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Violence in Our Time Psychology and Religion

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Terrorist violence as violence in our time

Since September 11, 2001 at the latest it is evident that terrorism has become a new form of warfare. Until then generally small political fringe groups used the terrorist attack to draw attention to themselves; today, however, organized terrorism constitutes a grave threat to everyone.

- The dangerousness of terrorism lies, first, in the fact that it is organized in global networks and pursues global changes, otherwise sought only in wars.
- A second reason for the dangerousness of terrorism is that terrorists can attack not only with explosives but can utilize biological, chemical, and atomic weapons as well.
- An equally important, third reason is the great vulnerability of our technological world and our public utilities and supply systems for food, water, and energy, which can be attacked and substantially damaged with relatively little effort.
- A fourth reason why present-day terrorism constitutes such a serious threat is related to the suicide attacks, that is, to the religiously-justified willingness of human beings to sacrifice their lives for terrorism. As a result there is practically no sure protection against terrorist attacks anymore. The consequences are increasingly elaborate security measures and a deepening sense of mistrust among human beings.
- A fifth reason is, finally, our widespread inability to deal adequately with terrorist violence. This reason is the focus of my reflections here. Is there an alternative to reacting to violence with counterviolence? What role does religion play in this context? Does religion contribute to overcoming violence or does religion reinforce the willingness to use violence?



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Even though violence in our time primarily takes the form of terrorist violence, the question of dealing with violence is as old as humankind. At the beginning of the biblical history of humankind Abel is murdered by Cain. And up into the present political conflicts have often involved *lex talionis*, also taught in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. *Lex talionis* dictates that the degree of punishment is to be oriented on the magnitude of the offense: „eye for eye, tooth for tooth.“ (Leviticus 24:20) According to the ancient maxim, violence can only be contained and prevented through counterviolence. This maxim is currently held to be the right approach to overcoming terrorism. However, the opposite will be the case.

Counterviolence will generate even more violence. There is a simple explanation for this: in order to commit acts of terrorist violence neither military nor political power and strength are necessary. Almost anyone can carry out terrorist attacks today, even women and children. For this reason alone fighting violence with counterviolence is no longer expedient.

What is the alternative to reacting violently to violence? A psychology that attempts to understand how violence arises and why violence generates counterviolence can offer an answer. In the second section I will outline a psychological explanation of the origins of violence.

Psychological Explanation of the Origins of Violence

Forms and functions of human aggression

There are endless expressions and terms for describing aggressive behavior: human beings are aggressive, destructive, hostile, resentful, contentious, reproachful, critical, degrading, cynical, sadistic, jealous, envious, deceitful, competitive, et cetera. Such behavior is always an expression of an aggressiveness of some kind. This is why it is sometimes thought that it would be best if there were no human aggression at all. In reality, this would be a poor solution, because aggression is a human capability that the human being needs in order to assert, protect, and defend himself or herself against threats. This aggression in the interest of life and survival is something which human beings have in common with animals. It is essentially defensive in nature, even though it has a destructive effect in the concrete situation.

The human capability for aggression is, however, not only self-preservative in life-threatening situations ensuing externally. Aggressive behavior is also crucial to the psychic development of the human being. It is by no means a coincidence that a young child learns to say „no“ before he or she can say „yes.“ The entire psychic development is actually characterized by the fact that the human being devalues what was important to him or her during a specific phase, distances



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himself or herself from it, and fights it with hostility. Psychic development is only possible as a process of becoming and dying, of yes and no. Growth is only possible if the human being can turn against what was before – against the pampering and the dependencies imposed by maternal figures or against the subservience and submissiveness imposed by paternal authorities or circumstances. Without aggression there is no freedom, independence, autonomy, and no self-realization.

Thus aggression has two sides: it is the reason for destructiveness, war, and disaster in the world but it also has a life-preserving and growth-promoting function. How does the one kind of aggression differ from the other in the human being? And – more important – how does an aggression that is not self-preservative develop in the human being? Erich Fromm has given a plausible answer to both questions in his book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York 1973).

The defensive, self-preservative form of aggression only arises in those situations in which the life or the growth of the human being is acutely threatened. As soon as the threat has subsided, the human being no longer feels any need to be aggressive. The self-preservative form of aggression is thus always reactive and situational, that is, linked to threatening situations.

Precisely this is what distinguishes it from another kind of human aggressiveness, which, independent of a threatening situation, expresses itself as a constant desire to be aggressive. It waits for opportunities in order to bring about „relief“ through destructive discharges; if necessary, it even creates these opportunities itself in order to be able to be destructive. Here aggressiveness has become a need, a drivenness. Erich Fromm called it *characterological* aggression in contrast to *reactive* aggression.

Naturally, no one wants to be an aggressive person or have an aggressive nature. Accordingly, the active expression of this kind of aggression is rationalized in diverse ways. A person tries to legitimize his or her own behavior, for example, by desiring the best for the child, or by purporting that humiliation was not harmful to himself or herself, or by dropping bombs or waging a „holy“ war in the name of freedom.

The origins of characterological aggression

How does this second, characterological kind of aggression arise? Erich Fromm's explanation is that characterological aggression always arises when reactive aggression, enabling psychic growth and survival, is hindered or thwarted. This means concretely: if human beings are not allowed to react defensively with aggression, because all aggression is the work of the devil, another kind of aggres-



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sion develops, one which is experienced as an aggression instinct constantly demanding gratification. Such persons must always dominate, oppress, or humiliate others – or themselves – because they suffer from a sadistic or masochistic aggressiveness; or they must always abase themselves or others because they suffer from a narcissistic aggressiveness; or they have the constant desire to destroy or expend something because they suffer from a necrophilic aggressiveness, that is, they sense an urge to render everything lifeless.

Whatever form characterological aggression takes, it always arises when human beings are kept from living out their self-preservative and growth-promoting aggression. If it is to come to a dissolution of characterological aggression this is only possible if the person concerned again learns to assert himself or herself against that which he or she actually experiences or experienced as threatening, specifically at the time when the characterological aggression initially developed during childhood, adolescence, or a marriage.

Violence as a distinct form of aggression

Up to this point I have intentionally spoken of aggression only in a general sense, and not of violence, to make clear that every aggressive act can be in the interest of life but can also direct itself against life. Violence is a distinct form of aggression. When do we speak of violence? What distinguishes violence from other forms of aggression?

In contrast to other forms of aggression we speak of violence in everyday life when there are perpetrators and victims. We speak of victims when a human being is attacked but cannot defend himself or herself – either because the attacker is stronger or because the victim is unable to defend himself or herself due to weakness, helplessness, or unknowingness. From a psychological perspective violence always aims at producing defenselessness. It can be defined as *that form of aggression directed toward a defenseless victim or pursuing the aim of making a person defenseless*. This singularity makes violence the most dangerous form of aggression. For violence tries to eliminate defensive aggression and contributes extensively to the actual emergence of characterological forms of aggression and new violence. Thus the use of violence lends itself particularly well to the psychological observation of how new violence arises.

In order to comprehend how new violence emerges we must begin by empathizing with the victim and by trying to discover how he or she experiences violence.

How victims experience violence

Violence, in our definition, seeks defenseless victims or intends to make a victim



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defenseless. How does a child feel who is being sexually abused and being threatened with a juvenile detention home if he or she tells anyone? How does a person feel who is being tied up and tortured? Whose face is being slashed and who is being tormented with electroshocks? How does a spouse feel who never experiences anything but criticism and abasement, and whose protests only provoke more criticism and abasement? How does a young child feel who is afraid at night and whose parents have only gone out for the evening? How does a teenager feel who is not told the truth about his or her biological father? How does a disabled or an elderly person feel when he or she is physically attacked?

The answer is always that such persons are filled with unbearable feelings of powerlessness, defenselessness, and helplessness as well as feelings of isolation. Among the worst feelings imaginable are those of being defenseless, helpless, and totally alone in a violent situation. There are many extremely unpleasant feelings: feelings of fear, feelings of failure, feelings of shame, feelings of loneliness, feelings of triviality, feelings of inferiority, feelings of worthlessness, feelings of inner emptiness. Most of us are familiar with such feelings from personal experience to a certain degree. The feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and isolation arising in the context of violence effecting total defenselessness can be imagined by many people but not actually felt because they are so unbearable. (Some experience these feelings agonizingly in their nightmares.)

The examples given were related to situations in which resistance is more or less impossible. Fortunately, not all violent situations are such extreme situations in which a person is totally defenseless. Then the person tries to assert himself or herself, and in these situations other emotional reactions are possible as well: feelings of powerless rage, despair, and grief. The more defenseless human beings are made through violence, the more helpless, powerless and alone they feel, and the more unbearable these feelings become. In precisely this situation – when these intolerable feelings cannot be psychically endured any longer – new violence arises.

The origins of new violence

We human beings have many possibilities for excluding unpleasant feelings from our conscious existence. We can repress them, project them onto others, convert them into the opposite, et cetera. In the case of absolutely unbearable, life-threatening feelings the last resort is to introject these feelings. We incorporate them in us, so that they no longer threaten us and we are no longer at their mercy, helpless and defenseless. Like a cannibalistic incorporation these threatening feelings are now within us and are available to us. The violence effecting defenselessness has been averted, admittedly, at a very high price. For now the



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violent is within oneself, as something foreign and yet one's own; an introjection which is part of me but which is experienced as a foreign element which should not be part of me. Human beings who have had to or have to fall back on introjection in order to avert violence effecting defenselessness are usually marked human beings, because from this point on they must fight against this inner violence. We speak rightly of traumatized human beings.

Whenever we human beings have to fight against difficult, unpleasant, and threatening inner feelings and impulses, there are basically two possibilities open to us for coping with them. One either directs them outwardly toward other people and things or one directs them inwardly toward oneself, above all, toward one's own body. Both of these possibilities can also be observed in the ways human beings cope with this introjected violence. Some direct it towards themselves by cutting themselves, by becoming self-destructive, by becoming suicidal, or by becoming anorexic; others direct it outwardly and *themselves* become violent and threatening, abusive, rendering others defenseless.

As tragic as the development is for the individual, psychologically seen, violence is in this way *reborn* in the victim, the victim becoming the perpetrator. Many parents who beat their children were beaten as children themselves. The sexually abused become perpetrators themselves and abuse others sexually. Persons who have suffered from violence in the form of public humiliation cannot restrain from publicly humiliating others themselves, et cetera. One inflicts the same type of violence on others that was inflicted on oneself: „eye for eye, tooth for tooth.“

The example of coping with violence effecting defenselessness illustrates psychologically how characterological aggression arises: because violence makes defensive aggression impossible, violence is born again in the victim. This reborn violence is constantly perceptible as a willingness to employ violence and demands gratification. Moreover, this example of coping with violence effecting defenselessness shows how a spiral of violence develops and how counterviolence effecting defenselessness will cause new violence.

Here the question of the reaction to terrorist violence which I raised at the beginning can be approached from a different perspective: is the political response of reacting to terrorist violence with counterviolence and of waging war on terrorism the result of an introjection and traumatization? Does counterviolence simply reinforce the spiral of violence? The question cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Valuable in clarifying this question is the significance which religion has for each side. Both terrorist violence as well as the political counterviolence legitimize their use of violence by appealing to religion. This question, what significance religion has for both sides in violence in our time, is our focus



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in the following section.

The significance of religion for violence in our time

Religion as legitimation for human action

Human beings do not act violently without inner necessity. Whoever is violent out of inner necessity, however, does not wish to appear as violent to himself or herself or to others. This is why many people prefer to inflict violence on themselves rather than on others. If, however, they do act violently toward others, their violence must be legitimized through rationalizations and ideologies. These rationalizations are individual legitimations for behavior that one does not really accept for oneself. Ideologies, on the other hand, are collective legitimations: I only am doing what other people do and consider to be right.

A typical rationalization is well-known from the discussion on corporal punishment. The father who beats his children says: „A good beating never hurt me,“ though -- the sentence should continue -- that's why I beat my own children, something I actually detest. Through the sentence „A good beating never hurt me“, the father legitimizes his own use of violence, even though the sentence is obviously untrue; the beatings that he received as a child *did* harm him in actuality. They led to *his* having to become violent *himself*.

Among the many meanings that religion has for human beings pertinent in this context are those with which human beings collectively justify their questionable behavior. It is indisputable that religion also has an ideological function when it legitimizes actions contradicting the ethical goals of religion. We find numerous examples in all religions throughout history. Obvious examples in Christianity include the Crusades and the Inquisition, the blessing of weapons or the discrimination against women.

Religion as legitimation for violence

The ideological function of religion is striking when it is a matter of the collective legitimation of violence. A prominent example is the legitimation of murder and suicide by the suicide attackers. How can a devout Muslim be motivated to kill himself and others? Islamic ethics clearly rule out such a use of violence, and no Muslim would be capable of a suicide attack of his or her own accord. Religious zealots lead the potential extremist to believe that he or she has an inordinately important mission to carry out in a holy war. How important the mission is becomes evident in the reward. Upon dying he or she will directly go to paradise. Both the talk of a holy war as well as the singularity of the mission are aspects of an ideology with the express intention of initiating the rejection of moral scruples and the complete abandonment of previous restraint from employing vio-



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lence.

The ideological function of religion is not only evident in the case of Islamic fundamentalists. In the declaration of war against terrorism by the American government the ideological function of religion is also of central importance. With obvious allusions to the book of Revelation apocalyptic images of the fight against evil and against the „axis of evil“ are conjured with the sole purpose of legitimizing the counterviolence and persuading the soldiers to willingly go to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Here, too, visions and missions play a role taken from religious fundamentalism. Of course, it does not preach suicide attacks; only the desperate are capable of those. Yet what distinctively characterizes Western religious fundamentalism is that it is beyond reproach. Since the religious „rebirth“ God is absolutely reliable and is always on one's own side. Why should there be any doubts whatsoever about the necessity of using violence for freedom and for a just cause? Here, too, religion offers a mock justification for the inner willingness to use violence.

From a psychological perspective an inner willingness to use violence always arises from a personally endured experience of violence -- a traumatization. The willingness of the Islamic fundamentalists to use violence definitely has a different historical background than that leading to the declaration of war against terrorism. This traumatization can be identified with a specific date. On September 11, 2001 the self-image of the American people underwent a severely violent experience, which was traumatizing above all for those, who, as religiously „born-again“ Christians, imagined themselves to be unassailable.

At this point it is useful to recall what traumatization actually entails. We speak of traumatizations in a psychological sense when someone is defenselessly subjected to violence and cannot cope with the ensuing feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, defenselessness, and isolation other than by incorporating the violence, and having it under his or her control as an introjection. In this way external violence has become an inner willingness to use violence demanding to be gratified.

Religion plays a decisive role in the question of coping with feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and isolation. Up to this point the impression may have arisen that religion only serves the purpose of legitimizing violence. This impression is false. On the contrary, I am convinced that above all religion can help to cope differently with feelings of powerlessness and can thus contribute to the prevention of new violence.

From a psychological point of view religion has a variety of functions that are indispensable for human beings. One of the most important tasks of religion is to



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thematize hidden and forgotten aspects of our being as human beings. Religion is concerned with areas of reality that go beyond everyday life and do not have a place in everyday life. I am not only thinking of the question of the meaning of life and the origins and the scope of human existence.

In our current daily life many feelings no longer have a place anymore, are quite literally out of place – feelings that are crucial to an integrative being as a human being. In our society feelings of failure, shame, powerlessness, fear of old age and death, of dependence or hopelessness, for example, are to a great degree taboo. There is no longer any place for them because such feelings only indicate that someone is a failure. Because our lives and social existence still require us to cope with such negative feelings, religion could be the place where such feelings are experienced, communicated, and shared.

With respect to the question of violence religion actually does have two sides: it can rationalize new violence and in this way reinforce or even increase the potential for violence; however, it can also contribute to enduring the feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and isolation in the face of violence effecting defenselessness as well to counteracting defenselessness. This possibility will be the final subject of my reflections.

Religion as liberation from violence

Whether a religion contributes to a decrease in violence is not contingent on its stigmatization of violence and its condemnation of violence as the root of all evil. On the contrary, if religion is apprehensive about confronting violence it actually puts itself at the service of violence. This is only a contradiction at first glance. Once it has been comprehended that violence always has its roots in the incapability of a person to defend himself or herself and to sense and endure feelings of powerlessness, defenselessness, helplessness, and isolation, it becomes understandable why someone who is apprehensive about confronting violence is at the same time influenced by violence. In actuality he or she is defenseless and – like the violent person – does not want to have anything to do with these intolerable feelings of powerlessness and defenselessness.

In my opinion religion must fulfill four preconditions in order to contribute to a decrease in violence:

- First: in religious practice there must be a unity and solidarity with the victims and the losers of a society structured on violence. Such solidarity is only possible if closeness is sought to those who are powerless, defenseless, helpless, and isolated.
- This leads to the second precondition: religion must offer the individual hu-



man being space in which he or she learns to be able to feel powerless, defenseless, helpless, and isolated.

- Third: religion must itself refrain from the use of violence toward the believer. Religious violence takes many forms. Ritualized acts of humility and self-humiliation are more often than not another form of religious violation. Conversion cannot be forced. Mandatory confessions of guilt and public testimonies of personal sin and wrongdoing are gestures of submission. And conflicts with dissidents and infidels can never be resolved through violence.
- Fourth: religion must encourage people to be critical toward every kind of violence and to assert themselves against every claim to violence. Violence is always aimed at making people defenseless and at curtailing defensive aggression. In American English there is a word that does not exist in contemporary German and that expresses this capability to defend oneself succinctly: *empowerment*. When religion facilitates *empowerment* it prevents violence from being born again in the victim.

Counterviolence is not an adequate response to violence. On the contrary, it only contributes to the rebirth of violence. This psychological insight is valid to an exceptional degree in the case of terrorist violence. Terrorist violence does not only constitute a challenge for politics not to react with counterviolence. It equally constitutes a challenge for religion, because religion is instrumentalized by both sides to legitimize violence. This, and how the Christian religion in particular, with its central message of the powerlessness of the cross and the solidarity with the defenseless, could and should play a role in the reduction of violence, is what I have attempted to suggest at the end of my reflections.

The provocation of terrorist violence cannot be countered with the alternatives „peace in our time“, or „violence in our time.“ Neither Chamberlain’s „appeasement policy“, toward Hitler nor Bush’s declaration of war against terrorism have ended the cycle of violence. Violence arises from defenselessness and aims at effecting defenselessness. If it is possible to successfully reduce feelings of powerlessness on both sides through *empowerment*, violence will be deprived of its breeding ground.