

# **The Politics of Protestant Violence**

**Abolitionists and Anti-Abortionists**

Joel Olson

2011

# Contents

The Ontology of Violence . . . . .	3
John Brown and the Ontology of the Slave . . . . .	5
Paul Hill and the Ontology of the Unborn . . . . .	8
Pacifism and Ontological Violence . . . . .	11
References . . . . .	12

The famous mural *Tragic Prelude* at the Kansas State Capitol depicts John Brown with a Bible in one hand and a rifle in the other. Brown firmly believed that when it came to fighting slavery, the former sanctioned the latter. In the early morning of July 29, 1994, Paul Hill prayed and then drove to the Ladies Center in Pensacola, Florida, where Dr John Britton performed abortions. He killed Britton in the parking lot, set down his shotgun in the grass, and waited for the police to arrive. Hill, a former Presbyterian minister, was soon found guilty of two counts of first degree murder and one count of attempted murder, and sentenced to death. He was executed in 2003. For these deeply religious men, something in their faith brought God and the gun together.

This chapter seeks to explain why some American Protestants defend, advocate, and/or engage in violence in the name of God. It does so through an investigation of the role of violence in the fanatical wings of the abolitionist and anti-abortion movements, two of the most significant Protestant social movements in US history. Such abolitionists and anti-abortion extremists use violence because they believe it an effective means to achieve their political objectives. They also view it as apocalyptic and redemptive, delivering a corrupt nation from its sins lest it be chastised by an angry God. But even more, abolitionist and anti-abortion extremists view violence as ontological. That is, they do not just sympathize with the victims of oppression – in this case, slaves and the unborn. They powerfully identify with them. This identification turns *sympathy* into *ontology*. It turns compassion for the downtrodden into a sense of being one with them, even to the point of feeling oppressed oneself. The radical abolitionist spoke in the voice of the enslaved – “Am I not a man and a brother?” Radical “pro-lifers” justify attacking abortion clinics and providers as a form of defensive action. Each movement exhorts its participants to “love thy neighbor as thyself.”

If the ontology of the oppressed presumes struggle – if the worker’s nature is to struggle against the capitalist, if the slave’s nature is to struggle against the master, or if the unborn is the locus of a struggle between good and evil – then identification with the oppressed presumes struggle as well. Any violence committed by or on their behalf is self-defense, even if the defender strikes first. Violence is simultaneously a means to fight one’s oppression, a part of one’s identity, and an act of redemption.

The faith of the pious Puritan John Brown and the apocalyptic anti-abortion assassin Paul Hill enabled each to go from sympathizing with slaves and the unborn, respectively, to powerfully identifying with them, to the point where each came to see his violence as self-defense. Brown and Hill’s cosmologies foretold an apocalyptic struggle between oppressor and oppressed, one that required their intervention in order to redeem the nation from its complicity in sin. To act forcibly on behalf of the downtrodden in such a struggle was a form of self-defense that God permitted – even demanded.

## **The Ontology of Violence**

Most political scientists regard violence as instrumental. In Machiavelli’s classic exposition, violence is the ultimate means of achieving and expressing power. War is the essence of politics and a wise prince “must have no other objective, no other thought, nor take up any profession but that of war, its methods and its discipline, for that is the only art expected of a ruler” (Machiavelli 1966: ch. 14). Hobbes’s defense of the absolute power of the sovereign, Weber’s definition of the state as that body with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and Schmitt’s belief

that the essence of politics is the potential for physical combat between friends and enemies also understand violence as instrumental (Hobbes 1968 ; Weber 1921 ; Schmitt 1996). Hannah Arendt, on the other hand, argues that violence signifies the *absence* of power. Legitimate power rests on the support of the public sphere; violence emerges when that sphere dissolves and those in charge are tempted to substitute force for assent (Arendt 1972; see also Carlson, chapter 1 in this volume). Yet this argument also views violence as primarily instrumental. Violence, Arendt argues, is the use of “implements” (weapons) to rein-force the strength of individuals or groups in the absence of power, which is people engaging in the public sphere.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of violence as instrumental also shapes numerous interpretations of religious violence, by which I mean violence inspired by a perceived religious duty and/or designed to achieve a religious objective. Robert Pape argues that suicide terrorism is planned and executed by religious fundamentalists with a strategic intent, specifically, “to coerce a target government to change policy, to mobilize additional recruits and financial support, or both” (2003: 344). For Pape, religious violence is rooted less in specific religious beliefs than in a religious militant’s desire to achieve a strategic end (Pape 2005; see also Gill, chapter 3 in this volume).

Others argue, however, that such an approach underplays the role of religious beliefs in such actions. To say, as Pape does, that al-Qaeda’s main objective is to remove foreign troops from Muslim lands is no doubt true, but it does not explain why foreign troops’ presence is so offensive to al-Qaeda. Such a question can only be answered by examining the group’s specific religious-political beliefs. In this vein, sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer argues that religious violence emerges out of a sense of a “cosmic war” between good and evil, believers and infidels, which must be fought in this world as well as on a spiritual plane. Violence becomes likely when one side “satanizes” the other, turning one’s earthly opponent into the embodiment of cosmic evil. “A satanic enemy,” he points out, “cannot be transformed; it can only be destroyed” (Juergensmeyer 2000: 217). Religious violence is thus less instrumental than symbolic; that is, it does not seek to immediately change the political facts on the ground but to shock and terrorize, and thereby delegitimize the powers that be.

Instrumental and symbolic theories of violence both reveal important aspects about radical abolitionist and anti-abortion violence. But Brown’s and Hill’s justification for violence goes even deeper. For them, violence was not just a means to an end or a symbolic statement. It was also *ontological*. That is, violence was built into the very nature of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed.

We see this perspective clearly in Marx and Fanon. For Marx, the working class is that group that engages in struggle against the terms by which capital is accumulated. Struggle is thus built into the very relationship between worker and capitalist (Cleaver 1976). Consequently, it is built into their very identities. The tactics in this “battle of democracy” range from foot-dragging in the workplace to revolution. Violence is thus always a potential in the class struggle. Even if the struggle can be won nonviolently (as he believed was possible in some places; see Marx and Engels 1978: 523), the potential for violence is still built into the very nature of the proletarians’ struggle.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Arendt argues that when violence destroys power (public speech and action), it devolves into an end in itself (Arendt 1969: 4–5) but this does not change its initially instrumental character.

<sup>2</sup> As this example demonstrates, to argue that violence is built into certain social relationships that define who we are is not to argue that violence is a “natural” aspect of the species. Nor is it to argue that our being is fixed and unchangeable. Violence is ontological in that it defines the very being of the oppressed (and the oppressor, though

Similarly, Fanon argues that the colonial world “is a world cut in two,” divided between colonizer and colonized. The colonizers’ refusal to recognize the humanity of the “natives” produces a struggle that constitutes both groups’ identity. “Because it is a systematized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, colonialism forces the colonized to constantly ask the question: ‘Who am I in reality?’” (Fanon 2004: 182). Violence, then, is not simply a pragmatic necessity of anticolonial revolution. For Fanon, the colonized are *defined* by violence and *become human* through it. Freedom and self-realization are achieved through the destruction of the colonial world, “burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory” (2004: 6). Natives’ identity for Fanon, like workers’ identity for Marx, is constructed by an antagonism that is always potentially violent. Violence is thus a *constitutive* feature of these struggles and the identities they produce (Ciccariello – Maher 2010).

For Marx and Fanon, then, violence is not simply an instrument of power (or its lack) or a symbol of resistance. Their ontological notion of violence, I argue, is the key to understanding the religious violence of the extremist abolitionists and anti-abortionists under consideration in this chapter. Brown and Hill believed that violence is built into the *structural identity* of the enslaved and the unborn, just as it is for proletarians and natives for Marx and Fanon. That is, violence is intrinsic to these groups’ structural position in slavery, legalized abortion, capitalism, and colonialism, respectively. Of course, violence is not ontological to the fetus’s natural existence or to the “natural” lives of the people who are proletarians or natives or slaves. Rather, violence results in occupying these categories. For Hill, violence is inherent to the structural identity of the unborn in a sinful society in which abortion is legal and even (in his view) encouraged. For Brown, violence is inherent to the structural identity of the slave in the master–slave relationship. The ontological nature of such violence motivated Brown to think of those in bonds as if bound himself.

## John Brown and the Ontology of the Slave

Abolitionism was a deeply religious movement that believed that God wants human oppression to end and that humans can be redeemed from the sins of oppression. Much of the intellectual framework for this movement came from William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879), editor of *The Liberator* and president of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Garrison was a devout if unorthodox Christian who argued that slavery was a sin that damned the nation and required repentance. He insisted that slaves be freed immediately, unconditionally, and without compensation to slaveholders, a belief that came to be called “immediatism.” Garrison and his followers believed that slavery had so corrupted the political system that slavery could not be overthrown through the normal channels of political reform. Rather, moral suasion, or the transformation of public opinion, was the means by which abolitionists would persuade their fellow citizens of the evils of slavery and the need to abolish it (Kraditor 1989; Mayer 1998).

John Brown was not a follower of Garrison. He rejected the strategy of moral suasion as well as Garrison’s belief that the Constitution was a “covenant with death and an agreement with

---

in a different way). Yet it does not fix this identity permanently, for one’s being is determined through relationships that are historical rather than essential. Through violent struggle the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is abolished, and therefore the nature of one’s being is transformed. Ontology, Marx shows, is thus always ultimately political.

Hell.” While Garrison practiced a brand of Protestantism known as “Christian Perfectionism,” Brown was an orthodox Puritan who observed the Sabbath strictly. Yet like Garrison, Brown’s faith led him to a hatred of slavery and racial prejudice and to believe that these were national as well as individual sins. He also shared Garrison’s powerful identification with the oppressed. For the Garrisonians did not merely sympathize with the plight of the enslaved, they empathized with them to the point of seeking to fulfill Hebrews 13:3, “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.” Seeking to live by the biblical injunction to love thy neighbor as thyself (the quotation on the masthead of the *Liberator*), Garrisonians sought to think, feel, and act as if they were in the slaves’ position. “In becoming an Abolitionist, I pledged myself to stand by the side of the slave, and make his case my own” (Garrison 1855).

Brown’s own powerful identification with the oppressed led him to seek deep connections with black people. He studied the revolts of Gabriel and Nat Turner, read David Walker, sought audiences with Henry Highland Garnet and Harriet Tubman, befriended Frederick Douglass, and organized in free black communities (Quarles 1969). He identified with African-Americans so closely, Douglass once commented, that it seemed as if “his soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery” (quoted in DeCaro 2007: 41). Brown lived, worked, interacted, and fought alongside black people as if he had a “black heart” (Stauffer 2002). Lerone Bennett Jr argues that this identification was so deep that Brown was effectively black.

There was in John Brown a complete identification with the oppressed. It was his child that a slaveowner was selling; his sister who was being whipped in the field; his wife who was being raped in the gin house. It was not happening to Negroes; it was happening to him. ... John Brown *was* a Negro, and it was in this aspect that he suffered. (Quoted in Reynolds 2005: 504)

This profound identification with blackness made Brown an insane fanatic in the eyes of most whites – and a hero to most African-Americans.

Brown’s willingness to engage in violence stemmed from this powerful, religiously motivated identification with the oppressed. He saw slavery as the keystone of immorality, “the mother of all abominations,” in an apocalyptic conflict between good and evil that was taking place on earth as well as in the cosmos (Ruchames 1969: 89).<sup>3</sup> By attacking slavery, he believed he could help win this cosmic conflict, please an angry God, and redeem the nation from its sins. Abolitionism was thus “the greatest service man can render to God” (1969: 129). Brown’s millennial sense of antislavery violence foreshadowed the chiliasm of many Northern Protestants during the Civil War, who saw the United States as a chosen nation that “could prepare the way for God’s reign on earth by purging the land of the sin of slavery” (Murphy 2009: 63).

When one acts as if enslaved, and if the enslaved are beloved of God, then attacking the enslaver becomes a form of holy self-defense. One example of this is the League of Gileadites, which Brown helped form in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1850, after passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. The Act, which required federal marshals to arrest suspected fugitives and send them back to slavery, terrorized free black communities. Brown reported to his wife that some black people in Springfield “are so alarmed that they tell me they cannot sleep on account of either themselves or their wives and children” (Ruchames 1969: 83). (He then urges, tellingly, “I want

---

<sup>3</sup> For Brown’s writings, I have used those collected in Ruchames 1969 and compared it to the smaller collection in DeCaro 2007.

all my family to imagine themselves in the same dreadful condition.”) According to its statement of purpose, which Brown wrote, the League was to provide a means of organized and aggressive self-defense against slave catchers. Its signatories, “whether male or female, old or young,” pledged to defend any member of the community in case of an assault or seizure by a slave catcher. It called for members of the league to form groups to attack slave catchers and federal marshals and to “sow confusion” (1969: 86). But the League clearly understood its violence to be defensive. Militant action is compelled by the tyranny of the Fugitive Slave Act. “Let it be understood that you are not to be driven to desperation without making it an awful dear job to others as well as to you” (1969: 85). Any “dear job” a League member committed was a form of self-protection.

This view shaped Brown’s understanding of his military exploits in Kansas, including his bloody assault in Pottawatomie, in which he and his men hacked five proslavery settlers to death. From most scholars’ perspectives, even sympathetic ones, Pottawatomie was an act of terrorism (e.g., Reynolds 2005 and Russell Banks’s brilliant historical novel *Cloudsplitter*). Yet Brown considered it self-defense. The political climate in Kansas at the time was terrifying, largely dominated by bands of proslavery ruffians. The legislature was elected in 1855 by over five thousand armed men from Missouri, who after the vote promptly returned to their home state. This bogus legislature passed laws that permitted only proslavery men to hold office or serve as jurors, punished the very discussion of whether slavery in Kansas “exists or does not exist” by at least two years’ imprisonment, and authorized the death penalty for inciting slaves to rebel (Ruchames 1969: 29). Further, proslavery settlers had openly threatened Brown’s family, promising to annihilate “those damned Browns” and to protect the proslavery government “until every damned abolitionist was in hell” (1969: 199). In this climate Brown felt it necessary to “show by actual work that there are two sides to this thing” by defending antislavery Kansans (including his family) from proslavery attacks, even if that meant murdering proslavery ruffians in the middle of the night (quoted in DeCaro 2007: 49). As Louis DeCaro argues, the bloodletting at Pottawatomie, from Brown’s perspective, was not so much terrorism as it was a “preemptive and counter-terroristic” strike (2007: 50).

Likewise with Harpers Ferry, Virginia. One of the curious things about Brown’s infamous raid on the federal arsenal there is that after his capture he insisted that he “never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection,” even though it appeared that way to nearly every contemporary observer, and to most people today. All he intended, he said, was to “free the slaves” and “to have made a clean thing of the matter” (Ruchames 1969: 134). This apparent contradiction of a raid to liberate slaves that does not incite slave insurrection disappears, however, within the framework of self-defense. Rather than trying to incite an insurrection Brown “devised an alternative model of rebellion where the enslaved would flee, incite others to fight, and resort to violence only in defense of their operations” (DeCaro 2007: 82). His real intention with Harpers Ferry was to create a maroon society that could move down the Alleghany Mountains deep into the South, liberating slaves along the way. Violence would be necessary only to defend the maroon community or in case of slaveholder resistance. Thus, the violence at Harpers Ferry, as at Pottawatomie, was

really a form of self-defense for Brown.<sup>4</sup> It was intended to end slavery “without [verry] [*sic*] much bloodshed” (Ruchames 1969: 167).

This strategy is evident in a close examination of Brown’s “Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States,” which was adopted at a convention of predominantly black abolitionists in Chatham, Ontario, a few months before the raid (Brown 1859). Brown wrote the constitution to provide rules for guerrilla warfare and to establish a republican government for the maroon society in the Alleghenies. It emphasizes democratic citizenship, racial and gender equality, and Christian morality, prohibiting “immoral conduct” (Article XII) and imposing a religious and moral code on government officials (Article XVI). This blend of guerrilla governance and Puritan morality, which seems curious or even contradictory today, emphasizes the right to self-defense – which includes freeing people from bondage – while seeking to limit the potential mayhem of a dual power situation.

Brown’s religiously rooted opposition to slavery resulted in violence, then, because his apocalyptic view of slavery, his identification with the oppressed, and his belief that struggle was built into the very ontology of the enslaved led him to see any strike on their behalf as a form of self-defense. By remembering them in bonds as if bound with them, he acted as if he were enslaved himself. He thus did what any slave would do, given the opportunity: he resisted. Who struck the first blow was unimportant. Brown committed such violence without enthusiasm and with some dread – “O God must this thing be?” he asks in Kansas territory in 1856 (DeCaro 2007: 139). At Harpers Ferry he insisted that he acted with no “murderous intention” (Ruchames 1969: 158). He was not making excuses, for he was convinced that God judged his actions as righteous. After the bloodletting in Pottawatomie he wrote to his family, “We feel assured that he who sees not as men see does not lay the guilt of innocent blood to our charge” (1969: 105). Even more, Brown saw himself as an agent of God. From jail he wrote to a friend, “Christ once armed Peter. So also in my case; I think he put a sword in my hand, and there continued it, so long as he saw best, and then kindly took it from me” (1969: 137). To act on behalf of the oppressed is righteous self-defense, and God knows this.

Militants in the anti-abortion movement borrow Brown’s notion of defensive violence. Indeed, many of them explicitly compare their struggle to Brown and abolitionism. Convicted abortion clinic bomber Michael Bray, for example, refers to anti-abortion extremists as “the new abolitionists” who, like John Brown, use force justifiably to end sin and deliver the nation from God’s wrath (Bray 1994). This apocalyptic justification of “defensive action” against ontological violence is expressed most clearly by considering the case of Paul Hill.

## **Paul Hill and the Ontology of the Unborn**

Like Brown, Hill saw his murder of Dr John Britton as a defensive and not a terroristic assault. He first expressed his theory of “defensive action” in a statement he wrote in 1993 to justify Michael Griffin’s assassination of abortion provider Dr David Gunn. The “Defensive Action Statement,” signed by 28 other people as well as Hill, declares:

We, the undersigned, declare the justice of taking all godly action necessary to defend innocent human life including the use of force. We proclaim that whatever

---

<sup>4</sup> Prior to the raid he instructed his men, “Do not ... take the life of any one, if you can possibly avoid it, but if it is necessary to take life in order to save your own, then make sure work of it” (quoted in DeCaro 2007: 83).



force is legitimate to defend the life of a born child is legitimate to defend the life of an unborn child. We assert that if Michael Griffin did in fact kill David Gunn, his use of lethal force was justifiable provided it was carried out for the purpose of defending the lives of unborn children. Therefore, he ought to be acquitted of the charges against him. (Hill 1993)

(In 1994 there would be a second Defensive Action Statement, adapted from the first by Donna Bray of the group Defenders of the Defenders of Life, this time on behalf of Hill. A third statement appeared in 2009 on behalf of Scott Roeder, who killed Dr George Tiller in Wichita.)

Hill's justification for killing abortion doctors on behalf of "the unborn" can be expressed in a simple syllogism: "It is certain," he writes in his book *Mix My Blood with the Blood of the Unborn*, "that we should use the means necessary to defend the innocent, and since the unborn are innocent, it is equally certain that we should use the means necessary to defend them" (Hill 2003b).

Hill's syllogism rests on his interpretation of the Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Hill argues this is properly translated as "Thou shalt not murder" (this is indeed the New International Version translation, see Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17). According to Hill, this commandment does not just forbid murder but also requires defending against murder, including meeting lethal force with lethal force if necessary. In fact, Hill argues, the Sixth Commandment *requires* the use of violence if it is necessary to defend against murder.<sup>5</sup>

Hill also reasons that if we must love our neighbors as we love ourselves, then we must defend them as we would defend ourselves. If we are justified in using lethal force to defend ourselves, as we surely are, then we are justified in using it to defend our neighbors. And unborn children are neighbors. Thus, we are justified in using whatever means necessary to defend them. "Now is the time to defend the unborn in the same way you'd defend slaves about to be murdered!" Hill shouted to the media throng awaiting him after he was arrested (1997b). His final words were, "If you believe abortion is a lethal force, you should oppose the force and do what you have to do to stop it. May God help you to protect the unborn as you would want to be protected" (Hill 2003a).

Hill's justification for violence can be summarized as *defend thy neighbor as you would defend thyself*. If the Bible instructs us to love our neighbor as ourself, then we must love the unborn as if *we* were unborn. We must be willing to protect them when they are being aborted as if we are being aborted.

But given that this sinful society has made it a crime to defend the innocent, persons of devotion, courage, and zeal must stand up and take the necessary action to defend them, regardless of the consequences. These persons can redeem the nation by turning it toward God's law. The movement to abolish abortion needs zealots who are willing to accept the "forbidden duty" to protect the unborn and shake society out of its sinful stupor.

What those who favor abortion need to fear, and what those who oppose abortion need to promote, is a God-given zeal for protecting the unborn. The immoral passion that drives the pro-abortion movement – to indulge their lusts and abort the

---

<sup>5</sup> Hill insists that only violence in self-defense is acceptable. The Bible instructs that we ought not use violence to overthrow authority. His shooting of Dr Britton did not seek to overthrow a government but to protect unborn children from being murdered. Thus, he argued, his actions were morally justified (Hill 1997a).

unborn – must be over-come by an even greater and godly passion for defending these children. This desire needs to be fanned into flames, purified by the entire Bible, and directed toward God (He is the ultimate source and object of our fervor for protecting those made in His image). As we learn to sustain and spread this zeal, it will illumine the world with the blazing brilliance of the glory of God. (Hill 2003b)

Hill's logic of defensive action presumes that violence is built into the structural identity of the unborn, as I argued above. In this sense, the terms "fetus" and "unborn" are different, for the latter presumes that the former is oppressed by a sinful world in which abortion is Satan's work. "Unborn" embodies the violence of a secular, corrupt society marked by bloodguilt, or guilt caused by the refusal to avenge for the shedding of blood of innocent babies. In Hill's apocalyptic worldview, abortion is the crux of immorality in a cosmic war between good and evil, just as slavery was for Brown (Mason 2002). In such a struggle, Hill (like Brown) takes the antinomian position that one may disregard man's law to obey a higher law if it is necessary to restore God's order (R. Hill 2008). Resistance to abortion promises life for the unborn, redemption for the living, and eternal life for the righteous, no matter how bloody it may be.

Like Brown, Hill saw himself as an agent of God. The killing of Britton "was His project; I trusted Him to complete it. I was in His hands to accomplish His purposes and He worked marvelously" (Hill 1997b). Given this, Hill argues that he had no real choice but to kill. "Obedience was the only option" (1997b).<sup>6</sup> It is his Christian duty to repel lethal force against the innocent with force, and thus to attack abortionists.<sup>7</sup> "The Lord is at work to deliver the unborn. I have confidence as never before that He is moving in America and throughout the world to stop the onslaught" (1997b). This sense of divine duty comes from Hill's belief that he is performing a *defensive* act in an *inherently violent* struggle against abortion. His act was thus, as he described it, "premeditated lethal defense" (Hill 2003b). Estimating that he prevented Britton "from killing about thirty innocent people" that day, and thousands thereafter, Hill believed that shooting Britton actually prevented a "bloodbath" in Pensacola (Hill 2003b). Resisting the violence that *is* abortion compels violence on behalf of the unborn, a violence that God not only sanctions but also demands.

When apocalypticism and a notion of ontological violence combine, total identification with the oppressed can easily justify violence on their behalf. Paul Hill was convinced that he was going to be the anti-abortion movement's John Brown. His killing at the Pensacola Ladies Center would be the Harpers Ferry that ended abortion and fused church and state (Reiter 2000: 184). Hill would be the catalytic figure whose actions would shake the pillars of secular society, just as Samson toppled the Philistine temple. "I am going to be the one who causes the abolition of abortion in America," Hill boasts from prison. "It is my call. I am called to be a martyr. My death will cause the righteous to rise up and take to the streets and say 'no more' to the baby killing, 'no more' to the sin. When I am executed unjustly you will see an uprising that will shock the nation" (quoted in Reiter 2000: 188). Hill's violence was motivated by his sense of the ontological

---

<sup>6</sup> At the same time, he writes of the temptation to drive on past the clinic and not carry through with the act (2003b). This temptation, he suggests, was the devil's doing. Thus Hill both has to *make* the choice to carry out the act and he has *no* choice. He is God's agent, but he must choose whether to accept that role.

<sup>7</sup> Hill does not demand that others engage in anti-abortion violence; only that they not condemn those who do (Hill 2003b). As Bray puts it, anti-abortion activists should be "pro-choice" when it comes to the use of violence – people should have the option to use it if they choose, without apology (Juergensmeyer 2000: 24; Bray 1997).

violence of the unborn and his apocalyptic empathy with them. Defending the unborn as if one was unborn oneself, he believed, could redeem the nation's sins.

## **Pacifism and Ontological Violence**

Identification with the oppressed, of course, does not need a religious motivation. Ideologies such as anarchism and communism and quasi-spiritual philosophies such as deep ecology do the same work. The role of religion in violence is inspirational and philosophical (i.e., it provides justifications for one's actions and a certainty that one is correct), but such inspiration and philosophy can come from secular sources as well.

Nor does a powerful identification with the oppressed necessarily lead to violence. Many abolitionists, for example, were pacifists or "non-resistants." Garrison recognized the irreducible antagonism at the core of the master – slave relationship and believed that the only question regarding this conflict was "will it go down peaceably?" His pacifism led him to emphasize repentance and peaceful abolition rather than violence. He told a crowd after Brown's execution, "I am a non-resistant ... I therefore, in the name of God, disarm John Brown, and every slave at the South. But I do not stop there; if I did, I should be a monster. I also disarm, in the name of God, every slaveholder and tyrant in the world" (Garrison 1859). And of course, the other great Protestant social movement in the United States, the civil rights movement, was defined by its commitment to nonviolence. Martin Luther King Jr argued that segregation should be undone without violence and that suffering at the hands of evildoers redeems the victim as well as the attacker (King 1958: ch. 6). King and Garrison viewed the systems of segregation and slavery as violent, but they believed that the violence of the oppressed was no better than the violence of the system.

Brown and Hill on the one hand and Garrison and King on the other recognized violence as ontological to the structural identity of the oppressed, and none sanctioned offensive violence. They differed over whether defensive violence is morally acceptable.

Brown and Hill interpreted Scripture to say that violent self-defense is redemptive, while Garrison and King claimed that redemption comes from enduring violence, not inflicting it. Brown and Hill armed themselves in order to defend the oppressed, while Garrison and King sought to remove the implements of violence from both sides.

Yet nonviolence is a difficult position to maintain when one believes that violence is ontological. Garrison always had difficulty condemning slave insurrection and in the same speech on Brown he ultimately supported it, crying "Success to every slave insurrection at the South, and in every slave country ... Whenever there is a contest between the oppressed and the oppressor ... God knows that my heart must be with the oppressed, and always against the oppressor" (Garrison 1859). His New England Non-Resistance Society went dormant after the fighting in Kansas and he quickly set aside his nonresistant principles to support the Civil War. The philosophy of nonviolence in the civil rights movement was almost always quietly accompanied by a belief in armed self-defense, particularly among rural black Southerners (Payne 1995: 204–5). For all but a few souls such as King and Robert Moses of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, nonviolence was a tactic rather than a deeply held philosophy (Morris 1984: 158). Certainly by the mid-1960s, most civil rights activists saw nonviolence as at best tactically useful and at worst as capitulation to white supremacy. Many former pacifists came to believe, as Malcolm X put

it, that it was time for less singin 'and more swingin'. These histories suggest that while it is possible to view violence as ontological and remain a pacifist, it is a volatile combination that is typically resolved by subordinating one's commitment to nonviolence. Once one identifies rather than sympathizes with the oppressed, it is increasingly difficult to urge them to struggle with one cheek turned toward their oppressor. This is especially so when one sees the world through an apocalyptic lens.

The dominant academic interpretations hold that Brown is a hero despite his violence and terrorism while Hill is a villain because of them (see Reynolds 2005 ; Mason 2002). But this view ignores what they share. The religious violence of John Brown and Paul Hill emerge from a profound solidarity, a solidarity that seems awful to those who oppose their respective worldviews and heroic to those who share them. It is here where extremism and populism meet. When extremism is put toward democratic ends, we recognize its agents as martyrs and heroes. When it is put toward a theocracy, we see villains and failures. Such are the places, respectively, of John Brown and Paul Hill in American politics.

## References

- Arendt, Hannah (1969). *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World.
- Arendt, Hannah (1972). "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution." In *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Bray, Michael (1994). *A Time to Kill: A Study Concerning the Use of Force and Abortion*. Portland: Advocates for Life.
- Bray, Michael (1997). "Y2K Judgment." *Capitol Area Christian News* (Fall). At [www.christiangallery.com/bray.html](http://www.christiangallery.com/bray.html) (accessed Nov. 2010).
- Brown, John (1859). "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States." At [www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/brownconstitution.html](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/brownconstitution.html) (accessed Aug. 16, 2006).
- Ciccariello-Maher, George (2010). "Jumpstarting the Decolonial Engine: Symbolic Violence from Fanon to Ch á vez." *Theory & Event* 13 (1).
- Cleaver, Harry (1976). *Reading Capital Politically*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- DeCaro, Louis A. (2007). *John Brown: The Cost of Freedom*. New York: International.
- Fanon, Frantz (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove.
- Garrison, William L. (1855). "Dissolution of the Union Essential to the Abolition of Slavery." At [www.ux1.eiu.edu](http://www.ux1.eiu.edu) (accessed Feb. 2, 2009).
- Garrison, William L. (1859). "John Brown and the Principle of Nonresistance." At [www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=569](http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=569) (accessed Feb. 11, 2009).
- Hill, Paul J. (1993). "Defensive Action Statement." At [www.armyofgod.com](http://www.armyofgod.com) (accessed Sept. 27, 2006).
- Hill, Paul J. (1997a). "A Reply to *Credenda Agenda's* 'Moving beyond Pro-life.'" *Credenda Agenda* (1) (June). At [www.trosch.org](http://www.trosch.org) (accessed Dec. 31, 2008).
- Hill, Paul J. (1997b). "Letter to the White Rose Banquet." At [www.christiangallery.com](http://www.christiangallery.com) (accessed Dec. 31, 2008).
- Hill, Paul J. (2003a). Last statement. At [www.armyofgod.com](http://www.armyofgod.com) (accessed Feb. 16, 2009).

- Hill, Paul J. (2003b). *Mix My Blood with the Blood of the Unborn*. At [www.armyofgod.com](http://www.armyofgod.com) (accessed Feb. 16, 2009).
- Hill, Rebecca (2008). *Men, Mobs, and Law: Anti-Lynching and Labor Defense in US Radical History*. Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hobbes, Thomas (1968). *Leviathan*. New York: Penguin.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark (2000). *Terror in the Mind of God*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr (1958). *Stride toward Freedom*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Kraditor, Aileen S. (1989). *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834–1850*. Chicago: Elephant.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo (1966). *The Prince*, trans. Daniel Donno. New York: Bantam.
- Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels (1978). “The Possibility of Non-violent Revolution.” In Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton.
- Mason, Carol (2002). *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-life Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mayer, Henry (1998). *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery*. New York: St Martin’s Griffin.
- Morris, Aldon D. (1984). *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: Free Press.
- Murphy, Andrew R. (2009). *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Olson, Joel (2007). “The Freshness of Fanaticism: The Abolitionist Defense of Zealotry.” *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (4): 685–701.
- Olson, Joel (2009). “Friends and Enemies, Slaves and Masters: Wendell Phillips, Fanaticism, and the Limits of Democratic Theory.” *Journal of Politics* 71 (1): 82–95.
- Pape, Robert (2003). “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.” *American Political Science Review* 97 (3): 343–61.
- Pape, Robert (2005). *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. New York: Random House.
- Payne, Charles (1995). *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Quarles, Benjamin (1969). *Black Abolitionists*. New York: Da Capo.
- Reiter, Jerry (2000). *Live from the Gates of Hell: An Insider’s Look at the Antiabortion Underground*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus.
- Reynolds, David (2005). *John Brown, Abolitionist*. New York: Knopf.
- Ruchames, Louis, ed. (1969). *John Brown: The Making of a Revolutionary: The Story of John Brown in His Own Words and in the Words of Those Who Knew Him*. New York: Universal Library.
- Schmitt, Carl (1996). *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stauffer, John (2002). *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weber, Max (1921). “Politics as a Vocation,” trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. At [en.wikisource.org](http://en.wikisource.org) (accessed Nov. 2010).

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Joel Olson  
The Politics of Protestant Violence  
Abolitionists and Anti-Abortionists  
2011

Retrieved on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2021 from [joelolson.net](http://joelolson.net)  
Chapter 39 of *The Blackwell Companion to Religion & Violence* ed. Andrew R. Murphy (Oxford:  
Wiley-Blackwell, 2011)

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)