
The Christian and Violence

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Fifty years have passed since Franklin D Roosevelt, addressing the United States Congress on January 6, 1941, enunciated his four Freedoms: "freedom of speech and expression ... freedom of everyone to worship God in their own way ... freedom from want ... and freedom from fear . . . everywhere in the world." Subsequently, the Atlantic Charter incorporated these four freedoms, but sadly at the end of the 20th Century, the lives of millions continue to be enslaved by fear in each of these four areas; fear of want, fear of bigotry, fear of repression and fear of violence.

Persistent and widespread violence amongst the poorest countries of Africa, Asia and South America is almost taken for granted. What really disturbs us is the growing violence of the rich, urbanised, 'Christian' countries of Europe and the United States. It is the prevalence and nearness of gratuitous violence and recurrent riots on the streets of Birmingham, Oxford or Cardiff! We are also disturbed to hear time and again that when doors and windows are locked, alarms are set and the threat of violence should be shut out, for many - especially women and children - this daily routine is but a prelude to terror. Both recurring news reports of domestic violence and research findings from a number of countries, including our own, consistently tell us that, for example, children are more likely to suffer abuse from their parents or relatives than anyone else¹ and that many, if not most rapes are committed in the home by men known to the woman.² 80% of women who kill another person also do so in their own homes!³ Tragically, therefore, many - young people, especially - abandon their homes, regarding the risk of violence on the streets as a relief from certain and habitual violence in the home. However, the risk of violence on the streets is also such in many communities that it seriously affects people's quality of life, since psychological violence - such as intimidation, rage, or fear of aggression - is as potent as a physical attack in inflicting its own kind of damage. Psychological violence also includes the more subtle, 'middle class' coercion which is frequently put upon children which

... often takes the form of demanding too much from them and imposing heavy sanctions if they fail. Because the sanctions are defined as being part of the order of nature and come with the possibility of rewards which are defined to the children as being great the children accept the sanctions, and when they themselves get power over others, they uncaringly impose the same sanctions.⁴

Acts of *personal* or *individual* violence, such as mugging, child abuse, rape or murder, together with acts of *group* violence such as football, or race riots and gang fights, are those which almost daily make the headlines and arouse fear, outrage and calls for action. However, there are at least four other major areas of contemporary society where violence is also prevalent and reaction to its

increased presence and use in these areas is much more ambivalent and varied, ranging from strong disapproval to strong support. First, **both democratic and totalitarian states** employ violence: either overtly (eg, through war) or covertly (eg, through both economic structures and subversion).

All kinds of violence are the same... the violence of the soldier who kills, the revolutionary who assassinates; it is also true of economic violence - the violence of the privileged proprietor against his workers, of international economic relations between societies and those of the third world; the violence done through powerful corporations which exploit the resources of a country that is unable to defend itself.⁵

Secondly, in **medicine** - especially in its acceptance and advocacy of abortion and the growing support for euthanasia. "Some 200,000 unborn babies are aborted annually in this country" and "it is undeniable fact that fetal life is now taken for the most trivial reasons. Indeed, in many areas, there is virtual abortion on demand."⁶ Both Christian and secular writers have recognised the increasing acceptance of abortion as a watershed - as a "major blow to the sanctity-of-life view" and the opening of the door to the acceptability of killing others - such as the handicapped or aged - who are unwanted, or whose quality of life is judged unacceptable. "If human life can be taken before birth, there is no logical reason why it cannot be taken after birth."⁷

Thirdly, in **religion** the rise of liberation and revolution theologies within Christianity embody the latest attempt to justify violence as a legitimate means of countering injustice. This is a new version of the traditional arguments for 'a just war' which in turn, Ellul argues⁸, reflect the influence of Islam. Islam perceives itself as "the only religion that conforms perfectly to nature. In a natural state we would all be Muslims... In making war to force people to become Muslims the faithful are bringing them back to their true nature". In both religions, therefore, there are those who argue that worthy ends justify violent means!

Fourthly, the **mass media** - especially television - shows both real and fictional violence with increasing frequency and explicitness. The programme planners' assumption that viewers find other people's violence and suffering entertaining appears to be borne out by the frequency with which programmes with violence as a central story-line appear amongst the 'Top Ten' weekly viewing figures. Such violence is not new. Human history is substantially a history of conflict and aggression. However, this century has experienced war and organised brutality on a massive scale and whilst we may not have evidence to determine reliably whether or not it has been more violent than some other periods, scientific and technological developments have certainly made it more dangerous, for as Mumford concludes: "Modern man is the victim of the very instruments he values most. Every gain in power, every mastery of natural forces, every scientific addition to knowledge, has proved potentially dangerous because it has not been accompanied by equal gains in self-understanding and self-discipline."¹⁰

The Roots of Violence

This brings us to the main purpose of this article which is to examine why human beings are so given to violence: why in spite of witnessing and experiencing its damaging and so often deadly effects, we appear addicted to its use and willing to utilise every advance in human knowledge and skill to increase the variety and effectiveness of the violence we inflict on others. Why are even the most privileged positions of power and influence used time and again so as to harm others? Since limited attention appears to have been given to violence in contemporary Christian writing, this article aims to assist Christians, in particular, in understanding and reacting to violence. It is therefore written on the basis that the Scriptures, being the inspired Word of God, are the only source from which sound insights can be gained.

The Bible makes clear that from the moment Adam and Eve accepted Satan's invitation to rebel against God in order to become 'as gods' (Gen 3:5), violence became an inevitable and endemic feature of human behaviour. For if I regard myself 'as god' - an autonomous being, with the right to do what I wish, to the limits of my power, then I will be inclined to view other human beings either as rivals - to be overcome or eliminated - or as useful resources - to be exploited and manipulated to further my own purposes, and then discarded. Genesis traces the rapid development of such thinking and the consequent brutalisation of human relationships. Following Adam's insolent attempt to put the blame for his own sin on Eve and on God (Gen 3:12) came Cain's jealousy of his brother's acceptance by God which generated hatred and culminated in murder (Gen 4: 4-8). By the end of chapter 4 (23-24), we find Lamech boasting to his wives of his power and intention to wreak vengeance seventy-seven fold on anyone who offends him and bragging that he has already killed two men who hurt him. Leupold comments that the arrogance, hate and vengefulness expressed by Lamech here makes this "one of the most ungodly pieces ever written."¹¹ Fallen man - 'as god' - makes his own rules, extols violence as virtue and celebrates murder as success! It is not surprising, therefore, that by chapter 6 we read that 'the earth was filled with violence' and that this was the immediate cause of God's universal judgement (Gen 6: 11-13) on the human race. Later, in the New Testament we again find reprobate persons described as filled with violence (Rom 1:28-32). Finally, when God renews with Noah the covenant He originally made with Adam, it is with a significant difference. Now, He tells Noah, because the created head of the creation has become a renegade, violent being, 'the fear of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth and upon the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered (Gen 9 1-2). As Schumacher argues, the concept of violence has to be widened beyond conflicts between people to include "an ever-increasing warfare against nature and violent attitudes."¹²

As might be expected, our Lord's diagnosis confirms this deep-seated corruption of man's nature. He declares that 'out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies' (Mt 15:19). Man's rebellion against God was a moral offence resulting in the

spiritual, psychological and physical abnormality of human nature. Having opted to obey the arch-rebel, Satan, human beings became infected by the same motives and affections and, alienated from God, powerless to free themselves from that condition and the judgement of God upon it. 'You are of your father the devil' says Christ to the Pharisees, 'and the lusts of your father ye will do . . . ' (Jn 8:44). Violence in all its forms is, therefore, a manifestation of the spirit and methods of the kingdom of darkness and the endemic violence in human behaviour is evidence that the whole world is infected by its wickedness (1 Jn 5:19).

Triggers of Violence

Having established that human nature in rebellion against God is violent, it is stating the obvious to say that it is not uniformly so. Individuals and communities are influenced in their espousal of violence, in the forms and degree of violence they practice, as well as in the purpose to which they put it, by varied and complex factors. Whilst it is not feasible to consider such factors and their operation in any detail in an article such as this, I suggest that five separate, but interacting, groups of factors are triggering the human predilection for violence and its proliferation and escalation within our society. First, **cultural factors**. The massive defection from Christian belief and values which has taken place during this century has left naturalism as the dominant world-view. This maintains that "nature is nothing but matter in motion" and since "the scheme of things is purposeless and meaningless, then the life of man is purposeless and meaningless too."¹³ This secular world-view also leads inevitably to the conclusion that morality has no objective validity. 'We may speak about certain behaviour as being "right" or "wrong" but such words do not describe anything real, for there is nothing, and can be nothing, in the impersonal universe that corresponds and gives substantive meaning to such words.'¹⁴ The loss of belief in a self-revealing God and in the uniqueness and dignity of human life created in the image of the Creator, inevitably results in the reduction of morality to human likes and dislikes. As we saw above, this in turn has made acceptable the routine termination of life even to those whose profession is the care of people. It is not surprising, therefore, that others, less well disposed towards their fellow human beings, should be increasingly prepared to use various forms of violence, including murder, in order to get their own way.

The argument most frequently used by the 'media masters' for the increasing frequency with which such violence is reported and depicted - particularly on television - is that they report the facts; they reflect society; they respond to demands. However, the undisputed effectiveness of television as a means of communication and education also means that what is shown and how it is shown influences people's perception and choices. Rowe argues that "television is a much more powerful means of ensuring uniformity of belief than was the Inquisition."¹⁵ If that is not so, then the value placed on it by politicians, advertisers, and educationists is seriously misplaced! Whether or not media violence is a *direct* cause of violent behaviour, it certainly stimulates violence in

at least two ways. First, the fact that "the manner in which people commit violent acts or adopt a violent style of behaviour often shows similarity to popular media scenarios" means that at a minimum, the media provides people with "the costumes in which to clothe aggressive behaviour."¹⁶ Secondly, the frequent showing of violence in the 'soaps' as well as in the news, used by police as well as by criminals, in the homes as well as on the streets, conveys the impression that violence is a normal and legitimate way of solving problems. As a consequence, the 20th century version of the song of Lamech can frequently be heard in the board rooms as well as on the football terraces of this land: 'Aggression Rules - OK'!

Secondly, **power factors**. By no means all power is immoral or its exercise violence but it becomes both immoral and violent when we exercise it to enforce others to comply with our will - in spite of their resistance and what it may cost them. This applies to the exercise of economic, political and religious power as well as to the use of personal, physical and psychological power. The war in Yugoslavia, sectarian killings in Northern Ireland and the 8% increase in crimes of violence in England and Wales in the year ending March 1992¹⁷ are indicative of man's predilection for using violence in pursuit of all kinds of causes - or of no cause at all! People 'as gods' have "a taste for power as such and the pleasure of being obeyed"¹⁸, apart from any substantive advantage they may gain through its use, and since we all have power in relation to someone, the temptation to abuse that power is one each of us has to face.

Feelings of powerlessness and injustice also give rise to resentment and to violence. Scheler concludes that in a society "where everyone has the 'right' to compare himself with everyone else, yet 'factually cannot so compare himself', here - quite apart from any individual character and experience - the actual *structure of society* cannot fail to ensure a tremendous build-up of resentment within the society."¹⁹ Such resentment often expresses itself destructively, for example, in vandalism, or in attempts to change a society by violently removing the perceived injustice - usually by 'removing' the people perceived to be unjust - for example, by a revolution. On the other hand, such feelings of injustice, coupled with powerlessness may also turn into an urge for self-destruction. "In the UK, on average, two people try to kill themselves every hour; every day over 12 will succeed, totalling 4,500 deaths a year. Suicide is the third largest cause of death for people under 25, and the trend is accelerating. Whilst eating disorders appear to be the province of women, killing oneself is something men seem to excel at."²⁰

Thirdly, **personal factors**. As we have seen, the Bible makes clear that violence has its source in the depravity of the human heart. All of us are therefore capable of some forms of violence, although differences in temperament make violence more appealing to some than to others.²¹ There appear to be two personal characteristics in particular that render the individual prone to violent speech and actions. First, envy, which the Bible describes as 'rotteness of the bones' (Prov 14:30) leading to 'confusion and every evil work.' (Jas 3:14) Shoock defines it in more prosaic terms "as a disgruntled emotional state arising from the possessions or achievements of another, a spiteful wish that the other should lose them"²² Shoock, along with others concludes that envy "plays a

significant role in the criminal personality", involving a consuming desire that no one should have anything" and resulting in acts which have as their only motive the destruction of other people's possessions or pleasure. All too common expressions of envy in our society are vandalism, malicious gossip and delight at the misfortune of another.

A second personal characteristic which triggers violence is "the inability to express oneself". This "produces frustration, and this frustration can lead to violence. Escalating emotions in a obscenity-filled shouting match become the stepping stone to violence".²³ Parents are known to resort to violence in attempting to control their children when they fail to do so by using other (moral) means and even Christian husbands have been known to use violence in order to try and achieve what they regard as an overriding obligation - the obedience of their wives.

Fourthly, **the effectiveness factor**. Violence is popular because it is an accessible and, in many cases, a highly effective means of achieving both inherent and instrumental rewards. Lamech clearly delighted in the sheer sense of his power to avenge and kill (Gen 4: 23 - 24), whilst Ahab and Jezebel used their power to obtain Naboth's vineyard through illegitimate means, the legitimate having failed (1 Kings 21). Similarly, the playground bully and dominating husband²⁴ amongst others, find it a ready means of satisfying the desire to dominate and be feared.

Finally, **spiritual factors**. The existence and active operation of evil spiritual powers have to be included in any serious attempt to understand violence. Incidents such as the testing of Job in the Old Testament and the violence of the devil possessed in the New (Lk 8:26f), the Lord's prayer that His people should be kept safe from the evil one (Jn 17:15), together with other biblical teaching, reveal that powerful, malevolent spiritual powers are at work and that they are directly opposed in character and purpose to God. God's love for a rebellious humanity has been clearly shown by His initiative in sending His Son into the world to redeem it through His sacrificial death on the Cross. During this age, God's declared intention of bringing the good news of that redemption to every nation will only be accomplished in the face of determined and persistent opposition by the powers of evil, including the use of both physical and psychological violence (Mt 16:18; 24:14; Eph 6:10f). Where the New Testament message is received and strongly influences individuals and societies, violence, amongst other evils, is curtailed. Where it weakens, and especially where it is replaced by naturalism with its denial of human uniqueness and a rapidly growing interest and involvement in the occult, as in this country currently, violence is unleashed and stimulated. In the absence of widespread mutual respect amongst the population at large and a consequent, voluntary eschewing of violence, curbing violence in the society becomes a difficult task and usually results in the state using increasing amounts of force.

Responding to Violence

Ellul concludes²⁵ that historically Christians have responded to violence in one of three ways.

Firstly, **conformity**. This means that Christians support and act out the view that violence is a justifiable instrument - at least of government. Since the end of the 3rd century, when the church abandoned its non-violent position, Christians have frequently sought to justify war *per se*, and have endorsed particular wars as 'just'²⁶. This view has also led to Christians supporting activities such as slavery²⁷ and the violent suppression of trade unions²⁸ whilst in recent years, it has given rise to Liberation and Revolutionary Theology seeking to justify revolution against oppressive governments.²⁹ Christians who respond to violence in this way have a most difficult task in demonstrating that their response is in accordance with the teaching and example of Christ - which is why, perhaps, many such appear to have a weak belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures. The Lord absolutely refuses to use, or to endorse the use, of violence (Mt 26:52; Jn 18:36) and His command to His followers is that we are not only to love our neighbours but 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust' (Mt 5:44,45). The Lord makes quite clear here that the loving of enemies is an essential mark of genuine sons and daughters of God. However, the sole aim of violence, exercised by an individual or group, is to dominate, damage or destroy others and, therefore, such action is always wholly irreconcilable with the spirit of authentic Divine love, and its expression in human behaviour..

Secondly, **compromise**. This occurs when Christians agree that, in principle, violence is sinful but that in specific situations its use is justified.

A general formulation of the compromise position is that when all reasonable options have failed, and subject to certain criteria, violence is justified. It is from this position that the seven conditions of just war were developed by the Roman Catholic church. It is also on this basis that some, including Christians, seek to legitimise abortion. For many, the 'last resort' argument is very persuasive when applied to extreme cases. For example, if you or I are faced with a threat to injure or kill our loved ones, is it not justifiable to resort to violence if all other means fail to remove the threat? For the Christian this argument, reasonable though it sounds, presents the same serious difficulties as does the whole of the compromise position. First, it shifts the basis for determining whether violence is right or wrong from the character of God - who is light and love (1 Jn 1:5; 4:8) - to the nature of the circumstances with which we are faced. In other words, we move from acknowledging that "God's character is the moral absolute of the universe"³⁰ and that His character is revealed for us in the inspired Scriptures, to *situational ethics* - which means that we believe, or at least act as if we believe, that what decides whether actions are right or wrong are the circumstances in which the actions take place, and our understanding of what is acceptable or effective behaviour in that situation and at that time. Secondly, to resort to violence as a last resort proclaims to the world that we concede the limitations of Christ's teaching and example and accept the supremacy of violence over love and faith as a means of resolving certain problems. The compromise position, therefore, reveals an absence of faith, an inability to believe that even though there may be short

term suffering or loss, 'all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose' (Rom 8:28). However, we have to be careful not to make harsh and hasty judgements regarding the behaviour of others in this matter since we are each weaker in faith in some circumstances than in others and each of us is liable in such situations to adopt the ways of non-faith. It is important for relationship with God and for our spiritual well-being that, rather than seek to justify such unwarranted compromise we confess them to be what they are - the sins of unbelief - and seek the forgiveness of God and the strengthening of our faith to enable us act with integrity in such difficult situations.

Thirdly, **confrontation**. This means responding and witnessing to the violence of this world with *total non-violence*. Outside the Christian world, the model of non-violence and its expression in passive resistance, is Gandhi. Within the Christian world it is regarded as Jesus Christ. However, I suggest that there are two fundamental differences between non-Christian and Christian non-violence. First, Christian non-violence is not passive but active. Not only is it a reaction to the evil and folly of violence but is the result of conviction that men and women bear the image of God and are not therefore to be in any sense violated. It entails an expression of love towards both neighbours and enemies, which is inspired and energised by the love of God towards mankind - especially as it is manifested in and through Jesus Christ. The New Testament writers clearly understand that the way to respond to evil is through practically working for the good of the evil-doer³¹ and that this excludes violence. Secondly, Christian non-violence recognises limitations. In response to Pilate, 'Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence' (Jn 18:36). The Lord explains here that His Kingdom does not use armed force, even in self-defence, since it is not of this world. Since they are citizens of His Kingdom, neither will His followers engage in violence: and surely this continues to be the standard for His followers in every generation.

However, there is also a clear acceptance by the Lord that were He a leader of one of this world's kingdoms, in similar circumstances, He would have resorted to violence. He does not condone the use of force by earthly rulers, as some have argued, but makes a statement of fact highlighting the contrast between the principles and methods of the heavenly and earthly kingdoms. Earthly kingdoms use and cannot survive without the use of force. 'To say that the state should not employ force is simply to say that there should be no state. It is the same with regard to war. To the extent that the state is charged with ensuring the survival of the social group that it leads and represents, it cannot avoid war.....And war, like violence, is not "just". It exists - that's all.'³² It is a corporate expression of the abnormality and corruption of the human heart (Jas 4:1f) and until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of God they will continue to operate imperfectly, using the means perceived by leaders, who are themselves sinful, as expedient and effective in achieving their goals. As citizens of Christ's Kingdom, Christians can, therefore, quite consistently reject violence as sinful in every sphere of life but at the same time acknowledge that

it is an inescapable and tragic reality in the world as it is, and that there are circumstances in which the use of violence by the state is a necessary - though sinful - means of preserving its very existence and a measure of order and peace in a world which would otherwise tear itself apart. In the end it would do so anyway, were it not that the King of Peace will return and establish His righteous reign of peace! (Mt 24:22)

Christian Responsibility in a Violent Society

However, for Christians to acknowledge that violence is wrong and inescapable does not justify inaction. Indeed, for Christians to stand aside from the violence in our society is as much an abdication of the gospel as is conforming with violent attitudes and methods. As I understand the Scriptures, they place upon us two general responsibilities in dealing with violence. The first is *to be* particular kinds of persons and the second is *to act* in particular ways - and to be such persons is a prerequisite to acting in such ways! First, we are called to act in ways which **compensate** for violence. The principle behind the Lord's examples in Mt 5:38 - 48 is that we are to respond to personal violence and injustice by generosity and love, manifesting the nature of the kingdom to which we belong. In the case of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25f), we are taught to practise compensatory love towards the victims of violence - even at risk and cost to ourselves. And surely, this is at the heart of our Lord's ministry who came with good news for the poor; liberty for the captives; recovery of sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed (Lk 4:18) and laid down His life in order that they might be freed from such violation of their humanity.

Not only so, for we are also called to **confront** violence in all its forms. Being 'salt' and 'light' (Mt 5: 13 - 15) with regard to violence inevitably involves confrontation, for being such people challenges the wisdom and way of living of this world. It involves that fight against wicked spiritual forces in which Paul bids us engage in union with the Lord who has overcome them, using the whole armour which God has provided for the purpose (Eph 6:10f). A distinctively Christian witness involves resolutely opposing evil and error whilst clearly pointing men and women to the example and redemptive work of Christ, always showing respect and love for others as beings created and loved by God. Such confrontation is our reasonable obligation because - and only because - our Lord took on the powers of evil on the Cross and "the resurrection assures us that the decisive victory (of pure, sacrificial love) over injustice and violence has already been won and that the completion of that victory will surely come."³³

It is not surprising that given the demanding nature of what we are called *to do*, that the emphasis of the Scriptures is continually on what we are called *to be* in union with Jesus Christ. There are two characteristics, in particular, which are essential if we are going to be able to confront and compensate for violence. First, **courage** which is, a quality of mind derived from "faith in the present Christ. Here is no 'grin and bear it' attitude, but a more than natural one which sees an occasion for victory in every opposition (cf 1 Cor 16:9)."³⁴

As Paul makes clear to the Philippians (1:27f) such courage grows from the conviction that it is a privilege to serve Jesus Christ, not only through believing in Him but by suffering for Him. The capacity to exercise such courage is also evidence of His grace and power working in us.

Secondly, we are called to act with **compassion**. In both the Old and New Testaments the expectation is that those who have experienced the compassion (or mercy) of God will be inclined to show compassion to others, especially the fatherless, the widow, the foreigner (eg, Dt 10:18; 14:29) and the poor and afflicted. (eg, Ps 146:9; Zech 7:9-10) and will do so positively and practically (1 Jn 3:17-18). The victims of violence in its various forms are time and again left to fend for themselves and we read that when our Lord saw such people - harassed and helpless - His heart was 'moved with compassion' and He said to His disciples 'The harvest is indeed plentiful, but the labourers are few. So pray the Lord of the harvest to thrust labourers into His harvest' (Mt 9:37,38). Who can doubt that as He views this violent age, His compassion and His call remain the same? Are we not also therefore called to be intercessors and labourers together with Him, ministering to the hurt and helpless around us, and above all bringing the good news of forgiveness and peace with God through Jesus Christ to violators and victims alike.

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A common Old Testament word for violence is GEZELAR. It means to pluck, snatch, tear away or take by force - usually by fraud and with the implication of injustice. It is used in particular of the rich and powerful taking or seizing from the poor. Micah uses the word in condemning wealthy land-owners who 'covet fields and seize them' (Mic 2:2).

Dave Cave, THIRD WAY, April 1993
