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THE BIBLICAL GOD AND VIOLENCE

1. Introduction

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What is God's relationship to violence? More in particular, how does the God of Hebrew-Christian tradition, the God of the Bible, relate to force, to the violence that human beings can exercise in God's name? Why is the God of the Bible a violent God?

There is no immediate answer to these questions. The Old Testament God is violent and that is that.¹ But it is also a fact that the Old Testament God is a God who forgives, is loving and is of peace. And this God in the Bible requires mankind to do likewise.

The image of God in the Bible contains in fact a fundamental ambiguity. We must, of necessity, understand the reasons behind this ambiguity. This I shall do from the philosopher's stance. To be more precise: within the sphere of the philosophy of religion.

¹ Just as in another foundation text for the West, the *Iliad*: see the parallel texts on this subject by Simone Weil («L'Iliade ou le poème de la force», in: *La source grecque*, Gallimard, Paris 1953) and Rachel Bessaloff (*De l'Iliade*, Brentano's Inc., New York 1943).

In the face of today's conflicts among different religions, philosophy of religion cannot confine itself to merely analysing fundamental religious concepts. It cannot spend time on merely discussing in the abstract, proofs that God exists and defining his divine attributes. Enquiry, in the philosophy of religion, must comprehend the fundamental conditions from which such conflicts arise and in this way, provide the instruments for dealing with them.²

Within this framework it is crucial to investigate the relationship between the Biblical God and violence. I shall discuss this question and as my discussion develops, attempt to find an answer to several questions. I shall ask myself: How should we understand the figure of a violent God in the Old Testament? Is this violence the only conception of God that we have from the Old Testament? Then: does this violence really belong to God or is it in the first place mankind who has projected his own violence on to the divine image? But why should man want to attribute this violence to God, and turn religion itself into an exercise in violence? This is perhaps because certain fundamental ideas that serve to communicate the religious experience, such as the concept of the 'uniqueness' of God, the 'universality' of a faith and the 'identity' of a religion are conceived in a particular way? What is, more in general, the »logic« of fundamentalism? And finally – in the face of the Old Testament God's ambiguity, i.e. God both of violence and of love; God of war and God of peace – from which standpoint should the conflicts that arise in God's name be viewed, in order to govern them?

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2. Some data

Before I begin, I shall provide some data concerning the presence of violence in the Bible. There are no doubts as to its being there. Schwager, for instance, provides an impressive catalogue. In the Old Testament the theme of God's bloody revenge recurs more often than human being's violence. Roughly one thousand passages refer to an ireful God, who punishes through death and ruin, who judges and destroys. In more than one hundred passages – Schwager continues – it is written that Jahweh orders people to be destroyed.³

The external given is therefore undeniable. But this is a given that raises questions. Because, as we know, this is the very same God who condemns human

2 See A. Fabris, »La filosofia della religione oggi, nell'epoca dell'indifferenza e dei fondamentalismi«, in: *Archivio di filosofia / Archives of Philosophy*, LXXV, 2007, n. 1–2, Fabrizio Serra Editore, Pisa-Rome 2008, pp. 287–302.

3 See: Schwager, *Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock? Gewalt und Erlösung in der biblischen Schriften*, München 1978, pp. 65–66 e 70. See also on this subject: G. Barbaglio, *Dio violento? Lettura delle Scritture ebraiche e cristiane*, Cittadella, Assisi 1991.

violence, whose commandment is »Do not kill«. He is the God of love and of forgiveness, not only towards the Hebrews but also – as Noah's precepts demonstrate – towards all the peoples of the Earth.

But it is not enough merely to point this out. Because actually it is above all *for us* in the Modern Age that the presence in the Bible of a vengeful God is a problem. It may not have been a problem in ancient times. So we must see the Biblical images in their proper context and relate them to a mentality and an awareness different from ours.

But this will not resolve our problem. The Bible claims to speak to people through the ages. So also to us. And to us the idea of a violent God is scandalous, both from a moral and an emotional point of view. For the religious and for the unbeliever alike. As Miller, the author of a study on the *Warrior God* says: »For modern man, including the Christian, the image of God as a warrior is the true scandal in the Old Testament«.⁴

It does not surprise us therefore that this given (violence in the Bible), and the scandal it causes, is used by authors such as Jan Assman, who believe they discern a necessary link between the concept of monotheism – the concept of an only God – and the use of violence. Their reasoning is simple: to proclaim the uniqueness of God means to exclude all other gods. The concept of uniqueness generally implies the necessity of fixing boundaries, of establishing what is good and what is bad, of defining what is false and what is true. When the idea of uniqueness is applied to religion, it causes the separation of true religion from all others. Within any one religion, it then introduces the concept of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. This gives rise to the denial of, and therefore to the possibility of violent expulsion from, all that which does not refer directly to the unique relationship that men may enjoy with a unique God.⁵

Similar results derive from developing another idea which may also reach violent consequences. This is the idea that my personal position, my perspective as an individual or as part of a group, is not just valid for me or my group alone, but must also be *immediately* valid for all the other people and groups. According to this concept, that which is *individual* becomes *immediately and forever universal*; the occasional comes to be seen as the eternal. For this reason, those left out of the group can only either accept and be included in it, sooner or later, or, if they

4 D. Miller, »God the Warrior: A Problem in Biblical Interpretation and Apologetics«, in *Interpretation*, 19, 1965, p. 40.

5 See, for example: J. Assman, *Moses the Egyptian. The memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge (Mass.)-London 1997.

refuse, must be fought. The alternative is simple: conversion or death. And this is the attitude – or rather, »logic« – that gives rise to religious fundamentalisms as human conduct.

3. The Logic of Fundamentalism

In fact, how do fundamentalisms originate? Where do they come from? Essentially, the response to such questions can be found by considering the simple observation that various religious contexts, even those which have undoubtedly *common aspects* – the sharing of sacred books, the common reference to a single God, the requirement of conduct dictated by compassion and love – are conceived and experienced *in different concrete ways*. Each of these ways is considered to be the *only legitimate and suitable one* that leads to salvation. Therefore, this means that *one specific path*, one specific divine experience is assumed in many religious contexts to be *valid for all people*. In this way, all the other paths are excluded and one ends up virtually disregarding his determinate origins.

Inevitably, we are dealing with a series of steps that should be explained:

- [1] It is a universal value to have a *specific* religious perspective.
- [2] By placing oneself at such a universal level through the application of various confirmation strategies, one puts aside that very *peculiarity* from the initial position.
- [3] Consequently, there is no longer a connection to *one* religious perspective *beside* another, but rather, *one and only true religion*.
- [4] Therefore, it is necessary to establish and consolidate the *identity* of this religion (in a particular meaning of the term 'identity'), by defining what corresponds to the right doctrine and what does not.
- [5] From this starting point, the relationship with those who do not accept this clearly-defined religion, whose right doctrine distinguishes it from others, is subject to either *assimilation or destruction*: the possibility to convince or the will to destroy.

It is here that we see the common root of fundamentalisms. Apart from the valid explanations on historical and social levels that can be accepted, fundamentalism reveals itself to be an innate element of the way the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – conceive themselves. This deals with the idea that it is inscribed within their own 'self-comprehension'. The logic behind fundamentalism, in other words, is in its insistence on underlining elements of exclusion rather than elements of convergence, based on the conviction that one's own *particular* religion is immediately *universal*, e.g. is *the only right and suitable*

way to interpret the relationships that an individual has with God, the world, and others.

4. Interpretation of violence in the Bible

So, the Biblical idea of monotheism and the idea of the immediate universal validity of a particular religious experience can bring about violent results. Furthermore, they are perhaps at the root of the Biblical God's violent image.

However, we must now ask ourselves: Are these outcomes really inevitable? Is the fact of violence in the Bible only the expression of a deeper conceptual structure which, because of the shift in modern man's emotional reactions, must be rejected? Must the God in the Bible, inasmuch as the only God, e. g. God's image, necessarily be the image of a violent God? Must the religious human being who professes a monotheistic religion, such as those based on the Bible, sooner or later become a fundamentalist?

Clearly, these are rhetorical questions which, by their very nature require a negative answer. There are in fact other possible interpretations on this theme in the Bible itself. That is just it: there are other *interpretations*. The Bible is in fact a text that must be interpreted. Even a literal interpretation is interpretation. To the believer, the Bible is »the word of God in the words of men and women«: a revelation manifest in human language. Therefore it is precisely these human words – incomplete and inadequate as they are to express the revelation – that *require interpretation*: that require clarification through yet other human words.

To return to our subject, that of violence in the Bible, scholars have generally adopted two strategies for interpretation. Thus, the Biblical image of a violent God is interpreted in such a way as to put aside the violence itself. On the one hand, the presence of a violent God is seen *only in the Old Testament* and *not in the New*, so the contrast between the warrior God of Hebrew Scriptures and the gentle, patient God of the Gospels is heavily underlined. This was the well-known, clearly anti-Semitic position of Marcion in the 2nd century AD, a position that stems from a particular interpretation between the Law and the Gospels in Paul of Tarsus which although defeated, has popped up again and again in Christianity through the ages.⁶

6 Until Bultmann wrote his clearcut contraposition between the God of Law, the God of Hebrew Scripture and the God of grace announced by Jesus. On Marcion see the work of A. von Harnack, *Marcion, das Evangelium vom fremden Gott. Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche*, 1923, ²1924, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1996. See also in particular Bultmann's essay:

On the other hand, an evolutionary paradigm has been invoked: there is presumed to be a development, documented in the Bible, which goes from Israel's being a part of a violent world and, through a gradual change in awareness, reaches its final defeat in the Good news of the Gospels. This is in a nutshell, Lohfink's scheme.⁷

But there can be another interpretation, that does not come from theologians or Biblical exegetes. According to this theory, the violence found in the Bible, even that emanating from God, stems from the fact that human beings *transfer* their own destructive impulses into particular violent religious attitudes which in this way can be controlled and justified. Thus for example, the community's choice of a sacrificial victim. From this point of view, religious violence is explained in the light of »Religious Sciences« (f. e. Psychology of Religion and Sociology of Religion).

This is René Girard's well-known theory, presented in many of his works.⁸ Girard maintains that »it is violence that constitutes the true heart and secret soul of the sacred«. So he analyses the mechanism of sacrifice – which we could call the »logic« of the scapegoat – on which basis a religion is born and thanks to which that violence which is within a community is channelled elsewhere.

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I am unable here to discuss Girard's idea in detail, although it is interesting in our case because it furnishes a solution to the question of God's violence. The problem is resolved if we attribute divine violence – and religious violence in general – to the violence that is pertaining to the human race. So it is not in fact God, but man, who is violent. But the scholar can hold this view because he does not need to establish whether there is or is not a God. Sacred scriptures, like literature, are in Girard's opinion, the fruit of human psychology.

At the basis of Girard's theories, as I have remarked, is in fact the question of *anthropomorphism*, one which Girard does not tackle as he considers only the human – all-too-human – level of religious sciences. Girard's idea, shared by many

»Die Bedeutung des antiken Testaments für den christliche Glauben«, in: *Glauben und Verstehen. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1972.

7 N. Lohfink, *Il Dio della Bibbia e la violenza. Studi sul Pentateuco*, Italian translation, Morcelliana, Brescia 1985. In reality, in the Christian God too the belief in a »God in judgement, who at the end will divide the good from the bad giving the former eternal life and condemning the others in eternity. In this there is the extreme concession that Biblical thought allows to the power of violence as a means to salvation and justice« (G. Barbaglio, *Dio violento?*, Cittadella, Assisi 1991, p. 21). Therefore not even the Christian God is immune to violence.

8 See: R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, Grasset, Paris 1994.

others, is that God is violent – or rather the image of God is violent – because violence has a place in religion. And violence has a place in religion because, by using this violence, it resolves and allows control of a more general violence that is part of human being's makeup.

In a word: God is violent because human being is violent. In Girard's opinion, this violence, when applied to a scapegoat, is even so a lesser evil, when seen in fact, from the standpoint of inter-human relationships and dynamics. Furthermore, considered merely as a human phenomenon, violence becomes something which can be checked by human being himself. This means that, from Girard's point of view, there are no characteristics specific to religious violence in comparison to other forms of expression of human violence. And this perhaps is just the question.

5. Questions of identity

It would appear, then, that the question of violence in God can be resolved through an interpretation of violence inside the human race. And this human violence can definitely be explained by discovering its genesis. We have seen the cases of monotheism and the immediate relationship between the particular and the universal in the field of religion. Another way of adopting a mentality that can produce violence, from a religious angle too, is that which refers to the category of »identity«. It is in fact possible to see a violent attitude as deriving from a particular concept of identity – the identity of an individual, a people or a nation – that can circumscribe those who share certain characteristics – blood relations, sharing a pact, belonging to the same land etc. – excluding all others.⁹

But if we do not wish to acknowledge these results as being inevitable – if we do not wish to accept that the affirmation of an identity necessarily implies violence – in this case too, it may be useful to use an interpretation of the concept itself of »identity«. Three distinct types of identity can be distinguished: »closed« identity (or, to use an image, »wall« identity), »reflected« identity (or »mirror« identity) and finally, »open« identity. What do these expressions mean?

Wall identity is when the other is seen simply as that which must be denied. It implies its own affirmation as exclusive and excluding. A wall must be placed between me and the other to guarantee this exclusion. This is how fundamentalists view their identity.

9 R. Schwartz, for example, has developed this reasoning in a highly convincing manner in her examination of the Jewish-Christian tradition: see: *The curse of Cain. The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, Chicago U.P., Chicago 1997.

The image of the mirror proposes a different idea of identity, less violent but just as hegemonic. In this model, the other is seen only as a function of my own affirmation, to confirm my identity. That is to say, its function is merely to reflect my positions, that I know from the outset to be worthy and which therefore are beyond discussion. In this vision, the other is merely a sparring partner who will be defeated.

Finally, the open identity is that where my identity is defined by my relationship with others. Only when my identity becomes real in this relationship is it in fact an *open* identity; open to anything new that crops up in this relationship; open to new relationships. I am not closed towards others; I simply do not see myself in others. On the contrary, in seeking a relationship with them, I change my perception of myself and develop my identity. Identity is therefore not something that is static but a constantly developing process.¹⁰

6. The God of the Bible and violence

So to close this analysis I have to answer the questions that I raised at the outset: how should we deal with the Biblical God and his undeniably violent character? How are we to deal with that God of the ambiguous image – a God of violence as well as of love – pictured in the text which is basic to the three main monotheistic religions? How can the philosophical enquiry – i.e. a philosophy of religion – make a concrete contribution to management of conflicts born from a unilateral, violent interpretation of religions?

I believe the following are possible answers to the questions. Primarily, we must accept that on the question of violence, as I have already observed, the Bible's position is ambiguous: violence is admitted (and God is made to use it) but is condemned (and the same God is made to condemn it). This obliges anyone reading the sacred writings of the Jewish-Christian tradition to turn to interpretation. The ambiguities in this text make a literal interpretation inadequate.

But, moreover, anyone reading this sacred text, wishing to take up a stance in its regard and in regard of the ambiguities present in it, is faced with a series of choices. For example, they may take up a position »from the outside«, studying it with detachment as does the Religious Sciences scholar. They may try to explain the occurrence of violence in the text. They may do this unilaterally, using an

10 About a philosophical inquiry on the concept of »relationship« see: A. Fabris, *TeorEtica. Filosofia della relazione*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2010.

omni-comprehensive explanation (as do Assman and Girard), or be more open-minded and malleable towards a variety of interpretations.

There is yet *another perspective*: this text can be read as would the religious men, whether Hebrews, Christians or, like the Muslims, they who find many Biblical images in the *Koran*. The religious men too, must provide an interpretation of the Bible – for them a sacred text – as required by their faith. They too, find the presence of violence and love together in the text a problem for their conduct. Indeed, religious men in their interpretation are faced with the *choice* of professing the God of violence or obeying the Commandment to love.

In the face of this choice, what a philosophical enquiry can do, what a philosophy of religion can do is in the first place to emphasise, against any fundamentalist attitude, that the violence model *is not the only one* to be found in this text held sacred by religious human beings and therefore, if one wishes to keep faith with this text, violent behaviour is *not inevitable*. In other words, what can be achieved through philosophy of religion is *maintaining open spaces for interpretation*. And, within the confines of these spaces, the philosopher of religion can reflect on what properly distinguishes the activity and experience of religious human beings. Yet another action he or she can do is to point out that religious human beings, inasmuch as they are religious, are so only because they are *open towards others*, only because they are *open-minded towards connections with others* – with God and other men and women. According to the etymology indicated by Lactantius, the word *religio* itself has this meaning.¹¹

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But this call for open-mindedness and relationships means justifying an interpretation of the sacred text and providing support for a choice in religious *praxis* which condemns destruction, war and violence. This because, apart from appearances, religious human beings, insofar as they are involved in relationships, cannot exercise violence which would result in the destruction the very same relational characteristic of their being religious.

Philosophy and the philosophy of religion can point all this out, both to religious human beings and to those who do not intend to share a religious way of life. It can, that is, underline the fact that, although violence in the Bible is a fact, the God of the religious experience, the God of the human beings who seek to relate, this God cannot be violent, because not only is the terminal point of this human religious relationship, but is above all the guarantor of a good relation.

11 See: Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, 4, 28.

And violence destroys the possibility of every relation, of every connection: of every *religamen*.

Philosophy can underline this possibility, even going against history, against facts. I know: we must therefore adopt a Utopian position. But this is in the philosophical tradition. Utopia, in philosopher's experience, is a true vocation.