

The Violence of Modernity

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The calm voice at the helm says, “Make it so...” and with it, the mantra of modernity is invoked. The philosophy that governs our culture is rooted in violence, the ability to *make things happen* and to *control the outcome*. It is a deeply factual belief. We can indeed make things happen, and, in a limited way, control their outcome. But we soon discover (and have proven it time and again) that our ability to control is quite limited. Many, many unforeseeable consequences flow from every action. If I am working in a very, self-contained environment, then the illusion of total control can be maintained for a very long time. If, say, I am building a watch, my actions and their results can remain on a desktop. However, when the scale of action begins to increase, the lack of true control begins to manifest itself. Actions on the level of an entire society or culture are beyond our ability to manage. A culture is not a very large watch.

But we think it is. That delusion lies at the very heart of the philosophy of modernity.

The arguments supporting the success of modernity are always misleading. The single desired effect (e.g. the end of slavery) is cited. But every unplanned consequence is ignored (the massive displacement of black families, the rise of Jim Crow, etc.). Certain actions are extremely desirable (such as ending slavery), but every action carries its unforeseen consequences. What tends to be the case is that the desired outcome is credited to our actions, while the unforeseen consequences are credited to “nature” (or some such thing). Modernity always wins, because it cooks the books.

The work of “making it so,” is always an act of violence. We take what is not so and force it to be otherwise. Whether it is the violence of a plow making a field suitable for planting, or the violence of creating a parking lot, human beings have formed and shaped their world by “making it so,” throughout our existence. The field and the parking lot, as innocuous and innocent as they may be, also create consequences that were not part of the plan. The only means of dealing with these consequences are to employ more violence to alter things yet again (requiring yet more violence, *ad infinitum*), or to treat the consequences as an acceptable change.

In this sense, to be an active part of the world is to employ violence. We do not sit lightly on the surface of our planet. Most human societies across history, have made a moderate peace with the world in which they live, using forms of violence whose consequences have been well-enough tolerated and accounted for so as to be bearable. The rate of change in such societies was modest, and within the limits that a culture could easily accommodate.

Large and rapid change is another thing entirely. “Changing the world,” under a variety of slogans, is the essence of the modern project. Modernity is not about how to live rightly in the world, but about how to *make* the world itself live rightly. The difference could hardly be greater. The inception of modernity, across the 18th and 19th centuries, was marked by revolution. The Industrial Revolution, the rise of various forms of capitalism, the birth of the modern state with its political revolutions, all initiated a period of ceaseless

change marked by winners and losers. Of course, success is measured by statistics that blur the edges of reality. X-number of people find their incomes increased, while only Y-number of people suffer displacement and ruination. So long as X is greater than Y, the change is a success. The trick is to be an X.

The ceaseless re-invention of the better world rarely takes stock of its own actions. That large amounts of any present ruination that are the result of the last push for progress is ignored. It is treated as nothing more than another set of problems to be fixed. As the fixes add up, a toxic culture begins to emerge: food that cannot be eaten; air that cannot be breathed; relationships that cannot be endured; safety that cannot be maintained, etc. As the toxicity rises, so the demand for ever more action and change grows, and, with it, the increase in violence (of all types). The amount of our human existence that now requires rather constant technological intervention is staggering. The entire modern pattern of dating, marriage, family and procreation are impossible without chemical and biological intervention. There has been no “sexual revolution,” only the application of technology into one of the most all-pervasive and normal parts of human existence, creating an artificial aspect to our lives that rests on violence. The abortion of nearly one-third of all children conceived is but a single example. The foundations of our present society are built on doing profound violence to human nature.

It should be noted that I have not suggested some mode of existence that is free of violence. Human beings *make* things happen, as does most of creation. Modernity, however, is another matter. Its better world has no limits, its project is never-ending. What are the proper limits of violence? Are there boundaries that must not be crossed?

Modernity has as its goal the creation of a better world with no particular reference to God – it is a secular concept. As such, that which constitutes “better” is, or can be, a shifting definition. In Soviet Russia it was one thing, in Nazi Germany another, in Consumer-Capitalist societies yet another still. Indeed, that which is “better” is often the subject of the political sphere. But

there is no inherent content to the “better,” nor any inherent limits on the measures taken to achieve it. The pursuit of the better (“progress”) becomes its own morality.

The approach of classical Christianity does not oppose change (there is always change), nor does it deny that one thing might be better than another. But the “good” which gives every action its meaning is God Himself, as made known in Christ. In classical terms, this is expressed as “keeping the commandments.” Those commandments are summarized in the love of God and the love of neighbor. There are other elements within the commandments of Christ that minimize and restrict the use of violence.

There is, for example, no commandment to make the world a better place, nor even to make progress towards a better world. The “better world” concept is, historically, a heretical borrowing from Christianity, a secularization of the notion of the Kingdom of God, translated into terms of progressive technology and laws (violence). But, in truth, the management of history’s outcomes is idolatrous. Only God controls the outcome of history.

My experience is that questioning our responsibility for history’s outcome will always be met with anxious objections that we would be agreeing “to do nothing” and the results would be terrible. Keeping the commandments of Christ is not doing nothing. It is, however, the refusal to use violence to force the world into ever-changing imaginary versions of the good.

I will cite a somewhat controversial example (all examples would be controversial, for modernists love nothing better than to argue about how to next use violence to improve the world). Consider the task of education. Teaching children to read, write and do numbers is not a terribly modern thing. It has been done for centuries, and, occasionally, done rather successfully. But the education industry (a subset of government) exists as an ever-changing set of standards, techniques, and procedures, whose constantly changing results occasion ever-increasing testing, change, control, management and violence to yield frequently lesser results. It has largely produced a cult of management and administration (the bane of every

teacher's existence). This example could be, *mutatis mutandis*, multiplied over the whole of our increasingly dysfunctional culture.

Sadly, as the results of modernity's violent progress become more dysfunctional, the greater the temptation grows to do more of the same. Every problem is greeted only with the question of how it might be fixed, with no one ever suggesting that the fixing of the world might be our largest problem.

Again, this is not an all-or-nothing thing. The classical world was not passive nor was there an absence of change. Modernity has chosen *economics* as the measure of the good, treating increasing productivity as the engine of progress and prosperity and the primary measure of a better world. Debates over the best means of driving such productivity, whether through command-and-control or passive market forces, have been the primary arguments within modernity.

There are many, many other goods that could be, and have been the measure of a culture. The only reason for using economic productivity is the false belief that material prosperity is the fount of all blessings. If we are rich enough, we will be happy.

At the very dark end of the spectrum, America's philosophical assumptions have made it the servant of modernity-as-export where literal violence is the day-to-day result. Remaking the Middle East has not only failed (completely) but cost hundreds of thousands of lives, a large proportion of which were complete innocents. The resulting chaos has been, at best, a distraction from our unrelenting pleasure in the entertainment industry, though our wars have generated a very popular genre of video game. Violence itself has become a consumer product.

This picture of the modern world can, in the modern Christian mind, provoke an immediate response of wondering what can be done to change it. The difficult answer is to quit living as though modernity were true. Quit validating modernity's questions. Do not ask, "How can we fix the world?"

Instead, ask, “How should Christians live?” and give the outcome of history back to God.

How should we live?

- First, live as though in the coming of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated into the world and the outcome of history has already been determined. (Quit worrying)
- Second, love people as the very image of God and resist the temptation to improve them.
- Third, refuse to make economics the basis of your life. Your job is not even of secondary importance.
- Fourth, quit arguing about politics as though the political realm were the answer to the world’s problems. It gives it power that is not legitimate and enables a project that is anti-God.
- Fifth, learn to love your enemies. God did not place them in the world for us to fix or eliminate. If possible, refrain from violence.
- Sixth, raise the taking of human life to a matter of prime importance and refuse to accept violence as a means to peace. Every single life is a vast and irreplaceable treasure.
- Seventh, cultivate contentment rather than pleasure. It will help you consume less and free you from slavery to your economic masters.
- Eighth, as much as possible, think small. You are not in charge of the world. Love what is local, at hand, personal, intimate, unique, and natural. It’s a preference that matters.
- Ninth, learn another language. Very few things are better at teaching you about who you are not.
- Tenth, be thankful for everything, remembering that the world we live in and everything in it belongs to God.

That’s but a minor list, a few things that occur to me offhand. They are things that encourage us to live in a “non-modern” manner. It is worth noting that when Roman soldiers approached John the Baptist and asked him how they should live, he told them to *be content with their wages* and to *do violence to no one*. They were in charge of the world in their day – or so they could mistakenly think. My few bits of advice are of a piece with that beloved saint’s words.



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