

God and Repression

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In his attempt to defend the Declaration of Human Rights against criticism from both the second and the third world, the Belgian philosopher Guy Haarscher admits in his book *Philosophie des Droits de l'homme* (Brussels, 1987) that this would be easier if modern men could still believe in God. Why? Because God is the embodiment of what is common to all people. He represents the universal truth of human values on which human rights are based.

Ever since Durkheim we have been strongly aware of the fact that there is a close relationship between society and faith in God. But Guy Haarscher states that God is dead. We cannot go back to a faith in God, he says, for it would entail accepting a hierarchically structured cosmos and thus a hierarchical society. Society before the French Revolution was such a society, one in which all individuals had their place, their definable rights and obligations. It was a society in which the value system was clear and persons enjoyed quite a lot of security, but in which they were not allowed to leave their places lest they endanger the society's unity. In the third century Plotinus had argued for the inner goodness of such a social order, and his impact on Christian theology can hardly be overestimated; many Vatican declarations cannot be understood fully without some knowledge of Plotinus' philosophy.

For modern human beings this hierarchical society is repressive. The French Revolution marked the death of of hierarchical society and the dawn of an age in which (in theory) all individuals were allowed to find the places in society which suited them most. Today we appreciate our social mobility much too much to long for the fleshpots of Egypt, the house of slavery. But it is characteristic of these closing years of our century that all the ideologies are losing their attraction and power, and this is as true of ideological atheism as it is of theism. Up to now we were always thinking and acting towards some end or point of orientation (though usually doing this implicitly), but this horizon is disappearing. We are living in a room without walls; everything is possible for anybody, we say, but we feel paralysed, for it is hard to move without a point of orientation.

If God is dead (and if 'ideologies' are losing their appeal), how do we find something that may untie us and make it possible for us to communicate and to live together in relative peace? Is it in fact possible to live truly together in a competitive society?

Guy Haarscher's attempt to justify human rights has to be seen in the context of a search for some common ideology on the basis of which the people of the whole world can unite. He appeals to the individual to respect the other individual as one who, like all, is born and dies alone. But Haarscher admits that his choice of the individual over against the demands of a concrete society remains obscure. He represents the opinion of much of modern Western humanity by stating that faith in God entails accepting repression, but he does not have a convincing alternative to offer. It would seem that there is only one realistic choice. We can opt for a society in which individuals are continuously fighting one another for the 'best' places, a society not governed by a repressive regime but at the same time without God or some common transcendence. On the other hand, we can opt for a society that is repressive but at least gives one a sense of belonging.

Or is it possible to believe in a God who is not repressive and violent? Does a non-violent God exist who can give a new direction to our lives? Is, after all, a world possible in which we could communicate with one another in freedom because we all know that we are children of one non-violent God?

In this article I am restricting myself to exploring very briefly how far, if at all, Christianity might be able to offer positive answers to those questions ... in spite of the fact that, in view of the central place 'sacrifice' has in religion, God nearly always has been associated with power, repression, even violence—at least in the great monotheistic traditions of the West—and seen as the guarantor of a hierarchically structured universe and society.

The Father of Jesus Christ is a likely candidate for a non-violent God, for He is love (1 John 4:9), or, in the words of the ancient letter of Diognetus, 'violence is no attribute of God' (VII). In love people are equal, but at the same time their differences and otherness are stressed.

However, this God is the same as the God of revenge of the Old Testament. The writings of the Old Testament mention more than 600 deeds of violence, some of them unrestrained, such as that in Joshua 10:40, where we are told that Joshua wiped out all that breathed in southern Palestine 'as the Lord God of Israel commanded'. If the God of the New and Old Testament is the same, He—or at least the way He revealed himself—went through a historical process.

Yet what, then, are we to think of Ephesians 5, where women are urged to submit themselves to their husbands, children to their parents and slaves to their masters? And, until only very recently, was not the theology of redemption, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic, dominated by St Anselm's concept of a God who demanded the sacrifice of his Son if we were to be reconciled to Him? Is it scandalous to ask whether this Anselmian God is very different from the God of Ayatollah Khomeini, who united human beings to Himself and to one another through the death of those—Salman Rushdie, for example—who were

supposed to be guilty? Do we not today see in the Catholic Church a process of scapegoating one theologian after another in order to reaffirm again and again the unity of faith and authority in the Church?

Let us, though, go back to those Old Testament terms such as 'revenge', 'wrath' and 'punishment' which are, it seems, a major obstacle to the thought of a non-violent God. How big an obstacle are they in fact?

In both the Old and New Testaments individuals and communities reveal themselves in their deeds. A man does not exist outside his actions; he is alive in what he does. If he does evil, he is in this evil and meets with evil. Hebrew does not have a word for punishment; sin is at the same time punishment. A sinful deed reveals itself in time to be evil for both the evil-doer and for those who suffered from it. A deed is like a seed, it grows and becomes a tree. Sowing evil will result in a harvest of crime (cf. Hosea 10:12—13). The Hebrew word 'revenge' has as its root 'sjim', in which we easily recognise the word 'sjalom', 'peace'. 'Sjim' is most frequently translated as 'revenge' or 'retribution' but a better translation is 'to make complete'. God makes the sinful deeds of a man complete, He guarantees that their harvest will be evil. Murder will result in the death of the killer.

So, when Pharaoh orders the killing of the children of the Hebrews and God kills the firstborn Egyptians, God is not so much taking a special action as completing Pharaoh's evil plans, which turn against him so that he reaps what he has sown. Revenge is here very close to justice. What, though, about the Old Testament texts—about 100—in which God orders people to kill their fellow human beings? Men are here doing God's work. But in later texts there is a development in theological thinking, and this kind of command becomes rare. Wishes to take revenge are most abundant in the Exilic period, when it is impossible to take revenge. Then, instead, revenge is left to God (Dt 32:35). In Daniel 12 revenge against the ungodly is at a general resurrection, when the just are called to everlasting life.

But we are told that God is not only revengeful but wrathful. However, God's 'wrath' is first and foremost an appeal to the offending people to be converted; it gives them time to think and to return to God. The most violent saying about God is, in fact, that he is zealous.

All this, nevertheless, will not be enough to convert the critics. They are likely to object that, even if we have succeeded in putting God's 'revenge' and 'wrath' in a rather different light, we are still left with the fact that the idea of God which dominated the life of ancient Israel produced a violent and repressive society. But this overlooks the complexity of the Old Testament witness.

In the Old Testament we find five powerful concepts—*kinship*, *monarchy*, *covenant*, *temple* and *eschatology*—which over the centuries continued to play a role in the formation of the sacred texts. Each of them has violent connotations of its own. In a society based on *kinship*

relations (like Hebrew society in the time of the judges) social repression is powerful: no individual may become too prominent. But *monarchy* is an even more violent system: not only because it has a military and civil apparatus of its own by which subjects can be repressed, but also because originally it was a religious as well as a political institution, and anthropologists have argued quite cogently that in many parts of the world the king was originally a victim appointed to be sacrificed.

In the late 7th century, out of the prophetic critique, the theology of *covenant* was developed—what has been called the ‘Deuteronomic’ tradition. According to this theology, God concluded a covenant with Israel by which God obliges himself to support Israel as long as it remains within the covenant, and every generation has to decide for itself whether it will. Instruction in the law, which is at the same time God’s law, assures the future of the people. The new concept divorces Israel from other nations. Already here is the beginning of monotheism: for Israel there is only one God.

The Deuteronomic tradition is the most violent of all traditions in Israel. The so-called ‘ban’—the requirement to commit genocide—which plays a major part in the book of Joshua is a Deuteronomic invention. Those horrific stories have no historical value, but are a product of the emphasis in the Deuteronomic tradition on the need for Israel to be untainted by pagan thought and ritual. Israel is forbidden to ally itself with any foreign nation; there is only the one covenant with God. In this perspective peace always implies the submission of other nations to Israel (Deuteronomy 20:11).

However, during the Babylonian exile a new tradition came to the fore—the *temple* became the point of focus, and political and military leaders were seen as subject to the high priest (Numbers 27:21). Precisely because of the absence or remoteness of the temple, each house became a place of worship, and the purity customs became part of everyday piety. Purity laws always give a strong feeling of belonging and identity. It was thus not necessary to exterminate the pagans; it sufficed to live within the borderlines of cultic purity. In this tradition there is no place for a ‘ban’. Although there is violence in this temple tradition insofar as it was supposed to be centred around the temple’s sacrificial liturgy, in this theology God forbids war and violence amongst human beings, and asks that a society be founded that does not use violence against outsiders. However, violence was already reigning in that world. In the version of the Pentateuch that has come down to us the temple tradition is preserved but the Deuteronomic tradition is more powerful.

Prophetic theology, combined with disappointment about post-Exilic society, in which the just lost their lives rather than the evildoers, was the source of *eschatology*, according to which none of the existing societies was the society God wanted: His kingdom would come at the end. This shift of focus to the end-time did not, however, mean that there was no violence in the eschatological tradition. While in Daniel

violence is not particularly explicit and it is not human beings who carry it out, according to the 'War Rule' of Qumran the last days will see a unique carnage.

What this little survey of these five central concepts (or, rather, traditions) seeks to demonstrate is that even in the time of Jesus it was not possible to make comprehensive generalisations about what scripture said God was like and what his people were supposed to be like—and especially about what scripture had to say about the place of violence in the life of God and his people.

Jesus clearly does not stand in the main tradition of the Old Testament. He is non-violent. Rather than exercising violence, he became a victim of violence himself. Being converted to him implies going through a similar experience to St Paul, who changed from being a persecutor, with a clear sense of identity and a well-defined 'ideology', into someone who discovered that his place was with those who were being persecuted—those not fitting into the world-view of the persecutors.

For St Paul, freedom was not any more summed up in keeping the law, with its clear rules and boundaries, but in being with those who had nothing to lose because they did not possess anything, not even a clear identity. The new Christian identity had to be understood negatively as being driven out of established groups, and positively as a relationship with Jesus, who had himself been driven out. Being a Jew or a Roman or a Greek, male or female, master or slave, did not count any more. The membership of the new group was inclusive, not exclusive. Everybody could belong to it. It did not have a hierarchical structure, in the sense of a division between oppressors and oppressed. Neither, though, was kinship a basis for belonging to this community. Neither law nor purity regulations could delineate its boundaries. The identity of the new group was therefore weak. It was based on the weakness of the victim Jesus. It did not have sacred things, taboos, sacred rules and authorities, not even sacred books in the sense in which the Koran is sacred for a Muslim. We do not have to imitate Jesus in a literal sense or to live in the same way as the first Christians, but we are invited to act in his and their Spirit, making our decisions within the ambiguities of our own historical and cultural situation.

How to live without violence and repression in a world full of all this turns out to be a difficult challenge. And this brings us back to the Ephesians 5 passage which was instanced early in this article as a New Testament text seemingly recommending repressive behaviour.

The society in which the New Testament was written was a so-called 'household society'. The 'household' is a somewhat autarchic entity, producing itself most of the things that it consumes. Its members are strongly dependent on one another, and its structure is hierarchical. The 'household' of New Testament times was seen as a reflection of the cosmic order, a microcosm mirroring the macrocosm. It was a rather

repressive institution, containing great tensions, which was upheld by the emphasis of the dominant interests in society on the need for submission to those in power.

At first sight the author of Ephesians seems to repeat and affirm the prevailing ethics of his repressive society. He takes up the key word in his culture: 'submission', 'be subject'. However, he begins by saying that his readers should 'be subject to one another'—something which editors of some influential editions of the text have obscured by starting a new paragraph at 5:22, so that the submission of the wife to the husband is over-stressed. When the author urges the wives to respect their husbands (5:33), he points his finger at a society in which women do whatever their husbands say, but merely because they have no other choice; in their hearts they often despise their husbands. According to the author of Ephesians, a new relationship becomes possible if women give up their contempt for their husbands: their husbands lose their fear of being despised and disobeyed in public; the reasons they may have to suppress their wives disappear. Again, a completely new relationship emerges when masters and slaves, and fathers and children, give up making use of their capacity to repress publicly and resist furtively. The author is using the key word 'be subject' over and over, in the same way as today's preacher uses the modern word 'freedom' again and again in the hope that through this word he can guide his hearers towards another kind of freedom than the liberal one which is prevailing in our culture.

Ephesians 5 is only one example among many in the New Testament of a contribution to the struggle involved in living as children of a non-violent God in a world in which violence and repression abound—either in a hierarchically structured society or in a so-called free society, where anybody who can is allowed to drive out others from their places. We are living in a society very different from the 'household' society of the author of Ephesians. The old repressive hierarchically structured society has broken down, at least partly because of the influence of the message of the Old and New Testament. The breakdown makes all of us very uncertain. We feel threatened by violence that may lurk just around the corner.

The leadership of the Catholic Church sees as the only way out the restoration of as much as possible of the old hierarchical structure with clearly defined boundaries, at the price of repressing or driving out people who cannot live any more within such a community. At a local level many churches of the Reformed tradition seem equally oppressive and intolerant towards people with dissenting views and alternative ways of life. All this confirms the conviction of many people that God is by definition a repressive and violent power. For more and more people the Church becomes a place where human rights are not respected, and in the Netherlands more than half the population says it does not have any relationship with any church.

Contemporary philosophy tends to deny that there is a point of

orientation, a goal in life. Reality is thoroughly fragmented. The cultural climate is becoming favourable again for so-called leader figures who seem to know where they are heading. So as to find a way to a common future, it seems to me that it is better and even more logical to go back to the biblical sources in a creative way, in order to meet the non-violent God that I have argued can be found there. This will entail a complete revision of creation theology, soteriology and ecclesiology, and, more than all this, a new way of living with creation, of making people free and of founding communities.

We cannot return to the repressive type of society of the past. Neither can we live forever in an empty space without boundaries. It seems to me that we can only hope in the revelation of the non-violent God who was in Jesus, and hope that there may happen to us that change of understanding which happened to St Paul in the no-man's land between Jerusalem and Damascus.

Lefebvrism—Jansenism revisited?

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I: Context and theory

1. Similarities of background

Jansenism and Lefebvrism arose in profoundly different worlds. Yet there are striking similarities between them in beliefs and practices—common tendencies, attitudes and assumptions.

Important similarities in the circumstances of their origins and development help to explain these. Not, of course, that the same weight can be given to all these similarities.

For example, both movements have been led by people with *charismatic personalities*. Central to the development of Jansenism was a series of individuals with powerful personalities such as Saint-Cyran, the Arnaulds, Nichole and Pascal. Their biographies are well recorded—all too well, for the Jansenists loved writing hagiographies of each other—and need not be retold here. Suffice it to say that 'the personal factor' was pre-eminent in the direction of the coterie¹.

Though vacillating and, by his own admission, inclined toward