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Jolyon Mitchell

Excerpt

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It is hard to avoid media depictions of violence. Some images etch themselves onto the viewer's memory. Consider the controversial photograph from Southern Lebanon of a man carrying a young girl in his arms (fig. 0.1). Walking towards us he clutches the child tenderly, as a parent might carry a sleeping infant to bed. His eyes are closed, his forehead furrowed and his mouth open. He looks as if he is letting out a cry of anguish. It is clear that something is desperately wrong. His tanned olive skin contrasts with the girl's pallid face. Beside his large clenched hands, her lifeless fingers look tiny. The caption in one newspaper begins: 'A rescue worker carries the body of a young girl from the ruins of a basement shelter . . .' Her death was caused by an air-strike on a three-storey house in the village of Qana, in which most initial reports claimed that over fifty people, 'mostly children, were killed'.¹ As so often, the viewer is confronted by a single metonymic image of suffering to represent the violent deaths of many. It is used as a visual imperative, demanding our immediate attention, until the next memorable image of the effects of violence is digitally circulated around the globe. We will consider later in this book why this image, along with others from Qana, became so controversial. The single focus of this picture is reminiscent of the widely used photograph of a fireman gently carrying the limp body of a one-year-old baby following the Oklahoma City bombing.² For some people such images evoke the medieval *pietà* where Mary holds and laments over the body of her dead son.³ In

¹ Like many other news sources, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, both Monday 31 July 2006, p. 1, appear initially to have overestimated the actual number of deaths as a result of the Israeli air-strike on 30 July 2006. See the Human Rights Watch report which put the figure of fatalities at twenty-eight, including sixteen children, with thirteen people missing. www.hrw.org/english/docs/2006/08/02/leban013899.htm

² For a fuller discussion of this photo, see Edward Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 145–64.

³ See, for example, Jean Seaton, *Carnage and the Media: The Making and Breaking of News about Violence* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 113–15.

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each of these cases the violence that these portrayals bear witness to has passed. They speak loudly of suffering, caused by certain kinds of violence.

It is not only through newspapers, magazines and websites, but also particularly through television, that pictures of injured civilians, burnt-out cars or devastated buildings have now become visual commonplaces. Increasingly the actual moments of violence are captured on camera. The depiction of violence and its aftermaths, whilst not new, has become progressively more prevalent and graphic. Today's media also continue to recall stories of yesterday's violence. The Web ensures that the visual memories from Qana can be kept alive and regularly revisited. Numerous websites are designed to ensure that not only recent killings and executions, but also the genocides of the last century are never forgotten. These are digital reminders of what a 'civilised world' can produce. With a few clicks on the computer we can take a virtual tour of a concentration camp like Auschwitz-Birkenau, see a commemorative stupa filled with skulls in Cambodia's 'killing fields', examine a memorial shelf of human bones in one of Rwanda's 'killing churches' or peruse evidence of the atrocities against Armenians in what was once the Ottoman Empire. In most public libraries it is easy to pick up a history text book on the twentieth century and find statistics of fatalities from the two world wars, Stalinist purges, Mao's murderous 'Great Leap Forward' and Pol Pot's slaughter in Cambodia. Given that the last century was the bloodiest ever, with an estimated 191 million deaths arising from conflict,⁴ it is no surprise to find these violent evils from the past still casting their shadows through the media of today.

Behind these news images, statistics and reports invariably lie experiences of pain, heartbreak and unresolved suffering. In the face of such apparently meaningless violence, both despair and resignation are common responses. Millions, including myself, enjoy going to the local cinema to escape, to relax and to be entertained. Once there we often find ourselves watching a film showing explosions, shootings and sword-fights. Even the cinematic fantasy worlds of Middle Earth, Narnia or Hogwarts present a moral universe permeated by conflict. A visit to the arts cinema does not necessarily provide a haven from violence, with films like *Cidade de Deus*

⁴ Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano (eds.), *World Report on Violence and Health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002), p. 218. See also R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publications, 1994); and Niall Fergusson, *The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred* (London: Penguin, 2006), as well as the accompanying UK Channel 4 television series (2006).

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(*City of God*, 2002) or *Tsotsi* (2006) transporting viewers into the gun cultures of favelas in Brazil or shanty towns in South Africa. Alongside such apparently 'authentic' or 'realistic' representations, audiences can encounter more 'playful' depictions of violence.⁵ Television may provide amusement through children's cartoons, yet according to some researchers these often present many more 'violent acts per hour' than found on 'typical adult programming'.⁶ Even playing games on the computer offers users the chance to become a sword-brandishing gladiator, a reckless car thief or a weapon-wielding special-forces soldier. Most media, offering fictional or non-fictional portrayals of the world, are drawn towards the dramatic, and depicting violence invariably adds drama to the game, the film or the news story.

There are numerous forms of media violence, which audiences in different contexts learn to distinguish, to endure or to derive pleasure and entertainment from. By contrast, as we shall see, the actual practice and virtue of peacemaking make far fewer appearances in most media than the drama of violence. For though the modern media, in all their forms, are permeated by various types of violent images and stories, they are by no means dominated by violence: there are plenty of other kinds of narratives and images to be found. Nevertheless, how the different genres of violence are represented through various media and how they are then used by audiences are important topics to consider, especially given the cascade of human suffering that can be caused both directly and indirectly by actual violence.

The study of media violence, and the many forms that it takes, has a long history. It has been and remains one of the most hotly debated topics in media, communication and cultural studies. Questions such as 'to what extent, if any, does media violence influence viewers?' have provoked countless quantitative and qualitative studies.⁷ Some argue there are no

⁵ See David Morrison, *Defining Violence: The Search for Understanding* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1999). On the basis of audience research, Morrison, with others at the University of Leeds, distinguished several different kinds of fictional violence: 'playful' (obviously unreal), 'depicted' (realistic and graphic) and 'authentic' (violence set in a context that the viewer would be able to easily identify with), pp. 4–5.

⁶ On the basis of content analysis this was estimated as five times more in children's programmes than in adults' by George Gerbner and Larry Gross, 'The Violent Face of Television and its Lessons', in Edward L. Palmer and Aimee Dorr (eds.), *Children and the Faces of Television: Teaching, Violence, Selling* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), pp. 149–62, also cited by Jay Black and Jennings Bryant, *Introduction to Communication*, 4th edn (Dubuque, IA: Brown and Benchmark, 1995), pp. 65–6.

⁷ For a helpful collection of essays on the topic, see C. Kay Weaver and Cynthia Carter (eds.), *Critical Readings: Violence and the Media* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2006). For comprehensive overviews, from different perspectives, see W. James Potter, *On Media Violence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), and Cynthia Carter and C. Kay Weaver, *Media Violence* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003). See also David Trend, *The Myth of Media Violence: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

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or very few discernible causal effects, while others posit significant and specific impacts. In this book, I will both draw upon and go beyond this extensive research, so that I can investigate how audiences may become dynamic moral agents in the face of the various forms of violence communicated through, critiqued and celebrated by many different media. In order to do this I analyse different processes within the circuit of communication,⁸ considering the creation, the content and the reception of specific examples of media violence. By including consideration of the role of the audience in this communicative circle I am moving beyond the tendency found among many media ethics books to concentrate primarily upon the role or responsibility of the journalist, editor or producer.⁹ In the pages that follow I do not confine myself to contemporary examples from the so-called modern media, as many of the issues raised by the phenomenon of mediated violence are by no means new. As I will show, the Christian church has used different media for both violent ends and peaceful purposes.

My contention is that Christian communities have a crucial role in forming people who will be able to interact with the whole range of media violence wisely and peaceably. For instance, looking at the photograph of a child killed by a bomb may provoke sadness, anger or despondency, but if such emotions are evoked, they need not be the definitive responses. Audiences can learn to analyse, critique, deconstruct and where necessary oppose certain forms of media violence. My argument is that there are rich resources available to viewers, listeners and users as they seek to navigate through the storms of violence which are to be encountered via every imaginable form of media. These resources inform different practices, such as remembering well and reframing wisely, which I will outline in detail in subsequent chapters. What exactly are these practices and resources? And where are they to be found? These questions I consider later, but at this stage it is worth highlighting that I am neither promoting what David Buckingham critically describes as an ‘inoculation model’ of media education,¹⁰ which seeks to protect viewers from what is perceived as the ever-spreading disease of violence, nor am I proposing that religious leaders, teachers or parents should attempt to build an ‘impenetrable

⁸ For a good example of this triadic methodology, see David Miller, Jenny Kitzinger and Peter Beharrell, *The Circuit of Mass Communication* (London: Sage, 1998).

⁹ See chapter 3 of this book. For more details about media ethics books, see Clifford Christians’ useful annotated bibliography in Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (eds.), *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture* (London: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2003).

¹⁰ David Buckingham, *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 7.

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moral shield'.¹¹ I am also certainly not arguing that Christians should avoid all forms of media violence or that re-presenting violence is necessarily morally problematic. I am, instead, advancing a more nuanced approach: one of my aims is to demonstrate that mediated violence is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, which merits creative, critical and thoughtful engagement.

My thesis is that a number of Christian practices have the potential to provide both the resources and a context in which not only widely publicised hostilities, but also hidden, forgotten and structural violence can be remembered, reframed and redescribed in ways that promote peacemaking actions. These practices also have the potential to interrogate the very category of media violence, encouraging people to imagine how their own identities and communities do not have to be founded upon violence, but rather upon a more lasting form of peace.

DEFINING 'MEDIA' AND 'VIOLENCE'

Before we proceed further it will be useful briefly to define the terms 'media' and 'violence'. These definitions are significant for how my argument develops through the remainder of the book. In the field of Christian ethics, violence is a commonly studied and discussed topic; by contrast, media are regularly taken for granted, ignored or even castigated as a force for evil. While the importance of developing a Christian vision for the world is a recurring theme among Christian ethicists, the actual role of visual and other media in moral formation is rarely studied. This is surprising given the long history of media use by local churches and individual Christians to exemplify and to express their faith. As we shall see, different media have also been put to violent uses by Christians. To illustrate this complex history and to demonstrate how inextricably connected media are with Christianity, I will draw upon both contemporary and historical examples throughout this book.

What is meant by the word 'media'? The term is currently used in a number of different ways. Two usages are particularly noteworthy for my purposes. First, many people speak of 'media' to refer to the actual or principal means of mass communication, such as the newspaper, the radio and the television. Second, others refer to 'the media' not in reference to the actual forms of communication, but rather to describe the institutions and communities of journalists, editors and other professionals who make

¹¹ Jack Valenti, cited by W. James Potter, *The 11 Myths of Media Violence* (London: Sage, 2003), p. 15.

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up the communications industry. In this second sense, 'the media' is often used in a similar fashion to 'the press', as a way of either describing the institutions which produce the papers and the programmes or those who work as journalists and broadcasters. It is becoming more and more common to read in newspapers or hear on the radio phrases which turn the media into a single entity: 'The media has contributed to the furore surrounding the publication of the inflammatory cartoons of the Prophet.' The drawback of such a singular use is that it provides little room for nuance or qualification.

Throughout this book I will use the term 'the media' in its plural form, not because I wish to resist, King Canute-like, the tides of linguistic evolution, nor simply for the sake of linguistic precision, but because seeing media as a plural noun offers a more accurate description of the multi-layered and highly complex organisations, communities and technologies which make up the media. There is a sense in which the media as a singular entity is a social construction which does not fully reflect reality. The media is not a single, homogeneous mass, even if it is often viewed as such by those who disparage journalists or the journalistic profession. As I seek to demonstrate in this book, there are many different media, even if they are converging through the use of digital technologies.

With digitisation and the advent of new media, the term 'mass media' has become rarer. Individuals and small communities, such as local churches, have far greater access to different media technologies. In many contexts the word 'media' has been severed from the term 'mass', as a result of a growing awareness that the media come in many different shapes and forms, which are both fragmenting and converging. Fragmentation is due partly to the explosion in the number of television channels, radio stations and websites, and convergence is partly a result of the merging of communication technologies and the limited number of international companies who now own these outlets. While some media allow communication between one and many, other media also facilitate contact between one individual and another. One irony is that the very media which can compress vast distances and bring people closer together can also be used to accentuate difference, to extend divides and to inflame already tense situations. The potential of different media not only to be communicative bridges, but also to be communicative barriers merits careful attention.

I will therefore analyse both the different 'media', such as film, television or the Internet, and 'the media', including some of those organisations, communities or individuals who produce the material and use these media to communicate. In other words, my study encompasses examples both from different

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means or forms of communication (media) and the communities behind these expressive creations (the media). To stop there, however, would be to leave out a vital element in the communicative triangle: the media audience. Their creative use of different media forms with which to interact with actual media organisations is instructive. Given that the church, from its earliest days, has made imaginative use of various primary media (such as spoken or sung words) and secondary media (such as books or pictures), how do Christians now interact with electronic media, both in their traditional (e.g. radio, television and film) and new (e.g. computers and the Internet) manifestations? Over the last two thousand years the church has been one of the most prolific users of various media; yet, more recently Christians have become some of the most vocal critics of the media industries and ways in which certain media are used. There is an intriguing dynamic, rarely reflected upon, between primary media and secondary media, that Christians and churches actually use, sometimes for violent ends, and the electronic media, and organisations behind them, which attract their suspicions, criticisms and, on occasion, admiration.

What is meant by the term ‘violence’? Many photojournalists, filmmakers and artists define violence not through words, but through images. Photographs, video reports and films can reflect different moments of the fall into violence. Contrast the recent photograph from Qana of a dead child in the arms of a man, with the picture of a brutal beating, taken during the Second World War, which was awarded the first-ever Pulitzer Prize for photography (fig. 0.2). It was taken on 3 April 1941 by Milton Brooks, capturing not an aspect of the war raging in Europe but a fight outside the Ford River Rouge car plant in Detroit, USA. At least nine pickets vent their fury against a defenceless strike-breaker. The bodies of the attackers are openly directed against their victim, who cowers in an attempt to protect himself. Notice how in this picture violence is expressed in non-verbal terms: one man holds a club high above his head poised to strike, while his eyes and tongue speak of concentrated anger. The faces and mouths of several of the aggressors reveal a glimmer of pleasure in their violent actions. Unlike the photograph from Lebanon (fig. 0.1), this comparatively crowded picture, which includes a number of bystanders, captures one moment in an outburst of passionate violence. Placed side by side these two images highlight the difference between actual violence and its consequences. One speaks of uncontrolled rage while the other reflects the fragility of the human frame. Violence is an off-stage presence in the Qana photograph, but very much in the spotlight in the picture from Detroit. While violence can be visually represented in many different ways, words are required to explain and make sense of these contrasting images.

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Figure 0.2. *Labor Strife in Detroit*, 3 April 1941, awarded first-ever Pulitzer Prize for Photography (1942). Photo: Milton Brooks © *The Detroit News*. Reproduced with permission.

The actual word ‘violence’ is used in various ways in different cultural and social contexts. As a UNESCO report emphasises, ‘there is no universally accepted definition of violence’.¹² Some see violence primarily as ‘excessive, unrestrained, or unjustifiable force’,¹³ and others describe it as ‘behaviours involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something’.¹⁴ Such descriptions have informed one of the most commonly cited definitions for the term ‘media violence’ as meaning: ‘the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon) against self or other, compelling action against one’s will on pain of being hurt or killed or actually hurting or killing’.¹⁵ This definition has been extended to

¹² Visit Unesco.org, ‘What is violence? What is non-violence’ at http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=36790&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

¹³ *Chambers English Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1990), p. 1647.

¹⁴ *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 1968.

¹⁵ George Gerbner *et al.*, ‘The Mainstreaming of America: Violence Profile No 11’, *Journal of Communication* 28.3 (1978), pp. 176–207.

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include verbal aggression and violence against inanimate objects and animals. These definitions are often used to provide researchers with clear parameters to assess how much violence was actually to be found depicted in specific media.¹⁶ While the word ‘violence’ is a slippery term and the varied effects of violence are hard to assess accurately, it is experienced by millions of people around the globe, with, for example, at least 1.6 million people dying and many more being injured through physical violence in 2000 alone.¹⁷ The experience of witnessing first hand some of this violence has led many journalists to describe our world in terms similar to Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, who famously declared that without civil order human life is naturally ‘nasty, brutish and short’.¹⁸ Many journalistic descriptions use striking visual images, such as those from Qana and Detroit, to reinforce such assertions.

But are these verbal and visual accounts both of reality and of violence too narrow? A number of theologians argue that humans naturally desire not violence, but peace.¹⁹ They provide different descriptions of reality, which, as we shall see, challenges the claim that violence has either the first or last word. Johan Galtung, the former Professor of Peace Research at the University of Oslo, asserts that ‘an extended concept of violence is indispensable’.²⁰ Other more recent accounts, influenced by both Galtung and Latin American liberation theologians, highlight hidden and structural forms of violence:

We live in a time in which violence is right before our very eyes. The word is applied to extremely varied contexts, but each is marked by open violence – by violent acts, fury, hatred, massacres, cruelty, collective atrocities – but also by the cloaked violences of economic domination, of capitol–labor relations, of the great North–South divide, to say nothing of all the ‘everyday’ violences perpetrated against the weak: women, children, all those excluded [from] the social system.²¹

¹⁶ See C. Kay Weaver and Cynthia Carter, ‘Media Violence Research in the Twenty-First Century: A Critical Introduction’, in idem (eds.), *Violence and the Media* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2006), p. 4.

¹⁷ See Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano (eds.), *World Report on Violence and Health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002), pp. 9–10.

¹⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), ed. Richard Tuck, rev. student edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 13. ‘Life in the state of nature is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.’

¹⁹ See, for example, Augustine, *City of God* 19, and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

²⁰ Johan Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace and Peace Research’, *Journal of Peace Research* 3 (1963), p. 168.

²¹ Françoise Héritier, *De la violence* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1996), also cited by Paul Farmer in *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), p. xxvii.

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One of the aims of this book is to show that, while there are many different kinds of mediated violence, visually driven media are often dominated by dramatic and spectacular representations, thereby contributing to the fact that other forms of ‘everyday’ or ‘chronic’ violence, as well as peacemaking practices, remain overlooked. Different media can both expose and hide violence, presenting, commodifying and trivialising it, as well as making it invisible from the public gaze. Without words of explanation they do not place these moments into any context, and they fail to reveal hidden or structural forms of violence. An important element of my argument is that many types and forms of violence, and peacemaking, are widely ignored by the news and entertainment media. They are either made or made to remain invisible by different media. While the two photographs from Qana and Detroit encapsulate different aspects of the violent struggles found regularly through the last century, like many images, they both leave much unsaid.

VIEWING AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Recognising the complexity of violence and the diversity of the media, we now turn to consider the significance of viewing media violence for Christian ethics. It is noticeable that many Christian ethicists now speak of the importance of vision, and by extension learning to see, to understand and to describe the world correctly. For example, Stanley Hauerwas, partly influenced by Iris Murdoch’s work,²² made the question of seeing and vision a central theme in his work during the 1970s, with the publication of *Vision and Virtue* (1974). Vision is deeply significant and means ‘really looking’ at the moral world which we inhabit, while avoiding the temptation of sliding into self-absorption, self-delusion or ‘fantasy and despair’.²³ In both this and his later book *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1983) he defines Christian ethics as ‘the disciplined activity which analyzes and imaginatively tests the images most appropriate to orchestrate the Christian life in accordance with the central conviction that the world has been redeemed by the work of Jesus Christ’.²⁴ This means a radical transformation in how

²² See Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1993 (1992)).

²³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 37–8. See also Charles R. Pinches, *Theology and Action: After Theory in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 182–90.

²⁴ Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, p. 2, and cited in *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 69.