

# **GOD'S VIOLENT WORLD**

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In January two years ago I was invited to preach in the theological department of Durham University. Visiting preachers were assigned passages from the book of Judges. The Department had given me chapter 4, the story of Barak and of how Sisera, the enemy, commander was killed by Jael who drove a tent peg through his head. I had to do some hard thinking about violence. An invitation to give a lecture in Gillingham on 'Killing in the name of God' has been a further incentive.

## **WHERE DOES VIOLENCE COME FROM?**

Traditionally Christians have pointed to the Adam and Eve story and argued that violence is the consequence of their disobedience. Violence began with the primal couple in Eden and has subsequently spread like a disease through the whole human race. Violence can emerge from our inner dark side. It exists in all of us. This is something which many in the 'soft south' of England find distasteful.

We do not live on the edge of an abyss like the people of Syria. This is because we are the fortunate inheritors of the Enlightenment Tradition of reason, democracy and education. This has not always been so. Watching Shakespeare's presentation of the Wars of the Roses reminded me that we too have had our violent times of anarchy. We have had our own wars of religion with their tortures, violations and burnings. Our island's history contains stories of atrocity and violence

spawned by the toxic mix of power, religion and politics.

What about original righteousness? Are we not made in the image of God?<sup>1</sup> I used to believe that the ‘divine image’ within us could not be totally erased. That was before I was in Sri Lanka during their civil war, before I listened first hand to the story of a black woman in Soweto, before I visited Kosovo with the army during my Presidency, before I stood in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and last year I visited Ypres. None of us really know how we would respond in a situation of extreme trauma or unremitting degradation. How much do we really know about ourselves? We human beings have a built-in propensity to deceive ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

Primal, uncontrollable rage can explode from our inner depths when we are subjected to conditions of severe trauma. It can happen when we least expect it. Psalm 137 ‘By the waters of Babylon’ ends with the expressed wish to smash babies against a rock. Then at the end of the beautiful Psalm 139 which speaks of God’s wonder and love we have the words ‘O that you would kill the wicked O God’. We humans are not what we imagine ourselves to be.

## **IS RELIGION THE ROOT OF VIOLENCE?**

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<sup>1</sup> I remember a commander from the SAS addressing a group of Forces Chaplains. He was asked what would happen in London if all the utilities and electrical systems in the world collapsed. He predicted that within a month chaos and anarchy would reign. The thugs and criminal gangs would seize control. If order was to be restored they would have to be killed. That was the job of the SAS.

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Augustine*. Bloomsbury, 2016. p.172f.

Richard Dawkins has argued that it is. There is certainly no denying that religion can be a force for evil, but it can also be a force for good. Over and against Dawkins one has only to look at the French revolution or the horrors of the Russian Gulags to see that atheism spawns violence.

Rene Girard,<sup>3</sup> the French historian, anthropologist and philosopher (b.1923), makes the opposite case arguing that it is violence which has given rise to religion. He uses the story of Cain and Abel to argue that violence arises when humans compete in their pursuit of a single goal. Mutual rivalry when driven by ambition and desire can become so intense that the one may attempt to totally eliminate the other. Cain according to Girard was not only the first murderer but the founder of the urban culture of violence (Gen 4:17). Violence spawns more and more violence which runs on into future generations.

Why doesn't violence escalate to such a level that we human beings destroy ourselves? It is the religious ritual of 'scapegoat' which prevents this. Communities transfer their hostilities on to victims who are chosen because they are different, for example lepers, the disabled, women, foreigners and always the Jews. Religion does not give rise to violence rather violence gives rise to religion.

### **WHAT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND GOD?**

What is religion: 'It is a cultural system of beliefs, behaviours and practices which attempts to relate human society to some

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<sup>3</sup> Rene Girard, *I see Satan Fall like Lightning*, p.24f.

ultimate existence, superhuman or otherwise.’ Religions invariably create gods both spiritual and materialistic. According to Jonathan Sacks ‘the crimes of religion have one thing in common; they involve making God in our image instead of letting God make us in his.’<sup>4</sup>

The very word ‘God’ suggests an object, something which can be defined and examined. The Old Testament word for ‘God’ as far as grammar is concerned is not a noun but a verb which could translated as ‘I am’ or ‘I will be’, or ‘I am becoming.’<sup>5</sup> God is a dynamic, transcendent, unknowable mystery. Every attempt to define God is like trying to catch the waves of the sea with a fishing net. To identify God with any religion steers close to idolatry.

The Christian religion (like all the other faiths) has been further shaped over the centuries by cultural forces, power struggles, political ideologies, philosophical systems, patriarchal oppression, racism and sexism.<sup>6</sup> Thus as Karl Barth reminds us ‘religion can be a form of unbelief’.<sup>7</sup>

This is Paul’s contention in Romans 1.18-26 where he argues that human beings keep creating their own understandings of the invisible God. When they do this they ‘exchange truth for a lie’ and this leads inevitably to a moral disintegration in which envy, murder, strife and deceit come to be regarded as accepted practices of behaviour.

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Not in his Name* H&S 2015, p.265.

<sup>5</sup> Janet Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, OUP 2007, p.14.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 1/2*, T & T Clark, p.303.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 1/2*, T & T Clark, p.303.

I conclude therefore that violence in our world arises from a toxic mix of ideology, politics, religion and power. Violence is a human creation and a human disease. God did not make violence. In the act of creation the Spirit brooded over the dark waters of chaos and the Word spoke light, order form and love into the very fabric of the world <sup>8</sup> and declared it to be good.

### **DOES GOD THEREFORE CARRY NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE VIOLENCE WHICH EXISTS IN OUR WORLD?**

John Roth <sup>9</sup> argues that God must bear his share of the responsibility for the existence of evil because ‘he is the one who ultimately sets the boundaries in which we live and move and have our being’. In the very act of creating the universe, God’s sacrificial self-limitation is necessary in the bestowal of his gift of freedom upon creation. What if God’s self-restraint is excessive; permitting the emergence of the wild and unrestrained?

Second, the first creation story assumes the presence of the wild watery forces of chaos which was later to flood the earth (Gen.1.1). Although tamed ‘they never lose their unpredictable power to upset the order and harmony of creation’. Indeed it has been suggested that chaos exists because of the failure of God’s previous attempts at creating. Mess and creativity belong together as any imaginative artist will tell you. But what is the nature of ‘the mess’ out of which God creates? How toxic is it?

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<sup>8</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Augustine*. Ibid. P.72f.

<sup>9</sup> John Roth, ‘A Theology of Protest’, in Stephen Davis (ed.), *Encountering Evil*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981, p.11.

A third way of looking at this puzzle is to imagine God creating in the youthful exuberance of play, but such are the explosive energies of Spirit that the chaotic is released alongside the symbiotic. However one tries to explain it, there is tragedy here! Wheat and tares are mysteriously sown into the very structure of this violent universe in such proportions that evil is able to thrive more rapidly than goodness. I can only conclude that God has NOT created the best of all possible worlds. What therefore does God do?

God in his grace ‘chooses’ to hold himself accountable for the tragedies of creation. He does not wish to exclude himself or excuse himself from responsibility. For love’s sake he embraces even the failed responsibility of human beings. By making himself accountable and entering our flawed existence in Christ he reveals his heart of grace. In Karl Barth’s words ‘God becomes the Judge who is Judged in our place...He makes his own the being of man under the curse of contradiction, but in order to do away with it as He suffers it.’<sup>10</sup> He acts as Lord over this contradiction even as He subjects Himself to it.’<sup>11</sup> It is because he freely and graciously takes to himself the ultimate responsibility for everything that we can say with Job, ‘Though he slay me yet will I trust him (Job.13.15).’

Sacrifice and pain-love are rooted in the heart of God who makes Jesus Christ the great scapegoat of all history. This however must not be viewed as ‘divine child abuse’. This

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, T & T Clark, p.222.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, T & T Clark, p.185.

critique is only valid if we have a static view of Trinity. Within a 'dynamic' Trinity each person within the God-head shares totally in the life of the other. All feel the joy and all feel the pain. On the cross God in Christ breaks the cycles of violence by taking 'the blame'. God has NOT YET created the 'best of all possible world' but is in the process of doing so. Through this atoning act the sum-total of all sin, wickedness and violence is absorbed and swallowed up within the Trinity itself, thus ensuring that the final act of recreation and liberation can and will take place. With the outpouring of the Spirit we are gathered up into a partnership with God. God's life and ours are bound together in a covenant relationship. His mission and our mission are one of the same. The redemption of all things is the end and miracles of grace become means.

#### WHAT ARE THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THIS FOR US?

Paul has been wrongly blamed for distorting the message of Jesus.<sup>12</sup> We forget however that he was once a man of violence before he became a passionate advocate of love, reconciliation and peace. Paul deepened and extended the ethic of Jesus and initiated a world mission to end all forms of discrimination between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free.

In Romans 12, after his exhortations to love and be patient in suffering, he commands 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave room for the wrath of God for it is written 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay' says the

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<sup>12</sup> Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul*, SPCK. 2015.

Lord. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if thirsty, give them something to drink.’ Christians in the Liberal Enlightenment Tradition find the word ‘wrath’ unpalatable. This is because we understand ‘wrath’ as anger or vindictive indignation, uncontrollable rage, or destructive vengeance. God’s wrath bears no resemblance to anything human. I have argued elsewhere that divine wrath is the shadow side of God’s pain-love<sup>13</sup>.

...hands us over to become the playthings of the false gods and the delusions we have embraced (Rom 1:24-25). In one sense the dark powers are God’s instruments of justice, in another they are his enemies, since they violate his rule and deface his image.<sup>14</sup>

When we love our enemies ‘we heap burning coals on their heads’ Those who commit violent actions open themselves up to being consumed in the fires of their own violence. There is a further irony since some are unable to limit their own capacity for destruction and turn on his own people thus sabotaging the very ideology which drive them. In Girard words ‘Satan is no longer able to limit his capacity for destruction. Satan in destroying his own kingdom he will destroy himself.’<sup>15</sup>

Many in the West rejoice at the passing of religion. I have argued that it is not religion which creates violence but rather the other way

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<sup>13</sup> I draw on the work of the Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori. See my *The Wrath of God Satisfied? Atonement in a Violent Age*, WIPF & STOCK, 2012. p.101f.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Boersma, *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*, Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Girard, *ibid*, p.142.

round. Violence is a feature of humanity. The West's current fantasy that secularism can replace religion has led to the return of religion in its most belligerent form.

I began this lecture by commenting on the challenge of the book of Judges. Was there any message of hope there? The hope lies beyond in the story which follows. In the tiny book of Ruth there are deaths but no violence. It is story of generosity and hospitality to the outsider. It tells us how gracious acts can plant the seeds of hope for future generations so that one day killing in the name of God will be replaced by loving in the name of God.