I feel a little uneasy when I am grouped in the “sociology” section. I am a theologian by training, a religion scholar by extension, but by no means a sociologist. I am in American studies only by virtue of the field that I happen to focus on. I started off my studies with the theology of Jonathan Edwards, a morose Puritan, or so perceived, who preaches down hellfire and brimstone on poor sinners. How appropriate, then, for me to comment on the relationship between religion and violence!

Professor Laderman surveys American history beginning from the Puritan era and shows the intricate involvement of religion in violence. Professor Rotter finds a number of Old Testament themes embodied typologically in the history of American foreign policy. Given the violent nature of these Biblical themes (“sacrifice,” “vengeance,” “destruction,” “purging” and “war”) one can say that here also we witness religion and violence in close allies to each other (I must confess that I was surprised to realize how interesting the “international relations” section can be with all those names dear and familiar to theology). Professor Spillers’ paper, by its very subject (Martin Luther King, Jr., and his ambivalent position in America’s popular and evangelical Christianity), naturally touches on the issues of violence, some of which I will mention later. Violence seems to be the common thread that weaves the three papers together. Indeed, it is not enough to speak about the involvement of religion in violence: “violence itself constitutes a sacred source of meaning for Americans,” as Professor Laderman writes.

One wonders, however, how distinctively American these entanglements are. Professor Laderman’s concluding sentence, “there is more to religion in America than belief in God or church attendance rates,” sounds like yet another variation of the often-played tune “spiritual but not religious” and applies to religion in most other parts of the world as well. If both religion and violence are so ubiquitous and pervasive in human society, their interactions must also be ubiquitous and pervasive. What’s new? It is like saying that since eating and reading are so pervasive in the human species that we often see people eat and...
read at the same time. The overlap becomes a subject of serious attention when we note the peculiar way in which it has come to pass.

“Violence” implies injustice and impropriety. Let me ask the three presenters today: is there “good” violence, personal or social, religious or secular, domestic or international? Can violence be “good”? If you say yes, then how do you tell “good” violence from “bad” violence? Or is it a despicable oxymoron, a blasphemous misuse of the word to speak of “good violence”? I ask this with the intention of deconstructing the unquestioned premise that underlies our discussion of religion and violence.

The etymology of the word “violence” only suggests “vehemence” and “impetuosity.” It is the rush and burst and explosion of something, but nothing of itself implies injustice. This neutrality becomes clearer in German: the word Gewalt has a more inclusive connotation of force, power, authority, or control. There is little wonder why that is so pervasive. Scholars including Anthony Giddens and Michael Mann have identified violence in the very existence of human social construction, but their insight might be extended to other realms of human behavior.

Our academic endeavor to understand anything is itself a form of violence, since our ability to make the world intelligible depends on the power to subjugate the object to our frame of perception. Unfortunately, that is the only form of perception available to us if we follow Kant’s epistemology. We throw questions to the world, and we exact answers from it. If the world does not yield one, we conscript it to do so. We argue, we convince, we override, because Right is Might. Legitimacy brings power. Justice issues force.

We labor. We work by applying force to the outside world. This is a form of violence as exploitation. We build society, make rules, and enforce them when necessary. According to Rene Girard, the modern legal system is a social function of controlled violence. Violence is an exercise of power, and no human society can function without some measure of it. Our very existence is violence. We stand at the very top of the food chain. We eat. We live at the expense of other lives. Physically speaking, we occupy a segment of space, thereby displacing what used to be in that space. Our Dasein starts with violence. We break into the world. Or rather, we are thrown into the world, without our consent, crying. Even Heidegger must have cried when he was born.

Let us not, then, pretend as if we could one day create a society in which there would be no violence at all. Let us not condemn violence as if we were able to stay away from it in our human living and dying (cheer me if this sounded like a Reinhold Niebuhr—I am trying to imitate him). Religious or not, violence is everywhere. Like it or not, violence is inherent in our activities. It is a reality that we have to live by. If this is the case, we cannot be content with the term “violence” in an indiscriminate manner. The question is not whether violence is involved or not, but what kind of violence? There must be ways to sort out types of violence. And this is what scholars of religion have tried to do.
The prewar German philosopher Walter Benjamin would subsume the nonviolent resistance led by Martin Luther King, Jr., under the category of violence. It is a use of force resorting to conscience, indeed a powerful application of moral force to human hearts. Benjamin’s definition of violence includes the workers’ strike as an example of organized violence. A strike is not an action, one might object, but non-action, withdrawal from action. Yet it still has an aspect of violence as long as it is conducted with “a conscious readiness to resume the suspended action.” The Montgomery Bus Boycott, for example, hit hard the economy of the city, constituting a form of violence. The civil rights activists’ non-action inflicted damage on the city revenue. I know this sounds outrageous. I say this only because I want to emphasize that we need to find ways to tell good violence from bad violence, or good ways from bad ways of using violence. But how do we do this?

Our initial response to this question would be to see its fruit: if it generates something good, it is good violence; bad results, bad violence. At first this may seem to work out. Yes, “the tree is known by its fruit” (Matthew 12:33). But immediately it encounters critiques both by Benjamin and King. Any attempt to sort out the kinds of violence in terms of means and ends must stand before this question: are we saying that violence is good as long as it yields good results? Does it amount to say that the end justifies the means? Is the United States’ bombing of North Vietnam justified by the presumed end of preventing Communism’s domino spread in Asia? Does the sacred mission of ending the war and thereby saving millions of lives justify the dropping of atomic bombs on the teeming cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? (Question to Professor Rotter)

Martin Luther King clearly says no to this kind of argument. He writes: “we will never have peace in the world until men everywhere recognize that ends are not cut off from means, because the means represent the ideal in the making, and the end in process, and ultimately you can’t reach good ends through evil means, because the means represent the seed and the end represents the tree.” Yes, a tree is known by its fruit, because only a good tree can yield good fruit. Good fruit does not make the tree good. It only proves that the tree has been good.

Benjamin would readily agree with King. Young Benjamin wrote that the critique of violence cannot be a simple question of whether it is “a means to a just or an unjust end.” The criterion of the critique should reside “within the sphere of means themselves, without regard for the ends they serve.” Within this sphere of means, Benjamin makes a distinction between “law-preserving violence” and “lawmaking violence.” The former preserves the existing framework of the legal system and maintains its authority, while the latter overthrows it and establishes a new system of legitimacy in its place. Lawmaking violence therefore invariably clashes with the standing norm. A classic example he mentions is war. The
violence of war, while destructive, always ends with the creation of a new world-
order signed and sealed by a peace treaty. (Here one has to wink at him; the 
article was written in 1921 without the knowledge of how fragile these postwar 
treaties would be.) Another example he cites is the legend of Niobe who was 
punished for her arrogance by Apollo and Artemis. Unlike the law-preserving 
violence we see in an established society, this mythic violence of killing her 
children is rather lawmaking, because it brings to light a law in the triumph of the 
fate over her challenge. There is always a grain of hope in heroic legends that the 
desperate but courageous fight will one day overcome what seems to be 
unchangeable and bring forth a new law and a new age. This is why Prometheus’ 
valiant challenge is infused with promises for humanity’s future. And this is why 
the public holds miscreant in suppressed admiration across ages and cultures.

III

Benjamin’s monograph is heavily shrouded in the particular context of 
Weimar Germany and defies easy understanding or application. Yet among its 
ominous pronouncements one can find implications that are suggestive to our 
discussion regarding the varied nature of violence. Do these examples not nudge 
us to look at the US history of violence under a different light?

Take a look at the picture that I happen to have used on the cover of my book on 
American Christianity. Originally, it is a lithograph produced for the Woman’s 
Christian Temperance Union at its inception in 1874. The title under the picture declares a 
“holy war:” they are on a grand charge against what they deem the archenemy of American 
society. At the center of the picture is a young, armored woman on horseback 
shattering barrels of beer, whiskey, gin, brandy 
and rum with a battle-axe. Although feminine, 
she is a very violent figure, not unlike the 
fifteenth-century St. Joan of Arc. Their cause 
is no doubt religiously motivated as the banner 
behind her reads “in the Name of God and 
Humanity.” It is true that every war on earth, regardless of the tradition, is waged 
in the name of God and humanity, but this picture deserves our particular 
attention for its claim to represent America. Note that the shield in her left hand 
is painted in stars and stripes. In the name of God and humanity, she is fighting 
America’s war. She will not let the evils of alcohol dominate America and ruin 
its citizens. She represents America in her holy war against what she sees as the 
empire of evil.
Another picture with the title “The Temperance Crusade: Who Will Win?”

which appeared in a newspaper the same year, portrays a real and not imaginary operation: women would go on a crusade, huddle together in front of, or sometimes inside of, saloons. While surrounded by grumpy, menacing drunkards, they would sing hymns and pray loudly for the spiritual salvation (or rather, salvation from spirits?) of the drunkards, no doubt to the great annoyance of saloonkeepers. As a result, thousands of saloons across 23 states were actually forced to go out of business. Nonviolent, but nonetheless very effective. With no actual or physical harm, it must have caused a great nuisance. It could be called “harassment” or “obstruction of business” in today’s terms. Perhaps nobody today would deny that harassment is a form of violence. Benjamin’s definition of strikes as violence proves to be surprisingly up-to-date. And sure enough, a law was made. In 1919, their untiring efforts materialized as the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution that prohibited the production and traffic of alcoholic beverages.

One may laugh at their gallant naïveté. Their warfare, though noble, was futile and even counterproductive in actual effect, their enthusiasm an eventual failure in constitutional history. Yet one cannot deny the fact that they evidenced what Benjamin called “lawmaking violence.” They have made a law—not simply a code or an article in legal documents, but a power and legitimacy that could fight what they saw as social evil. When you have to put up a fight against something as huge as alcoholism, something as long-standing as racism, something as institutional as militarism, you may need this kind of violence, violence not in the sense of injustice, but violence in its original sense of the word, “vehemence” and “impetuosity.”

In his critique of violence Benjamin refers to “mythic violence” as something that would rend and rip open the existing world order. It is “a mere manifestation of the gods.” The gods, whether Apollo or Prometheus or the young armored goddess in our first picture, don’t argue. They don’t explain, because there is no need to. They simply declare their arrival, for the entire world to see. They announce the advent of ultimate justice. They manifest the divine right of existence. In the name of God and humanity, they declare that all human beings have the right to live a decent life not ruined by alcoholism. Their legitimacy does not depend on an existing legal order. It is derived from a deeper level, from the ontological order of the sacred cosmos. When nomos is in disarray and loses its credibility, as Peter Berger would explain, a chasm opens, through which one can peek into chaos, and this is when the fundamental structure of legitimacy that
underlies our social existence reveals itself.12

Is this not exactly what happened in the formation of the nation we now call “America”? The colonies came to a point where they could no longer take British bullying, and declared independence in 1774. They did explain how they came to the decision, but they did not explain why they had the right to. Thomas Jefferson and other founding “divines” simply declared that it was “self-evident” truths that entitled them to independence. They announced that it was “the laws of nature and of nature’s God” that had given them the right. The Declaration of Independence (yes, declaration, not explanation) was a manifestation of mythic violence, not because of the ensuing war against England, but because of its lawmakers character. It dissolved “the political bands which have connected them with another” and made a new nation.

Apollo’s mother, Leto, decided that she should be duly respected and ordered her son to kill Niobe’s children. Without explanation and without warning, Apollo appears and manifests his deity by slaughtering them. One cannot help but wonder whether this was the same reason Osama bin Laden did not come out to give an explanation after 9.11. Mythologically speaking, he was a divine figure in his hideout, but gave up his divinity when he came out on TV to explain his motives. Perhaps he was bored in the cave and thought it would make more sense to become a popular idol than remain a jobless god.

There is yet one more observation to be made on the second picture from a religious point of view. Singing hymns and praying loudly at the saloons is a transgression of boundaries. Hymns and prayers belong to churches, and alcoholic beverages to saloons. These women are crossing the boundary of the sacred and the profane. This is the underlying cause of the saloonkeepers’ annoyance. They would have said: “Go away. Do it elsewhere. We don’t oppose your singing hymns and praying for us, but please do so in a more appropriate place.” Between them lies a threshold to be neatly kept apart. Crossing this threshold is a violation of religious order, and is a prime example of religious violence.

Note here that the crossing of the threshold is itself an offense, regardless of the direction. Whether you cross it from the sacred to the profane, or vice versa, whether you come from the saloon’s side or the church’s side, it doesn’t matter. There is a protocol to be kept when one crosses the boundary, like changing the attire or attitude you wear. If you don’t observe these rules, you commit religious violence. These women are dressed in Sunday dress to come to the saloon. They are bringing the sacred into the profane, which is the essence of their offense.

IV

In both pictures, there is a strong element of messianism. Messianism has been America’s destiny from the very beginning of its history, but late nineteenth century saw the high point. The Spanish War in 1898 was fought with the blatant
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charge of apocalyptic messianism that portrayed America as fighting against the
cosmic evil embodied by Catholic Spain. The women’s temperance movement
must also be understood within the context of fervent millenarianism and heroic
messianism.

This messianism, however, comes with a natural concomitant: a sense of
sacrifice. It is determined to carry out its mission at every cost. The young lady
gallantly rides her horse into the battleground, fiercely and fearlessly, without
regard to her own safety. She is willing to sacrifice herself. She is ready to pay
the cost to bring about what she sees is in the best interest of God, humanity and
America. She knows that an evil as huge as alcoholism will not be easily
defeated. To change the almost destined course of societal mechanism, one has to
sacrifice something extraordinary. To transform the status quo, to overthrow
what seems insurmountable and to establish a new order, an offering of sacrifice
is due, because one must jostle and crack open the ontological basis of reality that
legitimizes the present power structure.

Earlier on I mentioned Rene Girard, who understood sacrifice as a social
institutions that protects human communities by diverting violence toward an
expendable substitute. Georges Bataille had argued long before him to the
contrary. Bataille says that the nature of sacrifice requires the object to be most
valuable rather than expendable or worthless. “To sacrifice is not to kill but to
relinquish (abandonner) and to give (donner).” It is a pure and unconditional
consumption, an offering of a gift whose receiver cannot receive it for
preservation. The object of sacrifice must be something useful, something that is
valued for its utility, like the World Trade Center or Pentagon. The value of the
sacrifice is commensurate to the value spent and destroyed, to the utility it
rendered useless. Thus the theology of sacrifice stands in sharp antithesis to the
world of modern capitalist production.

In the Gospel narrative where a woman of sin breaks a jar of costly ointment
of nard for Jesus’ sake, Judas Iscariot protests in the utilitarian spirit: “Why was
this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”
(John 12:5) It is precisely this kind of utilitarian reasoning that sacrifice tries to
depart from. The human sacrifice in mythology is always the young and most
prized virgin of the village, whether it be in the East or the West. Sacrifice is a
religious violence that disrupts mundane world order; it is “the most radical
contestation of the primacy of utility.”

In the Hebrew Bible, we often read of divine orders to destroy all that belong
to the enemy to be offered to God—Professor Rotter’s subject of choice. “The
city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction” (Joshua 6:17).
In modern eyes, this is nothing short of a fanatic exercise of religious violence. In
fact, the word “holocaust” derives from the word “burnt offering” (shoah). Scholars argue the extent to which the reality of ancient war practice is reflected,
but the real purpose of the precept is that war should not be exploited for
utilitarian purposes. It is a prescript against plundering. When Achan could not
resist the temptation of looting the battlefield and slipped some of “the devoted things” (herem) into his pocket, he rendered himself and his entire family herem, causing their own annihilation (7:25).

Long gone are those days. Today, war is an elaborate system of methodical reproduction. Modern warfare began, according to Bataille’s historiography of human economy, when “the excess production could be devoted to the growth of the productive equipment.”16 This explains why the rise of capitalism, its rational ways of accumulation and re-investment, makes the backdrop of modern warfare. It is a rational but degenerate substitute for religious sacrifice that keeps production and consumption in equilibrium. Modern society has accumulated so much wealth that it has to spend it in an extravagant way.

Incidentally, I believe that this also explains shopping sprees. We feel an insatiable urge to spend, because we feel guilty of gaining so much. Psychologically, it is a form of redemption. We procure, indeed we buy, our salvation. Consumption has become a ritual for us. What we gain without toil, we must spend without purpose. We try to redeem ourselves from the guilt of gaining by losing it meaninglessly, by spending it senselessly. Its power of redemption resides in the fact that it is meaningless squandering. If it served to our benefit, it would lose its redeeming power.

A recent book by Professor Laderman describes how the American people developed ways to deal with death and its remains, especially during the Civil War and after Abraham Lincoln’s pompous funeral.17 My interest lingers a little before his death. Objectively speaking, Lincoln was at his life’s apex when reelected as President in 1865. They all knew that the war was finally coming to a close, and to his victory. Despite the double triumph, however, the tone of his second inaugural address was rather somber. At the sight of 600,000 lost lives in the war, he asked a painful question, “why, God?” He tried to wring meaning out of the meaningless deaths on both sides of the front, and came to an answer: namely, that the deaths had to be meaningless, their lives had to perish in vain, and all the wealth had to be consumed for no sensible reason, because it was the exact price that had to be paid for “all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil.”18 If God wills that war should continue until that price be paid back in full, until “every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword,” then who is to say that God is unjust? They were only paying the long overdue just price. Lincoln’s theodicy squares portentously well with Bataille’s understanding of sacrifice.

It is tempting to draw a direct line from here to the lives lost in the 9.11 attacks, but I dare not, for I do not wish to give religious sanction to the terrorists. Yet at least we see in this juncture that there is more to violence, that we cannot denounce it as if we could stand clean and away from it, as if we had nothing to do with it. Bataille interpreted violence as a form of meaningless sacrifice, and precisely in this meaninglessness he saw the meaning that is profoundly relevant to us all.
Professor Laderman is correct in pointing out the fact that religion is more than church-going and poll results. Religion would resume, resurge and revolt if the world became suffocated in utility’s domination. Religion would not be neatly contained “within the limits of reason alone.” In the name of God and humanity, it would protest civilization’s imposition of decency and morality, just as Nietzsche did amidst the decadence of Christianity in nineteenth century Europe. The sacred has its roots in transcendence, somewhere beyond the realm of ordinary reasoning. And who knows? Violence in the sense of impetuosity may sometimes provide the necessary impetus to shake and awaken the established order. There is yet an undying hope for the renewal of the world, to transcend the present impasse. Let us not overlook the dash of hope disguised and concealed in it.

Notes

15. Ibid., 60.
16. Ibid., 92.