

Violence is multidimensional

In order to stop it, we have to understand it.

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March 19, 2025



Century illustration

“We must stop the violence in this country,” someone said to me recently. “I couldn’t agree with you more,” I replied. “This is a gospel imperative.” I could have added that if we are going to answer that imperative, we will have to recognize the multidimensional reality of violence as it exists in our country and across the globe.

Peace studies pioneer Johan Galtung characterizes violence as an “insult to life.” Theologically, it is anything that harms or devalues the life God has granted us. Galtung further explains that violence is carried out in at least three interrelated ways: directly, structurally, and culturally.

Direct violence refers to an event—war, famine, an aggressive physical act—that poses an immediate threat to life. The “stratum of direct violence,” Galtung says, is reflected in “cruelty perpetrated by human beings against each other and against other forms of life and nature in general.”

If direct violence is an event, structural violence, Galtung explains, is a “process with its ups and downs”—a *process* that creates insidious and systemic patterns of exploitation, inequality, marginalization, oppression, and overall injustice.

Lastly, Galtung defines cultural violence as the “symbolic sphere of our existence”—that is, language, art, religion, and so on. Cultural violence is about a “slow transformation” that ultimately distorts our thinking and corrupts our moral imaginary, making “direct and structural violence look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong.” It makes it acceptable, even normal.

To stop the violence that shapes our nation, we must reckon with the cultural violence that is part of this country’s very DNA: Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. When the Pilgrims and Puritans fled from the Church of England, they arrived in America fueled by the myth that Anglo-Saxons were a distinctly virtuous and freedom-loving people. They considered themselves an Anglo-Saxon remnant on a divine mission to build a city on a hill reflecting their righteous and noble heritage.

In short order, Whiteness became the racial marker of this heritage, the passport into the exceptional space that was American identity. The city on the hill that the colonists were building was intended to be nothing less than a testament to Anglo-Saxon chauvinism. American exceptionalism was Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. From the beginning, therefore, US cultural identity was inextricably linked to a myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority. This myth was replete with a sacred canopy that suggested

that this was a divine mission.

This cultural violence laid the foundation for the racialized structural and direct violence that has prevailed throughout US history. If indeed we are to answer the gospel imperative to stop the violence, we will have to deal with the violence that exists within the nation's cultural fabric.

Ironically, the gospels are saturated with violence. It is the cultural, structural, and direct violence beset upon the marginalized and oppressed of Jesus' day, such as the Samaritans, the women, the lepers. This violence defines Jesus' ministry, as he seeks to liberate those whose lives are captive to its destructive forces—to all that is an insult to their sacred lives. Jesus makes this clear when he reads from Isaiah at the Nazareth synagogue:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's
favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

The crucifixion is thus nothing less than a reflection of cultural, structural, and direct violence colluding to condemn Jesus. And the resurrection is the ultimate response to this violence, defeating it and serving as a vindication of Jesus' ministry—a gospel call to stop the violence. The resurrection is God's response to anything that insults the sacredness of all those created in God's image.

We are without a doubt living in violent times—times shaped by the legacy of the myth of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. This myth continues to perpetuate narratives that dehumanize those deemed to threaten it, especially immigrants and people of color. The dismantling of diversity and equity initiatives, of care for trans people—the fact that such policies are labeled “culture war” reflects their intrinsic violence. And this violence continues to be legitimated by a sacred canopy, such as that of White Christian nationalism. The gospel imperative is clear: We must put an end to such violence. This begins by affirming the inherent sacred worth of all people—and taking deliberate action to make that affirmation a living reality.

This is a task that requires us to confront the deep roots of cultural and structural violence head on. It means a sustained commitment to resisting the systems and ideologies that perpetuate inequality, dehumanization, and oppression, even those within our faith communities. It calls for a radical transformation of our collective moral imaginary so that the value of every life is affirmed, so that all people—regardless of race, class, gendered identity, sexuality, or sexual expression—are seen as sacred and worthy of justice.

These values need to become instinctive for us. The work is hard, but the gospel calls us to nothing less. For it is only by reckoning with the violence embedded in our history and culture that we can build a future where peace, true justice, and dignity flourish for all. Only then will we have answered the gospel imperative to stop the violence.