

# Scars and Stigmata: Trauma, identity and theology

R.Ruard Ganzevoort

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## SUMMARY

This paper reflects on the interaction between trauma and identity using the metaphors of scars and stigmata. Two different attitudes toward trauma are described that need to be connected dialectically. The first sees trauma as an 'alien' intrusion that calls for resistance. The latter sees trauma as integral to identity development. Implications for theological reflection are sketched.

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In recent years, the concept of trauma has become an important aspect of understanding human life. This is the case not only in the helping professions, but also in the public domain. Individual experiences like car accidents as well as collective events like disasters and terrorist attacks are easily called traumatic. By using that term, we refer to shattering life events and we invoke the expectation that those involved suffer deeply and will be affected for the rest of their lives. Scars are supposed to last. The term thus carries profound dramatic and tragic overtones. The popularity of the term trauma has not always been like this. Herman (1993) has documented how attention for trauma has gone up and down in the past century, the shifts being directly related to social and political forces in society. Granting these developments in attending to trauma, the disrupting power of traumatic experiences calls for profound reflection on the meaning of trauma for identity. When indeed our whole being is affected by traumatization, how does this relate to our identity? In this paper, I try to describe some of the intricacies of this relationship and develop some building blocks for a theology of trauma. The connection between trauma and theology is not that far-fetched, given the fact that both deal with vital dimensions of our existence and given the fact that the Christian tradition – to name but one – has a traumatic experience as its nuclear story. In this tradition, the stigmata are a powerful metaphor for exploring the interaction of trauma and identity, and I will use it as such.

Let me start by clarifying some of the key concepts that will play a role in these reflections. Identity is taken here as the narrative construction of who the person is vis a vis her or his own life course and vis a vis other persons. Whereas the life course regards the phenomenal level of the facts, experiences and actions,

occurring in a person's life between birth and death, identity is the story one tells about oneself (Ganzevoort 2004). This story serves two main purposes. It first distinguishes the self from others to develop and maintain a sense of uniqueness in relation to others. Each one of us is not merely an exemplar of the human race, exchangeable with others, but a unique person. The events in the life course are integrated in the person's life story in such a way that the person's identity is supported. The second purpose of the life story is that it describes the consistent elements through which one can say that the present self is the same as the past or future self. Life events therefore are integrated in the life story to the degree that they contribute to this sense of continuity.

Trauma can be described as the psychological wound resulting from the confrontation with a serious event that shatters a person's integrity and induces powerlessness and estrangement. Contrary to common parlour, trauma is not the event as such, but the impact of the event on the person. Whether or not a trauma occurs following a particular event depends on the content and seriousness of the event, but also on the person's personality, coping skills, attribution of meaning, resources, and so on. The complexity of the definition reveals a complex phenomenon. The serious events may range from war through street violence to car accidents to childhood sexual abuse. Some would even count in medical events, but generally speaking these would not have the same disrupting quality. The victims can be civilians, soldiers, or terrorists. The effects may be expected or accidental. The event may be a one-time incident or life-long oppression. Obviously, the details of traumatization will be crucial for understanding the impact of trauma on identity. In general terms, we only speak of trauma when the event contains a direct threat to life. This may regard the person's physical life, it may regard one's integrity of being, or it may take the shape of witnessing a threat to the life of another person.

These definitory clarifications immediately foreground the interactions between trauma and identity. In traumatization, the person's identity is at stake. The final concept of stigmata offers a metaphorical basis for theological reflections of these interactions. The term has a long history that merits some attention. In ancient Greece, the term referred to signs applied to a person's body to express that this person was in bad standing. This could be done by branding or cutting the body and the scars would mark a person as slave, traitor, or criminal. The person was impure, blacked, and should be avoided by the public. In the days of Christianity and its saints and martyrs, the term was used for physical manifestations of divine grace, often in the form of the wounds of Jesus Christ. An important aspect of the history of stigmata is the fact that many of these saints developing stigmata were in fact themselves in one way or another marginalized and possibly traumatized (we lack proper details to claim that they would qualify for a psychiatric diagnosis). The story of St Rita of Cascia is a case in point. Her husband is killed by another man, after many years of severely abusing her. When her sons set out to kill their father's murderer, Rita prays that they may rather die than become murderers themselves, and her prayer is answered. Rita then

becomes a nun and her deep devotion culminates in stigmata. The devotional story of Rita thus not only talks of faith and stigmata, but also shows a deep connection between her life experiences of violence and traumatization and her devotion. In fact, her piety and stigmata may be seen as symbolization of her traumatization. Today, the word stigma is usually taken in the original meaning but with a symbolic interpretation: stigma is the social structure of non-acceptance, based on a disqualifying attribution of characteristics to a person (Goffman 1963). These attributions may or may not be correct, and the stigmatized person may or may not agree with the attribution. The stigmatized person may accept the idea that his or her characteristics warrant non-acceptance by others. For this moment it suffices to note that stigma is an attributed identity.

#### TRAUMA AS A THREAT TO IDENTITY

In connecting trauma and identity, we can observe two diametrically opposed positions. For better or for worse, traumatizing events are part of our life course. Obviously, that does not mean we get an even share. Some of us are confronted with several severe traumatizing events; others encounter a relatively smooth and easy life. It does not mean either that specific events have the same valence or meaning for all: what is an unbearable torture for one person may be a painful yet tolerable experience for others. The point I am making is that these events happen as part of our life course and that we are called to attribute meanings to them.

The first position takes trauma essentially as a threat to identity. The central issue here is that traumatization interrupts the person's life course. The direction of this person's life, the central values expressed in it, the taken for granted meanings and structures, everything is disrupted by traumatization. From now on, nothing is the same anymore. The traumatizing event is completely alien to the identity of the person, and it is traumatizing precisely because it is alien. Traumatization disrupts the life course that forms the basis of our life story and thus undermines our identity.

The meaning of traumatization in this perspective is a massive confrontation with darkness and death. It threatens to destroy life as we know it. This is a complete opposition between the meanings embedded in our identity, and the meanings of traumatization. We may for example consider ourselves to be well balanced, nice, caring, and rational human beings, yet in a situation of traumatization discover that we are feeble, egoistic, and impulsive survivors. Or on a more fundamental level, we may build our life on the assumption that life is meaningful and that God cares for us, yet find ourselves in total despair and utter meaninglessness when confronted with traumatization. When our identity seeks to maintain a sense of continuity through all the vicissitudes of life, traumatization represents the kind of discontinuity that cannot be integrated. To the degree that our identity serves to distinguish the self from others, thereby facilitating meaningful interactions with others, traumatization isolates the persons from his or her significant others.

If this perspective of opposition is taken, traumatization is not a neutral issue. It is an experience of the confrontation with darkness and destruction, with evil. Therefore it demands an ethical response. Judgment is called for. The prototype for this has become the response to the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Centre. These traumatizing events were branded as evil attacks and the response was a firm stance in the war on terrorism. Of course one may challenge these responses and ask whether they reflect proper ethical judgment or some kind of collective traumatization, resulting in splitting the world in all good and all bad. Fact is that in the experience of those involved the call for judgment and even revenge seemed appropriate. The same can be found in individual responses to street violence or drunk driving, for example with those parents of victims that have started campaigns against violence as a meaningful response to meaningless suffering. This ethical response takes into account that traumatization usually results from human wrongdoings. Of course, there is also a category of events that can be classified as accidental, strokes of nature, or acts of God. Most events, however, ambiguous as they are, are interpreted as malicious, due to human evil. When classified as tragic, they may evoke the ethical response of care for the victims out of the deeply held conviction that this kind of suffering should not be accepted as part of our human existence and that we should do everything possible to avoid or eliminate it. As far as this is the case, they can become the springboard of ethical action. The proper response to traumatization in this first perspective is resistance, not acceptance.

Resistance may take place in several forms or on several levels (Collins 2000). The first level of resistance is survival. The simple fact that one does not give in to the life-threatening forces encountered but manages to survive, proves the limits of the powers of the other person or system. When indeed the actions of the other are seen as intending to destroy the person, then survival resists these intentions. The second level of resistance is leaving the situation in which the threats are encountered and seeking refuge in a safer environment. Again, the annihilating powers of the oppressor are denied as are his or her rights to possess and destroy the person. By escaping the situation, the person claims a right to his or her own existence over against the oppressor. The third level is changing the situation. This is a higher order form of resistance in which not only the victim is protected or changed, but the oppressor as well. We find this level in revolutions, but also in family therapy. All persons involved in the traumatizing patterns of interaction have to redefine their roles and relationships. It may be obvious that higher level resistance is more effective, but that does not mean that it is always the more appropriate line of action. When personal strength and outside resources are too limited, it is probably wise to commit to lower levels of resistance. Even if one turns to revolution, forgetting these lower levels will result in retraumatizing the most vulnerable. Taking care of surviving individuals and offering places of refuge are important aspects of pastoral care in times of revolution. All this holds true for both personal and collective forms of resistance, even when the particular shapes differ greatly. A woman struggling with domestic violence has to negotiate these options and their consequences just as a population suffering from an

oppressive military regime. In his recent book *Raging with compassion*, Swinton (2007) helpfully identifies four fundamental Christian practices in resisting evil: lament, forgiveness, thoughtfulness, and hospitality. Whatever form is possible, the person confronted with traumatization is called to resistance, because eventually traumatization is the unacceptable intrusion into our life course and an intolerable threat to our identity.

#### TRAUMA AS IDENTITY MARKER

The second, diametrically opposed, prototypical position takes traumatization as a turning point in one's life course. That does not mean that one should rejoice in it, but it acknowledges that these events are so essential in our life course that they define our identity. We are the persons we are because of the traumata we have suffered. Our choices, actions, and longings that follow from our identity narrative – the story we tell about ourselves – and that seek to confirm this narrative result from these traumata. Whether we have integrated these traumatic incidents in our story or in contrast try to exclude them, the impact of trauma is such that it works through in how we can and cannot tell the story. This means that we cannot conceive of ourselves without these experiences, even if we try to exclude them. Sometimes we may indulge in the what-if questions: what kind of person would we have become if this or that had not happened? These questions are futile from this second perspective. If I would not have experienced bullying in school, sexual intimidation, moving from one town to another, and so on, and so on, I simply would not have been me. My life would have been different, but it would not be my life. The uniqueness of the person as well as his or her possibilities of engaging with others are shaped and marked by the traumata that are part of the life course.

The meaning of traumatization in this perspective is an affirmation of the unique individual history of the person's life. The scars on our body and soul tell the story of the wounds inflicted upon us. They mark the person as having lived through this particular ordeal and thereby refer to the story only this person can tell. They also identify the person as one of the many who have gone through such an ordeal and thereby define the relationship with others. Whether our scars are warrior wounds, concentration camp numbers, or the psychological aftermath of childhood sexual abuse, they evoke and reflect powerful stories of the life we have lived. Scars do not subtract meaning from our lives, but in fact add meaning to it. Our storied identity has become more complex and extensive through them, and when this complex story can be owned by the narrator and shared with others, it can be re-membered (Cooley 1994).

The response to traumatization from this second perspective is acceptance, not resistance. We are called to accept and integrate the traumatic wounds and carry our scars as identity markers. That is, we are challenged to re-member those parts of our body and life that have been dis-membered. Perhaps this is a way of understanding the close connection between stigmata and traumatization as we can find in the story of St Rita and many others. Their devotional life gave them

the opportunity to attribute spiritual meaning to the suffering they had endured and to symbolize their traumatization in the development of stigmata. More specifically, their devotion took the shape of identification with the suffering of Christ for precisely this reason that they were able to identify with Christ because of their own traumatization. As one young hemiplegic man said: 'when I have a bad day, I think of Christ. Because, when he was on the cross, things weren't too easy for him either'. This may seem like an understatement concerning the suffering of Christ, but it is at least a clear example of someone connecting his own suffering with Christ's. He sympathizes with Christ in a shared experience of suffering, which simultaneously means that the suffering of Christ for him becomes a model for understanding his own suffering and coping with it. In this particular story there is no sense of a redemptive value of suffering. Many other stories in fact incorporate that notion. Victims of domestic sexual violence for example tend to accept their suffering in hopes of protecting children or younger sisters and brothers from the same abuse. To add one more example, one Roman-Catholic man narrated how, being abused by his father, as a child he found solace in the idea that he was just like Jesus who suffered from his father and was glorified afterwards. This may not be an adequate coping strategy in the long run, but at that point in time it helped him survive (Ganzevoort 2001). That is, the fact that he could find a religious symbolization for his experiences of traumatization was a vital element in coping with them. It is interesting to note that as an adult, he was able to reinterpret the same religious stories to reflect his growing autonomy. He would wear the same scars but give them a different meaning because the story in which were to function had changed dramatically.

The difference between this second response of accepting and integrating that scars and the first response of resisting the forces that are behind the scarring involves the meanings of the stigmata as part and ground of one's identity or as alien to it. For counselling this is an important lesson: The meanings of traumatization are open to reinterpretation, and the degree to which a person rejects the scars or integrates them as stigmata, tells us much about his or her life story and spiritual frame of reference. One reason for the difference between people choosing either of these prototypical positions lies in the dimension of time. At the moment of impact, traumatization is usually experienced as an intrusion of alien, enemy forces. Later on, however, and looking back on whom we have become, we cannot but incorporate the traumatic experiences. Because they have actually taken place, we cannot think of ourselves outside of these experiences. By consequence, the logic for our suffering is a retrospective one. That is, traumatizing events should never happen to us, but when they have happened, they are a necessary part of our identity. Finding some kind of religious meaning in suffering can be an important element in making the transitions from position one to position two, from resistance to acceptance, from scars to stigmata.

There is a danger in accepting the unbearable suffering too easily, but there is also a danger in disowning it. In fact, disowning our stigmata parallels disowning essential markers of our identity, rejecting the person we have become. The

recently burgeoning research on posttraumatic growth attests to the possibility of positive responses to traumatization (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2006). This research shows that growth in the aftermath of trauma is much more common than is accounted for in trauma literature. Some even say that growth and not pathology is the natural response to trauma (Christopher 2004). Although it is too early to speak of a fully developed theory, the concept of posttraumatic growth typically includes increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004).<sup>1</sup>

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS OF MEANING

In these two extreme positions between which we have to find our way, vital questions of meaning are involved. Psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1992) has described them in what she called a theory of basic assumptions. Her view is that we all live with assumptive worlds, systems of meaning, or life narratives, that hold together our life and identity. In these assumptive worlds, three basic assumptions provide the skeleton of meaning. The first is that the world is a meaningful and coherent whole and not a basket of coincidences. The second is that the world is benevolent toward us and not inclined to do us harm. The third is that I am a person worthy of care and love. These basic assumptions are the foundations for our being in the world, for our social connections, and for our identity.

In the case of traumatization, these basic assumptions are shattered. Instead of a meaningful whole, we are confronted with the fragmentation of meaning. There is no way of interpreting the events into a consistent pattern of meaning. The events are too hefty, threatening, or painful to interpret them as meaningful. In fact, the only meaningful interpretation is to say that they are meaningless. But if we accept the fact that there are meaningless events, that challenges the whole system of meanings. Why would other meanings remain plausible? Our assumptive world disintegrates and we lose our place in the world. This is what people mean when they say that their world collapses or that they lose the ground under their feet. The metaphors point to the fact that their life narrative caves in to the threats encountered. The scars or stigmata inflicted on the body symbolize this end to the former existence. The wholeness or original perfection is destroyed and the wounds turn into scars that remind us of this destruction.

The second basic assumption, the benevolence of the world crumbles under the experience of betrayal. Especially in the case of human induced trauma, betrayal is a major component of traumatization. Where expected benevolence and a response of trust are the basis for our social infrastructure, the ground of our connectedness to others, traumatization includes existential isolation from others.

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<sup>1</sup> The close connection of posttraumatic growth, coping, narrative restructuring, and spirituality is central to an international research project on posttraumatic spirituality, carried out by Karlijn Demasure (Belgium/Canada), Julian Müller (Pretoria, RSA), Jean-Guy Nadeau (Montreal, Canada), and the present author.

We are left alone and feel the need to withdraw and distrust our fellow humans that so easily harm us in our vulnerability. In traumatized people we commonly find a sense of isolation and the idea that no one can understand their suffering. This is reflected in negro spirituals like 'Nobody knows the trouble I've seen'. Tellingly, these songs continue with the kind of religious identification I described earlier: 'Nobody knows, but Jesus'. This may be interpreted as Jesus looking down and witnessing our suffering, but it may be more to the point to understand it as Jesus having gone through the same kind of suffering.

The third basic assumption, the worthiness of the self, loses its plausibility where we discover that apparently our person is not important or good enough to merit care and love. Many victims of violence for example feel extreme guilt or shame for what happened. They feel the stigmata of their predicament and they hold themselves in contempt. Identity is at stake here, not only in terms of a coherent story of one's life, but also in terms of seeing the self as a unique and meaningful human being. The stigmata therefore initially symbolize some form of divine rejection or even damnation, although they may be reinterpreted as symbols of grace. This ambiguity can also be found in the efforts to understand the meaning of the crucifixion as both curse or punishment and grace or redemption.

These three fundamental assumptions are challenged in traumatization. We lose our place in the world. We lose our connection to others. We lose our sense of self. As my description of these concepts makes clear, this connection of trauma and identity is closely related to central theological issues.

#### THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

The basic assumptions are not only psychological mechanisms that sustain our identity and our being in the world. They are also the foundations for a religious identity and being in the world spiritually. Every religion provides the message that life is no coincidence but a meaningful whole. There is a larger story, a context of meanings that encompasses our life. There is a God that holds this world together and keeps us from disintegrating. This God is characterized by benevolence. He wishes us well and offers us the message of salvation. Even if bad things may happen, God promises that He will do us good. The person's worthiness is religiously sustained by the message that God loves us or that our contribution to this world is valued. These religious versions of the basic assumptions are shattered in traumatization, just like their secular counterparts. In traumatization we are tempted to look for a stronger, transcending truth that will help us keep our world and identity intact, but at the same time this truth sometimes falls apart under the weight of traumatization. Even if people find ways of keeping the faith, that does not resolve the fundamental theological issues.

There are many temptations in our theological reflection on the connection of trauma and identity in the life course. These temptations have to do with the wish to overcome the unsettling questions that traumatization raises. If indeed these fundamental existential and theological issues are at stake, we have to rethink our



entire theology. This is all the more clear when we become aware that traumatization is central to the religious tradition, yet usually overlooked completely. Limiting myself to the tradition I know best, western Christianity, the key elements can be understood more profoundly if we acknowledge their traumatic qualities. I have already referred to the crucifixion, but the same can be said of other formative stories of God's people. Immediately after being expelled from the Garden of Eden, humans face the horrific event of one brother killing another. God himself does not abstain from flooding his earth and killing almost everyone, nor from terrorist actions to liberate his people from an oppressive regime in Egypt. It is tempting to neutralize these stories by claiming that the New Testament shows a more loving God, but his wrath is part of these stories as well. Throughout the Bible, even until the eschatological stories in the book of Revelation, we find this unsettling notion of violence and trauma. Likewise, the two central symbols found in Christian sacraments refer to trauma. Baptism of course has become the symbol of tenderness and enjoyment in celebrating new life, but it refers to the experience of drowning in the sea of chaos and darkness. It is only through that event of drowning that we may enter into the new world. The Eucharist, finally, symbolizes the body of Christ, broken into pieces, and his blood shed in our midst. We may find communion in sharing this bread, even to the point of becoming one new body of Christ, but this takes place through the symbols of tearing apart what is most holy to us and mourning over dismembered bodies (Fröchtling 2002). Stigmata in this sense are possibilities for a new solidarity. In many ways stigmatized people find one another regardless of the reason of their stigmatization. Traumatization has been found in some studies to correlate with increased empathy, and we can interpret that as a sign of this solidarity. The sharing of the Eucharist thus can be read as a symbol of this communion of the stigmatized, but only if we are willing to become part of such a community ourselves. When we find the courage to read our tradition in terms of traumatization, the wisdom and salvation conveyed in it become all the more profound.

Usually, however, we refrain from that painful reading of the tradition. That does not mean we do not accept the reality of trauma in this world, but we see it as an individualized issue. This way we do acknowledge that some persons suffer from painful experiences, but we deny that their experiences and questions should be ours as well, let alone that their experience is in fact the central theme of our religious tradition. In fact, we treat them as the strangers to our world, the aliens that threaten our existence. We may support them in their suffering – gentle pastors that we are – but we refuse to identify with their questions. When they experience being abandoned by God, we do not see them as prophets expressing the same spiritual momentum as Jesus on the cross or the writer of Psalm 22. Instead we tell them that their experience is false and that God never again abandons us. When they experience the utter meaninglessness of the world, we try to console them by telling them they are wrong. Moreover, many cases of traumatization involve human actors as the cause of suffering. If we take traumatization seriously, we have to acknowledge that there is evil in our society,

our churches, our families. If we pay attention to victims as victims, we have to admit that there are perpetrators as well. And maybe we have to admit our own complicity to the structures of violence by which people have become traumatized. It is much easier to treat victimization as pathology. In sum, in order to maintain our own fundamental assumptions, we stigmatize the traumatized persons. We take them as pathological victims that need to be adapted to the normal religious world again. Even in friendly and pastoral gestures, this stigmatization is out of our own self-interest. It protects our life world and our safe reading of the tradition from their dangerous presence and dangerous memories (Metz 1977). In this respect, stigmata are not only individual experiences but prophetic markers of resistance against the normative cultural stories of wholeness and perfection. As Christians we do not believe in the perfect world that the marketing industry pictures before our eyes. Time and again we fall prey to such illusions of perfection, and it is the prophetic testimony of the stigmata of the traumatized that counters such an illusion.

#### TO CONCLUDE: FROM SCARS TO STIGMATA

In this paper, I have elaborated the two-faced phenomenon of trauma, especially in the psychological and spiritual responses we can develop. I am not suggesting that a 'positive' response of integrating traumatic experiences is necessarily the best option, nor that a 'negative' response of rejecting it is unhealthy. Instead I claim that the dialectic between the two is essential to an adequate theological understanding of trauma. This dialectic is powerfully present in the religious traditions. It is also found in the central metaphor of the stigmata. More than being just scars, the stigmata symbolize the spiritual meanings of the wounds of traumatization. As theologians we are called to develop a deeper theological understanding of trauma as stigmata.

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