The Bible and the Psychology of Violence

By

Dr. James R. Beck, Professor, Denver Seminary, Denver Colorado; Visiting Lecturer at Caribbean Graduate School of Theology since 1987.

Dr. Beck has earned degrees from Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M.), Oregan State University (Ed.M.), and Rosemead School of Psychology (Ph.D.). His previous publications include *Jesus and Personality Theory* (InterVarsity Press) and *Healing the Hurting* (Baker).

Violence in the contemporary world is not a new phenomenon. From the earliest days of human existence on this planet, violence has been a dramatic representation of sin's devastating impact on the created order. The murderous violence that expressed itself in the first human nuclear family forever shattered any illusions that sin would make a minor impact on the dignity of the human race as created by God. That first murder and all subsequent murders are, in fact, such egregious assaults on the value and worth of human life that it was necessary for Yahweh to impose the penalty of death for the commission of murder (Gen. 9:6). Without the imposition of capital punishment, the meaning of the Image of God in humans would be lost and dreadfully tarnished whenever a murder occurred.

This article will explore violence in the contemporary world, the voice of Scripture related to this topic, major twentieth century theories

regarding the etiology or etiologies of violence, current research strategies related to violence, and the implications of this topic for ministry in the twenty-first century.

Violence in Contemporary Life

The United States of America has now taken on the dubious distinction of having the highest homicide rate of any of the industrialized western nations (Diamond 1996). American society, as is true for most all other cultures, has always had its share of violence, homicide, cruelty, and mayhem. Yet statistics reveal that current levels exceed that of past generations and that the acts and themes of interpersonal violence have permeated all segments of the society. The increase in violence is not just an illusion; it is a well-established fact. Anger, lethal weapons, and impulsivity take on new and more frightening combinations with each passing month.

There are now as many guns in the United States as there are people. "Firearm injuries, suicides, and unintentional gunshot injuries claim the lives of some 38,000 Americans each year" (Office of Juvenile Justice 1999, 1). The "Age of Anxiety" seems to have been replaced by the "Age of Rage."

> This distressing fact is vividly evident in our daily newspapers, nightly network coverage, radio talk shows, prime-time television, popular music, movies, video games, modern art, literature, and - perhaps most unpleasantly of all - in our own close encounters with the hostility, incivility, and animosity so endemic to modern life as we now know it (Diamond 1996, 7).

We are not surprised to see this increasing violence

among criminals who engage in their unlawful trades. But we are increasingly alarmed to see heightened levels of violence manifest themselves among adolescents and children. A recent study discovered that among "average" juveniles, fifty percent felt they could easily obtain a firearm (National Institute of Justice 1998). While both gun advocacy groups and gun control groups both agree that children and adolescents should not have access to weapons except for supervised hunting purposes, the sheer number of weapons now present in American society ensures that minors do indeed have far too much access to lethal weapons. Minors are victims of gunfire in increasing numbers. "The National Center for Health Statistics reported that in 1993 more preschoolers were killed by guns than were police officers and United States soldiers shot in the line of duty" (Flannery 1997, 27). "For persons between the ages of 15 and 24, the homicide rate of 15.2 per 100,000 U. S. residents is higher than the combined total homicide rate of 11 industrialized nations" (Office of Juvenile Justice 1999, 1).

The prestigious Rand Institute completed an extensive study of youthful offender attitudes towards guns before the now-famous Columbine High School mayhem in Colorado. The majority of those interviewed felt they had a 50/50 chance of being victimized, arrested, or killed by the age of twenty. Guns were at the heart of this fear.

> About one-third of the youths thought it was certain that an average teenager in their neighborhood or anywhere in the United States would be shot at within the next year. Interestingly, they perceive the world outside of their neighborhood to be even more dangerous. Many of the youth said they could be shot just walking to the mall, so they thought the only real way to stay safe was to never

leave their house, or to get a car so they never have to walk on the streets (Goldberg and Schwabe 1999, 18).

As troubling as youthful involvements with guns may be, observers also note that violence and guns seem to have crept into mainstream American life. A recent catalog of products for the American home features a remote television control device made in the shape of a handgun. The viewer can aim the gun-like device at the television set and change the channel just as easily as it is to shoot a real gun and kill someone. Violence is increasingly evident in professional sports and visual entertainment. The public itself seems obsessed with violent solutions to social problems when the electorate tolerates police brutality and insists on longer prison sentences for offenders (Elias 1997). American society has long passed the point of discussing how to get rid of violence; more and more the topic of discussion is how to lower violence to some "acceptable" level.

Americans in general express a willingness to control the problem, but at the same time they seem unable to elect officials who have the courage to do so. Powerful gun advocacy groups are thought to have an inordinate level of influence legislatively because of their ability to contribute campaign money to politicians. Meanwhile American media are saturated with violence to such an extent that some experts claim our children are being trained to kill (Grossman 1998). The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a nonprofit research group that is now 30 years old, recently issued a major report that concluded that America is in deep trouble as a society because of its crime and violence. "In part, the report suggested, this is because the number of firearms has doubled . . . many of them high-powered, easily concealed

models with no other logical function than to kill humans" (*Denver Post,* 6 December 1999).

How are we to understand this remarkable fascination in American life with guns? The United States has a strong heritage of Christian values, democratic ideals, and respect for human dignity. But none of these facts seem to have stemmed the tide of violence in the U.S. Social and political explanations abound. American society has a long pattern of violence (Brown 1969) with a vigilante and frontier mentality (Frantz 1969). The large presence of slavery in the history of the United States also contributes to twentieth century patterns of societal violence (Zinn 1969). Other social commentators point to powerful cultural and economic forces that have created a permanent underclass in American society, a socioeconomic group nonetheless affected in a powerful way by the new values of American life: personal entitlement, material acquisition, and instant gratification. Violence is one means available to the new underclass to achieve these goals (Flannery 1997). Each of these explanations, however, must be seen in a larger context as described by Perlmutter.

> A fair reading of American history will show that though there was evil in America, all was not so. The distinction is both logically and historically crucial for understanding American intergroup relations. Just as America was a land of Indian dispossession and Black enslavement, so was it one of refuge and opportunity for countless religious, political and economic émigrés. And just as scoundrels, criminals, and killers came here, so did good and compassionate people, who decried the injustices about them and demanded their compatriots conform to a

standard of behavior that would make the New World better than the Old World and closer to the ideals of the Promised Land (Perlmutter 4-5).

Our task now is to examine biblical material regarding violence as well as psychological explanations for the large presence of violence in contemporary life.

The Bible on Violence

We have already mentioned the first murder which occurred within the family of Adam and Eve (Gen. 4:1-16). Humans demonstrated early on that they were capable of murderous violence even before the advent of guns or swords. The violence of our earliest human ancestors increased substantially to the point where Yahweh repented of ever creating the human race (Gen. 6:6). "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. . . . Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence" (Gen. 6: 5, 11).[1] God preserved a remnant of humans but destroyed the balance of the race in a powerful statement as to how deeply the violence of humans distresses the very heart of God.

The psalms soberly address the problem of violence. "The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates" (Ps. 11:5). The wicked are described as persons who commit both injustice and violence (Ps. 55:9; 58:2; 73:6). But Yahweh notices the plight

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[1]Scripture quotations taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version®.* Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, by International Bible Society. Used by permission of the International Bible Society.

of the weak and the needy and He "will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight" (Ps. 72:14). Violence is roundly condemned in the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Those whom Yahweh hates are those whose hands are dripping with violence (Is. 59:6; Jer. 6:6-7; Ezek. 7:11; Jonah 3:8). God's people are called to "Give up your violence and oppression and do what is just and right" (Ezek. 45:9b). The suffering servant of Isaiah 53 "was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth" (Is. 53: 9).

This prophetic picture of the non-violent Messiah was repeatedly confirmed in the life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus consistently condemned violence beginning in the Sermon on the Mount ("Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God," Matt. 5:9) and ending with the garden scene where Jesus rebukes Peter's use of violence against the arresting mob ("Put your sword back in its place," Matt. 26:52a). The Kingdom of God does not advance itself on the cusp of violence but, in the words of the old hymn, "with deeds of love and mercy." These themes continue in the epistles of the New Testament where batterers are disqualified from church leadership (1 Tim. 3:2-3; 2 Tim. 2:24; Tit. 1:6-7). As Thomas Merton says,

> The religious basis of Christian nonviolence is then faith in Christ the Redeemer and obedience to his demand to love and manifest himself in us by a certain manner of acting in the world and in relation to other men. This obedience enables us to live as true citizens of the Kingdom, in which the divine mercy, the grace, favor and redeeming love of God are active in our lives (Merton 1968, 16).

Acts of violence in the Bible are certainly no justification for it. The Bible does contain accounts of mayhem, uncontrolled rage and destruction, and ruthless violence. But violence is not the legacy of monotheism as some people argue (Schwartz 1997). The sword that is present in the kingdom of God (Matt. 10:34) is a metaphorical sword. In the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus instructed his disciples to sell a cloak and buy a sword for their upcoming dispersal, he was clearly referring to a metaphorical sword (Luke 22:35-38). The message of the Bible regarding violence is clear and unambiguous: God hates it and His people are to shun its presence in their lives.

Twentieth Century Psychological Theories

Scholars in many branches of human knowledge have speculated about the roots of violence in the human experience. Philosophers, theologians, sociologists, and ethicists have all attempted to understand the pernicious human sin of violence. Psychologists in the twentieth century are no exception to this pattern. Space does not allow a comprehensive examination of how theorists have approached this topic, but we will examine four authors representing four very different viewpoints regarding violence: the pro-religious psychoanalytic/social psychological theory of Erich Fromm; the existential view of Rollo May; the secular, cognitive analysis of Aaron Beck; and the Christian approach of Paul Tournier.

Erich Fromm

Erich Fromm's extensive work in the second half of the twentieth century gave psychoanalysis a new social perspective. The Freudian tradition had strenuously argued

that human suffering, maladjustment, and psychopathology resulted from intrapersonal conflicts. Each individual was more or less an isolated entity interacting with the world, but primarily on the basis of unresolved or resolved inner conflicts. Freud thus gave the world a new approach to the understanding of human functioning, but by the midpoint of the century many analysts were beginning to see that the interpersonal domain was at least as important as the intrapersonal world when trying to understand human problems. Erich Fromm also differed from Freud in that he valued the contribution of religion to an understanding of human dilemmas. Though both Freud and Fromm came from Jewish backgrounds, Freud remained quite anti-religious during his entire professional career. Fromm focused a good portion of his scholarly activity on understanding the religious themes of the Old Testament from a psychoanalytic perspective. Fromm, however, adopted a higher critical approach to the Old Testament and did not affirm the supernatural character of either the Bible or God.

Fromm's first contribution to the discussion was to argue that human aggressiveness is not a "spontaneous and self-propelling aggressive drive" (Fromm 1973, 89). Fromm decried the instinctivism that had dominated psychoanalytic discussions of aggression and violence. He argued that findings from neurophysiology, animal behavior, paleontology, and anthropology all pointed against aggression as an instinct. "I believe I have demonstrated . . . that this destructiveness is neither innate, nor part of 'human nature,' and that it is not common to all men" (Fromm 1973, 181). Instinctivism added a deterministic quality to aggression and violence that bothered Fromm; if it is an instinct then its expression could hardly be avoided.

Instead Fromm felt strongly that human aggression,

violence, and destructiveness was a natural defense made by the organism to external threat. If no threat is present, destructiveness does not emerge. Thus, social engineering and societal change can directly affect the amount of destructiveness we observe. Fromm observed that humans can be far more aggressive than animals and sometimes exhibit hyperaggressiveness. He felt that this excess was due to the extraordinary aggression-producing conditions that frequently occur in human contexts. Humans are capable of taking pleasure in destroying life "without any reason or purpose other than that of destroying" (Fromm 1973, 186). Aggression can be benign (pseudoaggressive acts such as accidental, playful or self-assertive aggression or defensive acts such as conformist or instrumental aggression). Aggression can also be malignant, a term Fromm applied to Hitler's necrophilia. The desire to express malignant aggression arises in the character of an individual when one or more of the basic existential needs of the human is not adequately met: rootedness, unity, effectiveness, and excitation/stimulation. Thus Fromm was poised to work at societal, intrapersonal, and interpersonal levels to treat the problem of human destructiveness. Even though Fromm was sensitive to the role religion can play in ameliorating the effects of aggression, his conceptualization of the role of the spiritual domain was inadequate (Merton 1968).

Rollo May

Rollo May is another psychoanalytically-oriented psychiatrist who has tackled the problem of tracing the roots of violence in the human psyche. In his major work on the topic, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence*, Dr. May argues that humans experience five levels of power present as potentialities in every person (the power

to be, self-affirmation, self-assertion, aggression, violence). Neurosis, psychosis, or overt violence can emerge when any of these five power potentialities are not maturely handled by the person.

> We often speak of the tendency toward violence as building up *inside* the individual, but it is also a response to outside conditions. The source of violence must be seen in both its internal and external manifestations, a response to a *situation* which is felt to block off all other ways of response. (May 1972, 44)

Aggression is a moving toward a perceived adversary. The aim of the aggression is to restructure the balance of power that the individual feels is imbalanced. We normally conceive of aggression as primarily negative although May argues that constructive aggression also exists. He cites four abolitionists (Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, James Gillespie Birney, and Theodore D. Weld) as examples of mature people who were able to channel aggression in a constructive direction.

> These men fit our definition of aggression very well. They were actively moving into the territory of others (slaves were personal property and sanctified thereby) to accomplish a restructuring of power. Their activities were characterized by great conflict, both inward and outward, the latter including continual threats on their lives and limbs (May 1972, 158).

Like Fromm, May envisioned violence as related to the environment. "When a person (or group of people) has been denied over a period of time what he feels are his legitimate

rights, when he is continuously burdened with feelings of impotence which corrode any remaining self-esteem, violence is the predictable end result" (May 182). For May, violence comes in several varieties (simple, calculated, fomented, absentee, or violence from above) and also has a constructive expression. "Violence is a uniting of the self in action" (May 1972, 187).

Aaron Beck

Psychological theories washed over the decades of the twentieth century in quick succession. Whereas Freudian psychoanalytic thought prevailed in the first half of the twentieth century, existential and humanistic psychology became much more prominent in the 1950s and 1960s. They in turn were soon overtaken by a powerful cognitive revolution, a movement that de-emphasized internal conflicts or environmental fit and emphasized in their place the role of thought process in influencing behavior. Cognitive therapy, along with its closely related cousins cognitive-behavioral psychology and social learning theory, emphasized the power of the mind not only to shape behavior in maladaptive ways but to change behavior into more constructive directions.

Aaron Beck has recently described his view of violence in *Prisoners of Hate: The Cognitive Basis of Anger, Hostility, and Violence*. Although the book is very recent, this cognitive approach to violence has its roots earlier in the twentieth century. Cognitive theory first identifies the internal belief system of a person because these strongly-held values and ideas shape cognition and all forms of subsequent behavior. Persons can learn to identify their own internal beliefs and thought patterns or they can receive external help in identifying them. Beck studies violent offenders to uncover

the rigid, maladaptive beliefs they constantly carry with them in their cognitive world. These misbeliefs are that authorities are controlling, disparaging and punitive; outsiders are treacherous, self-serving, and hostile; people cannot be trusted. Persons prone to violence spend their lives in a constant battle, always defending the self and always maintaining a state of vigilance and readiness to fight. Thus these persons can engage in "violent counterattacks against suspected aggressors" (Beck 1999, 126). In a general way, their violent behavior which is based in faulty cognition is also related to spousal abuse, delinquency, child abuse, and individual violence.

Beck's cognitive theory of the origins of violence moves away from the socially constructed system of both Fromm and May toward the internal world of the violent person. But the central feature of the internal world that is crucially linked to violent behavior is not the unresolved intrapersonal conflicts pictured by psychoanalytic thought, but is attached to the dangerous and unexamined cognition system of the individual. Therapy naturally flows out of this picture of the origins of violence. People can substitute healthier, more mature, less destructive cognition for the prior belief system and thus move beyond the need to strike out at the world with aggression, destructiveness, and violence.

Paul Tournier

The final theorist we will examine in this brief tour of twentieth century psychological explanations for the origins of violence is Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist of considerable influence both in Europe and North America. Tournier was a medical doctor who developed an interest and impressive skills in working with the emotionally disturbed. Unlike the other three authors we have discussed,

Tournier built his understandings of violence within a Christian world view. For Tournier, aggression is natural.

> We must acknowledge that there is in nature a force—whether we call it aggression or violence—which is normal and healthy. . . . It is more than an effect of life; it is the very essence of life. And we must also acknowledge that there can be a sudden brutal amplification of this force—whether we call it aggression or violence—which no longer serves life, but acts against it, sowing the seeds of death (Tournier 1977, 6).

Human violence is especially problematic because humans lack the instinct to help preserve the species. Without this restraint, humans can only hope to control the violence within by utilizing moral conscience and, in the case of believers, divine inspiration. Reciprocal violence is the most destructive form of violence because it eventually terminates in mutual self-destruction for all parties concerned.

> Christ broke into the vicious circle of violence by taking upon himself the violence of men, and then refusing—though he knew how to be violent!—to pay back violence for violence. He is literally a saviour, as we still call him without really understanding the significance of the word: a sacred saviour from human violence, breaking its fatal determinism. (Tournier 1977, 76)

Scripture, for Tournier, adds two other major factors of importance to this discussion of violence. First, God is the God of revenge who takes away from humans, if they so

choose, the crushing weight of the desire for revenge which keeps cycles of violence alive and active. Even though God may sometimes appear slow in bringing vengeance to bear on the affairs of humans, His eventual reckoning is certain. Second, the Bible describes what Tournier labels "inaugural violence." In this form of violence, humans unite themselves together in common violence against a sacrifice that cannot reciprocate. In the Old Testament, inaugural violence was directed against the scapegoat (Lev. 16:10). The scapegoat "was not a true sacrifice, because the scapegoat is not killed. It is banished into the desert, taking with it all the sins of the people magically placed upon it; that is to say, all the accumulated grudges of social life which would call for revenge" (Tournier 1977, 89). Our faith in Christ can thus serve as God's provision for both reciprocal and inaugural violence.

> If Christianity is to make a worthwhile contribution to the grave problems of our civilization, it will rather be by a host of inspired men and women, attached to Jesus Christ, being resolved to move forward under his inspiration to face the difficulties of personal obedience to God in secular life (Tournier 1977, 99).

Current Research Approaches

In spite of these and other courageous attempts to understand violence in all its modern expressions, we are still left with a vast territory of unconquered ignorance. How and why does violence escalate in seemingly unpredictable ways? Why are some children in a family unusually prone to violence while other children in the same family highly repulsed by it? How does violence relate to various personality configurations? Is a tendency to be violent

inherited from one's parents? Can violence be managed through certain physical treatments or medication regimens? Are those who are involved in the commission of violence hopeless, or can they be rehabilitated? These and many more questions baffle social science researchers. While we can be certain that violence displeases God and that it is a bold and direct expression of sin, we can benefit from knowing more about it and how it operates in human experience.

Many recent theories about criminal behavior, including Eysneck's theory of criminal behavior and Mednick's Biosocial Theory of Criminal Behavior, share a common feature of not identifying violence as a specific variable to be analyzed. Criminal and sociopathic patterns of behavior include many factors, violence being only one (Raine et al. 1997). Carey also found that many studies examining criminal behavior are too general to yield specific conclusions regarding the more narrow concept of violence (1996). Huseman (1997), however, has identified a large number of factors that are related to violence within any given individual: genetic predispositions, environmental/genetic interactions, central nervous system trauma, neurophysiological abnormalities, temperament, arousal levels, hormonal levels, family violence, cultural predispositions, poor parenting, inappropriate punishment, environmental poverty, and peer group influences. Thus current research takes on a great deal more complexity than the question asked by early psychoanalytic researchers: Is violence learned or inherited? (Akhtar et al. 1995). The situation is far more complicated than that question implies. In fact, Volavka concludes, "There is no simple one-to-one relationship between biological factors and violence" (1995, 291).

Amidst all of these contributory factors is observational learning.

> Although habitual aggressive and violent behaviors seldom develop in children unless there is a convergence of multiple predisposing and precipitating biosocial and contextual factors, there is compelling evidence that early observation of aggression and violence in the child's environment or in the mass media contributes substantially to the development of aggressive habits that may persist throughout the life course (Huseman 69).

Thus violent societies face the dire prospect of passing on to each new generation higher and more intractable levels of violence and violent behavior patterns unless focused efforts to change these learning environments are successful.

As noted above, various physiological characteristics also fit into the complicated and multifaceted web of causal factors. Farrington writes, "Clearly, a low heart rate is an important correlate of violence" (1997, 103). Researchers are not sure why such a physiological symptom is predictive of violence; perhaps it is because a low heart rate may be associated with fearlessness thus allowing the person to violate the rights of others with impunity. Raine (1996) speculates that a lack of fear that may be associated with low resting heart rates is related to low arousal which in turn predisposes an individual to seek out some stimulation such as violence. Other researchers note that low birthweight, pregnancy complications, poor nutrition of pregnant mothers, viral infections during pregnancy, and delivery complications are also associated to some degree with violence. It is thought that these features of pregnancy can lead to damage

to the central nervous system that in turn leads to violence. "Early life factors, such as perinatal factors, appear to play a significant role in this process, when combined with other risks or vulnerabilities" (Brennan et al. 1997, 172). In short, current research into the roots of violence is looking for the interrelationships among a host of psychological, societal, and physiological causal factors. That they have some causal effect is widely accepted; exactly how they are related, however, remains an unsolved mystery (Shoham et al. 1995).

Implications

Christians living at the brink of the twenty-first century must face the issue of mounting violence in our societies. We can do no less for our children and our grandchildren. We can face this issue with three certainties.

The Problem of Violence Requires a United Voice

Evangelicals can be a powerful force for good in our societies. We have learned how to express our disdain for abortion, our conviction that moral reform is needed in our nations, and our commitment to honesty and integrity. Other issues with deep moral ramifications are more difficult for us, and sometimes we have a difficult time finding a united voice with which to address them. Violence ought not to be one of those problems about which we have little to say to our cultures. We ought to be able to discern in the teachings of Jesus a clear and unambiguous abhorrence for violence. We are not idealists; we know that violence will be a part of our world as long as our world has people in it. Violence has been with us since the beginning of the human race and it will be with us at the end of history. Yet we also know that evil can be restrained. The forces that oppose the righteousness

of God do not have to be given free reign in our societies. We can speak for what is right, and we should do so with a united voice. Silence is dangerous in the face of mounting violence. If we do not represent the teachings of Jesus in the societies where we live, who will?

The Problem of Violence Requires Christians in Research

Current research into the causes of violence has produced a very complicated picture. A host of causal factors (psychological, societal, and physiological) appears to be at work in the production of this problem, and we do not yet fully understand how they all interact. Research of this kind, however, can be very fruitful in the future as new technologies assist in the search for answers. We need to challenge ourselves, our students, and the next generation to pursue careers in research that will help speed the day when we know more about violence and how to control it. For example, researchers are calling for teams of investigators to explore the so-called protective factors that are related to violence. The vast majority of work to date has looked at what causes violence to arise in the individual; we need now to learn more about how that internal violence can be checked so that it dissipates rather than expresses itself in behavior. These protective factors could include various internal inhibitory functions that we can cultivate in people so as to curb violence. Intelligence, moral sense, and religious commitment all likely serve as inhibitors; we simply must understand more about how they work in individuals (Volavka 1995). Hopefully, many Christians will develop an interest in this type of research.

The Problem of Violence Is Not Beyond Hope

Christians are a hopeful people. We are hopeful because we know how the story ends. God wins; evil loses. History is on course; God is in control. Problems will escalate as the end nears, but we are commanded to work while we wait. Idleness in the face of the future is not a Christian option. Christians have found ways of living peacefully in the midst of terrible urban violence and of maintaining their hope for very bleak situations (Jackson 1981). Haugen (2000) has identified ways and means of tackling the most intractable forms of injustice around the world. We can do the same for mounting violence. Consider the following statement made recently by secular researchers:

> Interpersonal violence is indeed one of the most prevalent, stable, socially transmittable, societally destructive, and problematic health risks Americans face. Nevertheless, violence is by no means an inevitable, random, or unchangeable problem. What is needed is the will to treat violence as an unacceptable and preventable problem, combined with a coordinated set of scientifically derived, practical, and effective interventions that are carried out systematically and consistently in the home, schools, communities, media, and health centers of this country (Eron and Slaby 17-18).

Can Christians be any less hopeful?

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