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mk 7:24-30) provides much to discuss, discern, and interpret. Vasko's careful, step-by-step presentation of the biblical scholarship is both balanced and challenging. Drawing on postcolonial, liberationist, and feminist scholars, Vasko pays special attention to the social context of first century Judaism and the ethnic tensions in the world of the Bible. She invites us to place ourselves in the story and think about the issues from multiple perspectives. To think of the ways that Jesus's own race and gender conferred privilege and status is not unorthodox. And to say that Jesus insulted the woman is not a new interpretation. A careful reading of chapter 4 will provide an opportunity for personal reflection and critical engagement with the words of sacred scripture. How is this text good news? What does it reveal about Jesus's humanity? Did Jesus participate in the public shaming of this woman? Vasko does not provide neat and tidy answers, but she does ask the right questions. Chapter 5 is her most constructive contribution, and it is sorely needed in our contemporary theo-ethical context. Vasko is not "living in another universe," as an angry reviewer claims. She lives in the United States in the year 2015, and HELLO STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE. Personal, interpersonal, and structural changes are needed. Vasko points a way forward on all levels. I found the section on "Responsible Freedom" to be particularly helpful. In the words of George Yancy, whom she cites, Each of us must be open "to having one's world transformed and cracked." (231). Vasko invites us to strive towards maturity, "the courage and resolve to make

decisions and to take responsibility for them." (231). Vasko describes this as both spiritual and political praxis. Our churches and universities are not innocent, safe spaces; acknowledging such is a good first step. But then, we should not be complacent in that space. Instead, we should work hard, individually and collaboratively, to transform them. I highly recommend this book. A must-read for Christians in 2015.

An excellent book on the violence of our culture. Her focus on the systemic nature of the violence we participate within from our Social Location is spot-on-correct. Thank you. Unlike other reviewers, I am a White Heterosexual Male who understands your message and agrees with it.

This text is extremely timely in the face of Ferguson and NYC and the continuing brutality against people of color in the US. It calls us all to consider the role we play as "innocent bystanders" or rather complicit participants in systems of violence and oppression. Rather than protest our individual innocence, how might we best and most appropriately respond to structures of oppression and what resources can be drawn on theologically to both beseech and support us? Vasko provides some interesting and helpful answers to these questions. Timely and important text.

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