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Aspects of the Christian approach to violence in society

A systematic theological approach

topics:
-   *Biblical aspects on violence*
-   *fundamental vs. contextual understanding of violence*
-   *a realistic and responsible use of violence*
-   *reduction of violence and reconciliation*

Violence seems to be on the increase all over the world: On our streets, in schools, between individuals and nations, parents and children, teachers and pupils. This has led to a public debate about how to understand and how to meet such phenomenons of violence. Shocking reports about the violence of young people in our country against foreigners, homeless, and disabled persons have shown that violence can also be a real threat to modern society.[1]

And there is another fear, which has been brought up in the international discussion on violence: Will the "cold war" of politics be replaced by a global battle of cultures in East and West, North and South, thus leading to a confrontation especially between the Euro-Atlantic and the Islamic cultures?[2]

Violence is becoming an important issue in the thoughts and beliefs of individual people, and the anxiety of violence is becoming a normal disposition. We know that brutal violence against others is often nurtured and accompanied by the violence of persuasive talk and strong arguments. It is also caused by distressing mental situations which arise from an incapacity to express feelings which are not allowed to be expressed or from an inability to listen carefully.[3] "Violence is the result of an illiteracy of the soul and the speechlessness of common sense", said Rita Süssmut, the president of the German parliament, in 1993.

Violence is everywhere, and it has been with us since the beginning of mankind. The diagnosis is not very controversial, but where is the cure if there is one? Some people have realised that there is a useful violence which fights evil, controls it or eradicates it. They are – rather simply – blamed as "Bellicists" (belligerents). Others have realized that all forms of violence are evil, because the practice of violence results in violence and where violence is sown, it is reaped. They are – again simplified – known as "Pacifists".

Violence shocks everyone, but strangely enough people are inclined to close their eyes to it. Political accusations sometimes have their rights but they don't touch the fundamental problem. The fundamental problem of violence is controversial, and therefore the types of violence are explained in different ways, and various solutions have been described. What must be considered when talking about violence in our society? Is it an abnormal behaviour of the individual, resulting from a distorted education? Is it a moral desert in the midst of our culture and society? Or is it rather an atavistic behaviour, cultivated with some difficulty? Is it the result of a disintegration of elementary social values? The decay of civilisation caused by the culture of consumerism which knows no moral standards?

In analysing violence we all tend to use eclectic approaches – and perhaps this is unavoidable, as the issue is so extremely complex. Christian comments on violence indeed take a share from all of these positions – although Christianity contains some quite remarkable traditions and approaches of *cultivating violence.*

II

Moreover, especially in the German language we have a problematic factual and lingual tradition in using the term violence (*"Gewalt"*). On the one hand, *Gewalt* means lawful power or rule, but on the other hand *Gewalt* can mean just the opposite of law and can be encountered by the principle of self-defence. In this way, the Prussian Common Law in 1794 allowed everyone to "combat violence with violence" (*"Gewalt mit Gewalt abzuwehren"*) if help from the Government came too late.[4] Notoriously, the term *Gewalt* cannot be defined accurately and, therefore, often leads to senseless discussions. In the German language the positive and negative aspects of violence/force are combined in one word (*Gewalt* as government, power, coercion), whereas the equivalent terms in English (violence) and French (force) more clearly refer to unlawful actions and methods destructive to the welfare of citizens.[5]

III

In Jewish and Christian theology both positions, 'Pacifism' and 'Bellicism', meet forcefully – but they have not led to a suppression of violence. The Old Testament describes experiences of violence from beginning to end, from Cain and Abel to the prophet Malachi. How does it deal with this experience? "Trust not in violence" (Ps 62:11) "God gives justice to those who suffer from violence" (Ps 146:7) "God is against those, who exercise violence and injustice" (Mal 3:5). But it also states: "Yours, Lord, is the majesty and violence" (I Chr. 29:11). "Yes, the lord God is coming with mighty power, and he will rule." (Is 40:10), and a little further on it is written: "He will tread violence as a potter tramples clay" (Is 41:25). In Joel 3:10 we find the words: "Melt your ploughshares into swords" – not just the well-known contradiction in Isaiah 2.

The insight that only God has the monopoly of power/violence causes problems to justifying violence exercised to human beings. To be truthful, there are many examples of terrible violence in the Old Testament (cf. the "Holy Wars") and these passages have not been rubbed out during the process of transmission of the Scriptures. The Old Testament does not deny the existence of violence, rather it admits that it is a problem. The story of Isaac in the Old Testament (Gen 22) not

being sacrificed is there to teach us that human violence can be superseded only by the presence of the power/violence of God. This is the reason why Israel, the people of God, is allowed to assert itself with *a legitimate form* of violence, even though the vision of a pilgrimage of all peoples to Zion envisages an eschatological end of all violence.

The Old Testament deals with the issue of violence in a way which ought to be of interest to people involved in Pastoral Care. Violence is not straightaway rejected, instead it is accepted as a problem. No therapeutic suggestions which deny the fact that the therapist himself is affected by the issue! And finally (and perhaps most importantly): Human violence has its effective counterpart in the *Almighty* God – not only in the *Loving* God.

One of the main aspects of the New Testament is the teaching of Jesus to his disciples: "I have been given all power (*Gewalt*) in heaven and earth" (Math 28:18). Consequently the disciples realise: "We have to fight the powerful rulers" (Eph 6:12) on the one hand, and "exercise neither violence nor injustice" (Luke 3:13) on the other – and all this must be lived in the pious consciousness that "the rulers have power (*Gewalt*) over us" (Rom 13:1)

The insight that Jesus holds the monopoly of power forbids *and* allows human power, and it does not hide the fact that we must live our faith in an world dominated by violence. Confronted with violence, we are required to differentiate. And the Sermon on the Mount, especially the commandment to "love our enemies" reminds us that the means to combat violence should not be borrowed from violence itself. In our fight against violence we should not allow ourselves to be infected by the virus of violence. Both in the Old and in the New Testament there is no denying that violence is real, but we are warned against overtaking it as if violence should be a theoretical and practical principle of history.

Christ says: "All power in heaven and earth belongs to *me*!" Therefore, Christians should not surrender to this real presence of violence; but they must not confuse their belief in the possibility of a world without violence with the claim that the ideal world without violence can be brought about by they themselves. There is still an 'eschatological reserve' for a world without violence, and Paul says very precisely that at the end *Christ* will destroy all ruling powers and violence – Christ, not *us*. (1 Cor 15: 24b)

So, this is the first important issue which we must mention when speaking of violence from a biblical viewpoint: Violence is a reality, an whoever emphatically denies it, is already a victim of violence because he must blot it out – thereby often treating himself or others violently. On the other hand, there is also a perspective of how to deal with violence: Violence should not exist, and whoever emphasizes only the reality and reason for it, is already a victim of it, because he blesses it.

Especially on the subject of violence, we are touching on the core of Christian belief: namely that we are living *in* this world like those who are not *of* this world, but who have hope *for* the world, which represents a surplus-value in comparison to all facts and values of this world. Christian hope for reality is *more* than realistic, and therefore it must be free to act – sometimes, and sometimes even categorically – *against* historical experiences and anthropological and psychological perceptions. If scientific anthropology would deduct the innate readiness to violence in human behaviour out of the genetic disposition of human beings, or out of the total amount of historical experiences, this could *not be ignored* as a perception of

human science. But even if this perception would be secured in general – which it is not – there is no reason why the Christian belief should readily *agree* with it, because Christian belief does not represent the total amount of human experiences in this world. Rather, it represents the insight that a person in the historical world can make *a new start*. According to Christian understanding, the pattern of history is not a cycle or circle but rather a line and arrow. History is open for the future, because the spirit of God interacts to break open the cycles of history and life circles. The circulation of violence in individual life-histories and in politics must not be *perpetuated* for ever, although they always *have been* present.

This brings the Christian belief into a difficult position when talking of violence. Let me put it this way: How should a Christian, whose aim in life is to control and avoid violence, relate to himself as a human being, who is constantly entangled with violence he cannot avoid? The Christian way of conquering violence, therefore, is always the way of conquering one's own violence and not only being aware of violence in *other* people.

One's own pacifism does not solve the problem of violence – and the violence of other people is disturbing to Christian pacifism. A person who chooses to live a peaceful life is confronted by the violence of other people, who violently take advantage of Christian pacifism – and to accept violence as a means of combating it conflicts with the basic Christian belief that it should not exist. Christian theology had to find a theoretical way of dealing with both of these problems, and after hundreds of years of debating this task is still unfinished. And some people believe that the problem of violence cannot be solved theoretically at all, but has to be discussed in every generation anew. Then, what are the leading theological viewpoints in this discussion?

IV

In the history of theological ethical discussions about violence we can find, roughly speaking, two main lines of argument:

(1) From the times of the first Christians to the Reformation and until the present day, the issue of violence was discussed in a fundamental way: Should violence exist or not?

(2) Especially in the realm of the Ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches (WCC) the problem of violence is discussed in a functional and contextual perspective: In fact, the Christian attitude to violence has changed throughout history, and still is changing. Doesn't this show how the attitude to violence is influenced by social-political structures? Can there really be one single ethical solution for this problem – for North and South and West and East alike, for men and women alike, for those at the bottom of the ladder or those at the top alike, for oppressors and the oppressed alike?

Reference to (1) – the fundamental debate on violence: Generally, Christians agree (and the Jews do, too) that individual self-willed violence should be rejected and that (as the Theological Declaration of Barmen has put it) "in the as yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace; it fulfils this task by means of the threat and exercise of force (*"Gewalt"*), according to the measure of human judgement and human ability." Especially in the German-Lutheran tradition there is the general conception that some force/violence (*Gewalt*) is necessary for com-

communal life, but it can and must be cultivated or civilised by the state. Beside this more Lutheran tradition, there is a more Calvinistic West-European tradition which either emphasizes the right of resistance of the individual against the authorities of the state (cf. the theologian Theodor Beza) or which tries to minimise state power through a separation of powers (cf. Montesquieu) or which desires to limit state power by including a guarantee of inalienable pre-governmental human rights (cf. John Locke). Both of these approaches were – and still are – strongly disapproved of by the peace movements and religious Pacifists. These people, understanding themselves as diligent followers of Christ, reject violence of any kind even for the best of purposes. This is the position of the so-called historical "Peace Churches" like the Mennonites and the Quakers. It seems that their position gains more and more acceptance in Christianity today.

Reference to (2) – the functional/contextual debate on violence: Today, more and more people support the thesis that it is important to know in which situation biblical statements about violence are read. No theological and ethical decision on violence is possible apart from a certain context! Two examples: In the churches of old, as soon as Christians took over official positions, they also got involved in cases of force/violence. This led to a tendency to ignore, more or less, the critical passages of the Gospel about violence. In the time after the second World War the conception grew, especially in the churches of the so-called Third World, that there may be common ethical principles, but that these have to be adapted anew in every specific situation. This should apply to the Liberation Movements as well as to the New Social Movement in old Europe, to Feminism and to parts of the Peace Movement.

Important is: Both the "fundamental debate" and the "functional debate" on violence have global and universal as well as a local and individual implications. If violence is everywhere, the solution must be sought on a global basis, even though there are only individual and local starting points at our disposal. What solutions of violence, therefore, do Christians have?

V

Our opinion about violence depends strongly on what sort of understanding of reality we, as Christians, have. And our understanding of reality is a consequence of our conception of the beginning, the development and the end of human history. To put it theologically: Our thinking about creation, about mankind and about our hope for the future is decisive in our attitude towards the problem of violence. Here, two basic models have been found worth considering in Protestant theology, and both have their implications with political and social scientific sides.

The "Realism of Creation"

Especially in the Lutheran tradition, the understanding of Creation and of Human Sin has led to the conception of a barbaric core in the human culture against which barricades must be built up, and which must be suppressed forcefully, so that humans will not harm each other. The forceful suppression of evil is the central point in this conception, and the political counterpart can be found in a conservatism, whose main political achievement lies in stressing the fact that humans have a potential for aggression which will stop at nothing, and which must be constantly kept "under control" – even by use of violence. Politically, this theo-

retical model manifests itself quite often in a pessimism that is critical towards progress. The utopia of a society without violence seems, from this point of view, to be a naive denial of the human character, that entered history in the fatal relationship of Cain and Abel. Even among people, who have accepted the Christian message, the power of evil can be kept low for a limited period only. Therefore, the use of power will follow human culture until its eschatological end.

The "Realism of Reconciliation"

In contrast to this we have a Christologically orientated human image, whose understanding is guided by the reality of the reconciliation of god with his people. Though violence is not denied as a part of this world, it can be seen in a quite different perspective. Where in the realism of creation evil (violence) can, at best, be kept under control the realism of reconciliation reflects on a world which is already reconciled through Christ. In this world which has been reconciled through Christ evil, in the form of violence, has been conquered in such a way that steps can be taken to practise non-violence to a certain extent – of course, in the knowledge that it is Jesus Christ who will in the end put a stop to all violence (1 Cor 15:24). This position favours a kind of Pacifism, which is practised not "principally" but "responsibly", that means: without disregarding the realities of the world. The *reduction of violence* would be the general rule of such a Pacifism, not the intention to overcome it completely. To keep track of violence, getting to the roots of it, to develop case studies and models to explain the source of violence, to help one another in our common readiness for violence and not to talk about it as if it was only something that affects others – this, indeed, is what is needed in the face of our crumbling moral standards.

VI

The Christian belief encourages such a *reduction of violence* in all realms of life. But from sociological and psychological studies we know, how difficult it is to put an end to violent relationships. Such relationships have a tendency to repeat again and again their internal violent structure – as Thea Bauriedl explains in a very interesting book.[6] Only a very conscious way of dealing with violence will be able to overcome this "chain reaction of violence". Here the Christian faith has a fundamental contribution to offer: A Christian knows that, through faith in God, he/she lives by a *salutary disruption* of his/her relationships to this world; he/she lives by reconciliation and God's will to be with him/her. He/she lives in opposition to the "fear of nearness" amongst humans.

In my opinion, the following results of my reflections are of importance for pastoral counselling:

(1) The Christian tradition compels us to discern the different forms of violence: Power is not just violence, ruling is not simply suppressing, there are positive and negative aspects to violence that must be differentiated.

(2) In order to deal with violence, pastoral counselling must accept it as a real phenomenon of human culture and society – as it is shown in the biblical tradition. At the same time, violence must never be principally accepted. Working for justice, freedom and peace is the *opus proprium* of Christians, the responsible use of violence is the *opus alienum*, which in turn must be derived from and must be

legitimised in front of this *opus proprium*. Therefore, the Theological Declaration of Barmen says that the State performs its duties "by means of threat and exercise of force" and not "by threat and exercise of force", because its *opus proprium* is to "provide for justice and peace".

(3) After the destruction of political "blocs" all over the world, we are no longer forced to side with one of the antagonistic parties. That means that we have a chance to get rid of our established *images of enemies*, and we should train our alertness to detect all new images of enemies wherever they are being formed. Indeed, we have the chance to expose in a self-critical manner the individual and social reasons, why people are infected by violence. This is especially important with regard to the many mechanisms of legitimising violence in competitive political groups. To initiate and to encourage contacts and meetings between such groups should be an excellent task for the Protestant church. Here counselling is of ultimate importance, because it enables individuals to soften their own stiff self-images.

(4) Theology and counselling should also reflect on the conditions which, in fact, allow them to exist. Unfortunately, in the Protestant theology in Germany there is still a certain "deficiency in democracy", caused by old antidemocratic ideas of "law and order" on the one hand and by utopian ideas of freedom on the other . Democracy is an open process. It must be secured by social institutions (which constantly have to beg for acceptance), and it relies on certain human traditions which provide for the ethical potential of democracy. A church in the democracy must care for those cultural traditions, which make democracy possible at all. Tolerance, sympathy, friendliness, politeness are some "pillars of orientation" for a democratic culture. Without it, the pastoral counselling of the Protestant church would be much more difficult.

Notes

1 On the new problems of violence among youth see (for the German context) the excellent book of Eisenberg /Gronemeyer (1993).
2 The contemporary debate on cultural violence is heavily influenced by Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilisations*. For a lucid critique see the study of Thomas Meyer (1997).
3 Cf. Michael Strauß (1993), p. 572.
4 Wolfgang Lienemann (1989), p. 164.
5 Ibid., p. 165.
6 Thea Bauriedl (1993), p. 116.

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