

First Steps in the Decade: Toward a Broad Definition of Violence

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The World Council of Churches Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace, which began in February of 2001, provides an opportunity for Christians to reflect deeply on their biblical, historical and theological perspectives and resources, and begin to take steps to address the ecclesiastical tendency to uncritically reflect the vision and values of popular secular culture. Since the establishment of the Christian Church in the 4th century, the time of Constantine, the Church has been the "baptizer" of culture, seeking to maintain its power and privilege through the support and affirmation of cultural norms. Through missionary, hierarchical and similar efforts which were at least as geo-political as they were religious in nature, the Church has endorsed and countenanced countless forms of violence, many of these performed with the presumption not only of divine justification but of divine sanction and initiative. The Decade is a fresh, sustained opportunity to step back, to ponder deeply through scriptural and theological reflection the shape of our historic witness, to re-assess both internal and external forms of violence perpetrated by individual Christians, local, regional, national and international Churches, and Church and societal leaders and authorities, and re-formulate a contemporary Christian response to the pervasive violence within and around us that forms us from birth in both character and culture.

Given the need for broad reflection on a whole host of topics related to the overcoming of violence, perhaps a good starting place is with the changing nature of the concept of violence itself. Most Dictionaries define violence as some kind of physical force, especially extreme, sudden, unjust or improper force, which results in injury or destruction of persons or property. This definition is clear enough, since most of us will know that when we see it. When someone is pushed, hit, stabbed, shot, raped, or in some other way made the object of physical abuse, most people would agree that violence has occurred. The problem lies in the meaning of the adjectives extreme, sudden, unjust or improper, all of which beg the question, according to whom? Are there normal, just or proper forms of violence, or should those acts be called something else?

Another question raised by these conventional definitions is whether the naming of violence should be restricted to physical abuse or destruction alone. One of the Latin roots from which we get our English word violence is *violare*, which means "*to violate*." Whatever violates another, in the sense of infringing upon or disregarding or abusing or denying the personhood of the other, whether physical harm is involved or not, can be understood as an act of violence. The basic definition of violence, therefore, is the violation of personhood, and the World Council of Churches seems to agree with this assessment, since it names many forms of violence in its related publications which are not limited to physical forms alone.

That basic definition of violence, as a violation of personhood, has been broadened by

some to include four kinds or types of violence:

1. First, the clearest instance of violence is ***personal overt physical assault***. This occurs when one person does direct physical harm to another, such as in conventional and Dictionary definitions.
2. Second, when overt physical assault is practiced in corporate terms it becomes ***institutionalized overt physical assault***. The clearest example is war, when society mobilizes resources for collective acts of destruction. Violent political repression of a population, through a police force or army's reign of terror meant to silence or eliminate opposition, is also this form of violence.
3. Third, ***personal covert violence*** is when one individual violates the personhood of another in psychological, spiritual, and emotional, rather than physical, ways. Many forms of domestic violence, including the consistent use of threat and verbal intimidation, fall into this category of violence.
4. Fourth and finally, ***institutionalized covert violence*** occurs when the structures and systems of society violate the personhood of some of its members. Systemic racism, sexism, poverty, etc. are all included in this most subtle and pervasive kind of violence.¹

Another way to characterize violence, building upon the understanding of institutionalized covert violence outlined in number 4 above, was articulated by Dom Helder Camara, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Recife, Brazil, many years ago. In a small book called *Spiral of Violence*,² the bishop notes that the most basic form of violence, the first violence, is ***injustice***. This occurs at a societal level when its structures of power and governance so depersonalize people they become objects rather than subjects. One can think of this in many ways, including the consistent denial of basic human rights through the deprivation of entitlements such as food, clothing, shelter, education, etc.

When the injustice of society becomes too oppressive, the second form in this spiral of violence, which the bishop called ***revolt***, rises. Violence as revolt is directed against the status quo, against those who have power and privilege and are therefore responsible for ongoing injustice. It is committed by those who have suffered under violence number 1, who have attempted other means which seek transformation toward justice, such as civil debate, protest, etc., and who conclude that revolt is their last, best option to restore their personhood.

Just as violence number 1 (injustice) leads to violence number 2 (revolt), so does violence number 2 lead to violence number 3, which bishop Camara calls ***repression***. Those who hold the reins and levers of power, when confronted with revolt, repress it by violent means, to ensure that they maintain their privilege. Token changes may in fact be made before violence number 3 is implemented, as a way to appease those who revolt without having to give up power. The question of law and order, and the maintenance of the decision-making structures of civil society, are concerns, and steps

to avoid anarchy or random death need to be taken by governments with legitimate claims to power provided them by the population. However, those same concerns can become effective instruments of repression when invoked as a result of the perception of danger that the status quo may be challenged. Democracies in particular need to be on the alert for the crossing of this subtle line by the powers that be, since laws can be, and are often found to be, unjust, and the exercise of power for the good of all can soon become the exercise of power for the good of only some. For this reason dissent ought to be encouraged in democratic societies, rather than scoffed at or dismissed, so that vigilance regarding the many subtle faces of institutionalized covert violence can be rooted out and made public.

The question before us as Christians, when faced with this analysis of bishop Camara, is both profound and simple: How do we stop the spiral? Any adequate answer must deal with the root causes of violence, with the injustice of violence number 1, since violence 2 and 3 are reactive forms, by protestors and powers respectively, that result from prior and primary structural violence. As bishop Camara put it, "*The only true answer to violence is to have the courage to face the injustices which constitute violence number 1.*"

To return to our theme and summarize, the Decade to Overcome Violence is clearly an initiative which allows and calls for a broadened and deepened understanding of violence. It therefore encourages us to expand our ecclesiastical self-reflection to ponder institutionalized forms of violence, in both Church and society, to admit our complicity in structural and systemic violence, to come to terms with the nature and nurture of violence in us and in our midst, and to repent, pray, and act in ways that will not only name violence in its many guises but begin to take steps to eradicate and overcome its power and persistence within and among us all. May we be given the grace to do these things, that the God who longs to mend the world may find us partners in that enterprise.

Endnote

¹ This four-part summary of other work is taken from Robert McAfee Brown, Religion and Violence: A

Primer for White Americans, (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1973), pgs. 7-8.
2 (Dimension Books, Denville, N.J., 1971).