



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Consuming Violence:  
Voyeurism versus Vision  
(*Patterns of Violence*,  
pp. 63-70)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Consuming Violence

We are tempted to be voyeurs of violence, dangerously drinking it in as entertainment. Or we turn away instead to sentimentalized distractions, which promise to be safer and proclaim our moral superiority. Neither represents a cross-shaped response to the violence in our culture.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: *Philippians 4:8-9*

### Meditation†

In our attempt to understand the United States and its relation to violence in the world, it is necessary to come to terms with...the staggering number of violent depictions in video games, films, and television. Seldom do we stop to ponder how these violent projections become embedded in the mythic consciousness of Americans.

*S. Brent Rodriguez-Plate*

### Reflection

We are violence junkies. We have developed such a taste for it that news channels and reality TV shows loop images of gruesome violence to boost their viewership; writers and visual artists employ lurid depictions of mayhem to sell their novels, TV dramas, movies, and video games; and sports entrepreneurs invent more battering competitions to entertain us. Our voyeurism encourages and is constantly nurtured by a violent pop culture.

How can we break our voyeur addiction and responsibly relate to the violence in society? Daniel Train draws the following insights from two autobiographical literary works: Augustine's *Confessions* and Flannery O'Connor's "The Partridge Festival."

- ▶ *Isolation from violence can lead to dishonest, self-righteous sentimentalism.* "Perceiving violence (both actual and feigned) can corrupt the viewer's soul," Train notes. We see it in Augustine's story of Alypius succumbing to the grisly violence in the gladiatorial games. So, some Christians attempt to avoid all violence in the news and cultural objects; they retreat to "modern Christian 'alternatives' to popular movies, visual art, music, or literary fiction." Yet, there are spiritual dangers in doing this. The creators of violence-free imaginative worlds often "show a complete disregard for the integrity of their craft, materials, and audiences." Viewers may haughtily evade the "ugliness, injustice, and dishonesty" in the world, and sentimentalize those alternative imaginary worlds.
- ▶ *An 'all things are lawful' approach is dangerously naïve.* Reacting to isolationism and "the widespread caricature of Christian moral teaching as prudish, other believers emphasize the freedom we have in Christ to participate in culture." Yet this risks the "unspoken spiritual hubris that Augustine observed in Alypius." Some violence in sports, news, and culture today is "as spiritually destructive as the coliseum games were in Augustine's day" and we should "avoid these altogether."

The approaches above—"no garbage in" isolation and "all things are lawful" participation—rate the *content* of cultural objects as permissible or not, but ignore "our own, often self-serving, motivations." The



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next two insights, drawn from a Flannery O'Connor story, suggest "real violence occurs not only in *what* we consume, but also in *how* we consume it."

- ▶ *Disguising the violence in culture is a form of violent sentimentalism.* People in the fictional village of Partridge scapegoat a man named Singleton who murdered five city leaders after they publicly humiliated him at a "mock court" in the town's signature Azalea Festival. They proceed with festivities as though nothing happened. Without excusing Singleton's horrific acts, O'Connor refuses to "absolve the town for its violent sentimentalism – namely, its efforts to cultivate an image of politeness and civility whatever the cost." She reveals why we often gloss over violence in our communities.
- ▶ *'Studying' the violence is a subtle, self-righteous voyeurism.* The focus of the story falls on Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, a would-be novelist and aspiring academic who milk the tragedy for their self-serving projects. With "self-righteous disgust for the town and its festivities," they show no concern for those involved in the tragedy. O'Connor "unmasks the voyeuristic postures of both the academic and the artist." There is remarkable self-critique here: the story is based on an event in O'Connor's hometown, and Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth speak lines and display attitudes reminiscent of the author. Perhaps O'Connor realized "the impulse to make a character either out of the real life Singleton or her own town would be to engage in the same abstracting and 'othering' that fueled the violence in the first place," Train observes. "She could not write that story without in some way using the event for her own gain – either as an opportunity for entertainment or as a way to bolster her self-righteousness." By focusing on "people's efforts to retell the story...she includes herself and her audience among those chastened."

Train urges us to "cultivate practices of reception and self-examination that give us a more honest assessment of and loving appreciation for both the world and ourselves." His explorations in Augustine and O'Connor suggest "a clear-eyed vision of our world is a gift of God's grace. It is a gift that has been modeled for us in both the way Christ lived and the way he died."

### Study Questions

1. What features make a person's approach to violence in the culture voyeuristic? Where are you most tempted to voyeuristically consume images of violence?
2. Which of the four insights in this study best describes your temptation to voyeurism of violence? Have you changed your approach to violence over the years? If so, why?
3. Consider how Augustine and O'Connor, in their authorship, relate to violence. How do they exemplify what Train calls "a cross-shaped vision of the violence in [their] culture"?

### Departing Hymn: "O Christ, You Did No Violence" (vv. 1, 2, 4, and 5)

† S. Brent Rodriguez-Plate, "A Nation Birthed in Blood: Violent Cosmogonies and American Film," in John D. Carlson and Jonathan H. Ebel, eds., *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America* (University of California Press, 2012), 49.

# Consuming Violence

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To examine four temptations to voyeuristically consume the depictions of violence that we encounter in the news and in popular culture.
2. To identify, by contrast to those, how we might responsibly relate to those depictions.
3. To glimpse, through the creative writings of Augustine and Flannery O'Connor, defining features of what Daniel Train calls "a cross-shaped vision of the violence in our culture."

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Patterns of Violence (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

Because Augustine's friend Alypius was ashamed of his fascination with the gruesome gladiatorial contests in fourth-century Rome, he vowed to avoid them. Daniel Train tells us what happened when some fellow-students persuaded Alypius to accompany them to a gladiatorial event. "[Alypius] was determined not to pay any attention to the gory spectacle before him; he even hoped that his condemnation of it (and scorn for the debauched friends) would be strengthened by being present, but refusing to watch. Not surprisingly, the roar of the crowd proved too much for his willpower. Augustine explains,

His curiosity got the better of him, and thinking that he would be able to treat the sight with scorn—whatever the sight might be—he opened his eyes and was stricken with a deeper wound in the soul than the man whom he had opened his eyes to see got in the body.... Seeing the blood he drank deep of the savagery. He did not turn away but fixed his gaze upon the sight.... He continued to gaze, shouted, grew hot, and when he departed took with him a madness by which he was to be goaded to come back again, not only with those who at first took him there, but even more than they and leading on others.

Train notes that "In no time at all, Alypius had traded places with those friends whom he scorned. He was rendered absolutely powerless against his self-corroding addiction to viewing the bloodshed" (*Patterns of Violence*, 63-64). Surely the story of Alypius's voyeurism and failure strikes home for many of us in a culture of violence-soaked news and entertainment.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to help members discern how they should view the depictions of the violence in the news and in popular culture.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Philippians 4:8-9 from a modern translation.

### *Meditation*

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

### *Reflection*

This is the second of three studies – begun with “Recovering from Moral Injury” and concluding with “Responding with Violence” – that focus on practical ways that individuals and congregations can respond faithfully to salient patterns of violence in our culture. Daniel Train finds layers of voyeurism, some obvious and others more subtle, in the ways we consume depictions of violence in cultural objects – the news, visual and literary arts, video games, etc. As members examine and critique each layer, consider how they point back toward a more self-critical, empathetic, and Christ-like engagement with violence in our culture.

### *Study Questions*

1. Daniel Train describes the voyeurs in terms of why they watch violence and how they are related to the suffering caused by that violence. First, regarding motive, Alypius is “self-serving” and “self-indulgent” because he watches the gruesome gladiatorial violence to satisfy his desire for distraction and entertainment; Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth are eager to use Partridge’s mayhem for their profit (writing a novel to entertain, or producing research to advance an academic career), or as a foil to showcase their own self-righteousness. Second, regarding their relationship to those who suffer the violence, Alypius is distant, seeing himself as (morally and socially) “‘above’ the spectacle,” and as “controlling” his relationship to its participants; Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth show little empathy for the townspeople, and make them and Singleton “abstract.” The voyeurs typically avoid self-examination of their motives and attitudes toward the sufferers (though, initially, Alypius has a twinge of conscience and feels shame); they accept without question that their viewing is all right.

Encourage members to discuss where violence appeals to them as entertainment, or as a foil for their own righteousness. Do they find themselves watching more violence or less? When does their watching bother them?

2. Form four small groups to discuss the insights regarding the “no garbage in” isolationist approach, the “all things are lawful” approach, the disguising the violence approach, and the distant studying approach. Ask the groups to give concrete examples of the approaches and consider how they are voyeuristic. Daniel Train suggests the second one is often a reaction (in society and, perhaps, in an individual’s life) against the limitations of the first approach. Are members tempted by more than one type of voyeurism? Have they migrated away from one approach and toward another? Does age and experience lead them toward a type of voyeurism? How has their “taste” for violence in news and popular culture changed over the years?
3. A “cross-shaped vision of the violence” does not avoid knowledge of the violence or of the suffering it causes. It empathizes with victims and does not stand aloof from their suffering. It does not adopt a self-righteous attitude that we are “above” the violence, or that it is perpetrated by or happens only to others, and so on.

Augustine and O’Connor do not tell stories of violence to entertain their readers, but to reveal how violence occurs and why we are drawn to watch it. They reveal how voyeurs do further violence to the victims. They engage in an examination of conscience, and invite their readers to do the same.

While their example does not yield a complete account of what Train calls a “cross-shaped vision,” it helpfully points away from the four approaches he criticizes. Invite the four groups formed above to reflect on how Augustine and O’Connor’s storytelling exposes and undermines the sort of voyeurism of violence they studied.

### *Departing Hymn*

“O Christ, You Did No Violence” is on pp. 43-45 of *Patterns of Violence*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.