

Violence — American as apple pie?

Thursday, October 17, 1985 O&E

(T.S.F. Po) 8B

WAS traveling by train through Milan, Italy, when four men attempted to rob me. It was a clever plan. They had me surrounded in a train aisle. My hands were filled with luggage.

The man behind me had my wallet halfway out of my pocket when I caught him in the act. We were virtually alone in the passageway, but as soon as I felt my wallet leaving my pocket and yelled out, they backed off and left the train.

Ever since this experience, I have wondered why they did not physically restrain me while they took my money. There were four of them and no help for me in sight.

Later we questioned people in Rome about trouble on the streets. Even at night, they said, they like to snatch your purse but never physically attack you. I wish I could say as much for our citizens.

WHY IS there so much personal violence in America? We can recall that our nation was born in violence. The frontiers were a violent place. My great-grandfather noted that those men who carried guns were often the ones who were killed.

He refused to carry a rifle until on their trek west, and his family were loyally with by three men on the trail who shot "playfully" at their wagon. At the next town, he purchased a rifle.

I believe that Americans live with a subtle message that the test of brave a man is the capacity to fight. In the James Bond stories, we enjoy the portrayal of a man who escapes every kind of violence. John Wayne was the symbol of a man who hated to get into a fight, but he enjoyed beating the tar out of them when he did. His barroom battles are waged with a smile on his face. He is seldom wounded in his movies, and then only on the arm or leg.

THEN THERE is poor America, where men and boys are forced to fight to prove their manhood. Being called a coward is the worse fate. Claude Brown, recalling his childhood in Harlem says, "Most of the cats I swung with were more afraid of not fighting than they were of fighting."



moral perspectives

Rev. David Strong

He tells of how the typical father sent his sons back out onto the street to fight. Few fathers thought about the final fate of such training. A friend of mine grew up in Harlem and reflects upon the fact that most of the boys he grew up with are either in prison or dead.

Columian Nickie McWhirter tells us of a study done in Europe which found that young men equate fast driving with virility. So it is an America with violence. Ultimately a man in our society is supposed to judge himself by the question: If put to the test, will he be willing to fight?

WE NEED to call it what it is: our national temptation to do violence. Our "soft" presidents were those who talked of peace. Our "tough" presidents are the ones who when confronted, threatened to escalate violence.

This temptation to violence was faced by Jesus. The first temptation was to ally himself with those advocates of violent overthrow of the Romans. Such men, called Zealots, were even attached to his movement. We know that from his own story of his temptations, they included the possibility that he might seize power.

He did use force to confront the money changers. Jesus instructed his band of followers to have a sword with them (Luke 22:38), but in practice he opposed violence. The record shows that it was a constant temptation to escalate violence. I believe that this is the situation today.

WE NEED to address this temptation, among

men and nations, to escalate violence in an attempt to show their virility. Albert Schweitzer considered this problem over much of his lifetime. He concluded that the only violence that can be condoned is that which is used to restrain a greater violence.

Near the end of his life, he concluded that nuclear bombs were the ultimate in violence so there could never be an excuse to explode nuclear weapons.

If violence is particularly an American temptation, we need to find ways to counteract it. There are "mothers against drunk drivers" and "drug alerts." What about a campaign like "violence burials?"

INSTEAD of our current mania for building more prisons and keeping the violent people there longer, or worst of all, more states killing their violent people, why don't we put the blame where it really lies.

We condone and even at times enjoy violence in America. Way down deep, we agree with Claude Brown's assessment: Men are more afraid not to fight than to fight. Let's translate this to mean afraid of being called a coward.

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