Violence, technology, and the powers

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Bartholomew von Ahlefeldt was a European nobleman who in the mid-1550s offered sanctuary to Menno Simons and his followers, risking diplomatic fallout with neighboring rulers and compromising his standing in the social hierarchy. In his youth, von Ahlefeldt had been an officer in the Dutch army and witnessed the execution of some of Menno's followers. He became convinced that these Anabaptists were harmless and unjustly persecuted, and he allowed them to settle on his large estate.[1] His support and shielding was key to their long-term survival and prosperity, helping to ensure the fledgling movement's longevity and vibrancy.

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Von Ahlefeldt's conversion to protecting Anabaptists was one of conscience, and experiential. No doubt, witnessing the violence of imperial religion in action helped the good nobleman move into a new religious and social paradigm: he must have realized the truth of nonviolence and opened himself to new gospel awareness. Menno had had a similar experience: it was not until some of his parishioners were killed in an armed uprising that he left the priesthood.[2] His also was a nonviolent awakening to new gospel awareness, born of gruesome spectacle. I suspect that if we were to look closely, we would see that much of the early Anabaptist religious revival was triggered by such experiences. This is one reason why the eschatological realities of Anabaptists and military veterans are inextricably entangled.[3]

Tieleman Jansz van Braght later capitalized on this phenomenon of experiential conversion in publishing the *Martyrs Mirror*, "a bloody spectacle"[4] evoking the kind of violence that still

propels book sales and religious revivals. Many of van Braght's disturbing and gory illustrations of Christian martyrs through the centuries continue to inform the identity of Anabaptists worldwide. My point is that in the religious and cultural struggles of the church there is a long history of use of technology to induce traumatic awareness. A contemporary example is Mel Gibson's terrifying *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). For all the profits and the converts that have been extracted using these technological means, we lack basic understanding of the mechanism behind their success: the experiential, traumatic conversions associated with being witness to or participant in violence, and the opening of an awareness of gospel nonviolence.

In this brief essay, I will offer first a phenomenological reflection on the nature of technology and its relationship to violence, and then a theological reflection drawing on Walter Wink's work on the powers.

Technology and violence

One morning in mid-2006, at Forward Operating Base Taji, Iraq, I moved from night-shift guard duty to start my day job as an operational intelligence analyst. One of my functions in that capacity was watching and analyzing captured media material— digital videos of executions, attacks, and other grisly crimes. It was one of the myriad disturbing aspects of participating in the occupation of Iraq, and it was traumatic in a way categorically different from the other prominent traumas of that war: incoming mortars, small arms fire, and improvised explosive devices. Phenomenologically—which is to say, on the level of our understanding—such violence is made possible through a combination of the existential vacuousness of materialism[5] and the morally neutral[6] omnipresence of technology. I hope here to explore the second of these conditions a little.

As I entered the brigade intelligence office that day, my military colleagues on the night shift were (quite unprofessionally) using our office monitor for a screening of the bloody (and bloody awful) horror flick *Saw II*.[7] *Saw II* is one of those movies best described as over the top, but not ironic or silly like *Evil Dead*.[8] It tries too hard to take itself seriously and, unlike the original *Saw*,[9] fails to establish the minimum notional qualification for consider-

ation in the serious horror genre: engaging and frightening viewers more than making them laugh, or yawn in distraction, or leave in revulsion because of gratuitous bloodshed. *Saw II* overdoes the formulaic genre-reinforcing tactics at the expense of emotional engagement in plot, mystery, or character, and the result is a confusing mash-up of medieval torture scenes sans reflective or emotional value. As the night shift finished the movie, there was a general sense of relief, but also a kind of dull yearning to see something real—so we went back to our job of analyzing insurgent propaganda videos featuring the very real suffering of fellow humans being mutilated and murdered.

What struck me about this juxtaposition of imagery was the fact that none of my colleagues seemed to share my interest in contrasting understandings of two different paradigms of violent media and their underlying epistemological foundations—how we create and respond to violent media—or in comparing respective cultural values. While there is a clear connection in the social-psychological research between violent stimuli and the frustration-aggression complex,[10] the connections between fictive violence and actual violence run much deeper, but exploring this was not something the other soldiers were interested in.

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Watching the unenhanced, raw video footage of the beheading of a hostage is a straightforward and stomach-churning endeavor; the more one watches, the more it seems to settle into the psyche, disrupting things within. But overwrought, expensive, fake Hollywood violence—concocted for the specific purpose of emotional manipulation—is hardly able even to elicit a sincere human reaction after the initial shock of the first viewing. (This is also the raison d'être for *Saw II–VIII* as well as *Saw 3d: The Final Chapter*.) There are other salient factors in this comparison: the half-hearted irony of a horror business that knows its place in the hierarchy of the entertainment industry; the reinscription of politico-religious ideology onto the palimpsest of the real-life subject of filmed torture; the objectifying of the subjective experience of real-life horror.

What matters most about the experience of viewing violence through technology is what we tell ourselves about that violence. If a normal person, paying ten dollars for the experience of watching *Saw II*, were suddenly to realize that the violence being projected onto the silver screen was in fact real, the experience of watching it would immediately change from one of titillating consumption to one of revulsion and terror. Consider, for example, James Holmes's costumed massacre at a screening of *Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado: moviegoers initially thought that Holmes, dressed as the Joker, was playing some kind of bad prank or engaging in a promotional gimmick—which redoubled the terror effect when they grasped the reality of the situation. One of the most traumatic things about witnessing actual violence after being raised on Hollywood movies is the absence of an existential mediator: there is no attendant illusory fictionality to mediate the reality of the act itself—the subjects are actually being murdered there in front of us, again and again, and our apprehension of their very real terror is not diminished by repeated viewings.

There is an immediate need in Anabaptist theology to articulate a philosophical and biblical accounting of the fact of violence, the different kinds of violence. There is also a distinct need in Anabaptism for the development of trauma-awareness theory, as well as a new understanding of how trauma and technology relate to the Anabaptist concept of *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness). This, more than ethnic or behavioral purity, is the central task in Anabaptism: to heal the putrid sore of the violence inherent in our technology, in our worldly governments, in our static awareness, in our nonrelational systems, in vacuous materialism, and in the sacrificial blood-atonement theology the Christian church perpetuates. This project—the articulation of these new ideas—will spell salvation for the veterans, the war weary, the disenchanted—and for the believers church. More importantly, it is the central purpose of Christ's commission in human history.

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Redeeming the powers

In Walter Wink's compelling analysis of systems of violence,[11] he asserts that the powers of this world will be redeemed by God. The list of the powers included in this redemption is substantial. Awaiting transformation are human cultural institutions, governments, and technologies. Ostensibly this includes militaries, cities, economies, and churches. There is some good scriptural evidence to support these claims, with the ultimate promise aligning the Old Testament prophetic vision to Jesus's eschatology and that of John's Revelation: that God will dwell in the "New Jerusalem" and be "with us." But what do we make of the New Jerusalem in the age of Cosmopolis?[12]

Surely the idea of all the peoples of earth worshiping the beast of Revelation is given new meaning in the era of global capitalism, instant access, and connectivity. While the personification of the city—the woman of Babylon—dominates the kings of the earth and gets drunk on the blood of innocence, the beast personifies Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's capital-e "Empire" of globalism mixed with neo-liberal economics.[13] Finally, the dragon that gives the beast its power is, as Ted Grimsrud asserts,[14] violence itself, which alone will be excised from human awareness and cast into a lake of fire.

To give this interpretation more validity, we can turn to Jacques Ellul's *The Meaning of the City*, which lays out a critique of urbanity from a scriptural perspective. To Ellul, the city—starting with and especially including Babel—is an institution with its own spirit and a place where God is not allowed to be. (Ellul says that this is signified in the very name *Bab-El*: the gate keeping God out.[15]) All the spiritual descendants of the city live in open rebellion against God, and yet God decides in the end—through the interventions of the prophets and in the person of the Christ—to dwell there anyway. This is particularly salient in today's world, in the cultural projects conceived in modernity, especially those with universal or transcendent aims,[16] which are only possible through the artifice of city life, industrial agriculture, and systemic violence.

Technology plays a key role in the rebelliousness of human cultural awareness. According to the Jewish historian Josephus,[17] Cain invented agriculture, scarring the earth in order to force

more from it. This was a result of his greed and his failure to trust in pastoralism.[18] Cain's children taught people to rob and murder as a kind of innovation, and they invented idolatry as a way to control their subjects.[19] In the spirit of human rebellion, technology is both an idolatry—taking the place of life-through-faith—and a means of overcoming God.

The tower of Babel was, according to Josephus, a waterproof raised platform where the citizenry could wait out another epic flood, avoiding the consequences of God's wrath a second time. Interestingly, the problem of linguistic drift can be seen as the natural consequence of self-imposed alienation: when cultures are isolated for periods of time, their language naturally evolves more quickly. Thus, what the Genesis account attributes to God's wrath is actually a mere consequence of human misdeed. And it goes without saying that these misdeeds are facilitated hand-in-hand with technology.

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We cannot simply blame our technology for the violence it amplifies. In Heideggerian speculative philosophy, technology plays a special role. The human being exists in relation with his tools, neither one being separate from the other. We have co-evolved along with our language and our other technology, at an ever-quickening and frightening pace. We cannot guess the consequences of our innovations, and we can only hope to co-create our environments to a degree. In other words, technology will not save us from ourselves but will only reflect the spiritual and cultural flaws already present in our hearts. This philosophical understanding should inform our collective religious lives, and together with Anabaptist peace theology, can be leveraged to redeem institutions, governments, awarenesses, and powers.

Conclusion

Often when I have felt sickened by violence of various kinds, it has been the beginning of a process of positive spiritual change in my life. I believe that this is exactly what happened at key moments in the lives of Menno Simons, Bartholomew von Ahlefeldt,

and Tieleman van Braght. The trauma of violence can turn into sour psychopathologies if not properly understood, or it can be redeemed in the spirit of Christ through the teachings of *Gelassenheit*. It should be the work of believers to inspire this second option as much as possible. This redemption must encompass the insidious violence facilitated by and evolving with technology and entertainment.

The world today is as violent as it was in 1550—or in 33—CE, though the violence comes in a different form. No matter how we conspire to hide from ourselves our own violence—from industrial farming to third-world sweatshops to nuclear proliferation—our technology, our government, and our churches still desperately need redemption from it. Let us pray together that the Holy Spirit may move in its mysterious way to redeem our powers from violence, to save us from times of trial (though even these might also move us toward Jesus's teachings of nonviolence), and to deliver us from (our own) evil. Amen.

Notes

[1] John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1942), 204. See also H. van der Smissen, Christian Hege, and Cornelius Krahn, "Ahlefeldt Family," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1955, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Ahlefeldt_family&oldid=132208.

[2] Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe*, 189–92.

[3] See Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Church USA Peace & Justice Support Network's "Returning Veterans. Returning Hope" Sunday School curriculum, https://mcc.org/media/resources/1719.

[4] Thieleman J. van Braght, compiler, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Saviour, From the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987).

[5] I like Theodor Adorno's take in *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury, 1973): that materialism suffers from a problem of the image; that epistemology is laughed off in the materialist (reductionist) understanding and this creates a problem of thought-image, of virtuality (204). Nancey C. Murphy and Christian Early invoke Ludwig Wittgenstein in answer to this same problem, in an attempt to develop a nonreductionist materialism, which I also like. For more on this, see the first several chapters of Murphy's *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[6] It is seen as morally neutral in the paradigm of modernity, but not so in object-oriented ontology, or the Deleuzian, Foucaultian, Nietzschean, or conservative-Anabaptist systems.

[7] *Saw II*, directed by Darren Lynn Bousman (2005), also of *SAW III* (2006) and *SAW IV* (2007) fame.

[8] *Evil Dead*, directed by Sam Raimi (1981). See also *Evil Dead II* (1987).

[9] *Saw*, directed by James Wan (2004).

[10] See, for example, the research of Philip Zimbardo and Stanley Milgram.

[11] Especially Wink's trilogy on the powers: *Naming the Powers* (1984), *Unmasking the Powers* (1986), and *Engaging the Powers* (1992).

[12] "Cosmopolis" refers to the project of modernity; see Stephin Toulmin's book of the same name.

[13] See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[14] Ted Grimsrud, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Self-Study Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998).

[15] See Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), 15–20.

[16] See, for example, the Oxford English Dictionary, a project to stop linguistic drift and recover an essentialistic language as an attempt to transcend the limitations of human cultural awareness. See Russell Frazier's *The Language of Adam*.

[17] Josephus, though a Roman apologist, also preserves something of a historical portrait of the oral tradition of first-century CE Jewish theology.

[18] God disdains Cain's sacrifice of vegetables not because of God's preference for animal sacrifice but because of the motives behind Cain's agriculture.

[19] Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1:2:2.

About the author

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