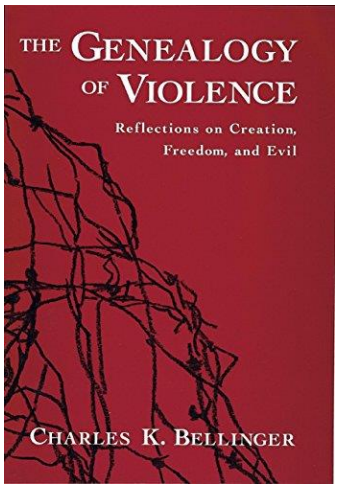

The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil, Charles K. Bellinger, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 157 pages.

By Wayne Northey

This gem is to theology what a Rolls Royce engine is to automobiles. One reviewer says, "It is no small achievement to write a theological book that is both first-rate social science and first-rate philosophy." It is first-rate theology too! And finally, Bellinger's theme is excruciatingly pertinent in a post-September 11 world reverberating from perpetual war – perpetual violence – promised by the West.

Besides the Introduction, the book has nine chapters. "In this study, I ask one basic question: Why? Why are human beings violent? (p. 3)" Helpfully, Bellinger lays out the content of each chapter in his Introduction. In that theologian Søren Kierkegaard and anthropologist René Girard are "the two key thinkers considered (p. 10).," ("two others play important supporting roles: Karl Barth and Eric Voegelin (p. 10)."), the author explains why the first two are chosen. Of Kierkegaard: "Kierkegaard's thought establishes a solid bridge between social theory and ethics (p. 9)." Of Girard: "His thought can be understood as the most sophisticated development to date of Kierkegaard's dictum, 'The crowd is untruth.' His analysis of the 'horizontal' dimension of human existence is extremely thought-provoking and challenging (p. 10)." Of both: "I argue that [Girard's] understanding of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism can be effectively coordinated with Kierkegaard's vision of the 'vertical' dimension of existence in relationship with God, to produce an explicitly theological theory of the roots of violence (p. 10)"

He also writes: "I must note with disappointment that theologians in the twentieth century did not as a general rule take advantage of the opportunity to address the question of the roots of political violence (p. 9)." Bellinger also indicates frustration at what he dubs "a *failure of erudition*," in that Barth does not carefully read Kierkegaard, nor has Voegelin or Girard apparently read much of either, nor each other. This blocks great potential "for dialogue and cross-fertilization." "Overcoming this unjustifiable isolation, and bringing these thinkers into conversation with each other, is a major goal for me (p. 11)." Finally, Bellinger writes: "Positively stated, this book is a work of theodicy… I work in the genre of narrative theology, seeking to make sense of violence in human history (p. 11)." The author delivers!

The first chapter considers four "Contemporary Perspectives on the Roots of Violence." They are: Alice Miller, Ervin Staub, Carl Jung and Erich Neumann, and Ernest Becker. In the end, the author weighs each, and finds them wanting. "But none of these authors… has discovered the most important relationship, the one thing needful: the relationship between the individual and God (p. 27)."

The second chapter begins with: “The principal goal of this book is to show how Kierkegaard’s writings can be used to form the basis for an understanding of the psychological roots of human violence (p. 29).” A provisional summary of the answer to human violence is provided at the end of chapter three: “we have arrived at the insight that resistance to the possibility of spiritual growth gives rise to violence (p. 55).” This is underscored at the end of chapter four where Bellinger summarizes under six propositions “Kierkegaard’s understanding of the individual’s resistance to the possibility of his own spiritual growth as the most basic root of violence (p. 71).”

In chapter five, the author invites into the conversation René Girard who “is, in my opinion, the most significant theorist of violence in the twentieth century (p. 72).” “Girard’s theory begins with the feeling of existential lack… (p. 74)” This lack leads to endless cycles of imitation or “mimesis” (Girard’s preferred term) of others. But this closes humanity to spiritual growth, the one thing needful, which alone arises through mimesis of the Transcendent.

Hence the biblical call to imitate Christ. Failing that, humans remain part of “the crowd,” which for Kierkegaard means “untruth.” The crowd invariably “seizes upon a victim and kills him to meet its own psychological needs. The crowd prevents itself from descending into a chaos of self-destruction by choosing a scapegoat whose death will create a new sense of social unanimity and cohesion (p. 79).” Bellinger adds crucial commentary here: “The central goal of Girard’s writings is to reveal and condemn the moral and psychological falsity of this form of ‘salvation.’ He accomplishes this revelation by applying a hermeneutic of suspicion to social phenomena… The scapegoat mechanism is one side of the great either/or of human existence: either a society will sacrifice victims to meet the psychological needs arising out of its ‘ontological sickness,’ [Kierkegaard’s term] or human beings will follow the way of the Kingdom of God, which is the way of love of the neighbor (p. 79).”

Again: “The way of the crowd is the exact opposite of the way of the Kingdom, which is expressed in the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself. The spiritual untruthfulness of the crowd renders it unable to recognize and love its victims as neighbors. The commandment to love is thus identical with the call to disentangle oneself from the crowd and to become oneself before God (p. 82).” And yet again: “Actually, at the heart of Girard’s thought we find the idea that mimetic desire results from a *failure of individuality*. It should be clear by now that this idea precisely parallels Kierkegaard’s understanding of sin… Christ was a single individual, but only because he stood outside of the culture of mimetic rivalry (p. 83).” (“Without sin” the book of Hebrews refers to Jesus.)

Thus, and finally: “The person who has become an individual, through relationship with Christ, is a person who hears the commandment: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ This commandment opens up the way to a new kind of society [footnote 9 here says in part: “it is only before God, that the neighbor *comes to be”*], a community of love and respect for all people, in distinction from the ‘crowd’ – a society of collective egotism (pp. 83 & 84).” (It could be inserted that this is a precise definition of the sin of

nationalism and of a collectivity such as NATO designed to destroy the neighbour in – paradoxically! – "self-defence.")

The sixth chapter bears the provocative title, "Are Secular Perspectives on Violence Sufficient?" Bellinger faults Girard for "wanting to have it both ways (p. 88)." Girard's third "great discovery," by his own account (see *The Girard Reader*, edited by James G. Williams) was the absolutely unique explanatory power of the biblical revelation, and supremely the Jesus narrative. Bellinger flatly says: "In my opinion, Girard ought to drop the pretense of adhering to the methodological atheism of social science, which has decreed that religious postulates are unacceptable foundations for understanding human behaviour… [that is] the forced agnosticism of the Enlightenment paradigm (p. 88)." A little later, Bellinger refers to this perspective as a "flattened secular landscape that characterizes mainstream social science (p. 93)." What he calls for on the contrary are "guides whose minds are open to the pull of creation (p. 93)."

At chapter's end he asserts baldly: "I suggest that the closure to transcendence inherent in methodological atheism prevents its theorists from fully understanding the phenomenon they are seeking to grasp. Concerning the religious vision of the relationship between humanity and its Creator, they presuppose that 'we have no need of that hypothesis.' (p. 96).

Secular theorists, by accepting "the lid placed on thought by the methodological atheism of social science," by refusing to permit "the horizon [to be] truly opened up to comprehend the divine source of life" (p. 96) are unable to achieve satisfactory explanation of evil because:

The most basic root of violence is the alienation of human beings from their Creator; thus, non-theological 'explanations' of violence are actually caught up in and expressive of the same atmosphere of human alienation from God out of which violence arises. [A footnote adds that secular social philosophy "is complicit with an 'ontology of violence,' a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter-force."] (p. 96, italics in original)

As such, they are unable to master their subject: the 'explanations' are themselves trapped in the tragedy of human history.

Secular theorists of violence, in other words, says Bellinger, are like the little girl looking for a coin under the street lamp "because there is more light there" than where the coin was really lost further up the street. The author refers to the present-day intellectuals' flight from God as embrace of a

." . . shrunken, contracted self," "in alienation from God, [that] is at the same time the root of violent actions and also the root of the inability of modern intellectuals to truly understand human behaviour (p. 97)

This is reminiscent of Albert Camus' assertion that he would acknowledge all explanations of evil but the transcendent; or (so commented Karl Barth) Jean Paul Sartre's brave atheistic existentialist staring down of evil, so imagined, when the real McCoy leers over his shoulder at the charade of the *papier mâché* evil he in fact engages.

If the book stopped here, Christian readers could smugly congratulate themselves. Not so fast says Bellinger at the outset of the seventh chapter. "It is my view that the Christian intellectual tradition provides us with stronger resources for interpreting violence than any of the alternatives with which I am familiar. I am fully cognizant, however, that this belief is in tension with certain basic facts of Christian history. If it is the case that the New Testament reveals the roots of violence so profoundly, then why have Christians been so violent throughout their history? (p. 98)." If openness to the transcendent in Christ puts one into a significant minority in today's secular world, actual full-fledged Christian nonviolence in theory and practice places one into an absolute minority in the church past and present.

Bellinger gives an illustrative sketch of the church's violence over two millennia, arguing for an "interpretation of Christian history which forms the basis of Anabaptist thought. This paradigm holds that an ethically disastrous 'fall' of Christian integrity took place during the age of Constantine. Christianity's apparent triumph over the world was in fact a defeat, from this point of view (p. 98)." This calls for the reintroduction of Christianity, specifically Christian nonviolence, back into Christendom. "For Kierkegaard, Christendom exists in a state of profound self-contradiction. On the one hand, it gives lip service to the ethics of the New Testament, but on the other, it is maintained by the same structures of violence that killed the prophets and Christ (p. 107)." In a summary replete with irony, Bellinger states Kierkegaard's and Girard's indictment of Christians thus: "… the Bible calls persons to spiritual maturity… To a great extent, the history of Christianity is the history of the resistance of immature 'Christians' to the possibility that they could actually become followers of Christ (p. 111)." The term "maturity" evokes Matt. 5:48 ("Be perfect [mature]…"), a call set in the context of nonviolent embrace of enemies, about which Christians throughout church history have demonstrated massive unfaithfulness.

Chapter eight is a discussion of the two most violent mass phenomena of the twentieth century: Naziism and Stalinism which were "not merely political events, they were at root religious phenomena [, … and] were as one in constituting the great twentieth-century revolt against the call of the eternal (pp. 126 & 131)." Bellinger asserts: "The basic presupposition of this book should be very clear by now: *we do not lack the philosophical categories that are necessary for comprehending political violence* [and] *human disorder has an intelligible order* (pp. 113 & 130, italics in original)."

In a creative look at "modernity," the author asks: "But if modernity is given a more substantive definition, concerning the maturity of present-day human beings in contrast with our primitive and superstitious ancestors, then we must ask what constitutes genuine maturity… For Kierkegaard and Girard, if modernity is understood to mean human

intellectual and moral maturity, in distinction from the immature cultic violence of the primitive world, then *Christianity is modernity* (p. 130)." (This is akin to Girard's assertion that the Bible is the only document of *demythologizing* in world culture, and the Cross of Christ is the sole point of departure for universal cultural *deconstruction*.) In light of the foregoing, Bellinger concludes the chapter: "Thus, the crux of Christian ethics, and the true strength of Christian proclamation in history, lies in the way Christ leads persons out of the hell of enemy-hatred and into the realm of reality, in which the other is simply another creature of God. As Dostoevsky's Father Zossima says, Hell is the suffering of being unable to love other human beings. [Georges Bernanos' country priest says, Hell is to love no longer.] Christ's life and message transforms [sic] the alien other into our neighbor by ending our spiritual evasion and opening up our spirit to the call of the Creator (p. 133)." This ethic is of course in direct antithesis to a perpetual "War on Terrorism," showing such for the *pre-modern* sacrificial monstrosity it is.

A concluding chapter discusses "four views of Atonement – the ransom, satisfaction, penal substitution, and subjective theories… (p. 137)." Bellinger points beyond all four towards a Gospel story of a "passion narrative [as] the authentic and entire account of God's reconciling action and our reconciliation, as events in his life and ours (p. 142, quoting Robert W. Jenson in *Systematic Theology, vol. I: The Triune God*, p. 189.)." He suggests "a vision of Christ as Doctor (p. 143)." "We can answer Anselm's question, *Cur Deus Homo? [Why the God-Man?]* by saying that the Incarnation is God the Father's action in sending the Son on a medical mission for the healing of humanity. This is where the doctrine of Atonement needs to begin: with Bethlehem, not only with Golgotha (p. 144)."

As indicated above, in this reviewer's opinion, this is as good as theology gets! In analyzing then pointing the way out of human violence, there is profound hopefulness to the entire volume. With reference to the Atonement, the author states: "… in a few decades I believe that the preaching and teaching of Christianity will differ greatly from what they have been in centuries past (p. 141)." This reviewer can imagine Bellinger's affirmation of J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement*, published likewise in 2001. And perhaps Bellinger will yet grace us with a volume on a healing, peacemaking, nonviolent reading of the Atonement towards which his entire thesis points, and with which the volume ends. One can enthusiastically hope so!