

VIOLENCE IN SOCIETY: A COMMENTARY

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I just saw another news feed about an act of violence that was committed in a school setting. It's alarming that such events are becoming increasingly prevalent. How are we to understand this and, even more importantly, to correct this seemingly disturbing trend? Certainly, a necessary approach must be immediate and must include responses by those tasked with public safety – our law enforcement warriors and heroes, law makers, nonprofit civic action groups, and those belonging to the judicial branch of our government. But I would like to suggest that tackling social problems through those venues will not result in the longer term and more comprehensive solutions that we all hope for. Such a strategy could be likened to EMTs, Paramedics, and Emergency Department staff treating presenting surface wounds while ignoring underlying organ or other bodily system damages. Yes, by all means triage and then tend to and find solutions for the immediate and serious symptoms that are plaguing our society. However, surely efforts must be made to search for and identify underlying factors that contribute to such a troubling social problem which is weakening the very fabric of our society. Those factor include, but are not limited to, the perpetration of violence upon the innocent and vulnerable, the venting of frustration and anger in negative and violent way, the inability of people to curb their destructive impulses, and even more deadly, the bullying and dominance of individuals, groups, and at even larger levels of social grouping based on a perceived division between THEM and US that is rampant within our societies and world.

In this paper I will attempt to examine, preliminary though my attempts may be, existing research done by some scholars who have looked deeper into the issue of social violence that I have encountered as part of my current graduate degree pursuit. I will also take advantage of a writer's license to insert my own leanings and thoughts at the conclusion of this paper. To be responsible and as transparent as possible, I am obliged to disclose that the selection of quotes contained in this paper are greatly influenced by my personal belief that current devastating and destructive social problems contain a spiritual dimension. I also need to explain that the material I will be drawing upon represents just a small portion of the scholarly material I have been encountering throughout my research. The decision to isolate specific portions of that material is mine and mine alone, as are the conclusions that I have derived from that material. I would suspect that those conclusions will undoubtedly be questioned, such is the value of living in a

society where public debate is encouraged and normal. With the preceding declarations being attended to, I'll now present the following paper consisting of scholarly material derived from the works of a few academics I have encountered and my subsequent thoughts, in an attempt to advance one perspective on potential contributing factors for violence in human society.

I'll begin with material taken from an article by Wolfhart Pannenberg, "How to Think About Secularism" published in *First Things*, June 1996. Pannenberg suggests that the religious and spiritual dimension of human beings has been excluded and marginalized in the public sphere. He traces this reality to the thought behind and actions of the French Revolution which, amongst other revolutionary initiatives including the separation of heads from the bodies of those in the monarchy and aristocracy that were not able to flee the wrath poured upon them, pitted reason against faith and scapegoated religious institutions (generally the Catholic Church) as sources of authoritative repression (unfortunately not totally undeserved), enacting a strict separation of church and state. In this scenario, the church and religion were seen as the source of problems, certainly not solutions. The separation of church and state in the USA is not as contentious as in many European nations, not having the antagonistic back story as found in Europe. This being the case, while religion and government are kept separate by the USA Constitution, religion is still thought of as a potential source of social help and beneficial public service, and while the USA is at its core a religious (essentially a Christian) nation, the place of religion in the public sphere is not a dominant one (Himmelfarb, 2004). Pannenberg also claims that while the separation of church and state manifested in a variety of national scenarios, while not all of those scenarios are grounded in the violence that was enacted during the French Revolution, he contends that the scenario where religion has been side-barred is prevalent and has resulted in a profound and debilitating loss of meaning for many in western society, which he ties to the presence of personal and social violence, which is our topic of concern. Pannenberg does point out that the religious sphere holds a lion's share of responsibility for this situation in the western world, due to rampant social instability caused by the wars of religion that were waged in Europe during the 16th, 17th, and early 18th century. So, he has some wise counsel directed to the Christian sphere and beyond that to other faiths, regarding their need to indemnify such historically based flaws, practices, and attitudes in hopes that such chastisement will compel them to make amends and refrain from repeating such shameful histories. The following quotes will address some of the key points of his argument.

. . . According to Barth, modern culture has been a revolt against the Christian faith aimed at putting the human being in the place of God. There is much to be said for that interpretation, for the human reality has indeed become basic in modern culture in a manner comparable to the religious foundation of earlier cultures. The concern for human rights is but one aspect, although the politically most important aspect, of modernity's preoccupation with man. Thus it came about that the human individual was seen as the highest value and criterion of good . . . The hope for a better world is no longer directed toward another world , but becomes the human project to improve this world. Karl Lowith argued that the modern *philosophy* of history is in fact a secularization of the Christian *theology* of history; it is a secularized version of the history of salvation . The providence of god guiding the historical process toward eschatological fulfillment I replaced by a philosophy of progress guided by the predictive power of science and technology and promising a future of worldly happiness. Science secularized the theological idea of law by turning it into the idea of the eternal laws of nature, and the idea of an infinite universe was the secularized version of an earlier belief in the infinity of God. In these and other theories, a religious content is transformed into something immanent and this worldly. (Pannenberg, 1996:3 and 6 of 10).

Under the influence of thinkers such as Max Weber, the dominant assumption of modernity has been that secularization will continue to pervade all aspects of social and individual behavior, with religion increasingly pushed to the margins. In the last two or three decades, however, it has become evident that secularization (or, as some prefer, progressive modernization) faces severe problems. The thoroughly secularized social order gives rise to feelings of meaninglessness: there is a vacuum in the public square of political and cultural life, and this invites violent outbreaks of dissatisfaction. As a consequence, it is hard to predict the future of the secularist society. It depends in part on how long most people will be willing to pay the price of meaninglessness in exchange for the license to do what they want. So long as people feel sure of the comforts of affluence, they may be willing to tolerate these tensions indefinitely. On the other hand, irrational reactions are unpredictable, especially when there is a sense that the institutions of society are not legitimate. The circumstances of modern secular society is more precarious than we may want to recognize. Those who recognize the danger call for a reaffirmation of the traditions by which the culture is defined, and most specifically for the reaffirmation of the religious roots of those traditions. (Pannenberg, 1996:8 of 10)

I am convinced that those of the religious sphere have some significant work to do if they wish to participate in the public sphere, a position that is strongly recommended by Pannenberg. That work will certainly be required if the religious sphere hopes to regain the trust and of those living in our modern society and must include the demonstration and manifestation of tolerance, love, and a marked maturity of spirit.

. . . The lack of tolerance among Christians in the post-Reformation period was directly responsible for the rise of a secularist culture. What Christians should learn from this is the urgency of overcoming their inherited controversies and of restoring some form of unity among themselves. In addition, the idea and practice of tolerance must be incorporated into the Christian understanding not only of freedom but of truth itself. (Pannenberg, 6 and 7 of 10)

Another insight by Pannenberg addresses the current understanding of freedom which has become dominant and widely accepted within western culture. This is the idea that freedom is divorced from the religious concepts of ethics, morality, and the idea of the good, including the

need to control the baser instincts of humanity derived from presence of sin. This divorcing of freedom from the good seems to have generated a type of mindset which implies that being free is akin to allowing citizens to do whatever they want, including behaving in such a way that religious people refer to as license.

There is a biblical teaching that all human persons are born to be free and that such freedom should be respected. There is the biblical teaching that human beings are created in the image of God and created to enjoy communion with God. In fact, it is only communion with God that actually makes us free, according to Jesus (John 4:36) and Paul (2 Corinthians 3:17). While every human being is created to enjoy the freedom that comes from communion with God, it is only in Christ that such freedom is fully realized through redemption from sin and death. Such is the Christian idea of freedom. The modern idea of freedom, most effectively proposed by John Locke, differs from the Christian view and in that it focuses only on the natural condition of man. It differs also in drawing upon ancient Stoic ideas of natural law. . . . In Lock's position there is an echo of the Christian understanding that freedom depends on being united with the good and, therefore, with God. The prevailing idea of freedom in our societies today, of course, is the idea that each person has the right to do as he pleases. Freedom is not connected to any notion of the good as constitutive of freedom itself. Because of the incompleteness of human existence in history, any idea of freedom involves the risk of abuse. But it does make a very big difference whether the distinction between the use and abuse of freedom is observed. . . . the disengagement of the idea of freedom from the idea of the true and good is the great weakness of secularist societies. (Pannenberg, 1996:7 and 8/10)

Han Joas (2014), in his book *Faith as an Option: Possible futures for Christianity*, sees the baser tendency of humanity to grab dominance through power as a root source of violence, what I interpret as bullying behavior. This behavior can be found at the individual level but is also present in organizations, nations and in the religious, political, economic, and entertainment, including the media, spheres as well. Really, the practice of self-benefiting dominance seem to be found when any specific characteristic such as race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, possessing a mental or physical disability, political affiliation, eye color, you name it, can be used to set one group or social entity against another – leading to a US vs. THEM mentality coupled with a sense of superiority being attributed to the US group. The following quotes speak to this issue:

All of them run the risk of a missionary universalism that may lapse into the ideological cloaking of self-interest. In religious terms, this represents a process of remagification, coercion of the god rather than worship of the god, a regression to pre-Axial Age conditions. (Joas, 2014:110)

American religious economists have sought, interestingly and I believe persuasively, to demonstrate that religiously charged violent conflicts in societies do not come about through the encounter of different religions such as (as the “clash of civilizations” thesis would lead us to expect) but through the particularist state regulation of religious life, regulation that seeks to aid one particular religious community while keeping another under control. (Joas, 2014:11 - 112)

A broader take on this bullying tendency and behavior has been elucidated by David Martin (2017) in his book *Secularization, Pentecostalism and Violence: Receptions, Rediscoveries and Rebuttals in the Sociology of Religion*. Martin sees this self-firstness and tendency towards bullying as an expression of the baser aspect of human nature that is manifested in multiple social systems.

I want to disrupt a narrative that lays the primary blame for violence on religion and my thesis is astonishingly simple. Violence is written so deeply into human relationships and into the unremitting struggle for power, wealth, honour and dominance, generated by the difference between Us and them, that we can take it for granted. Religion will be complicit in this struggle because it provides a major and powerful marker of the difference between Us and Them. But so does every form of social solidarity. In recent centuries other forms of solidarity, for example nationalism and secular political ideology have been as complicit as religion in the struggle for dominance. (Martin, 2017:157)

I conclude with two reflections from *Does Christianity Cause War?* If you seriously want to exorcise conflict then erase and eliminate differences. But you can be assured that any such attempt will be the occasion of ferocious conflict. If you select some generic factor like religion as *the* cause of all the trouble we are in, you have grossly simplified a complex problem in a way that offends science and morality alike, and in a way that can only lead to policies of repression that reproduce precisely the phenomena of conflict, dogma and intolerance that you initially set out to eliminate. The selection of religion as *the* source of evil has to be analysed, not as a scientific proposition, but as a cultural trope derived from a specific European history over quite a limited period of early modernity. Once enlarge the perspective to include the broad acres of human history over millennia it is quite clear that groups fight each other for any number of reasons and eliminate opponents whom they perceive as threatening their cultural, economic and territorial patrimony. They can do so without any adventitious aid supplied by religion. War, declared or undeclared, over scarce resources of every kind, including status and honour, is endemic, and may or may not be mobilized in its pursuit . . . (Martin, 2017:132)

Given that ethnicity, region, language and religion are sources of particular identities over against other identities, separately and in combination, they can be politically manipulated to secure power based on the drive for dominance, on plausible fears and the logic of pre-emption. (Martin, 2017:162)

The following quote from J.V. Langmead Casserly (1955) looks at the same understanding from a different perspective:

The classical theological term 'original sin' is a somewhat misleading one now that we have acquired the habit of using the word 'original' to mean new, unusual, or unique. Original sin certainly does not mean a new kind of sin that has never been sinned before. On the contrary, it refers to the spiritual sickness, the underlying sinfulness, which afflicts man from the very point of his origin, so that man is a sinner even when he is not sinning in any overt or particular fashion . . . Why, in other words, is eternal vigilance the necessary price of freedom? Why is limiting and dividing earthly power and balancing the various forms of earthly power over against each other, and subjecting earthly power to the rule of law, the only way in the long run to avoid being overwhelmed by earthly power? The answer can only be in terms of the doctrine of original sin. (Casserly, 1955:88-89)

It is because men are everywhere corruptible and always corrupted that no single man or group of men can be trusted with too much power, indeed with any power at all that is not in some way balanced and checked by the power of other men. For the same reason a social situation that leaves any particular man without any power, influence, status, or rights whatsoever is one that leaves him at the mercy of the power of his neighbors. The wisdom of democracy is to divide and disperse, to limit and balance power, to reserve some tiny minimum of power for each citizen as his inalienable right, to create traditions, institutions, and written constitutional documents which insistently remind power of its responsibilities and its inherently limited character. But why is all this necessary and important? The answer is now clear: because this is a fallen world and because in a fallen world the problem of government of power to particular persons and groups is the most hazardous problem of all. If men were morally perfect, or perfectible and rapidly approaching perfection, the case for democracy would not be so strong. But because this is not so, the case for democracy is overwhelming strong . . . The liberal humanist tendency toward an idolatrous absolutizing of democracy, which transforms it into an ultimate ethic or even a higher religion, is, of course, from such a point of view as this, a ridiculous illusion. (Casserley, 1955:89-90)

Well, I've thrown a lot at you, and it is only fair that I try to share the conclusions that I have drawn from the quoted material. As alluded to earlier, the following is what this author has derived from the foregoing. Please feel free to look deeper into the target issue of social violence and come to your own conclusions. I take full responsibility for my conclusions related to the target issue.

As I stated at the outset, I believe that the foundational and underlying contributor to the problem of violence in the public and private sectors is spiritual. By spiritual I am referring specifically to the internal dimension of human mind and heart that grapples with and endeavors to understand the supernatural dimension of God and those eternal question of life's meaning and purpose. This arena of human life typically comes under the purview of religion. In addition, religion is also concerned with identifying those baser natures of humanity and applies itself to counsel discipline and self-control of those natures as well as making available to humanity the great work of salvation for the purpose of hampering the reality of sin and evil in human life. To summarize, it is my understanding that the religious sphere's realm of concern, expertise, and work is in dealing with the tension between idealism and reality, in investing in bridging the chasm between God and human beings, in guiding humanity to develop universal and altruistic values, and to also to encourage and counsel humanity in the ways they need to behave and the mind/heart-set they need to possess to be able to dominate and counter their baser human natures. Religious educators and ministers also encourage character development including the nurturing of those qualities of the heart known as the fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23-NIV) - love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. I have found a quote I have found addition support for the above perspective from Rev. Sun

Myung Moon (“Let Us think Once More”, June 12, 1977) which speaks to the traditional role of religion:

Our Unification Church school teaches those simple things. Religious people live under the laws of the world and ultimately under the law of god instead of confining their point of view to just the family or the nation. Therefore, the people who limit their thinking to national laws, especially national leaders, need to be enlightened by religious people. Today there is a lot of confusion as to what constitutes a religious person and a political person. If politics were needed to govern religion, then religion would no longer be capable of serving the world. Religion would no longer function as religion but would function instead within the limitations of politics. (Moon, 1977:3 of 11)

From Casserley (1955):

Democracy must make its peace with the religious forces at work in the Western world if it is to succeed in uniting its friends in its defense, and this means that the aggressively secular phase in democratic thought must be brought to an end. It belongs to the eighteenth century, not to the twentieth. It survives only as an outmoded anachronism. . . . The great ethical virtues must be practiced and the great moral values must be revered whether our society is democratic or not. (Casserley, 1955: 72-76)

From my perspective, the richness of human society is lessened when there is a dearth of opportunities for those belonging to the religious sphere to contribute all heart-won wisdoms garnered through their work and service resulting from their labors on behalf of God and for the benefit of humanity. It is my perspective that there is a prevalent tendency for society to exclude religion and religiosity from a public cultural sphere, and yet it is my belief that the optimum platform for such inclusion is that sphere. It is also my observation that the exclusion of the voice of religion from that sphere has resulted in a vacuum which humanism and secularism cannot even remotely fill, and that society is the poorer because of it. If we then add to this vacuum the humanistic cultural attitude that separates freedom from the good and equates it with license without regard for ethics or morality or the rights of the other, then I believe society is dealing with a volatile and dangerous cocktail of influences that have the potential to ignite uninhibited violence against those perceived to be enemies and persecutors. This scenario can also be a source for flagrant venting of resentment, hatred, and anger, just because a person wants to and can, as though it is a justified behavior. Perpetrators of violent crimes may even feel that their society inadvertently and tacitly supports their giving into and following any self-compelled impulses and destructive actions, no matter how immoral or base they may be.

The quotes I shared from Pannenberg’s (1996) reinforced, at least for me, the connection between violence and lack of meaning found in a world that has lessened and side bared the voice of those whose job it is to advocate for God and the supernatural. Of course, there are those

who will seek out this realm despite the roadblocks set up by popular culture, but many more will be diverted by the anti-religion narrative, it's hard to go against public opinion and what is considered normative at a societal level. Considering existing anti or demeaning attitudes towards religion or at least a lack of public appreciation of that sphere, those searching for meaning in their life may attempt to assuage their spiritual uneasiness and hunger through a variety of options and venues, but many will probably give up or avoid such endeavors altogether. I was one of those who couldn't be sidetracked, but I would guess that my case would be more an exception than the rule. So, if Pannenberg (1996) is correct, this social reality can result in a buildup of frustration and despair leading to emotional and mental stage agitation in immature or troubled individuals who become obsessed and focused upon their internal state of frustrations and perceived injustices. If this is not dealt with or defused, it is probable that such a mind/heart-set can easily boil over and compel a person to burst through normal humanistic mental and social constraints (i.e.: respect of others) and express their agitation, resentment, and anger through violent negative and destructive outburst and actions.

What kind of solution would I posit to the above scenarios? Well, you can probably surmise that I feel that any solution must also include the reintroduction of religion into the secularized public sphere. Now, I have a lot of contingencies related to such a recommendation. First, I am not arguing against the separation between church and state, which I think is healthy and necessary to diminish the possibility of the emergence of a state sponsored religion or church, a scenario that the USA is fortunate to have avoided. Though I believe that the church should be separated from the state, I do believe that moral, ethical, and God and religiosity honoring men and women should be involved in politics and the sphere of government. I should clarify that I am totally in support of a religious landscape that embodies cultural and religious diversity and pluralism, which I think is healthy and valuable. As well, I would strongly argue that any religious discipline or body that wants to participate in and be welcomed into the cultural and public sphere, would need to demonstrate spiritual maturity, tolerance, and respect toward other faiths and be enacted within a social environment which encompasses a comprehensive spectrum of spiritual diversity. In addition, these religious bodies must absolutely refrain from any self-glorifying mind and/or heart-set, refrain from any tendencies to bully or dominate other faiths and believers, even if they believe in the superiority of their message and calling. In other words, no hypocrites allowed. The name of the engagement must be respect for

the other's right to follow their conscience carried out with the heart of love and compassion. If any faith refuses to be ruled by such guidelines, then they should not be welcome into such a sphere until such a time as they can do so. Additionally, I would not limit such participants and contributors to the sphere of religion, but would open it any who would encourage, nourish, uphold, and nurture humanities' moral and spiritual values and responsibilities. The following quote, again from Casserley speaks to this approach:

The communist have no monopoly of ruthlessness. Unless our prevalent obsession with technics can be compensated for a balanced by the labors of our preachers and poets, our artists and philosophers, and by a great mass of common people within Western civilization who really love its humane tradition, there is a grave danger that we may find ourselves charged with the same kind of accusation and reduced to the same kind of silence. Men are not justified by the righteousness of their purposes. Men are justified by a divine love which is as swift and efficient in the scrutiny and criticism of means as in the selection of ends. The fact that modern technics has created a situation in which we could be conceivably be ruthless to an extent that would utterly transcend all previous ruthlessness only increases the tremendous burden of moral and spiritual responsibility resting upon us to make quite certain we do nothing of the kind. (Casserley, 1955: 128)

We shall not in fact have achieved real democracy in depth until we can see the working masses inheriting the whole richness of Western civilization, pouring into the churches and the symphony concerts, consciously aware of the excellence of its rationalism and its mysticism, comprehending its poets, and acquainted with its philosophers. And when I say pouring into the churches, I have very definitely in mind those churches—a comparatively small minority of the bewildering variety of denominations that cater to America's spiritual—which really keep alive the full extent and richness of the Christian tradition . . . (Casserley, 1955:160)

I realize that I am setting a high bar and standard for this yet unattained, reformed and revitalized public sphere. I am doing so, however, to facilitate an envisioned response to the current social illness and danger. It is also my hope that quality control measures could be put in place to avoid and mitigate any unintended consequences and/or additional problems from cropping up. I think it is better to aim high while we're at the level of hopes and dreams. Now, it's not that I think a strong valuing of responsible spirituality will solve all of our problems and curb all violence, that won't happen until the baseness in human nature is conquered. Also, I believe that mental health professionals need to be included in all endeavors to hamper the tendency towards social violence. However, I also believe that if stronger norms abound in the cultural sphere that favor self-control and moral/ethical considerations, that tie the understanding of freedom with the good, that strongly promote a heightened respect and love for the rights and safety of others, beyond personal resentment, anger, and hate, that the tendency towards selfishly motivated violence will be hampered and at least tempered. It is at least worth a try! Since we are

witnessing an increasingly volatile social situation related to social violence, I would encourage others to contribute creative options and participate in brainstorming venues to help responsible citizens come up insightful ways to diminish this escalating social trend. It is in that spirit I offer the following quote:

“The great danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low and achieving our mark” Michelangelo.

Thank you for considering the thoughts reflected in this paper. I will just end with wishing God’s Blessing upon you, your family and upon your local community, nation, and the world.

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