

LET'S DE-IDEOLOGIZE VIOLENCE/NONVIOLENCE

CHRISTIAN CENTURY Letter to the Editor from Willis Elliott

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As a faithful reader of the CENTURY this past half century, I've been time and again distressed at its ideological antiviolence. It seems never to miss a chance to badmouth violence, as now in the case of our Libya raid.

I don't goodmouth violence. That would be the equal and opposite ideology. Instead, I evenmouth violence in two senses: (1) I'm predisposed neither to nonviolent nor to violent action, being guided instead by the principle of appropriate response; and (2) I'm modest in predicting the effects of a particular violent act, as I have a Niebuhr-ian sense of the irony of history and the ambiguity of the human heart.

Unlike the CENTURY, I don't claim to know, at least yet, whether the Libya raid was a good idea. My newspaper this morning headlines "Allies Weighing War on Terrorism." History evidences that often the most humanly productive response to violence is more violence. Will this be an additional instance? I would "know" only if I were an ideolog of the Rambo or the Gandhi type (with the latter a less pure representative of his ideology than the former).

I sympathize with the CENTURY and all other preachers who must orate on everything while trying to pontificate on nothing. Or must the preacher orate on everything? Is it not a form of arrogance and imperialism to assume that one's religion has something to say on everything? And is there not a straight line between paradigmatic imperialism and inappropriate violence?

In particular I'm thinking of the invalid linear logic now seducing many promoters of "democracy." For example, Christianity is democratic, democracy means one-person-one-vote, so Tutu is right and the American churches should press for divestment in South Africa. This "logic" encompasses two forms of violence, namely, a wrenching politicization of the Christian gospel and a cultural-imperialistic effort to export our revolution (usually in tandem with the hypocritical complaint against the Nicaraguan government for its alleged efforts to export its revolution).

Another current inappropriate holophrastic use of "democracy" is the moralistic notion that a straight ethical line can be drawn between America's behavior at home and abroad. The false assumption here is that America, which is both a so-so democracy at home and a sort-of empire abroad, can use the same set of "values" when it acts as empire as when it acts as democracy. This "thinking" is supported by the self-delusion that we are not, abroad, an empire. Why should we blind ourselves to a fact all the rest of the world knows? Further, our self-righteous self-criticism cripples us for appropriate action abroad, and we come up with half-actions that hurt everybody and help nobody: the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, and support for the Contras, not to mention President Carter's "rescue operation" in Iran.

I suggest a cognitive exercise to help us transcend ideological thinking about "violence." It can serve equally well when used about "democracy," the codeword so entangled among us with "violence." Draw a grid or simple window with "Good Effects of Violence" in the upper two panes and "Bad Effects of Violence" in the lower two panes. The two panes on the left will list and study instances of "Unintended" effects, and the two panes on the right "Intended" effects. One will not get far with this without experiencing humbling in the face of complexity and illumining in the face of unpredictability.*

Yes, we must speak for God and cry out against inhumanity. But in our speaking and crying out, God and humanity ask us to use all our powers--appropriately.

Willis Elliott

"Violence" is pejorative, a dirty word.
It's only when the other guy's doing it.

* #2052 is one development of the grid.