

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE
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Humans are beings capable of immense violence. This is self-evident and surely needs no proof. Violence is innately part of human nature but simultaneously it is an acquired skill, something that can be learned. What role does religions play in this violent world we are living in? Are religions teaching people to be violent? Violence is a complex matter.

Is violence part of human nature?

In our times the media appears to present a particular anthropological view of human nature. It appears as if the media is communicating that humans are primarily rebels, soldiers, activists, disillusioned citizens, fighters (Achterhuis 2017:43). It appears as if human nature has been reduced to that of being a combatant, a fighter. That seems to be all that we are: fighters.

Violence is potentially present in all human beings. Humanity has been described as being “the naked ape” (Achterhuis 2010:52) and more vividly as “the angry ape possessing weapons” (Lorenz 1966:208).

The Dutch philosopher, Hans Achterhuis (2010:52), indicates that human nature is described as being violent. But human characteristics also include humans as being rational, labouring, playful and caring beings. Violence is not the only characteristic humans possess. There seems to exist a glimmer of hope. Just as much evil that can be witnessed in human behaviour, just as much acts of mercy, charity and love can be witnessed.

Fighting is never nice. Humans at their core seem to long for and dream of harmony, justice, freedom, peace and unity. This dream of harmony is made visible today in all

of us being present here. At times to attain these dreams and longings of harmony, humans are however willing to do anything, even consider violence to achieve the goal of peace.

It is clear that violence should always be contextualised. Violence manifests differently in different contexts. It is not as easy to explain the reasons for violence. There are many reasons for violence. Even by being able to list all reasons for violence, still violence cannot be eradicated or prevented.

Hans Achterhuis (1942-):

The Dutch philosopher, Hans Achterhuis born in 1942, wrote extensively on the reasons for violence. He identified six possible perspectives on the origin of violence. There of course may be many more perspectives on the origin of violence. But today I am going to limit my introduction to these six perspectives on violence.

Goal orientated violence: In order to reach a goal (i.e. survival, wealth, power etc.) humans will violently remove any obstacle (i.e. people or structures) that comes in their way (Achterhuis 2010b:45). Violence becomes the means in order to reach a goal. Violence is then viewed as an instrument (Achterhuis 2010b:46). The German-born philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) explains in her work *Crisis in the Republic* (1970), that violence has become a means to several ends (Arendt 1970:145). She emphasises that the concepts of power and violence need to be separated. Political power ensures a safe existence for society. Violence can be destructive to the good life the state is supposed to maintain. Terrorism and structural violence forms part of this perspective on violence. Structures may oppress people and it might be necessary to remove structures in order to restore harmony and peace in society. Violence is then justified in terms of the good that can come from it. In order to remove oppression, violent opposition is considered necessary. Violence becomes the means to reach the goal of an ideal society even if violence is necessary to bring about peace.

Struggle for recognition: Humans are in need of recognition. Achterhuis (2010b:47) follows Hegel's philosophical theory to explain how two people living besides one another struggle to be recognised by the other. This struggle ends inevitably in one

surrendering to the other. This serves as basis for the explanation of cultural clashes. Achterhuis applies the theory of Hegel to the violence between sexes (male and female) and even the violence against children (2010b:48). Humans through their need to be recognised by others, will demand respect and even submission by others. To attain this violence may be used.

The polarity of us vs them: In a multi-religious society (and even in a secular society), different identities clash. Achterhuis (2010b:49) however indicates that this opposition of parties existed from eternity. In a globalized world people are trying to recover lost identities. Within this context Achterhuis (2010b:49) places the occurrences of genocide. Even Xenophobia can be seen as a symptom of this problem. The “other” is considered a threat of the own identity and constantly viewed with suspicion. Any negative incident is blamed on the “other” as an evil attempt to destroy that which is considered dear. The philosopher Carl Schmitt indicates according to Achterhuis that the polarity of “we and them” is inevitably part of the political reality. The solution Achterhuis (2010b:49) suggests is that different religious and ethnic groups ought to exist in one political system where the identity of the minority is accepted.

For Achterhuis (2010b:315) the most pronounced polarity between the ‘us’ and ‘them’ is portrayed in the concept of civilizations that clash as described by Samuel Huntington in his book *The Clash of Civilizations* (1997). East, West, South and North have become opposing identities and are no longer merely indicators of the direction the wind is blowing.

Violent human nature: Violence is not the activity of barbaric people. Hannah Arendt (2003:18) indicates how violence is committed by normal people who act on temptation to do evil. Her research on war time atrocities illustrates that normal people are capable of horrid and violent acts. Evil is not something autonomous outside of human nature. Violence is potentially present in every human being. Violence is part of human nature. How can you not expect wronged people to respond and retaliate!

Burkert (Segal 2008:29) follows Lorenz’s theory that humans are like animals: many human behaviour is innate (like that of animals), many animal behaviour (like some human) is learned. Aggression is innate as well as learned behaviour. Lorenz

(1966:204) believes that aggression can be transformed into sociability. Through showing mutual signs of aggression, bonds of friendship can be established (Burkert 1996:9). The acts of aggression become rituals repeated to unify the group. The ritual confirms the solidarity of the group (Segal 2008:29). Violence as part of human nature then has a positive outcome in society by re-enforcing social cohesion. These acts of violence however can bind some members of society but can also exclude and marginalise others from society.

Morality and politics: Violence based on moral grounds can take on any form in politics. The American theologian-philosopher, Reinhold Niebuhr (2005 [1932]), discussed the moralisation of violence. Violence in politics is morally motivated. This perspective describes the differentiation of all political actions into good or evil. Violence in service of the good against that which is considered as evil then becomes acceptable or tolerable violence. As an example Achterhuis (2010b:50) discusses the concept of a just war. A war fought in protection of that which is considered good. Violence in this case becomes acceptable when it serves the moral good.

Violence can re-enforce social bonding. “The ritualistic function of aggression is the communication of solidarity, not of attack” (Segal 2008:29). Through acts of violence against outsiders (the commonly perceived enemy of society) the bond between members of society is strengthened. The acts and even the planned acts of violence can be viewed as attempts of restoring and affirming social bonding.

Violence creates anxiety. There might be reasons that create anxiety and violence is merely the reaction to calm the anxiety. Burkert (1985:54) indicates how the ritual of violence has the function to calm violence and re-establish society. Acts of injustice in society creates anxiety. This can lead to acts of violence in order to restore harmony in society. Compare in this regard occasions where a society will take justice in their own hands by for example killing a suspected rapist

Mimetic desire: Based on René Girard’s (1923-2015) theory (published in 1986 and 1989) that all human culture originates from mimetic desire, Achterhuis (2010b:51) indicates how conflict has always been part of human interaction. According to mimetic desire humans want that which others possess. By mimicking the other in terms of

their desire humans end up in conflict. This creates the scarcity of things. Mimetic desire entails subjective as well as objective elements which are scarce and lead to violence in order to get hold of limited resources (Achterhuis 2010b:52).

Compare in this regard current brewing tensions on the scarcity of water. Someone must be blamed for the absence of water. Once the perpetrator has been identified, violent expressions against the scapegoat ensues. The problem of water is not solved, but the brewing tension and anxiety has been vented.

These six perspectives are presented by Achterhuis in order to come to a better understanding of what violence is and where it comes from. This is however not an exhaustive list. The perspectives however help to get a handle on understanding current cases of violence.

To search for one cause and reason for violence is like ignoring the current weather pattern that predicts that lightning is eminent. There are many possible reasons for violence: class differences, poverty, social structures such as capitalism, socialism, religious fundamentalism, etc. (Achterhuis 2010b:39). Violence only gets meaning the moment when all perspectives are taken into account (Achterhuis 2010b:44).

Current world conditions are conducive to violence. We live in a world characterised by the violent power of the times (Achterhuis 2010b:21). Similar to a threatening thunderstorm, the conditions worldwide currently are conducive for lightning to strike. It may be impossible to say where lightning will strike (2010b:26), but it is clear it will strike (Achterhuis 2010b:25). Violence is inevitable. It must however be stated that violence has always been part of human history.

Understanding violence includes understanding oneself (Achterhuis 2010b:23). Philosophical approaches include being self-critical and attempting to think differently (Achterhuis 2010b:24). In the discourse on violence philosophers have the task to identify the possible localities where lightning might strike next and to warn, prevent and if not that, at least suggest precautionary measures (Achterhuis 2010b:25).

The relation of Violence to Religion:

What role does religion play in this?

Karen Armstrong (2014:7) states that in the West it is currently taken for granted that religion is considered to be “inherently violent”. Although it is clear that not all wars are caused by religion, people tend to resort to the intolerant nature of monotheistic religions in particular. If God is on our side no compromise is possible (Armstrong 2014:7).

Religion is not the only cause of violence. Violence is not located in religion, but in humans. Religion can at most only be the fuse that leads to the explosive, violent considerations that are located within humans (Achterhuis 2010b: 323). As to the relationship between religion and violence, Achterhuis once more provides some insight.

According to Achterhuis (2010b:323), religion does not lead to violence. The origin of violence does not lay within religion. The origin of violence must rather be searched for within human nature. All humans are prone to react violently upon infliction. Violent actions can lead to violent responses. Hannah Arendt’s warning that even good people can perform horrid acts of violence, confirms this notion that violence is part of human nature. One act of violence can become the spark for a long chain of violent reciprocal retaliations. Examples abound: Christian Muslim relations are today still hampered by recollections of the injustices and violence during the crusades. Christian Jewish relations are today still influenced by accusations against Jews being the God-killers (cf Kesler 2012:102) 2000 years ago. Violent actions can cause violent responses.

Even in the absence of religion in society, violence will still continue to exist. Religion is not a prerequisite for violence. Achterhuis (2010b:313) points out how the dichotomy of “we” versus “them” has created extreme cases of violence in communities all over the world since eternity and will continue to do so. Religion is not necessarily the cause of all such instances of violence. It can however not be denied that religion can exacerbate violence. An intolerant attitude by religious practitioners towards different religions or even dissidents from inside a religion, increases the likelihood of violence.

Creating caricatures, mocking others, stereotyping others, these are already examples of clandestine acts of violence, begetting violent responses. Likening others from different religions to images of evil, is already committing acts of violence against them. Presenting ourselves (the “we”) as being different and superior to the other (the “them”), the fuse setting off this eternal chain of reciprocal violence, is lit.

SOLUTION:

So what is the solution? How do “we” live in peace with the “them”? Or stated differently, how is inter-religious tolerance possible? How do we reach the utopian condition of peace?

a. Religion as lightning rod

Achterhuis (2014:26) admits that society will need several voluntary change agents and leaders who act as powerful buffers between conflicting groups in society in order to prevent violence from erupting, as the threat of real or perceived violence can lead to retaliation. Such volunteers in society play an important peacekeeping role by being facilitators of conversation between groups (Achterhuis 2014:26). To differ is not a transgression. But to express differences in violent forms is an act of selfish self-realisation.

When Joas and Knöbl (2009) discuss the occurrence of violence and conflict within society, they emphasise the theory of Lewis Coser who indicated the positive effects of conflict. Conflict in society is a sign of a stable community (Joas et al 2009:177). A community gets the opportunity to release tension via conflict. This corresponds to Burkert’s suggestion of violence releasing anxiety (Segal 2008:31). When conflict is oppressed, tension increases. A healthy society is permitted to vent the anger or ‘clear the air’ (Joas 2009:177). Further, conflict may lead to the opportunity to learn and change existing social rules and institutions (Joas 2009:177). If no conflict is permitted, societies are prevented from gaining insight from others and prevented from learning and adjusting to new situations.

A “lightning rod” that may act as a precaution against forms of violence is to create discussion forums in society. Such forums may present opportunities for learning and

venting anger. Learning about the other is just as much as learning about oneself (Achterhuis 2010:23). In a discussion forum one is not only confronted with the other, but also confronted by one's own convictions. In discussion with others one needs to be critical with oneself. Stephan (2009:55) suggests as a counter-measure how to deal with immanent threat to engage in dialogue. Forums supporting dialogue between opposing parties create opportunities to learn from one-self and the other as well as vent anger.

Religious communities can act as such forums where opportunity is given to all members of society to state their concerns. By creating opportunities to discuss sensitive issues a stable community is created. It may not prevent violence but may divert aggression, alleviate anxiety and create reciprocal understanding.

b. Social awareness

Instead of seeking the origin of violence in order to stem it or establishing the absence of violence (utopia), rather learn how to fight and differ well. This notion Achterhuis (2014) develops in his aptly named publication *De kunst van vreedzaam vechten (the art of fighting peacefully)*.

For Achterhuis (2014:17) a world devoid of violence is not only inconceivable but also undesirable. To have conflicting ideas is considered a valuable characteristic of an open society. Views from different perspectives work towards creatively and innovatively solving social problems. If different views exist in society, it should not be seen as a threat, but rather as a characteristic of a successful democratic society where everyone's opinion is considered. Diversity then is not a sign of animosity and discord, but a sign of openness and inclusivity. The art is how to prevent differences from becoming reasons for violence.

When acts of violence can be framed within a moral frame it becomes not only condoned but even desirable. Good must always oppose evil. If the preferred lifestyles of individuals are portrayed as being evil, violent action directed against such individuals is not only condoned but even becomes desirable.

To avoid violence requires an awareness and tolerance of diversity. We need to be aware of others around me. This is what I would like to call social awareness. By knowing the others around me, I simultaneously become aware of who I am. Discovering my identity may lead to discovering the need of the other to just like me be allowed to express their identity. Social awareness comes down to the unselfish consideration of others. Or stated differently: to do unto others as you prefer them do unto you.

CONCLUSION:

Violence is like lightning. Just as lightning requires thunderclouds to be present, violence requires conducive conditions to occur. We constantly see gathering thunderclouds in our society. We see conditions in society brewing which may eventually culminate in violence.

But with thunderclouds come the promise of rain. Rain that brings life and growth. Violence can be destructive, but violence can also be viewed as the precursor to peace and harmony. When seeing the threatening clouds approaching, religious leaders should become the lightning rods, not preventing the thunderstorm, but preventing the destruction of violence. This can be achieved when religious leaders plead with opposing groups (the we and them) to engage in conversations to vent aggression and reach a peaceful outcome. As Achterhuis pleads: to fight peacefully.

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