Violence of Despair

William Stringfellow
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For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.

Romans 11:25.

That is all I have to say. It can be said in other ways. What is the reason, what are the causes for violence in the streets? You are the cause; I am the cause; the decadence of this society is the cause. But first of all, let it be pointed out emphatically that the chief fact about the contemporary American social revolution is not violence. On the contrary, especially in that dimension of the American social crisis called the civil rights movement or the Negro revolution, the chief fact is nonviolence. Let that never be forgotten, especially if we appreciate American history enough to consider the present revolution within the context, traditions and ethics of American history. This nation was born in violence, in the protests that finally matured into the American Revolution. That was hardly over when there was the violent crisis over the Articles of Confederation. Then there were the beginnings of the abolitionist movement and finally the Civil War. After that was the Reconstruction crisis and the occupation of the South. Then, after a period of foreign violence for colonialism, conquests and war, there was the labor revolution, the movement for women’s suffrage and the veterans’ rebellion during the Depression. Now there is the Negro revolution. If one considers the Negro revolution in that context, the astonishing fact is that the Negro revolution has been characterized by the tactics and ethics of nonviolence. In that respect, it emerges as virtually unique in the history of American social protest.

With the exception of the movement for women’s suffrage, all of these revolutions, until the Negro revolution, were dominated by the ethics and tactics of violence on the part of those initiating a protest against the status quo. Let it be underscored: the chief fact in the present day is that there has been so little violence on the part of those in protest. What violence there has been in the overwhelming number of incidents up to the present has been initiated by those in power, by those defending the status quo, by white society, not by the Negro citizens in protest.

Therefore, there is a certain strangeness about the whole question of violence in the streets, especially as it was referred to in the last political campaign. There is a strangeness, a radical hypocrisy in the popular mind in white society in the equation between violence in the streets and Negro civil rights demonstrators. That equation is not true and does not conform to the facts. So let

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us, first of all, in discussing violence in the streets, rid ourselves of the false notion that the protest of Negro citizens is a synonym for violence in the streets.

Yet there has been some violence. There were the riots in the urban North last summer and a month ago in Cleveland. Fundamentally, it seems that the situation in the urban North is chaotic and unpredictable. Anything can happen. It seems most likely at present that there will be an acceleration of violence in and around the urban ghettos. But one must direct his attention to the character of the violence that has already occurred in the riots in Philadelphia, New York, Rochester, Cleveland and elsewhere. It seems that one can speak of an ethics of violence, and that there is a significant distinction between what may be called tactical violence and the violence of last summer's riots. Tactical violence is the deliberate, premeditated adoption and practice of violent methods in order to attain certain objectives. The violence of the labor revolution on the part of those in protest was a tactical violence. It was the way that commended itself to them to get what they wanted, to make their protest felt and heard and acted upon. It was a deliberate, premeditated, planned violence; it was an ethics chosen from among other theoretical alternatives. But that is not true of the violence in the Negro ghettos last summer. It was not a tactical violence. No one planned to have a riot on a certain day. Rather, there was some incident which ignited the frustration and passion of people which was already there, ready to be kindled. Rather than a tactical violence, the violence of last summer was in the nature of spontaneous combustion. To be even more exact about it, it was a violence of despair. It was not a violence whose ethics prescribe violence as a means to an end. It was a violence which says there is really no serious hope of anything changing—a violence of despair.

This view can be verified. Among those arrested in the Harlem riots last summer was a seventy-three-year-old woman, who has a vested interest in the old order because under it she could get a job as a domestic in Sutton Place or in some hotel or in a hospital. She could support her family even though her men, her husband and sons, could not get jobs. Thus she has vested economic interest in things remaining as they are, distorted, in another sense, as that interest may be. When a woman of that age and venerability and with that kind of interest goes into the streets and throws some rocks at the police, the despair of the people is pathetic and profound. Nothing can be done by the newspapers or the police or the politicians or the complacent to rationalize or escape that fact. This is not a tactical violence; it is not even a violence of protest and impatience. Unhappily it is a violence of despair, of hopelessness.

It is verified in other ways, too. Tactical violence would not commonly occur within the ghetto, but outside the ghetto. It accomplishes nothing for those who live within the ghetto to break up their own neighborhood. On the other hand, perhaps it would accomplish something to blow up City Hall, for that might draw the attention of the mayor. Up to now, at least, the violence in the cities has not been tactical because if it had, it would have been located outside the ghetto. It would be addressed to, it would be an assault upon white institutions and white society, rather than an internalized violence of frustration and despair.
Why is there a violence of despair? That, it seems, is the most absurd question of all. Why should anyone feel unrest the morning after his child has been chewed by a rat? Why should there be despair for a boy who goes all the way through public education and graduates from high school and has only the equivalent of a sixth grade education — and who then cannot find a job, not only because he is Negro, but because there are no jobs for what skills he has? Why should there be a violence of despair? As someone has said, because the people are sick and tired, and they are sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Questions are raised concerning the problem of the beach riots, the so-called free speech protest at Berkeley and similar protests that have occurred. There may be no serious connection between protests like those at Hampton Beach or Berkeley and the protests of Negro citizens, except perhaps in an amorphous way. Surely the heart of the protest of Negro citizens is against the corruption of the American idea of society. Perhaps some of the other protests which have occurred are, where they have integrity, protests against the corruption of the American idea of society. I am making no general complaint about decadent white bourgeois morality. I have in mind, rather, a specific complaint. What is to be complained about, and persistently and vigorously protested by all of us if we have the wit to do it, is the ascendency in this culture and society of the preference of property over people. That is the authentic, ideological conflict in American history. What all those politicians and Congressmen and commentators say about an ideological conflict between Communism and Capitalism is largely hogwash.

There is no serious, internal ideological conflict in this nation in those terms, but there has been since the colonial days an authentic and indigenous American ideological conflict as to which is more important as the rationale of society and the structures of self-government: the institutions, rights and interests of property, or human rights and the welfare of human beings. It seemed that this battle, which was fought between Hamilton and Jefferson, to name only one instance in the earlier days, was decisively concluded about a hundred years ago in the Civil War. Do you remember what the Civil War was about? What it was about was, chiefly, whether persons or property are more important, and whether or not certain persons were really property or really people. That is what the Civil War was about ideologically in American history. It seemed that the outcome of that conflict had determined the course of American history, had weighted it upon the side of human rights, but we see in the present day that the conflict has by no means been concluded. And in terms of that conflict, the protests that take place now in society represent not a kind of nebulous, general complaint against the established order, against a decadent bourgeois white morality that dominates the scene. They have much more specificity than that. They are protests against those who think that the moral worth of a human being is determined by his acquisition of property. What is complained about is the idea, which is deeply imbedded and radically popular especially among both rich and poor white men, that a man’s justification or moral significance is measured by the property he acquires and manages.

The protest that has authenticity and is to be safeguarded, defended and,
indeed, advocated is the protest against those institutions and persons who think that the ethics of acquisition are and should be the rationalization of our life as a society. To put it another way, the protest is to be directed against those persons and institutions in the land who have such a profound distrust of democracy that they covet their property more than human rights.

The other side of the violence we now confront, at least in the civil rights movement, the inverse of the violence of despair, is apathy. That is the ethic which dominates the vast multitudes of citizens of this land and, especially now, white citizens. The symbol in New York of the ethics and practice of apathy, of course, is Mayor Wagner, a man unusual in the extravagance of his apathy. As a symbol of the issue, what was the response of the public authorities in New York to last summer’s violence of despair? The mayor called a news conference and said that there was trouble in Harlem, and we ought to do something about it— that we should find some jobs for these people, provide some better schools and really do something about the housing up there.

Of course, nothing, quite literally, nothing at all has been done about any of those things since that press conference nine or ten months ago. Nor is there any evidence at all of any inclination on the part of the public authorities in New York to do anything. But that is not the problem, not really. The problem is not the default on the promises to provide some schools, decent housing and jobs for the people of the ghetto. The real default, the real apathy is the premise of the mayor’s remarks in the first place. What he really said was that we are always going to have the ghetto, and since there is trouble in the ghetto, maybe we ought to clean up the ghetto. The underlying assumption was, that for an indefinite period, there would be a ghetto, a Harlem in New York, a separation in society, and perhaps sometime we will get around to making it a nice ghetto. The assumption in terms of public policy was that the ghetto would indefinitely remain. That is the symbol of white supremacy and of the mentality which characterizes most white people in and out of public office in this land. And it is to that mentality that we must, to use the New Testament word, die before there is any hope of reconciliation in this land. The premise with which we must begin, the mayor and everyone else, is that the ghetto must go. Every ghetto that blights every city and town with a Negro population must be erased.

Do you know why the ghettos exist? It is not because the Negroes like one another and prefer one another’s company to the exclusion of other persons. The ghettos exist because they are profitable. That is the fundamental reason for their existence.

Many people are holders of insurance, either as a beneficiary or purchaser of some sort of policy. In our society that seems like an ordinary, prudent, morally innocuous act. On the other hand, it seems that many people are against ghettos or opposed to slums. They would prefer that slums be abolished, if it were not too much of an inconvenience. Many people think it unfortunate that some people are consigned to live in the slums. Both of these are facts about many people, but the point is, there is a connection between these two facts, a moral connection, and, if you will, a theological connection, too. The
slums exist in our society to an appreciable extent because it is possible to manipulate slum real estate and gain a huge profit. This is euphemistically called urban renewal. And who speculates in slum real estate? Contrary to popular belief, many slum landlords and speculators are not big, fat, greasy, greedy men, are not wicked men, but are great institutions like insurance companies, banks, universities, unions, churches and other great corporate and institutional powers. That means theologically there is a connection; there is a responsibility. There is an involvement between the man who does an ordinary, simple and apparently innocuous thing, buying some insurance to guard against ordinary risks, and the persistence of poverty and the slum ghettos in our great cities. The beginning of conscience in white society, the beginning of health and maturity in a moral sense, will be when that is realized, when that kind of involvement in society is known and acknowledged.

A person's responsibility has very little to do with being a so-called liberal. The real recalcitrants in the American racial crisis are not, emphatically not, the so-called die-hard segregationists and, least of all, the pathological racists whose rationality has been destroyed by hate. They are there; they have some importance and are some nuisance. But they are neither so many nor so important, albeit they include some governors, some senators and quite a number of sheriffs. The real recalcitrant, in fact, is exactly the nice, white, so-called moderate in the North and in the South. He is the one who is sitting around asking, "Well, what do the Negroes want?" He is one who thinks by asking such a question progress has been made in race relations. He fails to see that imbedded in that question is the assumption that it is the white man's prerogative to dispense to the Negro what the Negro will get. That is the essence of white supremacy. In that tradition those of us who are white people have been bred for generations, and it is from that tradition that we must be set free, that we must be emancipated. It is from that tradition that we must beseech God to be exorcised before there is any hope for American society.

But as of now there is little hope. Apathy prevails. There is morally almost no significant distinction between a Mayor Wagner and a Sheriff Clark. Indeed, if there is a significant moral distinction, it accrues more to the credit of Clark than Wagner. At least he is candid.

The other side of the responsibility for the violence of despair is in the apathy of the great multitude of good citizens and their leaders. The great irony of that is the stupidity of apathy in a social and political context. Cannot we even see our own self interest? The President's Cabinet announced the other day that the loss in the gross national product specifically due to the prevalence of racial segregation and discrimination in the American economy is twenty-three billion dollars a year. If we can find no better reason, let us white persons be involved in protest because it is costing us so much money.

One broods about what happened during the last few weeks in Selma. I

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1 Ed. note: Mr. Stringfellow said that he could and would document this assertion, but he has not done so. While he has made specific allegations against certain unnamed educational and ecclesiastical institutions, he has mentioned no corporate, labor or financial institution. Letter from William Stringfellow to *Notre Dame Lawyer*, Aug. 10, 1965.
for one brood about the meaning of Selma for the role of the white people and, in particular, of the white Northerners on the present scene. First of all, I am grateful for Selma, as grateful as any man. It is said that Selma represents a great turning point, that Alabama and America will never be the same again. Probably that is true. Because of Selma, a white Methodist bishop slept in the same bed with a Negro man. The Chicago papers were saying yesterday in their interviews with those returning from the march that the churches were at last involved. That is particularly provocative if one takes into account the reality of the churchly institutions in American society. If one counted every head of a white clergyman who has been involved in civil rights demonstrations for the last twelve years, the figure would be in the vicinity of 10,000. That seems like a lot, and their participation is to be affirmed, although, no doubt, it sometimes is informed by mixed motives. But there are 400,000 clergy in this nation. Where are the other 390,000? The churches are involved. Last year the Protestant churches, predominantly the white Protestant churches, spent about a half million dollars in direct action in civil rights, although after great controversy; but those same denominations have investments in American enterprise in tens of billions of dollars. Where is the church which has seen that there is a connection between how it invests its money in American enterprise and its social witness? Where is the church which has been willing to divest itself of stock in a corporation which stands for racism in Birmingham, Alabama? One can count every penny which the nice white churches have put into civil rights suddenly and belatedly, and it is not a drop in the bucket compared to the real power and the real commitment, economically, of the churches to a racist status quo in America.

Selma did not change that, and nothing which has happened in Selma has yet absolved what is happening right here. No man is authorized to march from Selma to Montgomery or to raise his voice against Governor Wallace if back home he supports or tolerates the regimes of the Wagners and the Daleys. Selma did not change that.

Yet perhaps Selma is really a turning point, if on that awful Sunday the people of the nation got a glimpse of what could happen if there is a suppressive counterviolence which kills protests and demonstrations. There was, in recent history, a very great nation and, by all accounts, a civilized nation and a highly churched nation, much more so than this country. One day a decision was made to deal with the so-called Jewish problem in a way which destroyed the fundamental structure of the German nation. One wonders how that happened to such a sophisticated nation! There were, on the scene in Germany in the late twenties and the thirties, as there are here, the radical racists. There were, of course, the anti-Semites, who were deliberately and enthusiastically working to install demonic power in the throne of government. There were also, as there are here, the para-military groups involved in private military training. In this country at the moment there are over 200,000 people involved in para-military organizations—in Germany, there were so many that when Hitler finally came to power, he did not have to recruit an SS corps, but only to issue uniforms. There were on the scene in Germany, as there are here, the
racists, the radical political groups, the para-militarists and the so-called extremists, advocating a totalitarian scheme of government. They were all there and they did their part. But what really determined the matter for all of history, for all of us, was not the racists, not the para-militarists, and not the political extremists, because there were two other groups which became the indispensable accomplices of the destruction of the German nation. They were the intellectuals and the church members, the university and the church. There were a few exceptions: some of them were beheaded; others were shot; most of them were exiled. There were a few exceptions, but the bigger picture was that the sane, respectable, well-intentioned people in the intellectual community and in the community of the church were silent, were apathetic, were, if anything, actively indifferent and complacent. They defaulted; they thought it was somebody else's problem and somebody else's cause. And they thereby abetted the death of a nation.

The great danger which imminently confronts American society is that the white establishment in American society, which still has at its command the police and the military power, will decide by default, not by design, to deal with the so-called Negro problem in a way which would destroy the fundamental structure of the nation.

If Selma was a turning point, it was a turning point because for a few moments on that Sunday afternoon the nation had a glimpse of what destruction is like.