

Theologist tackles fear problem

FEAR, THEOPSYCHOSOCIO-
DIMENSIONS OF....
Elliott #970

To the Editor:

Our metropolitan area, like any other human center, should trade off liberty and tranquility against each other on behalf of all who want to live, let live, and help live. That leaves us with the problem of what to do about those who want to live without helping others live, those who want to live and not let others live, and those who don't even want to live — respectively the selfish, the criminal, and the depressed. This letter has to do with the middle subclass of these three outclasses.

More narrowly still, I mean to speak about a subclass of the subclass "criminal," viz. those who use direct physical violence or the threat thereof, with or without bodycontact, against their fellows, for parasitic purposes (muggers and other types of robbers, and rapists). When this subclass becomes strong enough to cripple society with fear, society fights back — perhaps not successfully enough to prevent chaos, but perhaps successfully enough.

With the public paranoia rising in urbia, suburbia, and now even exurbia, how goes the fight? As a lifelong libertarian, I thank God for the civil rights and human rights progress we've made in this country and for Jimmy Carter's persisting in speaking out for the rights of the person over against the state. But we cannot have liberty without adequate safeguards against threats thereto, and such safeguards we no longer have: the jurisprudential system is working so poorly that it is not what the New Testament (Romans 13:3) says it should be, "a terror to bad conduct."

What then? When the official

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ergy constantly flowing in some direction. Thus:

Case 1: fear flowing towards muggers, robbers, rapists. Some sections of our city are fear-immobilized at night, as I know from teaching night courses; some sections are so day and night. Some sections are almost without shopkeepers, so great has the fear become that keeping store is a daily terror "just not worth it any longer." The value of everything has plunged, including human life. In such areas, storekeepers should not be offered bounties so high as to tempt them to shoot innocent customers. That's a wry way of saying that anyone inclined to express simple horror at the bounty idea would be well advised to have a talk with some storekeeper in some such area.

Now, at the simplest level, governments are constituted to reverse the fear-flow from the tranquil to the violent. As a biblical scholar, I know this story best in its ancient Near-Eastern version — e.g., the emergence of kingship in Israel against Philistine raiding parties. Here lies the roots of Jesus' central phrase "the Kingdom of God." As a matter of plain fact, present fear-reversal devices, whether official or not, whether legal or not, and all of them combined, are not succeeding in reversing the fear. Ergo, the destiny of American urban society, beginning with New York City, is in doubt. As I think this society should not deteriorate into chaos, I'm for the minimum

against the government, was won last winter.

I am not ideologically against chaos, and would be a bad American face to face with Thomas Jefferson's masterpiece if I were. The citizenry should have seen to the collapse of their Nazi government and not depended on the outside world for it. But at the present time I consider America's level of injustice acceptable though barely tolerable, and so am for whatever is necessary, as minimum, to achieve and maintain the public tranquility. This necessity includes raising the level of fear, in the psyche of the violence-inclined, to the immobilizing level, the level at which the risks of criminal activity are inwardly experienced as unacceptably high. On the positive side, the parallel activity should be toward lowering the level of injustice — jurisprudential, economic, social, political.

Case 3: fear flowing toward God. Here, slogans in the Bible include "Fear God, honor government" and "We must fear God rather than man." Extrabiblical quotes should not leave out William Penn's "Fear God or you will have a tyrant to fear." Further, when the citizen fears God, personal controls reduce the need for social controls — as in a hymn we sang in church just this morning: "... God mend thine every flaw, / Confirm thy song in self-control, / Thy liberty in law." Not really a hymn, but an apostrophe addressed to America: "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies." The point of fearing God is the precise opposite of personal and social constriction: it is "soul" and "liberty."

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