

An Anatomy of Violence:

A psychological reflection with a theological twist

The starting point for this reflection is Søren Kierkegaard's conception of *Angst*.¹ He argues that it is our reaction to being called by God into authentic human existence or greater spiritual freedom and maturity. The awareness even of the alternative to one's present condition produces anxieties as the individual faces the unknown as well as the abyss of trust. *Angst* is thus the "misrelation" of the self to itself and to others.²

Kierkegaard assumes that the Creator is continually calling his creature into deeper and more mature selfhood so that the individual faces ever new possibilities for growth and hence ever-recurring states of anxiety. To reduce the discomfort, the person seeks to maintain control by actively resisting the voice of the Creator. This turning away from God produces inner conflict. The sinful human being "hates the pressure being placed upon him to become a more mature person. He hates this possibility." This response is in one sense the dread of losing the self by being "recreated in a more mature formation". The response results in a defensive kind of self-protection.³

Here we spot the most basic root of violence: hostility towards the authentic self, leading to a form of spiritual suicide aimed against the self, coupled with violence towards others and rejection of God.

In its desire for egocentric mastery, the self defiantly attempts to justify its autonomous existence by repeatedly turning away from the voice of the Creator. But such egocentricity reaps a deceptive fruit: a "hardening of the heart" as the Bible calls it or the hardening of the individual's psychological structure.

The defiant self is not only scandalized by the sheer givenness of creaturely life (which it wants to shape for its own purposes), but it is also threatened by the presence of God and of others whom it ought to respect and love. Thus the inner strategy of ego-protection represents the power struggle between the self and the

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*. Trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson. Kierkegaard's writings, vol. 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

² Charles Bellinger, *The Genealogy of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38.

³ Bellinger, *Genealogy of Violence*, 65, 67.

Creator over the right to create the self.⁴ In its attempt to become its own creator, the defiant self inverts the doctrine of creation by persistently drowning out the voice of the Creator who invites it to move forward to become a more authentic self. Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell rhetorically praised this attitude of defiance:

[P]roudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, [man's] knowledge and his condemnation to sustain alone a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power.⁵

In this state, the individual resents existence under grace and “would rather rage against the universe than do anything else.”⁶ Such is the virulence of the human condition. It refuses to be drawn into repentance, healing and transformation, which would totally undermine the defiance and the self-image forged over and against that of the Creator.

What comes into view is the mimetic intensification of sin. Scandalized by the life-promoting voice of the Creator (who calls the self forth into new life), the defiant self (or ego) hates this call because it engenders the sense of existential neediness or inadequacy. Hence, it seeks to do away with that possibility by denying the voice and by joining with others to form a crowd which suffers from the same sickness and seeks ego-protection in similar ways. Such company serves only to reinforce itself. If the process of collective defiance is repeated ever more often, a state of radical resistance is reached in which the ego now hates God without cause, the natural consequence of which is violence. As Charles Bellinger puts it, the individual is so enraged over its inability to silence or kill the voice that he or she “develops a need to kill other human beings”. Quoting Bellinger again:

He [the defiant self] subconsciously construes other human beings as a representation of that which he is trying to kill within himself. Instead of addressing his internal alienation as his own problem, he projects his anger out into the world.⁷

In sum then, the root of humanity's spiritual sickness is hostility towards the Creator. At the same time, human beings cannot escape the voice which summons them to a self-transcending life which they are invited to live empowered by the Spirit and the

⁴ Libuse Miller, *In Search for Self* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 256.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian*, (Simon & Schuster, 1957), 115-116.

⁶ Bellinger, *Genealogy of Violence*, 48.

⁷ Bellinger, *Genealogy of Violence*, 67. Eric Voegelin has called this condition “the egophanic revolt”, by which he means the eclipse of the epiphany of God in human consciousness by the epiphany of the ego (Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989], 67-68).

love of the Creator. They either answer this call and live, or refuse and die. In the latter case, they feel compelled to justify their rejection of God, of themselves and of others. Thus they slide downwards on an ever more slippery slope of inner corruption, which simply means the growing incapacity to hear the voice that calls them away from spiritual death, a death that is inherent in the self-justifying hostility towards the Creator.

To provide insights into the inner dynamics of the egocentric human condition (invariably tending towards extremes), I describe below a handful of symptoms. As diagnostic tools, they can help us identify the state we are in when the ego resists the call to a God-centred life. These symptoms appear in the order of growing severity.⁸

Anxiety

Anxiety or fear arises at the prospect of humiliation. It is the fear of loss or loss of face, of dropping out of existence, of being nothing. Compactly expressed, it is the fear of death. Under this perceived threat, the human being is tempted to rid himself of it by taking a pre-emptive strike at others. This can lead to aggression and eventually to the impulse to expropriate their glory, reputation, status, or beauty,⁹ possessions, money, and power or perceived superiority. All of these are the objects of envy; in short, the pre-emptive strike and its successors aim at the elimination of the very existence of the other, including the existence of God (see aggressive atheism, death-of-God theology, and particularly in the Christian tradition, the crucifixion of Jesus).

Unbelief

Failure in faith follows. We will only give in to this temptation when we do not trust. Only trust makes us fearless in the face of existential threats. Trust overcomes the temptation to strike out against God and neighbour. Without the spiritual power of trust, which is another way of saying without faith in God, we live in a perpetual state of unbelief and its inevitable consequence, the fear of loss which we try to overcome by the pre-emptive strike against other people in its many destructive forms.

Pride

⁸ For a more elaborate exposition of these 'symptoms' see Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1994).

⁹ This may explain why in cases of violence perpetrated against women, it is their face that gets violated most often. Analogously, in violent outbursts people often mutilate works of art, symbolic representations of aesthetic values.

When we cover this anxiety by denying its existence, we enter the state of pride or egocentrism. Like narcissism, it pretends to God-likeness by seeing itself as the life source. That's why, traditionally, pride has been seen as the essence of sin, for it is not only a turning away from the divine centre which is our origin, but also elevating itself above God by pitting one's opinion against God's will. Pride is thus the substitute of the human for the divine and is therefore idolatrous. It contradicts the first commandment of the Decalogue (Ex 20:3-4). For Augustine, pride arose in a soul that was inordinately enamoured of its own power.¹⁰ Thus pride relies on its own achievements, refuses to accept limits, arrogantly elevates itself above others, even into the sphere of the divine, is insensitive to the suffering of others, and is unable to enter into a sympathetic understanding of their needs. The evil of pride fragments communities and leads to repression, nepotism, exploitation, exclusion, violence and war.¹¹

Concupiscence

The state of pride has another face: concupiscence. This is the desire to make the soul secure against all contingencies through possessions. It manifests in the tendency to keep up with the Joneses, in overindulgence and in the desire to possess for the sake of possession. It seeks to profit from other people's loss and favours an economic system that exploits the poor. It is impatient and wants what it wants now. The inflamed passions of unrestrained sexual desire and its deliberate and destructive pursuits also belong to this condition.

Self-justification

When pride and concupiscence are at work, they lead to transcendent desire, wanting to possess what God possesses, namely his goodness, and to ascribe it to ourselves. This attempt to make ourselves good or "righteous" is called self-justification. Its

¹⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, 12.6; 14.13.

¹¹ In the 20th century war casualties increased from approximately 20 million to 108 million, a fivefold increase compared with the previous century, while the ratio of casualties to world population, which had been static for 300 years, more than doubled in that period (based on statistics on war casualties found in Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 221 in combination with data on world population in Raymond Peal, *Natural History of Population* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939], 238 Fig. 38). According to Wink, more people died in war in the 20th century than in the last 5000 years combined. While these statistics speak for themselves about our violent propensities, there is nothing more evil in modern preparation for war than the retention and development of nuclear weapons, especially the black market in radioactive material and weapons technology recently uncovered by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Yet investigations are being hampered by conflicting political interests between Pakistan, where this clandestine operation began more than thirty years ago, and the USA. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/26/International/asia/26nuke.html> (accessed 26 January 2006).

surface expression is scapegoating. We seek to exonerate ourselves at the expense of others, which in individuals and society often takes the form of political ideology, racial prejudice, religious intolerance or simply blame-mongering in any form. It is deceitful, and denies its own sinfulness, offloading it onto others.

Cruelty

When through self-justification we reject the possibility that there is any goodness outside and independent of ourselves (the grace of God and of others), we remove ourselves from the possibility of forgiveness. This leads to a hardening of the heart, which means further loss of empathy. The result is cruelty, or the ability to ignore the suffering of others. It shows in the willingness to inflict bodily and emotional pain on animals or people so as to cause anguish and fear.

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According to Christian faith, the malaise is spiritual and its cure is accepting God's judgment of this mode of being. The good news is that God loves us despite our "misrelation" to him and to others; he keeps calling us out of our former state of existence to a new way of being. In other words, we are invited to participate in his redemptive purpose not only for us as individuals, but also for the preservation of the world. The costly grace of God calls us to radical renunciation of our self-willed lives to single-minded discipleship under his gracious rule over us in Jesus Christ. In saying 'yes' to the call, we become sons and daughters of God who now consciously trust and obey him. When old attitudes creep in (as they will), instead of justifying them as before, we are now able to recognize them for what they really are: sinful ego-defences in denial of God's adequacy for our situation. Yet his grace is not withdrawn, still enabling us to mend the disrupted relationship through repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation (which he freely offers) and so return to the place of peace and love. I know of no better way to Life.