



## BOOK REVIEWS

---

*The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom and Evil.* By Charles K. Bellinger. Oxford University Press, 2001. 157 pages. \$35.00.

A book's title often promises more than it delivers, and *The Genealogy of Violence* certainly does promise much. "Genealogy" suggests a family tree with distinct roots, stems, and branches and in its use here, that an account of the origins, pathways, and dynamics of violence is forthcoming. Although Charles Bellinger does not wholly succeed in this task, he does not disappoint, either. The vagueness of *Reflections on Creation, Freedom and Evil*, however, fails to indicate the main focus and strength of this monograph, namely, Bellinger's probing analysis of Søren Kierkegaard's quest for an answer to the question, "Why are human beings violent?" His work's beauty lies in his use of Kierkegaard's answer to complement answers offered from other perspectives, most especially René Girard's.

Bellinger begins by reviewing accounts of the roots of violence given by Alice Miller, Ervin Staub, Carl Jung and Eric Neumann, and Ernest Becker, without attempting to justify his choice of those particular authors. His rationale emerges slowly, implicitly, in his careful analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of their thought (21–25). In effect, he develops criteria for judging the adequacy of any putative "genealogy" of violence. First, an adequate account must offer insight into the human condition while navigating between two extremes common to such accounts: some postulate a necessary connection between the violence one suffers and the violence one perpetrates while ignoring the power of human choice; others err in the opposite direction by refusing to recognize the conditions that predispose persons to become violent and assuming that everyone has the same degree of freedom and range of possibilities. In sum, an adequate account must demand moral accountability from both the agents and the victims of violence. Furthermore, it must explain why violence, once expressed, so often escalates out of control. In the process, it must contribute to understanding the often baffling complexity of human experience and behavior. Bellinger gives special applause to Becker's account of the manifold ways in which the compulsion to flee death gives rise to violence: it succeeds in recognizing more

of the complex psychodynamics fueling violence, as well as humanity's ultimate accountability for it. Still, it fails to explain why anyone would commit suicide. To understand suicide, Bellinger contends, one must recognize how individuals can become terrified of the future because it requires that they develop their own selfhood (26–27). Kierkegaard understood this terror as resistance to the divine call to develop a self and express the divine creative purpose.

Bellinger is not the first to find in Kierkegaard the thesis that resisting the call to spiritual development may become destructive; nor does he claim to be. But he notes that Kierkegaard alone systematically integrates this insight into his doctrines of creation, humanity, sin, and Christ. Bellinger succeeds in rendering an engaging and original reappropriation of Kierkegaard's thought here, one well worth the attention of Kierkegaard and Girard scholars as well as anyone else interested in understanding violence.

In chapters 2 and 3 Bellinger elucidates Kierkegaard's theological anthropology, beginning with his doctrine of continuous creation. Kierkegaard's belief that creation is an ongoing process "energized and guided by God, who transcends the universe while maintaining an intimate relationship with it" (29) is the metaphysical foundation for his belief that resistance to the divine call mediated by creation is the root of violence (chap. 4). God's hand is at work within human lives, through the Word of God and of Christ. This Word speaks to the individual when "away from the madding crowd," proclaims that one is in "untruth," and calls one to truth through the realization of authentic selfhood (29–34). This call to actualize the self in freedom provokes angst, dread, in the individual. This dread radically undermines the spirit's ability to synthesize in a balanced way the opposing elements (freedom and necessity, infinity and finitude, and so on) that constitute the distinctively human mode of being; this, in turn, renders the spirit's loss of itself in various modes of despair—sin, in Christian perspective—inevitable, though not necessary (34–39). Sin is not just separation from God, it is defiance of God; such defiant despair is intensified when one is offered divine forgiveness through Christ and refuses it (48–53).

Bellinger's analyses of dread and despair/sin (34–53) are careful and exacting and yet brief and concise. They clarify many difficult, complex texts drawn from a wide range of literature—Kierkegaard's journals and both his pseudonymous and signed works. Bellinger's most original contribution here lies in a conceptual clarification: despair resists the divine call to spiritual development and so is, essentially, "ego-protection" (42–55): "The 'leap into sin' involves the creature's turning away from God in an effort to control the process of creation and lessen the discomfort of angst. 'Sin' thus entails a hardening of the individual's psychological structure; the ego becomes a kind of 'shell' within which the individual hides in an attempt to evade the possible further development of the self. In this state, the self seeks to protect itself from the future, that is, it continually seeks to fend off the possibility that it could 'die to itself' and be reborn in a different, more mature formation" (53). Such "ego-protection" moved the forces that crucified Jesus to violence because he threatened their easy judgments regarding themselves, others, and God. Resistance to the divine call becomes violence against others as a result of the struggle between the "first self" (Bellinger's

hardened, anxious ego) and the “deeper self” possible in the future to which God calls the individual. The inherently unstable self who evades the divine call becomes “entangled” in “misrelations with others” (65); it simultaneously loves and hates its own self and consequently is subject to having its preferential love of others turn into hate in an instant (65–67).

Bellinger’s insightful analyses of the ways in which Kierkegaard’s account of the origin of violence complements Girard’s, and how the two complete one another (chap. 4), serve as the pivot on which his genealogy turns. Kierkegaard identifies the source of violence found in the vertical dimension of existence in the relationship between individuals and God; Girard identifies a source of violence found in the horizontal dimension in the relationships among persons. Kierkegaard’s view of “aesthetic existence” anticipates Girard’s on the negative dynamics of acquisitive desire, namely, the way in which desire for what others possess leads to a society of imitators and conformists (74–76). Both recognize that acquisitiveness comes from a fundamental lack of selfhood. Unlike Girard, however, Kierkegaard stopped short of developing a comprehensive theory of societal violence out of acquisitiveness; in particular, he never connected “mimetic/acquisitive desire” with “the scapegoat mechanism” (79). In Girard’s view acquisitive desire leads to conflict among members of a society, conflict that is repressed in order to preserve societal cohesion—until the repressed explodes in a sacrificial crisis in which some person or group is scapegoated and sacrificed in order to reestablish societal harmony (79–86).

Bellinger’s understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal violence relies too much on Girard and overlooks the deeper, destructive psychodynamics caused by trauma and abuse evident in Miller’s account. In attempting to explain the destructiveness of the ego’s compulsion to protect itself, Bellinger focuses on the ego’s rejection of an authentic ego ideal and ignores how its negative identity, the rejected “shadow” self, is often repressed and projected onto an “other” that is then scapegoated. Moreover, Bellinger uses Stephen Dunning’s language of “misrelationships” and “entangled freedom” to elucidate how intrapersonal despair becomes interpersonal violence; this only describes without explaining it (65). Attention to the work of object relations theorists W. R. D. Fairbairn, Heinz Kohut, Otto Kernberg, and David Holbrook and specialists in trauma theory such as Judith Lewis Herman would greatly advance his theory.

Bellinger wishes to bring his understanding of how “ego-protection” provokes violence to the forefront of societal consciousness (68). To succeed, however, he cannot simply assume that only a relationship to God will enable one to avoid violence and achieve stability and wholeness (57). Nor can he assume that the drive toward expressing one’s authentic self can only be explained as a call from God, rather than as a natural process of self-actualization that is often bungled (57, 67). Rather than assumptions, he needs arguments grounded in experiences available to all, but he does not offer them. Instead, he joins John Millbank, Eric Voegelin, and others in decrying the “methodological atheism” that causes social scientists to deny transcendence and argues that they need the “hypothesis of God” to understand creativity and violence fully (88, 96). Such theists are far more willing to accept resistance to God, rather than resistance to

taking the risks concomitant with change, as the only possible explanation. Theists may make the leap of faith he encourages; skeptics may remain so.

Bellinger's sensitive and insightful book points toward an overarching theory of the fundamental causes and dynamics of violence without actually constructing one. It focuses too much on how and what others say about violence (a pitfall common to scholarly enterprises) and too little on actually formulating an all-encompassing model of it. Still, his analyses of Nazism and Stalinism (115–133) go far toward making sense of the dark dynamics motivating those movements and demand the attention of anyone perplexed by the political violence of the twentieth century. Rather than faulting him for promising more than he delivers, I am hopeful that he will attempt another installment of this monumental project.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfh066

Jennifer L. Rike  
University of Detroit Mercy

*Exhibiting Religion: Colonialism and Spectacle at International Expositions 1851–1893.* By John P. Burris. University Press of Virginia, 2001. 240 pages. \$39.50.

On 11 September 1893 the World's Parliament of Religions was gavelled into session in the Hall of Columbus in what would become the Chicago Art Institute. Convened in conjunction with the nearby Columbian Exposition, the parliament brought together sixty-odd religious leaders representing primarily a diverse selection of Protestants but also some Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and others. Recently, more than one scholar has cited the parliament as an important catalyst for the rise of comparative religion in the United States, and in the last decade a fair amount of scholarly attention has focused on the gathering. Books such as Ziolkowski's *Museum of Faiths* (Scholars Press, 1993), Seager's *The World's Parliament of Religions* (Indiana University Press, 1995), and Snodgrass's *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003) have all intensively analyzed the event to draw out its larger meanings and consequences for the field. In *Exhibiting Religion* John Burris too uses the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions as his focal point, although Burris is not so intent on analyzing what was discussed at the parliament as he is on uncovering its ideological roots within the nineteenth-century tradition of international expositions. From a frankly Marxist perspective (3–4), Burris views international expositions as one of the key loci where industrial output and economic might were systematically linked to presumptions of western cultural superiority to form the ideology of colonialism. He also sees the expositions, and especially the intellectual congresses they spawned such as the 1893 parliament, as the primary sites where the general public was exposed to this developing ideology. The crux of Burris's story, therefore, is how the concept "religion" came to be a central category of this ideology and how the field of