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Four Alternatives to Violence

Presented at the GVSU Arts and Humanities Conference on Violence, November 16, 2000

Abraham Lincoln said it first, in a speech in 1856: “The ballot is stronger than the bullet.” It can also be much slower and more complicated, as we have learned during the recent weeks following our national election. Still, we prefer the electoral struggle between Democrats and Republicans in Florida and its outcome to the duel in which Aaron Burr resolved his political feud with Alexander Hamilton by shooting him to death, about fifty years before Lincoln spoke his famous words. And why do we prefer the modern mess in Florida to the earlier shoot-out in New Jersey (Burr’s home state)? The reason is simple: the bullet is violent, the ballot is not. Would anyone question that elections are one of the moral strengths of the democracy that America has enjoyed now for over 200 years? I offer democracy, then, rule by the people, who settle their disagreements by ballot, as the first alternative to violence.

What is wrong with violence? We all know what it means. Still, it is useful to consider the extent of its meaning. According to my favorite American Heritage Dictionary, “to violate” is derived from the Latin vis, which means power, strength, or force; and it ranges over three areas of human life: the legal, the moral, and the religious. The legal meaning surprised me, for the example given did not seem so violent at first sight: “to break a law”! But that is what the Dictionary says: to violate is “to break a law, intentionally or unintentionally.” A moment’s reflection, however, confirmed the meaning: If you speed or go through a red light, you get a ticket, and it is called a traffic violation. Suddenly it was clear to me, or clearer than ever before: when you break a law, any law, not just those
against violent crimes, you are violating the safety and security, the rights, of your fellow human beings. Antivi­

olence is at the heart of the law.

Violence also has a moral meaning, broader than the legal sense, though the legal is clearly based upon it. Says the Dictionary: “to violate” is to “injure a person or a person’s property.” No surprise over the first part: of course, to violate a person is to injure that person. Nor is it any surprise that the Dictionary gives the example of rape. But property? the things we own and the things around us? Can these, too, be objects of violence? A moment’s thought says yes, of course. For what are we doing to the whales, the rain forests, and the coral reefs; and to the very air we breathe and water we drink, if it isn’t violence? Some have even called it rape, the gang rape of our planetary home. To them, we are rapists all.

That led me to look up the word “rape.” Derived from the Latin rapio, to rape in English still covers what it meant in Latin: not only to force the act of sex on another person but also to seize and carry off anything by force; hence to pillage, to plunder, and to violate; so that its object need not even be a person, but a city and its houses, a countryside and its fields and streams. So rape and violence meet, violence of all kinds, at least on the pages of the Dictionary.

In the last meaning, to violate even has an antireligious overtone. For the Dictionary says that to violate is “to profane,” which is “to treat irreverently” or “to desecrate,” which is “to abuse something sacred.” Violence is not only illegal and immoral; it can also be irrereligious and impious. Half of our fellow citizens, for example, believe that abortion is not just immoral but also a self-centered abuse of the sacredness of human life. It violates not only the sacred procreative function of women and men bound together in the covenant of marriage, but also the sacred life itself of a new human being in its early, most vulnerable, stage. Of course, the extremists who bomb the abortion clinics and even shoot the abortion doctors are as impious as they regard such people, who aren’t such people, who do the violence they persuade their efforts instead to peace and argument that abortion is an honor among its citizens, democracy as their casti

To speak of reason is John Milton wrote (in a book good book kills reason), and nonviolent alternatives, people read any more? Teachers and slogans and political candidates who shout at us during their programs? But how invite us to read, to think? Children are still brought up, of course, is an art, a Liberal win. And now we come arts and Humanities in today are daily engaged.

How often we who teach English, History, Philosophy, ruefully say to our colleagues: we need to teach our students that reading is an art, as the arts that give us beauty. Of course, is an art, as the title book I own by Gilbert Highet. Next door to the Library, as they are sometimes, books that give us beauty. To
A thing of beauty is a joy forever. But yes, it is so. Whether it is a democracy as their casting a ballot, or a poem by Keats, Rembrandt painting, a Shakespeare play, or a poem by Keats, we can return to it, and return again, for sheer joy. Even when some of these imitate poetry itself. How often we who teach the Humanities, that we should never forget those artists are not only their creation, but also, and especially, their enjoyment. As if in contrast to the shortness of life, John Keats wrote in his poem “Endymion”: “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.” “A joy forever”? That is a long time. But yes, it is so. Whether it is a Beethoven symphony, a Rembrandt painting, a Shakespeare play, or a poem by Keats, we can return to it, and return and return again, for sheer joy. What an alternative to violence, even when some of these imitate violence itself! And how does it work? Because in us all is something that resonates to a work of art, something that can even prevent violence itself. Shakespeare expressed it memorably: “The man that hath no music in him, Nor is not moved by poetry. He is deaf even when some of these imitate poetry itself. How often we who teach the Humanities, that we should never forget those artists are not only their creation, but also, and especially, their enjoyment. As if in contrast to the shortness of life, John Keats wrote in his poem “Endymion”: “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.” “A joy forever”? That is a long time. But yes, it is so. Whether it is a Beethoven symphony, a Rembrandt painting, a Shakespeare play, or a poem by Keats, we can return to it, and return and return again, for sheer joy. What an alternative to violence, even when some of these imitate violence itself! And how does it work? Because in us all is something that resonates to a work of art, something that can even prevent violence itself. Shakespeare expressed it memorably: “The man that hath no music in him, Nor is not moved by poetry. He is deaf

brevis est, ars et artis contemplatio nobis. For the Dictionary says de profana, which is “to treat as profane,” which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, which is “to abuse or profane, 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We who are sponsoring this Conference today and tomorrow live and work in the two worlds of the Arts and Humanities, of beauty and books. We cultivate them daily, in ourselves and in our students. I regard it as a great privilege to spend my life in one of these worlds, the Humanities (teaching philosophy), and doing so right next door to the other, the Arts.

Finally, I want to add to democracy, the Arts, and the Humanities one more alternative to violence, the world of religion. This world is perhaps more controversial in our secular time than either the Arts or the Humanities. In the West, religion has meant, largely, the Christian religion, rooted in the Bible. One objection by those who dislike religion itself is that it is a book filled with violence. And of course, so it is. It begins with the paradigmatic murder story of Cain and Abel; later, we read about the wars of the Israelites against the Canaanites, as bloody and violent as anything we hear about in Israel and the Mideast today; still later, four accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, one of the cruelest ways to execute a human being. Finally, on its last pages, we read an apocalyptic prediction of a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil at the end of time, a battle that starts on earth at Armageddon, one of the bloodiest battlefields in the ancient world, located near the heart of modern day Israel. So the Bible is a realistic book; it does not flinch in the face of evil and violence. How, then can it be an antidote to violence? Because it is also filled with teachings of love and peace, and models of these as well, which flatly contradict the hatred and violence that march across its very own pages.

Indeed, the Bible was read by early Christians as a pacifist book, and some Christians still read it thus today. They point out that it actually goes one big step beyond nonviolence. What it teaches is nonresistance toward evil aggression, which is profoundly different. This we can see from Mahatma Gandhi, the modern hero of nonviolence; for his nonviolence was still only a characteristic of his resistance to the British in India. Though he also admired Jesus, he stopped short of going all the way. For Jesus is the paradigm of nonresistance, both in his teaching and in the example he left us. In one of his first sermons he said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Later he went on to elaborate: “You have heard it said, love your neighbor, hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies and pray for those who abuse you.” In other words, pray for the violent, even those who are violent against you. Jesus himself did it from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

No wonder Isaiah called him, prophetically, the “Prince of Peace.” The first biblical example of Christ-like nonresistance, however, is right there is the first story of violence, in Abel, who Augustine said was a prefiguration of Christ. And there are many, many more; read the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets. They were all imitators of Christ, long before he was born, lived, taught, and was put to death. No wonder Tertullian said of the early followers of Christ, less than 200 years after his death and resurrection, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of his church.”

Still, the Bible is a divisive book. Something must be said in answer to this second objection, not only to the Bible but also to religion in general. Of course wars have been fought in its name, and, for that matter, in the name of every other sacred book, East and West. The answer, do not blame those instead who claim ballot, book, and b (It’s nice also ev “ballot,” “book,” and “b”). I want rather to said there is nothing so divisive as, and perhaps even cleal belief and practice brings us as, and perhaps even clea arts, and humanities. We stand up on democracy, for example, divides us into right and left; however, we try hard to per right or left to come the world of religion, we are against violence in just the way.

So what is the answer? I have tried to put answers in two parts. First, we respect alternatives. I have tried to our ballot, the book, the vast is not enough, however, respect alternatives in our heart, and nestly put them into practice. It is not violent if it is framed, or elections, reading books, of art, and kneeling in p
face of evil and violence? Is there any antidote to violence? It is with teachings of love, justice, and peace as well, which fill the Bible, to help us rid the violence that mars our world.

As read by early Christians, we can see from the Bible that some Christians still read and believe these teachings of love and peace. This is why early Christians often referred to Jesus as a modern hero of nonviolence, which he was. In modern hero of nonviolence, which he was. In one of his sermons he said, "Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called sons of God." In other words, pray for those who are violent against you and your enemies and pray for them. In other words, pray for those who are violent against you and your enemies and pray for them.

In India, though Mahatma Gandhi didn't stop short of going beyond the paradigm of nonresistance, he provided an example on the way. In democracy, however, we try hard to persuade our opponents on the right or left to come closer together. So in the world of religion, why shouldn't we work against violence in just the same way?

So what is the answer to violence? I sum it up in two parts. First, we should know the alternatives. I have tried to outline four of them here: the ballot, the book, the beautiful, and the Bible. It is not enough, however, just to know these alternatives in our head; we must, secondly, earnestly put them into practice. How can a life be violent if it is framed, on all sides, by voting in elections, reading books, contemplating works of art, and kneeling in prayer and worship?