

NO ALTERNATIVE TO VIOLENCE

BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT

"The frustrations of powerlessness have led some [Negroes] to the conviction that there is no effective alternative to violence as a means of expression and redress, as a way of 'moving the system.'"

—U.S. Riot Commission Report (March 1, 1968). page 205

It would be patent folly for blacks to try to gain through violence what they can achieve, within a time-limit acceptable to them, nonviolently; or alone, what they can achieve less expensively with whites. But by the summer of 1966 the black "Now!" and the white "Never!" had come to kairotic clash as "Black Power" and the "the white backlash." Exit White Conscience, enter White Fear; exit King, enter Carmichael; exit "Negroes," enter "Blacks." The old *dramatis personae* were reduced to bit parts, and an occasional spotlight cannot alter the demotion. The radical recasting shocked the churches; the masses of white churchmen have been wringing their hands and muttering their exasperation, confusion, and anxiety—the mood that dominates when a myth dies. It is this mood that dominates white responses to violence. The following hypothetical conversation is a pastiche of these responses.

Do you really think you've exhausted the alternatives to violence? Personally, I don't hold with violence, and never will. I would agree that almost always there's at least one alternative that is both morally and strategically preferable to violence. Except for absolute pacifists, whose number is infinitesimal, all men believe that on occasion there is "no effective alternative to violence." Unless you are one of those rare absolutists, your lofty rejection of violence is as unethical as it is unreal. You and I may differ on whether the current black revolt is such an occasion, but if so we disagree as moral equals, on the same level; about a means, not an end (assuming that you agree with me on justice as the end). Yet doubtless we agree on this, that most violence is immoral, illegal, and self-defeating—a mindless, direct passage from rage to destructive action.

If you've got all that much to say against violence, I should think you'd be for reducing it, not increasing it. I am! I'm for reducing the quantity of black violence and increasing only its quality, its efficiency, through improved theory, strategy, and tactics. But my primary audience is not blacks, and I am not inciting blacks to violence. I'm speaking primarily to whites, to help persuade them to yield to the black pressures for adequate financial and structural changes toward the

equal-opportunity society that is now possible and therefore morally mandatory. Far from encouraging riots—and most whites think "riots" when they hear "black violence"—I am concerned that other means, which do not hurt a lot of little people in body and property, intervene to effect such societal changes as will free ghetto energies for constructive activities.

But is it really "violence" you want to talk about?

Can't you cool it some by talking only and specifically about destruction of property? After all, you aren't advocating injuring and killing people—or are you?

For what comfort it may be to you, I am not advocating injury to persons. My concern with violence is political: the strategic and tactical use of violence as one of many black pressures to achieve a goal. Whites hurting black bodies helps: blacks hurting white bodies hinders, and there has been very little of it. But blacks threatening to destroy, and actually destroying, white property is essential to the black cause.

Yet even this needs qualifying: I am against more black violence than is absolutely necessary. Not only is excessive violence counterproductive (a strategical consideration), it also is unjustifiable on human grounds (a religio-ethical matter). If you want a formula, minimum input of violence for maximum political effect. Since white property is the base of white power, it is theoretically possible to escalate threats against white property to the point at which white power concludes that continued denial of equal opportunity will cost more than "doing the right thing." At that point, the business-Congress complex will do the right thing for right and wrong reasons—or, better, for noble and less than noble reasons.

Mightn't the job get done without any violence but with only the threat of violence? Would that it could! But who is stupid enough to believe unfulfilled threats? That's Aesop's point in his fable of the cry "Wolf!" The power of the Mafia rests on its fine record of instant violence against those who do not yield to threat; if it were to go soft on follow-through, the criminal underground would evaporate almost overnight. The potency of the threat of violence is a function of violence itself.

Willis E. Elliott is a staff member of the national United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. One of his doctorates is a Ph.D. in Biblical Theology from the University of Chicago.

I'm shocked that you would use Cosa Nostra as a "fine" example of how Negroes should behave toward whites! Does this not make you guilty of aiding and abetting criminality? I leave it to your moral sensitivity to distinguish between the Mafia's parasitism on the society and the blacks' pro-human struggle for equal opportunity, though I grant that both are criminal in their violence. But in revolutions and wars—and our present crisis is being called "the Second American Revolution" and "the Second Civil War"—what happens to the category of criminality? At the beginning of the chaos, the "criminals" are the chaos-causers; at the end, the "criminals" are the losers. This is not a cynical remark but a hard fact: criminality is the negative of "law and order," the party in power having, by virtue of its power, the privilege of defining criminality as whatever activity threatens the social order which is the organum of its power. The extent of your shock measures the degree of your commitment to the present order, i.e. to white power; and, inversely, the probability that you would do anything revolutionary in the present crisis.

"We must serve God rather than man." Christians above all men should find this dissociation from the tribal psyche possible, for our Lord died as a criminal, executed for insurrection, the worst of crimes.

Yet I must add two more qualifications: (1) "Violence" has the immoral overtones of "for selfish reasons and to the disadvantage of others"—whereas it really contains no such idea, and violence can intend the benefit of all (e.g., the National Alliance of Businessmen's prediction of a \$30 billion rise in the GNP if blacks achieve equal opportunity). And (2) "Revolution" usually implies the replacement of one regime with another, and in this sense is too strong a term for the black revolt: only in the wildest rhetoric of the most militant blacks does one hear of reversing the oppression, black over white.

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Let's look at the Bible: isn't violence something the dark forces do to the bright powers, rather than a means for the saints to do God's will? I know there are some exceptions, but I mean in general. This is crucial for Jewish and Christian Americans, so let's take a good look:

In the *Old Testament* our Mosaic-Christian religion is born in the Exodus Event (from the burning bush to the conquest of Canaan), and it remains to this day the historical-ritual center of the Jewish faith. No matter what you may think actually happened, God is depicted as providing back-up violent ratification for Moses' preaching (the ten plagues) and for the people's positive response in the faithful act of leaving Egypt (the destruction of Pharaoh's host). Nine plagues were not enough: Yahweh used selective tactical terrorism graduated all the way up to the death of the first born. Then, as "the Lord of hosts" (armies), Yahweh did not frustrate Pharaoh's army: he wiped it out. All of which occasioned joyous celebration among Yahweh's people (Exodus 15:2): "The LORD is my strength and might (or song); he has become my salvation." Thus violence is an essential component in *Heilsgeschichte*, the salvation-story. (In Christianity, what parallels the Exodus Event is Jesus' Resurrection—parallels it not only in cultic significance but as a divine violent intervention (an "uprising" [*anastasis*]).

In the *New Testament* Jesus comes preaching "the Kingdom (Dominion) of God" as a sudden-and-soon violent in-breaking of the divine against the powers and principalities under the evil Prince and for God's "poor": "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God!" (Luke 6:20) In scores of passages his holybooks had instructed him to associate this coming with violence, so it was natural for him to see the Kingdom coming "violently" (Mathew 11:12 RSV-mg), the temple in ruins (24:2: "not one stone upon another"). The Judge of all the earth was to vindicate Jesus'

words and deeds in the very near future (before the end of the preaching campaign in Matthew 10:23). Jesus himself gave signs of the coming divine violence in nature (cursing the fig tree) and society (cleansing the temple). This Kingdom-connected violence had two sources: God the King, and the rebellious world (under Satan the Prince) resisting the divine suzerainty. Jesus and his disciples would suffer violence from this second source, but such suffering would end with the first source overwhelming the second within the lifetime of some of the first disciples (Mark 9:1; Matthew 16:28; Luke 9:27). But the End (eschaton, denouement) of power-violence did not occur, Jesus died feeling God-forsaken (though still trusting the Father), and the disciple-apostles had to puzzle out the discrepancy as best they could without any *logia* to give them clear dominical guidance.

To the disciples their Lord had become indissolubly merged with the Kingdom, *its* coming, which they faithfully anticipated, was to be *his* coming *again* (Parousia), this time "with power," the violence of the inbreaking Kingdom against "the kingdoms of this world." To conclude that Jesus would have nothing to do with "the fire next time," as he had refused his opportunities to win his way violently the first time, would be an error; for Jesus was only operationally, not philosophically, nonviolent. He believed that the condition of God's poor called for violent action, and he momentarily expected that action from God. Thus Jesus' own distinctive mission did not include the divine assignment of violence to *him*: violence was in *God's* bag, in God's part of the Kingdom Event. It was a true insight of the apostles to associate the Resurrected Lord with violence and even to view his resurrection as the first-fruits of the violent inbreaking of the End. We are left to construct operational responses to the question, What responsibility for power-violence would Jesus have taken had he not anticipated an immediate end to history?

I must be brutal: I think you flaw Jesus because your pro-violence forces you to get rid of him as a witness against violence.

Our biblical religions are bathed in violence—in contrast, e.g., to Buddhist origins—and it is naive and erroneous to put the figure of Jesus on one side and violence on the other.

As for Jesus being "flawed," I can't help that; I can't rewrite history, and neither can you. I can trace the doomed labyrinthine efforts of exegetes through the centuries to evade the discomfiting fact. But doubtless you would be no more inclined than I to seek refuge in incorrect data.

As to my motive, I confess that Jesus' small error gave me the out from what would otherwise be an inescapable contradiction, viz. that Jesus was almost entirely nonviolent and asks me to identify with the poor, who (I contend) are in need of violence and aren't about to wait around for God to be violent without their help. As a Christian I have the dual problem of congruence with Jesus' will for me (the identity dimension) and congruence with the need of the poor (the identification dimension).

As a Christian, and indeed a trinitarian, I believe God assigned Jesus the announcing of the Kingdom through all he was, did, and said: I believe he correctly apprehended God's will for his life and mission. But as an honest man I must face, with its consequences, his small but not insignificant mistake of predicting that there and then God would come through, without human help, with the necessary violence. The error is *small* because adjusting for it requires no revision of the Christian understanding of God, the world, man, or even of Jesus' character, intention, or role. It is *significant* (1) because it reveals the sinless Jesus as imperfect, the kenosis of incarnation including, along with insecurity and death, man's ignorance and tendency to err; (2) because it opens the violence option within loyalty to Jesus as Come-and-Coming;

and (3) because it removes from us Christians the double-minded use of Jesus vis-a-vis violence ("Put up your sword" and "I came to bring a sword").

Your exegesis provides us with a model for dispensing with Jesus whenever we want to, simply by flouting him. What a neat reversal of the roles of Lord and servant! Precisely that—the reversal of Lord and servant—is what I am accusing other positions of! My project is to stop using Jesus when we confront the possibilities and actualities of violence, and let him use us. But don't worry about a model. The error was not only small but single. As for Lord and servant, his role is not lord—he is. A Christian is his Lord's man only if he is his own man, not a xerox man. He says not Take up my cross, but Take up your cross (Mark 8:34, Matthew 16:24). Following him is not mimicking him but rather discovering, in communion with God, our roles as we identify with him in his role of compassionate identification with the world for which he lived and died. The question is dual: what did Jesus do and what does he want me to do? Does Jesus want me, in the present "crisis in the nation," to be nonviolent, to threaten violence, to be violent—me in my individuality and in my collectivities? On the violence issue, "What would Jesus do?" is as nonprofitable a question as "What would we have done had we been Jesus?"

Aren't you a little lonely? After all, unlike you, the churches are overwhelmingly against violence. Are they? Unlike many of their forebears, the mass of American Christians are presently predisposed against violence and revolution at home and toward the use of America's violence capability in suppressing violence and revolutionary change abroad. I'm not more pro-violent than most American Christians. It's just that I think the reverse would be better: violence at home, non-violence in Vietnam. It's all a matter of appropriate action. A certain Austrian Christian confessed to me that his action had been doubly inappropriate: nonviolent when his conscience prompted to violence, and violent when his conscience prompted to nonviolence. Backing out of a four-man plot on Hitler's life in 1940, he soon thereafter entered the Wehrmacht and killed Americans.

A cruciform image helps me here. Think of the transept as the outstretched arms of the available servant, a symbol of Christian presence to human need; and let the vertical represent the appropriate act in the situation. A two-box cartoon shows a clergyman rowing to a drowning man whose hand

alone is above water. The rower is providing a Christian presence, making himself available in the world to the world's agenda. But in the second box he puts in the man's grasping hand a book with a cross on its cover, and (we are left to assume) the man drowns. God's servant was available, but his action was inappropriate. I'm for violence when it's appropriate (which is almost never), and against it otherwise.

Violence is the primary power the poor have against the rich. Blacks have it in their power to make the white elephant feel he's sinking in black quicksand, i.e. to strike Congress and American business with the fears of chaos.

But don't Negroes realize white power would simply overwhelm them if they were to go violent? Riot-control capability, after all, is much greater than it was last summer. Riot-smashing advances the cause by deepening and widening the black rage and by driving it underground, where it is learning to do in the dark its proper work of deepening and widening white fear. Black chaos-capability is and will remain greater than white control-capability: that's the negative side of black power. Only if Pharaoh (white power) is scared enough will this slave revolt succeed. If it fails, Pharaoh will be all the more oppressive. Even though I'm one of the Egyptians, I hope it succeeds.

You're talking like a revolutionary, not like a Christian. A Christian is for integration and reconciliation, not black separatism for black power against white power. The fact is, God and his children are in the business of creating order and chaos, whichever is appropriate at the moment. There's a time for chaos as well as a time for order, a time for reconciliation but also a time to avoid premature, inauthentic reconciliation (Eccl. 4). As for chaos, biblical man is hopeful about it. That's where we came in at the beginning of the Bible (Genesis 1:2). You are right that the gospel reconciles, but it also occasions the need for reconciliations; and we can be unfaithful to the gospel by failing to occasion strife, by effecting premature reconciliations (conflict resolutions), and by refusing to be peace-makers when it is "a time for peace." Peace, for now, is an enemy of justice.

No matter how you try, you can't escape the charge that it's irresponsible, given our current supercharged atmosphere, to say anything good about violence. Irresponsible how, and in relation to what and whom? If it's time for chaos, it's irresponsible to refuse to contribute to the breakdown of "law and order." Responsibility is a relative virtue, a function of

commitment. The Christian's fundamental commitment is to the Kingdom of God, and his fundamental responsibility is to the "times" (*kairoi*). Within this commitment, indeed integral to it, is that he shall be as responsible to his *lesser* commitments—including state citizenship—as his *fundamental* commitment permits and enjoins. The Christian is obligated to take the initiative in the use of all his energies, individually and corporately, toward truly human ends to the glory of God within the vision of what it means to be human face to face with Jesus Christ.

Doctrinaire nonviolence elevates a nonessential means to the status of an essential end—as though it were the central element in ethics and religion; it *uses* Jesus philosophically rather than *following* him devoutly; it cripples its believer's range of response and therefore his servant capability; it freezes him into a moralism that time and again makes him irrelevant or even *negatively* relevant; it impairs the biblical understanding of creation and stewardship; it provides its adherent with a mode of self-deceptive rationalization in threatening situations so that he can "freak in" as a martyr or "freak out" as a hero; it opens him to propagandistic manipulation; and it gives him a pseudo-righteous stance from which he can cheaply use the psychic leverage of other's violence and threats at lesser risk to himself.

In the presence of injustice, the struggle for justice is the shape of love's action—as to the hungry man love must take the form of bread. The *a priori* ruling out of violence reduces love's options for serving justice: doctrinaire nonviolence will on occasion be unfaithful both to justice and to love. Accordingly, Christian ethics cannot exclude violence from the list of love's potential actions. Our society's sentimental hangups on "love" confuse this issue, as indeed the whole range of mortality and ethics.

Do you really believe that violent blacks are going to be that high-minded and philosophical about their violence? Some of them, yes; but no one has the right to demand this high motivation of all who participate in violence toward social change. But the Christian witness among the violent seems to me clear enough. Present just-revolution theory is a neat descendent of just-war theory among us Christians. Love prefers persuasion, and uses violence grievously when believes the persuasive options are exhausted. Confronting

injustice, love aims at justice on a timetable it believes God gives in the situation. Love aims to be "good news" to all, and agonizes through decisions for the better when the best is beyond reach. Love prays for the Kingdom of love and justice, and so witnesses through its wounds and its words.

If your feelings are all that positive, why do you talk so much about a negative sanction, the threat of violence—especially when psychologists have proved that rewards ("positive reinforcements") are more powerful persuaders than is the fear of loss and pain? In the present dialectic of the struggle for equal opportunity there is little public appreciation, especially among churchy types, for the positive value of and the desperate need for this negative side. White power thinks the situation is far less serious than it is, and it will take the push of fear as well as the pull of idealism to get adequate remedial-redemptive action. You may believe that the idealism is enough: I only wish it were. The mass of incentives must more than equal the mass of the inertia plus the mass of the need, and this "critical mass" must include negative as well as positive sanctions. Pollyanna thinking can only move America deeper into the fantasy-clash of rhetoric with reality and toward an Armageddon in which the divine judgment forecloses on our white evasion of reality and duty.

The Riot Commission's profile of the typical rioter is a young black who knows he doesn't fit and has decided to be an active *misfit*. Just behind him is a young black of superior intelligence and vision, whose question rather is *What should happen in our society, and with whom should I join to help it happen?* He is the heart and brains of the next stage of the black revolution, and he will not boggle at any means required to achieve equal opportunity (no matter how he may mythologize it). In the crisis that is upon us, his question is my question. He is the major enemy of my white power and privileges, and a friend of my American and Christian conscience.