

# Victims, violence and Christianity

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Fr D'Arcy had something to do with the ideas that I have developed all my life. When I first came to the States, Denis le Rougemont's book, *Love in the Western World*, was very popular, and Fr D'Arcy had written a book which was in part a refutation of it. It was a well-known controversy, and in America you still find the two books side by side in good bookstores. They are books about the role of violence in religion, even though the word 'violence' was not yet fashionable.

We imagine that everybody has always been talking about violence, since violence has always been with us, but that is not true. Violence is a new subject. In the past, people complained about insecurity, disorder, disorderly societies, and so forth, but there was no theme of violence as such. One can even question whether ancient languages had a word that really means violence in our sense. To ask 'why is there so much violence around us?' may feel like an eternal question, but in fact it is really a very modern one.

## What is violence?

As a Frenchman, I feel that the question really goes back to Voltaire. In *Candide*, the question is 'why is there so much violence in our world?', and the question has been with us ever since. Voltaire's pessimistic cynicism in *Candide* makes him seem more like a twentieth century man than an eighteenth century *philosophe*.

Because nowadays we really believe only in science, we try to study violence scientifically. So, we have countless symposia on violence, mostly on what people call the act of violence. People talk about violence in order neatly to circumscribe the subject and this makes it amenable to scientific investigation. They want to isolate the smallest knowable particle of violence.

By the act of violence they mean mugging in big cities. Of course violence in big cities, anonymous violence that strikes like lightning, more or less at random, is a real problem today. It is a very big problem which I do not want to minimise. But all criminologists will tell you that most violence occurs between people who have been acquainted with each other, often for a very long time.

Violence is a relationship, but in order to study it scientifically most people try to forget this fact. Relationships are messy; they are not clear-cut, you don't know where they begin, where they end, where they might lead you. Then they have a strange way of changing without you being aware of it; a good one turns into a bad one without you even noticing it. This is the difference between human relations and relations between animals. Relations between animals usually begin badly, with some fighting, but then they stabilise, usually once and for all and in an uneven way. There is a dominant partner, and a dominated one, and once established, this pattern will go on for ever.

## Reciprocity

Human relations are not like that at all, especially in a democratic world. Even when we had hierarchies, we nevertheless had a tremendous amount of reciprocity in human relationships. Reciprocity is one of the fundamental anthropological questions. The maturity of a science can be measured, I feel, by its ability to ask elementary questions. 'What is reciprocity?' is a question too elementary and fundamental for the current state of anthropology.

Reciprocity is always present in human relations, whether they are good or bad. If I hold out my hand to you, you will hold out yours to me and we will shake hands. In other words, you will imitate me. If you hold out your hand and I keep mine behind my back, you will be offended, and you will put yours behind your back as well. In other words, you will still imitate me. Even though the relationship is changing drastically, it remains reciprocal, which means imitative, mimetic. Relations of vengeance, revenge, retaliation are just as reciprocal as relations of perfect love.

But what is very interesting is that this reciprocity is absolutely fundamental. I think that in order to talk about violence rationally we must get away from the pure act of violence, which does not exist. Good criminologists will tell you that the man who mugs you in the street and

doesn't know you is a product of human relationships which made him violent, which turned him into the violent individual which he probably was not at a certain time in his life.

There is an additional reason why we try to isolate a clear-cut act of violence, namely from the judicial viewpoint. The judicial viewpoint, of course, tries to establish responsibilities. Its function is to keep the peace and in order to do that it must have very clear-cut guidelines. And the shift from violent to non-violent behaviour is absolutely essential. You cannot blame the judiciary for doing that, otherwise they could not keep the peace. In fact, if they try to refine their criteria too much, if they have the question of extenuating or aggravating circumstances becoming too complex, then you reach the mad world of the American judiciary today, where nothing can ever be settled and you have appeals that go on for twenty-five years. In order to function efficiently the judiciary must simplify the problem of violence.

### **How relationships change**

If we reject all simplifications we have to take into account this strange fact that violent relations are just as reciprocal as non-violent relations. And we don't always realise how and when the one turns into the other precisely because the reciprocity is always there. You can describe very roughly what goes on when a relationship becomes bad. The first thing to observe is that, in most relationships, we all tend to feel that the initiative belongs to our partner, not to ourselves.

We receive a message and it provides us with a means to evaluate the temperature of the relationship — it may be hot, it may be cold, it may be lukewarm and so forth. Normally we are polite to each other but if we feel someone is not quite as polite as they should be, we will return the message with some added emphasis. We do not think we are changing the relationship. We only want to inform our partner that his or her message has been interpreted in the spirit it was sent. Our partner sees things very differently because he also sees himself as the one at the receiving end of the relationship and he will interpret what we regard as legitimate retaliation as a gesture of unprovoked hostility.

Accordingly he will interpret the small increment of sympathy or antipathy as more significant than we feel it is, and then he will return the message with an added emphasis of his own. It takes very few exchanges of this type for the relationship to escalate to open hostility. Neither partner understands why the relationship has gone sour.

All human relations tend to be very complex and delicate. Therefore, they may deteriorate very fast and no one ever feels responsible for the deterioration. You will never find anyone who will say, 'yes, I provoked that individual' or if it does happen, it will only be after a very difficult conversion. Someone may say yes I was a persecutor, yes I misbehaved'. It happened to St Peter after his denial, it happened to Paul on his way to Damascus, but it doesn't happen to most of us. Most of us feel completely innocent in our relations, or if we feel we haven't paid enough attention to people we try to correct the situation but usually too late. Therefore, we are all involved.

If we start looking at things in this manner we will realise that human relations have a history. All human relations are historical in the sense that they cannot stay the same. They evolve, and they always evolve in one way or another. And it is always easier to make them evolve in the wrong direction, because to make them evolve in the better direction requires us to swallow our pride rather than retaliating.

### **Relations of desire and Shakespeare**

The question is, why are human relations reciprocal in this way? In order to understand that, you must go to relations of desire. We never think of relations of desire as reciprocal but some great writers do, in particular Shakespeare. In Shakespeare I feel that relations of desire are reciprocal from the beginning and the earliest plays are the most enlightening about this. The reason for this, I believe, is that the author has just discovered the paradoxes of imitated and mimetic desire and he delights in exhibiting them.

Take *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, for example. They have been raised together since infancy. They appreciate the same things, they like the same books, they like the same food, they like the same people and they are very conscious that imitation is the principle of their friendship. If they start liking different things, they feel that something is wrong with their friendship, so they do their best to move back on the same track. Then one fine day one of the two falls in love with a girl and of course the principle of imitation is obeyed and the other friend falls immediately in love with the same girl.

The principle of friendship has suddenly turned into a principle of enmity. Nothing has changed in their relationship. The only thing which has changed is the object which they feel they cannot share. The two friends become enemies when they fall in love with the same girl

and each one is going to reproach the other for betraying the friendship. Most critics, seeing this situation, interpret it in terms of a broken friendship, of a great distance suddenly separating the two friends. In reality it is a lack of distance which is responsible for the problem.

The same principle can make the most intimate friendship and the most bitter hostility, and the change is extremely sudden. Shakespeare constantly draws our attention to the paradox of human relations, and suddenly we are confronted by something that is like devilish magic, something about a principle in human relations which is about a principle of hostility which is universally present in humankind.

Therefore, when we ask why is there so much violence in the world, we always ask the question as if we had nothing to do with the violence, because we do not go out and mug people in the streets. But if you start thinking about Valentine and Proteus, the two gentlemen of Verona, then you feel that Shakespeare, who never talks directly about violence, is posing the problem of violence at an infinitely deeper level than we ever do. That is why the problem of violence is always very easy for us, because there is always someone responsible for the violence. But in the case of Valentine and Proteus, who is responsible?

If there is such a thing as original sin, maybe we must look in that direction. It must be something that we do not see as sinful and something that belongs to all of us, because we must say that the two friends are equally innocent. But also we cannot deny that the two friends share some guilt, for otherwise who is guilty for the violence there? Can we blame it on the world?

We often try to blame it on the parents – and Shakespeare is fully aware of that. That is why he borrows from what is called Italian comedy. He pretends to make the parents responsible, but it is clear that he does not believe it. He is fully aware that the young people themselves are responsible for the problem. This makes the play very paradoxical. You go and watch the play after dinner, and you do not want to be worried, especially by comedy, which is supposed to end nicely, without blood. The happy ending is supplied by something like the magical trick that intervenes to stop the bloodletting, like Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

### **Amity as the author of our variance**

But the problem is still there in all Shakespeare. It is not just a question of love and erotic matters. Take, for example, *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shakespeare offers a definition through a secondary character. This is before Antony and Octavius become enemies, but that they are going to become enemies is prophesied by Enobarbus, who says; ‘you shall find the band that seems to tie their friendship together will be the very strangler of their enmity’.

This sentence poses a problem that psychologists have not yet defined. It has nothing to do with Freud and nothing to do with Jung. It comes relatively late in Shakespeare’s career and he is so happy to have discovered the real formula for defining the problem that he repeats it a second time, two lines further on: ‘that which is the strength of their amity shall prove the immediate author of their variance’.

If that which is the strength of our amity can prove the immediate author of our variance, what sort of creatures are we? We have to ask questions about ourselves because we are likely to be in such situations. We manage to put the whole blame on our partner and we usually talk of conflict in terms of differences. When people are in conflict, we say they have their differences. When people have their non-difference, it is even worse. They are caught in a vicious circle, imitating each other’s desire. So what is going to happen?

When you are the model of my desire, you are the friend I admire and I am going to desire what you desire. And the friend is going to oppose this desire and say ‘no’. That ‘no’ is shattering and is going to increase our desire instead of making it less. As our desires increase we are going to move more forcefully towards the object we both desire and we cannot both have. Therefore, our model is going to have his hostility increased and his desire as well.

In this bad reciprocal game, the model becomes the imitator of his imitator and the imitator becomes the model of his model. This results in a relationship based on total misunderstanding. In reality there is more and more identity between the two characters who are fighting, of which they are unaware. They try to interpret their conflict in terms of differences. But they are rivals – the word ‘rivals’ refers to people who live on the two sides of the same river and they are fighting all the time. The fights between nations, like the fights between individuals, are fights about borders; they are rivalries about the same object. The main human conflict is not difference of ideology or opinion, or about mugging in the streets, but rivalry. We are constantly faced by rivalry in the modern world. We compete. It is very difficult to retain your friendship with someone you are competing with. Unless you are a

very strong person, you will be unable to interpret your relationship in terms of difference. You will never face the identity.

Our rivalry increases because we both collaborate to make it more intense. As I regard the object as more desirable, you are going to regard it as more desirable too. As a matter of fact, the modern world has adopted this as the main mechanism of its economic system, which is the stock market. In the stock market we are buying stocks because other people are buying them and we are buying them as everyone buys them and pushed to extremes this is called a speculative bubble.

Of course, Shakespeare already knew that. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind is incensed with a couple she overhears in which the girl is playing hard to get and increasing her value by rejecting her suitor. Rosalind advises her to 'sell when you can, you're not for all markets'. You would believe this was written by Lord Keynes, not Shakespeare, but Shakespeare understood the relatedness between romantic and economic games. You can create capital with mimetic rivalry, as long as you do not kill each other, as long as it remains some kind of economic game which can be productive up to a point, but which can also be very destructive psychically and physically and in every way.

In other words, we have a great problem of rivalry in our world as de Tocqueville understood so well when he visited America. He discovered the democratic system, which as you know is the worst of all systems, except for all others, and the democratic system is the system where it is safer to unleash rivalry up to a point; in other words, where people know where to stop and usually do not kill each other. Rivalry becomes incredibly productive not only in the economy, but in science, in the arts and in all sorts of other fields as well, as long as it does not go too far.

### **A contagious fire**

What makes mimetic rivalry terrifying is that it is a contagious fire, that it intensifies as it goes on. If you look at mythology, you will see its stories usually begin with an escalation of violence and with a great crisis. My own interpretation is that at the beginning of myth you really have a mimetic crisis of the type I am describing, but in an archaic community it tends to spread to the whole community. If such crises are mimetically contagious, if they tend to spread infinitely and store up more and more violence, the question about our world is not really why so much violence, but why so little? Why are we not always at each other's throats? That is the political question *par excellence*.

The first person to ask this question in a radical way was another English thinker, Thomas Hobbes. He said that when two people desire the same thing and cannot both have it, they become enemies and that is the beginning of what Hobbes calls 'the war of all against all'. I think that Hobbes is in touch with mythology, in touch with the beginning of human communities and with something very important. But after that he is not up to the challenge.

He is not up to the challenge because when he sees the war of all against all, the universal wolf turning into the universal prey, as Shakespeare said. He said that the moment comes when people start thinking about the situation, and they are reasonable (they are English I suppose), so they sign a social contract. The thing that is amazing about them is that people must sign social contracts and entrust their fate to a tyrant in order to have peace among themselves. You must have a master, Hobbes says, and this master human beings choose together among themselves in a friendly and amicable way. In order to stop their fighting, they must get together and form a government. But they do it at the very moment when they should be incapable of doing it, when the crisis is most intense, when the violence should run to extremes.

Long before the weapons catch up, Hobbes is talking of what the theoreticians of atomic power call mutually assured destruction. Hobbes' question is highly relevant. At the time of the Cuban missile crisis, people were wondering if they would be able to have a social contract, or whether they would trigger the apocalypse, the really violent revelation. They were able to have a social contract and this time it was the Russians who turned the other cheek when they turned back their ships. But I do not think that in human society as a whole this ability to refrain from violence at the most basic stage has ever prevailed—it is a modern situation in which we speak about violence. We speak about violence because it is a scandal to us, because we know it can destroy us at any moment. To think nowadays in global terms is constantly to keep in mind the possibility of destruction of our world.

### **Braking mechanisms**

But archaic people did not think that way and I do not think they had a social contract. I think there was a built-in braking mechanism in the mimetic crisis. When you have that

mimetic violence, there comes a point when you forget about the object and you concentrate on your opponent, and ultimately the mimetic influx converges on specific individuals, and there is a tendency for the system to simplify itself, to have fewer and fewer targets, and more and more people polarising against them until finally everyone polarises against a single enemy who seems responsible for the whole crisis.

If everybody believes in his or her guilt, in the guilt of the victim, when that victim is killed, the community will find itself free of violence (even if for only a very short time), because the violence will have been killed with that single individual upon whom the entire problem is projected. This is what we call a scapegoat. We use the word 'scapegoat' when someone pays for everyone else. I really think that archaic gods are scapegoats in that sense and since they solve the problems of violence they are divinised because they are the ones who solve the problem the community could not solve. Therefore, they are regarded at first as very bad and then as very good. The primitive sacred is both very malevolent and very benevolent, but you never know when it will shift from one to the other.

### **The Christian story**

From this perspective, you have a problem with Christianity. If you look at the Christian story, you will see it has exactly the same profile as the story I just gave you. You have a crisis at first, that of the little Jewish state, and then you have a polarisation against a single individual, Jesus. Then there is the resurrection, and Jesus is with God. At the end of the nineteenth century the anthropologists thought they had discovered the real nature of Christianity. They said it is like any other myth, but they did not really understand the scapegoat system. They failed to understand that the victim was really present, really existed, and was a real saviour, in the sense that to kill a victim who embodies the violence of the entire community really liberates the people from that violence. So they had a feeling that the gospels were the same thing as any myth. But there is a huge difference which we do not see because it seems unimportant.

If you look at a myth, like the Oedipus myth, you find someone who is supposed to have given the plague to his community because he has killed his father and married his mother. What kind of accusation is that? It is obviously a witchcraft accusation. If we read the myth as a medieval document, we would immediately recognise this, and we would not believe in it, because we would be in a Christian world and we would interpret it in Christian terms.

However the prestige of classical learning leads us to look at the Oedipus myth as some kind of unsolvable mystery, and we speculate endlessly about parricide and incest in each one of us. This is exactly the same thing as believing in the parricide and incest, which is exactly what I think Freudianism does. The difference with the gospels is that they tell you that this victim is wrongly accused, this victim is innocent, this victim is the victim of a mimetic contagion that has overcome violence.

In other words, the gospels are a failed myth. They are a failed myth because there is a power behind them that rejects the myth and this power is extremely mysterious, since the disciples at the beginning are willing to fall for the scapegoat's killing. At the beginning of the passion all the disciples abandon Jesus. They cannot wait for him one hour and the best of them, Peter, betrays Jesus. This does not mean that Peter is especially weak psychologically; it refers to all people; people in situations like that always believe in the guilt of the victim and are unable to resist the pull of a unanimous crowd. And the gospels are the only text which describes the truth of the scapegoat event. Therefore, they introduce us to a world in which we learn not to believe in scapegoating. That is why we can talk about it today.

A myth is the embodiment of scapegoating, its completion, its perfection. It is written by a crowd which believes it has been saved by its own victim in such a way that that victim is seen as a primitive god.

The gospels do exactly the opposite. Jesus says, 'I do not bring [the] peace [of the scapegoat], but the sword'. In John's gospel, every intervention of Jesus is followed by, 'they were divided by his words'. Far from reconciling the community, Jesus does not improve the situation of the world in the way which myth does.

Myth enables people to collaborate on the basis of a misunderstanding, which becomes their myth, their national myth. The gospels destroy this myth. Having for so long been unaware of this, today we are at a great turning point. We are for the first time able to understand the deconstructive side of Christianity and to understand that, far from being a myth, Christianity is what moves us away from myth, and places us in a world where we no longer have the safeguards of scapegoating.

These latter were called sacrifices. What did people do when they had a problem with violence in the ancient world? People had a myth, people had a scapegoating in their past that

they remembered as a divine epiphany. So they chose another victim and they all got together and killed that victim. They said, the god wants us to do this in order to reconcile us once again. So an archaic ritual, a sacrificial rite is really an effort to repeat an act of collective scapegoating which works because it is misunderstood.

People may say of the Eucharist, 'well, isn't that the same thing'? It is certainly the same symbolism. However, it is not a murderous action and the priest and the victim are one and the victim is aware of what the victim is doing. I think that the theory of redemption should be based on the fact that Jesus is aware that he is revealing the scapegoating that has underlain culture until then and taking humankind into a world where that scapegoating – and it will take centuries – is becoming less and less effective. But we are probably reaching the point where scapegoating has exhausted its possibilities. That is why we live in a world where violence and scapegoating have become spiritual stumbling blocks for us.

We talk about violence, we condemn our Christian predecessors for being prone to it. But we condemn them in the name of what superiority? I think we always condemn the past in the name of knowledge which, even if we are not aware, comes ultimately from the Bible. There is absolutely nowhere else, no other philosophy nor religion from which it could come. In other words the similarity between Christianity and myth which was long avoided by Christians as a dangerous thing, and a threat to Christianity, has to be explored. Now, though, the myths are understood from the perspective of Christianity.

If instead of the Oedipus myth — Oedipus guilty of the plague, of killing his father and mother — you look at the story as a passion play, you will realise that Thebes has capriciously moved against its king because it is tired of him. In the Byzantine world they still performed Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*, but they performed it as the passion of Oedipus, as the suffering of an innocent victim. Maybe they could not verbalise or conceptualise what they did, but instinctively they felt that Oedipus was a victim of the crowd, a victim, of the same type as Jesus, not an ugly goat but a kind of Lamb of God.

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