Violence within the church

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When my eight-year-old son noted my bedtime reading of René Girard's *Violence and the sacred* – or in Dutch: God and violence [1] – he commented that he found the title nonsensical. These words had nothing to do with one another and to him it seemed irrational to write an entire book on the subject. I must have raised him properly to come to this judgment, as it is quite in line with the usual comments I get when I am preaching, lecturing, or writing on such issues. To many members of the Christian community it seems self-evident that the terms 'God' or 'sacred' and 'violence' are mutually exclusive. At this conference however, we discover that it is actually much more ambiguous. My contribution will lie in the exploration of congregations' responses to violence in their midst and of the question whether the religious community as such is of a violent nature.

I have chosen not to give a clear-cut definition of violence. Identifying an act as violent is more than categorizing something. It is also a social construction in which moral judgment and social powers are expressed. There is no neutral or objective description of violence. The concept at least indicates the exertion of force and the infliction of harm.

My starting point will be in the case of sexual violence in a Christian congregation. From there I will move to the policy discussions around sexual violence to explore the consequences of not acknowledging the theological ambiguity of violence. Then I will challenge the idyllic concept of the religious congregation by discussing the way churches deal with 'the stranger'. Finally I will claim that the struggle against violence demands the awareness that violence is an essential feature of the congregation, that is: of our religion and of ourselves.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE CONGREGATION

Over the years, I have been involved in several congregations confronted with sexual violence in their midst. In a sense, I became more and more disinterested in the sexual dimension and instead intrigued by the dynamics of violence and power. Based on this experience and the unfortunately very limited literature,

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1. Girard, R.N. (1993) *God en geweld. Over de oorsprong van mens en cultuur.* Tielt. (transl. M. Perquy). Orig.: La Violence et le Sacré. Paris 1972. English translation by P. Gregory: Violence and the sacred. Baltimore 1977 / London 1995.

together with Alexander Veerman I wrote a pastoral guide for such congregations.[2] We described four stages in the process that have been proven insightful in coaching and consultancy.[3]

The first stage we called 'Silence before the storm'. It is the period in which sexual violence is present, but not manifest for the community. Although some members may be aware of the wrongdoings, there is no collective knowledge. This stage is particularly important for two reasons. First, it is the situation in which most congregations find themselves. Given the prevalence of violence – domestic, sexual, and otherwise – there is probably not a single congregation without violence. Nevertheless, instead of taking the presence of violence as the factual or normal situation, we indulge in the illusion that violence is the exception and that the calm waters of this first stage define normalcy. Second, this first stage provides the infrastructure of power dynamics, procedures, group identity, and so on. Whatever happens in the subsequent stages depends on or responds to this substratum. For church leaders, the task in this stage consists of prevention and information, providing an atmosphere in which power, sexuality, and violence can be discussed. If church leaders are aware of an actual situation of sexual violence, their main choice is whether or not to disclose this to the congregation. Obviously, this will depend on the particularities of the case, but in light of the topic of our conference, it is worth noting that disclosure may be a new act of violence toward the victim, overruling her or his wishes. The conflict between church leaders and alleged perpetrators is sometimes fierce, and the claimed victim often falls between two stools. The response to violence thus may be violent itself.

The second stage in this process we named 'All hell breaks loose'. Following the discovery of a case of sexual violence in the congregation, usually chaos erupts. There may be emotional or even violent meetings of the congregation or the church council, disputes and reproaches. The claimed victim may become the scapegoat of the community, or the alleged perpetrator may become the object of an unbearable witch-hunt. Many voices express the wish to return to the state of innocence or ignorance, back to the silence before the storm. Underlying conflicts may be played out and latent contrasts become manifest like fault lines between tectonic plates becoming visible in an earthquake. These conflicts about finances, ministers, liturgy, and the like easily become the focus of attention. For church leaders, the main task in this stage is to facilitate the expression of emotions, deescalate the conflict, and stimulate the collective understanding of the problem. Fierce and violent attacks – usually verbal – must not be responded to with counter-violence. Non-violent leadership is determined by steadfastness, transparency, equity, and dedication to justice.

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2. Ganzevoort, R.R. & Veerman, A.L. (2000) *Geschonden lichaam. Pastorale gids voor gemeenten die geconfronteerd worden met seksueel geweld.* Zoetermeer.
3. Adapted from Graham, L.K. (1992) *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds. A Psychosystems Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling.* Nashville.

The third stage is one of 'Broken relations'. Usually polarization emerges in which three fundamental perspectives come to the fore: victim, perpetrator, and bystander. Each member or group within the congregation pledges loyalty to one of these perspectives. The victim and those showing solidarity with the victim struggle for recognition and satisfaction, sometimes to the point of revenge. Their world is defined by good and evil in a form of what psychology calls 'splitting'. They challenge the congregation, its council, and its members to take a stand. The perpetrator and his or her sympathizers often claim acquittal – or forgiveness – and rehabilitation. Their world is defined by questioned identities and by doubt on the truth claims made. It is a world in which manipulation and overt attacks become the principal means. The bystanders finally come in many roles: spectators assuming neutrality, judges passing verdict, or saviors helping the victim or the perpetrator. The risk of this stage is that polarization backlashes into chaos, and the task for church leaders is to enhance communication through perspective-taking and to leave room for judgment, preferably by some legal authority.

The fourth stage is Recovery and rebuilding perspective for the future. Some may be tempted to return to the first stage, back to normal as it were. Such a strategy however would not acknowledge the radical impact of violence, nor the true meaning of hope that does not deny evil but rather builds on a future in which evil is overcome. This is the stage in which the congregation is faced with the most fundamental questions: What does it mean for us as a community that violence could take place in our midst? How can we understand our congregation as a Christian community and live with the fact that in response to this violence we ourselves have become infected with anger, violence, possibly hate? How can we become a new community, in which our violent tendencies are brought to light and in which our longing for peace and justice will prevail? These questions, as I will elaborate in a moment, invoke the critical understanding that violence belongs to the nature of the religious community. For now we need to note that the four stages reflect a spiral of violence and counter-violence. The response to violence relies upon a religious and/or legal system, upon a structure of power that allows the congregation to confront the perpetrator and control the violence. But in doing so, violence is used. In a Girardian sense, there is no means to restrain violence but violence itself.

POLICY AND THEOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY

It is, however, precisely the fundamental and self-critical question that tends to be obscured or rejected. When the material of our pastoral guide served in a report to the 1999 synod of the Uniting Protestant Churches in the Netherlands, there was unanimous acclaim for the statement that 'sexual abuse is sin: evil in the eyes of God and injustice toward the neighbor.' Likewise, it was declared that 'the church should choose plainly for the victims of sexual abuse.' Without denying the significance of these statements, especially for those victims that felt betrayed by the church, I did not feel comfortable with it. Firstly, at the time the report was

discussed by the synod, it would have been politically incorrect to take a different stand. In that respect, the unanimous vote reflected social and political pressure rather than prophetic courage. Secondly, the resolution included a series of policy decisions that would consume time and money. I doubted the availability by then, and at present it seems clear that most of these decisions will not materialize. Thirdly, the main debate at the synod as well as in other churches responding to the report was neither about the ethical appraisal of sexual abuse, nor about the strategic steps to be taken. It was about the fundamental question whether or not the Christian tradition and its biblical sources are prone to be misunderstood or manipulated, are characterized by ambiguity when it comes to violence and sexual abuse, and therefore need to be investigated critically to come to a deeper understanding of the pitfalls and risks of Christianity and of the Bible.

The exact same question came up in response to the horrors of the Second World War. Theology after Auschwitz became some sort of technical term to refer to a newly gained problematic self-conscience.[4] The churches' attitude toward the Shoah turned out not to be just one of impotence, but a very muddled one of resistance, denial, and complicity. Obviously, the memory of resistance was honored, denial and impotence were painfully accepted, but the idea of Christian complicity received fierce opposition.

This opposition also defines the debate concerning sexual violence in the church. Ample illustration can be found in the Roman-Catholic world, both in bishops' actions following the disclosure of sexual abuse by priests, and in the responses to these actions. Although the hierarchical structure is different from the protestant churches, the fundamental issues seem the same. For that reason I will remain with my protestant example. The 1999 resolution I mentioned earlier does include a decision to study the effects of central theological concepts like forgiveness and to enhance linguistic sensitivity in worship. It also includes the recognition that the churches' actions have often been unclear and not alert. All this however falls in the perspective of the bystander and does not acknowledge possible complicity. Responsibility is taken for adequate response to violence, not for violence itself. There is indirect recognition of a possible relation between the Christian tradition and incest, but a connection to the bible is repudiated as misuse.

Ethically correct as it may be to stress that justice and liberation are the biblical keywords, it stops short of understanding the theological ambiguity of violence. The prevailing view of violence is that it is an unexpected intrusion into the church. Violence in this view is not something inherent to the congregation, the Christian tradition, or the Bible, but alien. If it occurs, it has to be countered with clarity and vigor. Violence thus is characteristic of the enemy. In fact, labeling some act as violent usually implies moral judgment and condemnation. This

4. Jansen, H. (1982-1985) *Christelijke Theologie na Auschwitz*. Zoetermeer. Petersen, B. (1996) *Theologie nach Auschwitz. Jüdische und christliche Versuche einer Antwort*. Berlin. Fasching, D.J. (1992) *Narrative Theology after Auschwitz. From Alienation to Ethics*. Minneapolis.

austerity in response to violence does not allow scrutinizing one's own violent nature.

It is not hard to imagine that the unwillingness to face the violence within correlates with the overlooking of the violence in God. It is taken for granted that God is non-violent, that He is on the side of the victimized and the poor and that His efforts and calling are directed toward the realization of the Kingdom of Heaven in which the violent and powerful are dethroned. It is not difficult to find biblical words to phrase this God-image, but one should bear in mind that the contrasting image of the violent God also has its biblical roots. From the arbitrary rejection of Cain's offering through the bridegroom of blood and the killing of the Amalekites to the death of Ananias and Sapphira and the seven bowls of wrath[5], there is a returning unsettlement grounded in the experience or the stories of a God that is excessively violent. This dark side of God, the mysterium tremendum, does not fit in with our present-day understandings of the world or of our Christian tradition. Mainstream Christianity has developed an idyllic picture of humans of good will at ease with a benign God. Evil is usually limited to contingency, or located outside as in Pentecostal views of spiritual war or liberationist approaches to oppression.

THE STRANGER AND THE CONGREGATION

This idyllic view is exposed as an illusion when the stranger appears. Exploring this theme helps us to move from an understanding of our responses to violence to insight in our complicity to violence. A telling example, it seems to me, is found in the gay or lesbian person, but the same confrontation occurs with the refugees or even in the ecumenical encounters. Both victim and perpetrator of my earlier example can also become the stranger in a community, which is evident from expressions like scapegoat or witch-hunt. Such terms indicate that a person is expelled from the community. The gay or lesbian person, however, is in some sense a stranger par excellence, because his or her belonging to a minority group remains invisible up to the day that it is disclosed. Whereas most members of minority groups are raised within their own subculture, the gay or lesbian person is raised in a world to which he or she is a stranger. For congregations then, the coming out of a gay or lesbian member is a confrontation with the stranger.[6] The importance of this confrontation is clear from the recent debates around same-sex marriages. This debate should be marginal if we take into account that in a congregation there will only be a few gay and lesbian persons, and that there is not more than a thread of biblical or doctrinal evidence against homosexuality. Yet discussing same-sex marriages revives the dispute on the acceptance of homosexuality.

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5. Genesis 4:5; Exodus 4:24-26; Exodus 17:14-16; Acts 5:1-11; Revelation 16.
6. Vasey, M. (1995) *Strangers and Friends.* London.

I would suggest that the reason for this be found in what is commonly known as homophobia. The term may not be psychologically correct, because most people expressing it do not suffer from phobic reactions in a technical sense. Homophobia as I would define it is a form of cultural violence to strangeness. In an insightful piece of research, the Australian health sociologist David Plummer investigated the development of homophobia in gay and straight young men.[7] He found that homophobia is not primarily about sexuality. Instead it serves to define the ideas of self and not-self, difference and otherness in the formation of male identities. Derogatory terms like poofter are used early on simply to describe those different in whatever respect. Although for those with an established gay identity the terms may become proudly carried nicknames, their intended effect is to straighten out the deviant young man and turn him into 'one of the boys'.

The same procedure characterizes the ecclesial debates on homosexuality. In many churches it is no longer seen as evil or sinful in itself, although even in mainstream churches a considerable minority still condemns homosexual acts. Official tolerance does not coincide with full acceptance in congregations. Instead one commonly finds overt hostility or masked rejection. This rejection is present for example in the recurring questions about the pathological origins of homosexuality. If someone turns out to be gay or lesbian, apparently something went wrong. When I gave a lecture in a relatively liberal congregation on the blessing of same-sex marriages, one man commented: 'you forgot to tell that it is a perversion'. It is this type of hostility that brought a young man I counseled to the conclusion: 'I don't go to church because God doesn't want me anyway'.

Homophobia then is an act of sexual violence that goes unnoticed because large groups in the Christian community endorse it. I am not speaking of fundamentalist hate-ridden expressions like www.godhatesfags.com but of ordinary congregations struggling with strangeness. The common response to gay and lesbian persons is at odds with our self-understanding as liberal and tolerant churches. It begs the question whether violence is inherent to the life of a religious community. The exploration of this question involves two dimensions: the intersection of religion and violence, and the intersection of community and violence.

ESSENTIAL VIOLENCE

In his study of violence and the sacred, Girard rejects the common interpretation that the sacred is based in the sexual and instead proposes a close connection between the sacred and violence. This newer perspective parallels the recent view of sexual violence as being primarily violence and only secondarily sexual. It also parallels a shift in common moral thinking in the church that has moved from an excessive attention for the crossing of sexual rules to a more liberal focus on the principle of not infringing harm. Girard speaks of 'essential violence' that hides

7. Plummer, D. (1999) *One of the Boys. Masculinity, Homophobia, and Modern Manhood.* New York.

behind religion and appears in a mystified form in the category of sacrifice. Ritual sacrifice, as he describes it, aims at diverting vengeance and thus at breaking the vicious circle of violence. For that purpose, it employs the precise means of the original violence: blood and killing. All the methods that cultural innovation has yielded serve to divert or mitigate this vengeance. To the degree that they become more effective, they obscure the fact that they themselves are forms of vengeance. The most successful in this respect is the legal system as we know it today. The abolition of the death penalty then may be seen as the final obscuration of the violence inherent to the system. Likewise, the religious system in its present-day Christian form obscures this essential violence by coining a God image that is free of violence and yet promises that violence will be eradicated.

As an eschatological vision, this God image is very appealing. As a symbol for Christian life in the present, however, it seems more like a masquerade. In the end, the only way out of the circle of violence is indeed the radical refusal to participate. In fact, the Gospel of the resurrection can be read as a divine rejection of the cult of sacrifice and thus as a way out of the circle of violence, just as Abraham's not sacrificing Isaac can be read as free obedience.[8] The book of Revelation, however, aptly describes the coming of the new Jerusalem only after the last judgment. This seems consistent with the understanding that in the present era violence will remain part of our reality, even when we seek ways to end it. We therefore need an understanding of religion – and of God – that acknowledges the dialectics of violence rather than foster an illusionary and one-sided God-is-love ideology. Such a real-life dialectical theology might be better suited for the void we experience in God-talk in a post-secular and violent world.

In understanding these complex relations, perspective is crucial. The three fundamental perspectives of victim, perpetrator and bystander can also be applied to the role of God. God can function in our theologies as the victim of human violence, as an ominous and violent entity, or as the bystander: judge, helper, or savior. Each role-attribution implies specific perspectives and interests of the believer or the theologian. Each situation demands thorough analysis to come to an adequate role-attribution.

The second connection I mentioned lies between the community and violence. It is a well-known sociological fact that group identity is built on the difference between inside and outside. Therefore, any group – or congregation for that matter – endeavors to increase inside conformity and decrease the similarity with the outside. Successful congregations have a clear boundary and some sense of exclusivism.[9] The congregation always demands a minimum of exclusive dedication. Non-exclusive religious organizations can offer religious services, but they are not capable of creating a group or congregation. The exclusive

8. Hinkelammert, F. (1989) *Der Glaube Abrahams und der Oedipus des Westens. Opfermythen im christlichen Abendland*. Münster.
9. Stark, R. (1998) *De eerste eeuwen. Een sociologische visie op het ontstaan van het christendom*. Baarn. (Orig.: *The Rise of Christianity. A Sociologist Reconsiders History*. Princeton 1996)

organization, in contrast, has more to offer to its participants in terms of plausibility and validated religious experience and behavior.

This exclusivism – especially in a pluralist context – gives rise to conflicts. It may be labeled violent precisely because it forces its members to conform and to bring sacrifices: material offerings, intellectual adaptation, and a restraint of the freedom to speak or act. The religious community invokes divine powers to achieve this and the resistance to this force equals resistance to God. At the same time, the encounter with the outside or with other religious groups represents a conflict of truth claims, a conflict of gods so to speak. If group identity is to be maintained, violence can hardly be avoided. It may come in the form of aggressive evangelization or isolation. It may also present itself as the paternalizing reinterpretation of the other as the same, for example when non-religious persons are colonized as being religious after all or when the God of another religion is remodeled to become another manifestation of our God. True dialogue, as we all know, is hard and dangerous work that demands the shift of perspectives as well as the understanding that the other will always be other and the insight that we are strangers as well.[10]

The confrontation with violence within the congregation and the violent responses to the stranger thus should not be understood as incomprehensible excesses. They are, I would claim, indicators of the fundamental and perennial dialectics between essential violence and the efforts to stop it. The Christian tradition lends voice to the human longing for a non-violent life, but also to the equally human temptation of revenge. These conflicting voices are not only found in the sources of our tradition, they are present where two or three meet – even in the name of Jesus.

Is there a solution? Perhaps we should rest with the eschatological promise, the Kingdom of God that is utterly different in that it resolves the fundamental condition we are in. But in doing so we cannot escape our vocation to live up to this promise. We are called to reflect the non-violent nature of God at the same time that God reflects the violent nature of humankind. It seems to me that we cannot do with a black-and-white portrayal of human goodness or human evil and divine love or divine wrath. What we need is persistent scrutiny of the violence within. Girard suggests that we commonly dislocate this violence and project it into the sacred or taboo sphere as if it were something from outside. If he is right that religion masks violence and violence masks religion, then we are called to unmask it. But that, he warns us, would mean the disintegration of religion and thus give way to unbridled violence. Here is the paradoxical dilemma that leaves us uncomfortable for the rest of our lives. As it should.

10. Van der Ven, J.A. (1998) *Formation of the Moral Self*. Eerdmans. pp. 266-278.