INTRODUCTION

RELIGION AND THE ‘CIVILIZING PROCESS’

I am afeard there are few die well that die in battle; for how can they charitably dispose of any thing, when blood is their argument?

–Shakespeare, Henry the Fifth

Why do most in the ‘modern West’ now regard the use of violence, especially when justified by religious beliefs, as barbaric, degenerate and pathological, when for most of history, it was esteemed as an honorable way to resolve conflicts and win acclaim? With the possible exception of military or police action on the part of recognized political authorities, most of us recoil from the sight of violence. When confronted by news reports of suicide bombings, drive-by murders, or schoolyard beatings, we are often flooded by feelings of dismay, disapproval and most importantly, a sense of distance that hinders our empathy for violent individuals. Genetic predisposition cannot fully explain away such seemingly visceral reactions. Though a society solely governed by natural instinct might be more than a Hobbesian nightmare of violence and predation, it would, nevertheless, still be a place in which social bonds were both fostered and hindered by intense and often-times aggressive competition. For most scholars, our acceptance or rejection of violent behavior has far more to do with nurture than it does with nature. Indeed, this

1 W. Shakespeare, Henry the Fifth in The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston, 1972), IV: i.142–143. This quotation is a remarkable voice of doubt amidst the hyper-justification of Henry’s impending battle against the French. It shows that by the end of the sixteenth century, when Shakespeare penned these words, concerns about the use of violence as an impediment to salvation were important enough to be addressed and debated within the play itself.

academic consensus about the influence of environment on character development has moved well beyond the confines of the college campus. If forced to explain the causes of violence at home or abroad, many people quickly point to a deplorable conglomeration of psychological, social, economic and political factors. However, while now we might seem ready to accept that violent behavior is quite often a product of nurture, we still have not given full attention to, nor truly begun to grasp, the historical process that has fostered our current abhorrence of interpersonal aggression as well as our often reflexive rejection of religious belief as an acceptable excuse for violence.

If we initiate our quest for greater understanding in general studies of the relationship between Christianity and violence, we will soon notice two opposing schools of thought: the ‘essentialists’, who regard Christianity as fundamentally peaceful, and the ‘critics’, who contend that violence is inherent in Christian dogma. By exploring the arguments of both schools, we can attain a broader, if still incomplete, perspective on the interaction between Christian faith and a society’s attitude toward the legitimacy of violence. On the one hand, the ‘essentialists’, such as J. Harold Ellens or the much-heralded René Girard, regard Christianity as essentially a religion of peace, love, compassion and forgiveness. The studies of ‘essentialists’ often contrast the ethos of...