

VIOLENCE IN THE FAMILY

1. Introductory remarks

1.1 We do not know and probably we will never know if there is nowadays more or less violence in families than there was in the past. Violence may drift around, coming now into strategy of society where it once was (more or less) unknown. Anyway, violence in the family is now seen as a problem.

1.2 There are many sorts of violence. Very generally speaking we can distinguish between physical and psychical violence. Physical violence is more worrying to society as a whole, although often it might not be clear if it really is worse than psychical violence. Physical violence is culturally much older. Physical violence we have in common with the whole of nature. Because it is a strait-away violence. Physical violence is culturally much older. Physical violence we have in common with the whole of nature. Because it is a strait-away violence, it is more fascinating. It is much more clearly visible. The reactions on it are immediate. It can end in physical death. Nevertheless certainly it is necessary not to forget psychical violence. More and more we are all psychically violent to each other.

1.3 This paper only tries to give a first insight into the reality of violence in families. Which are the cultural backgrounds? What happens to families where violence breaks out? Of course every family in which there is violence is an individual reality, an entity on its own. That does not exclude that at the same time the way to violence has very much in common for all families. Violence destroys differences. So families become more and more alike.

1.4 The background of this paper is the mimetic hypothesis of Rene Girard. More information about this hypothesis can be found in his books and in a booklet written by the author of this paper, A Corrymeela Enchiridion.

2. The family “as it once was”

2.1 The title “the family as it once was” has something to do with a fairy tale and in fact it is. Very probably there never were very many ideal families. There was always stress between members of the family, certainly there was always violence or at least, in our view, cruelty. Nevertheless when we compare families in the past and families now, there are big differences. They all have to do with the fact that families of the past lived in another culture than families nowadays do. The big difference is the cultural reality in which we, and in which families move.

2.2 When we describe the cultural reality in which families once existed, “moved”, gave shape to their life together, then the following aspects come to mind:

2.2.1 Married people and families lived in a tradition or in traditions. These were the traditions of their ancestors of culture. They showed the experiences of life and how the life of married people and of families was possible and so had to be. How to cope, together, with life and the difficulties of life.

2.2.2 Tradition was given to the next generation by doing and by telling. People found their self-understanding in history, in fact in myth. The history of the groups they belonged to, of their ancestors, of their parents, of their past life. Life was founded in this ongoing narrative.

2.2.3 Married people and their family were in this tradition and myth not alone. They were together with the living generations, with their relatives, with the people of their neighbourhood. People knew of each other's family-myth and they had much myth together.

2.2.4 Tradition was stable, not endangered by continuing changes in culture and society. Neither was tradition endangered by an overwhelming amount of information from all over the world.

2.2.5 Tradition gave structure in the relationships. Aspects of this structure were:

2.2.5.1 Everybody in the family had his own place and his own worth. This is especially true for husband and wife. They knew, with their very existence, their places and defended them, if necessary. Children too had their well-defined places.

2.2.5.2 The relationships, everybody having her/his own place, were regulated by customs. Everybody knew, in normal life, what to do in which situation and how to handle the relationship.

2.2.5.3 So there were distance between husband and wife. They did not come too near to each other. Primary, very generally, they were husband and wife and used these words when they spoke to each other, only secondary they were Jim and Jane. Being married was a sort of office, of a task. Fulfilling it they went together.

2.2.6 It belonged to structure that there were commands(eg. Honour your father and your mother, which means don't take their place away) and especially prohibitions which prevent that structure is destroyed (eg. Don't desire, don't steal, don't be dishonest).

2.2.7 Both husband and wife had, very often working very closely together, their very clearly distinguished tasks, lifelong. They had to care for the children, to do the work conforming to the rules. Although most died much younger than nowadays, the younger generation had to take care of the elderly people who could not any longer look after themselves. In fact every couple was a link in a chain of generations, much more so than only being people by themselves.

2.2.8 Everything happened in the family, in the house. Birth, illness, death. The bringing up of the children. There are again many aspects to consider. One very clearly is, that here too husband and wife had together extremely important tasks which you could not do away with and which in the same time gave a knowing of belonging together which went very deep.

Very interesting for all this is Ivan Illich: Gender (London, New York, Marion Boyers, 1983). For the situation in Ireland: Nancy Scheper-Hughes: Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics. Mental illness in Rural Ireland (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979 Pb 1982).

2.2.9 Structure is a reality between human beings. Human beings are always, in one manner or another, apt to rival with each other. Rivalry destroys structure, because we rival to have another place or worth in the whole. So all structure wears out. If structure wears out, life itself is endangered. To renew structure we have ritual. Ritual was already aspect of daily life. Nearly everything the members of a family did together was ritualized: times of the meals, places people sit, the manner work is done together. Besides that there were the big rituals, feasts for the family, in which all relatives partook, feasts for the neighbourhood. And, again there were the religious rituals, going to church together. All these rituals kept life in order and put life again in order.

2.3 Again, no family was exactly like this. The point is not that they were exactly like this. The point is that they would have been able to recognise themselves in the picture. Many families do recognise themselves, more or less, in this picture even now. Many but not all and maybe less and less.

3. The changing marriage. The changing family

3.1 Marriages and families are changing. Slowly or quickly. In this manner or in that manner. They are happy or not all that happy. They may be happy living in this time and not in the past or they have the fantasy that life in the past was easier and so desirable. It might be that happiness in our understanding did not exist earlier on, or was less important, because the meaning of love changed.

3.2 What does the changing of marriages and the changing of families mean? The process is all encompassing. The family "as it once was" was a whole. Change in one aspect necessarily has changes everywhere as a consequence. To get a better insight I follow the aspects mentioned 2.2.1 till 2.2.9.

3.2.1 Tradition

Of course we have still tradition. People still know, more or less, how their parents stood in life and how they coped with it. The big difference is, that this tradition does not have any longer authority. Although much of the tradition is, in an unconscious manner, still alive, as soon as people of this time think about how their parents and grandparents lived their lives, in the same time there is the question if these experiences still are valuable or even there is the certainty that they are not. Culturally the loss of tradition goes even deeper. We don't know much about history and we are not interested in it. It can't be important for us. We don't know that much about the sources of spiritual life, the bible. That old book. Tradition leaves us in the same time as we are leaving tradition.

3.2.2 Myth

Modern marriages and families hardly have myth in the old sense. Every marriage that does not go too badly has its own myth. The story of husband, wife how they got acquainted, which difficulties they had to overcome. Beautiful and important. And in the same time, not anchored in the more embracing myths of bigger groups of people, of culture itself. When life becomes difficult the myth does not give hold with the difficulties it loses its reliability.

3.2.3. Modern Isolation

Married people and their families live more and more isolated. The relatives are far away. About the neighbours we know hardly anything or nothing. No knowledge about their parents and their histories. No helping each other with the self-understanding of custom. We lose contact with the relatives and the neighbours are only neighbours for some years. A small and telling sign of this isolation. We are buried, not any longer amidst of members of our extended family who died early, amidst of other families we know of old, in the neighbourhood of the parish church. Buried we are as strangers amidst of strangers. Or our remains are brought to a crematorium.

3.2.4 No stability

Nothing nowadays is stable and everything changes time and again, mostly without our acknowledging it. Only looking back we know. And we are completely overwhelmed by a constant stream of information, making everything relative and so existentially worthless.

3.2.5 Dwindling structure

Tradition, which is dwindling away, gives less and less structure in the relationships.

3.2.5.1 In a marriage and a family nowadays the place of everybody becomes more and more insecure. The place, the rights and duties of every member of the family are not any longer a matter of fact. Instead it very often is a constant fight, a constant rivalry who is allowed to, who has to. The identity as a wife, a mother, a husband, a father, which tradition gave is disappearing. This is even more so because in society exactly the same happens. Less and less men have a profession in which they work the whole of their life. Time and again they have to change the profession or workplace, or both. Or they are out of work, made redundant or put on invalidity benefit. They are rivaling with the women who are fighting for a place in man's land. Fascinating and fear-provoking, again, for these men. As is for the women.

3.2.5.2 So everything becomes unclear. Instead of knowing how a relationship between husband and wife is, it is a trial and error, which goes on and on, exactly as in the relationship between parents and children. If they're any end results, all too often they are the end results of power games, in which the losing party gave up.

3.2.5.3 This means that the distance between husband and wife, which gave freedom in the relationship is destroyed. Because structures are breaking down we could not go on with the old manner in which marriages were contracted, in which custom and rationality played a big and, anyway under those circumstances, a wholesome role. We had to fall back on the ideology of love in which we constantly take fascination for love, being something totally else. Fascination is rivalry, which so often goes wrong with as a result of unhappiness. For our theme in fascination the end result is quite often that one of the parties is absolutely in power, the other utterly powerless. The last one becomes inexplicably, the party in power unhappy or depressed or violent.

3.2.6 Commands and prohibitions lose their force

when structure dwindles, commands and prohibitions, which are fact part of it lose their strength. Instead of commands and prohibitions which are acknowledged as such by all the members of the family, they become weapons in the fight, so losing the last bit of their value.

3.2.7 No clearness about roles

Nowadays husband, wife goes more and more their own ways, if they have any, and they have hardly to care together for anything. We are living, if we don't separate, an endless time together, but hardly together because there is hardly anything to care for which really is existentially important. For some years the child, if we wish to have any, and that is it.

3.2.8 The home

In the home (and very often it only is something like a shelter) happens less and less. No birth, no severe or prolonged illness, no dying, no burial out of the house, our deaths brought "somewhere", so too in that sense real life, experienced in the house, which becomes a treasure to live in and with, disappears.

3.2.9 Dwindling rituals

The old rituals of family life are disappearing too. Everybody eats her/his own meals, in her/his own time or eats "outside. Family-feats, in which all the relatives partake, in which the generations are together are disappearing too. Habits, customs, in which all the members of the family partake in which they recognise each other and are happy together to go the same way. Instead of these we have, if anything at all, parties. Very often in fact casual meetings of people who, at this moment, like each other, have to do with each other, need each other and from which the children are excluded.

3.3 To be sure again, there is no family exactly like this. If the picture of the family of old is something like a fairy tale (but even about the fairy tale many people would disagree vehemently), this picture of the changing marriage and family is a caricature. And nevertheless, as we recognise our own marriage and family or at least the marriage and family of our parents or grandparents, in the "fairy tale", so do we recognise our marriage and family more or less in the caricature. Both pictures try to draw upon the cultural reality in which every family, every marriage tries to find its own shape, its own possibility, and its own happiness.

3.4 Happiness is the keyword of marriage in our time. In the family of old, it was not. Their keywords were duty, task. The task to keep life going, to take care of everything and everybody needing care. Fulfilling this task together gave fulfillment, which we probably would call happiness and gave love. Love and happiness were the result of a good marriage. Both were given. For us these are the points of departure. We claim both. In fact we claim as a right what only truly can be given, the love of our husband, our wife and we claim happiness, which is the gift of life when we live together in responsibility for and loving each other. So, necessarily, we quite often destroy them, becoming unhappy.

3.5 We all have to cope with the situation, the cultural situation we live in. Certainly very often it is much more exciting than life was in the past. Maybe nowadays more people are happier now than people were in the past. In the context of our theme, that does not matter. The paper is about violence in the marriage and in the family. So it certainly is about unhappy people.

4. Violence in the family

4.1 Violence always is a last resort. We are now living in the situation that structure, which gives everybody, in this case belonging to the marriage, the family, a place where she/he can live and find self esteem, is disappearing or has disappeared. In which ritual is absent or does not work in the good direction. If in that situation people, out of which reason ever, stay together, violence is the only and last possibility.

4.2 Violence in fact is part of ritual. It is the last bit. Ritual ends in violence. And the first one. From violence on a new life together, with (new) structure and (new) ritual can be built. Violence is the last means to get things right. However destroying the mood of a violent man, violent woman may be, this knowledge too, which is as old as culture itself, is somewhat there.

Ritual is not only part of culture; it always kept culture straight, in order. When structure was dissolving and life became difficult not complicated, the ritual circle was again performed. The ritual begins with joking and mocking (as in comedy). This beginning of ritual is very clear in family life.

We try to get things right by joking and pestering a little bit. The next phase is more serious. The real culprits are sought out (as in tragedy). The family finds its, the husband or wife finds his, her “bad one”, in fact the victim of the system. In ritual in culture the next phase was that the “bad one” was driven out, often killed and so peace was restored: the “cause” of all the misery was away. The predicament of the family is that “the cause” cannot be driven out or killed. The drive of what is happening in violence still is, to get peace back by driving out the “cause”, because then there is peace. Because this result cannot be obtained, the violence becomes endless, is endlessly repeated.

4.3 Violence is per definition always interpersonal. Even when only all the china is smitten against the walls, in the china a person is meant. (So, if a husband is destroyed the china, and his wife would not become afraid and calmly said, You are mistaken, take me, then the whole atmosphere changes). Violence being interpersonal means that there are no perpetrators only and no victims only (besides when small children are hit). Both (or all) are responsible. Both (or all) are perpetrators and victims. Violence, as all human relationships, is perfectly circular. Conferring roles as perpetrators and as victim is arbitrary interjunction.

4.4 The same can be put in another manner: Violence always and only happens when the “parties” are fascinated by each other. In fact violence and fascination are two sides of one happening, of one relationships. The background of the fascination and so of the eventual violence can be extremely different and complicated. As soon as there is violence, the fact of the fascination is undeniable. Fascination is always a consequence of rivalry. The erotic rivalry between a man and a woman in our culture we call love.

Love which runs out of hand might become violence, other possibilities being e.g. To separate or to live indifferently beside each other, which means that the fascination went, or, if the fascination stays, that the couple endures all the tensions and that at least one of them, the weakest endures all the ongoing depression.

When we are interested in somebody, she/he has something we would like to have. We are already, without our knowing it, already rivaling with the other. The other way round: When we are rivaling with somebody, because of whatever, we are at the same time, because of the rivaling, already interested. The more we are interested, the more in fact we are fascinated. Fascination always is unfreedom. It can be a very nice unfreedom, when we are in love, more generally when the fascination is rewarding for us. Then there always is something like equilibrium in the fascination. Fascination becomes violence, when the equilibrium does not any longer work or has disappeared. The people in the fascination don't have any longer a place of their own in which they can live, they e.g. still can in a sado-masochistic relationship. When the equilibrium in the fascination disappears, the person who is the object of the violence has to be destroyed out of two reasons: The violent partner wishes to have the every being of the other, of the wife, or the husband, of one of the children. And this other is the absolute bad one, which has to be destroyed, at any price. So rivalry and fascination, both beginning with being interested, are two sides of the same relationship between people. The rivalry deepening without the counterbalance of an equilibrium in the relationship (or destroying this equilibrium) glides more and more to violence in the all-penetrating desire to take possession of the other and to destroy the other in the same time and that to all price. Nothing is any longer of any interest, compared with this goal.

4.5 This shared responsibility for the violence is a very existential reality. Both husband and wife, do their utmost to prevent it in a very curious sense, their utmost to provoke it. To provoke it, because life is because of tensions endurable and violence too is part of ritual on the way to a new life. In this situation very curious mechanisms are going on. The party in power, the strong one, either the wife or the husband, tries to show that she/he is not that strong, so only showing again to be the stronger. The weak one tries to get out of the weak position, so making and showing him/herself again weaker. And, of course, the sado-masochistic game is going on, the masochistic party making the sadistic more sadistic and the reverse till the masochistic one turns the tables and becomes violent.

4.6 So violence in the family is always the violence of the weakest. He/she has the choice to be destroyed in the relationship or to be driven out totally, as the (again arbitrary) designated scapegoat of the family, or to provoke violence. Consciously of course to have revenge at last, very deep down hoping for a new life.

4.7 It is clear: Not only the responsibility for the violence is a shared one; the violence too is always reciprocal. Only the form of the violence is mostly very different. The violence of the winning partner can have the shape of goodness, of caring, so destroying the weak one better. Or of complaining everywhere about him/her. Or being extremely righteous. There is no violence in a family without hypocrisy, which always is violent. But violence in the societal acknowledges form, as bodily violence, always comes from the weakest. Mostly this position of the weakest in a marriage is enduring, but even the balance can any moment change.

4.8 Physical violence, in our culture mostly, probably, is the husband's, the friend's although certainly women too are well able to be physically violent and there are famous violent women in history. So, although of course there are very deep cultural roots of violent behaviour of men against women which makes it in a sense easier for men than for women to be violent, it is the men who feel weakest in the relationship in such a dangerous manner for their identity, that they can't cope without using physical violence.

In fact it is common knowledge that if you feel strong, you need not resort to violence. Resorting to violence, not trusting to find a way by talking together, means to be a coward, taking advantage of physical power. Only those suffering under the violence might forget this. For everybody, thinking about the situation, this is quite clear.

That men feel so weak is in many cases quite understandable. They don't have a place in society, which gives them a good feeling about themselves. Men are maybe more isolated even than women in our modern society. The women are the bosses at home, the last reliable place in this world that, more or less, stayed. Anyway, however difficult it might be to see and acknowledge the weakness of the violent partner, certainly it is the overwhelming reality of the weak one.

4.9 One of the aspects of matrimonial and familial physical violence is that the ritual goes wrong time and again. Instead of achieving a new possibility to live together, the hidden agenda of the in the end all violence, the violence falls back on the perpetrator. Instead of winning he/she loses more. After the violence there comes the new depression, and the exploitation of this depression by the partner and the surrounding people. Two circles going through each other.

4.10 Violence is one of these human realities which have their origins in very distinct relationships (even when we cannot find them back) and which can be channeled in another direction. So we can take the china or the children. Children can be extremely destroying and violent, especially in disintegrating families, so it is quite understandable when a mother, a father becomes physically violent against them. Nevertheless it seems to me an iron rule that whenever there is violence in a family, directed against the children, the problem to be looked at is not in the first place the relationship of the parent(s) with the children, but that of husband and wife, of the couple. Something must be "wrong" there; otherwise the violence against the children would not exist.

5. We and violence in the marriage and the family

5.1 Our first impulsive reaction on hearing about violence in a marriage or a family is one of condemnation. These are bad deeds; this is a very bad man, woman. Exactly that what the violent man, woman wishes, in a last and utmost try, to prevent to be driven out as a scapegoat is, together with wronged partner, achieved by the surrounding people. So all the condemnations strengthen the violence, either against the partner and, or the children or against the violent man or woman him/herself, who destroys him/herself by drinking or by whatever.

5.2 The reaction of ours is our hypocrisy. We know, deep down when we are honest with ourselves, that we have exactly the same possibilities when we come into the same situation. We don't wish to have these possibilities because they are dangerous. People

would not like us if they knew. We are not sure if we can like ourselves. So we drive these possibilities out by driving out, scapegoating the perpetrator.

5.3 To say it still in another manner: We are deeply ambivalent when we hear about familial violence. We feel revulsion is a feeling, which belongs to fascination. We are drawn to it. We recognize our own possibilities in it. And we fly from it because violence, contagious as it is, is dangerous. And again we drive our own problem out by driving out the scapegoat.

5.4 It is very clear that there is only one possibility to bring violence to a real human solution: all those involved, the violent person and the “victim”, better: the active as well as the passive violent person have to regain self-respect and so an identity which gives self-respect. Everybody who is important for him and her can give this, by having respect for all the people involved. To stay accepting in our lives, to stay loving and caring in a human manner. Not by “understanding everything”. It can’t be true, that we understand everything. By doing as if, we again put ourselves up and all the people involved down. We are again in the game out of which the people involved down. We are again in the game out of which the people involved wished to escape, be it with not too adequate means.

5.5 To have this respect for everybody involves, and especially for the active violence we have to live up to, being real human ourselves. Aspects of this are:

5.5.1 We have to recognise and accept our own possibilities to be violent. Not resigning about or disgusted with ourselves, but matter of fact. We are as everybody, just human.

5.5.2 This means at the same time that we leave the cultural distinction between good and bad people behind us. We know that his distinction is deeply hypocritic. It always made possible to scapegoat people, which we called bad, so making their predicament inescapable. As long as we make this distinction between good and bad then in our eyes violent ones clearly bad, we are as clearly still fascinated by violence and are part of it. Making the distinction is already an act of violence.

5.5.3 This means again that it is possible to moralise people. Moralising people, using, however hidden, distinctions between good and bad, is always putting them down, again is always violence.

5.5.4 We have to get rid of our fears for our own violence, just accepting that we are the people we are. Exactly in the same manner we have to get ride of the fear for the violence of others. Fear is part of being fascinated as in revulsion, indignation and excitement. Fear is part of unfreedom.

5.5.5 In fact, summarizing we only can be in a human manner together with violent people, not driving them further down but giving them a taste of dignity, the only possibility to get rid of their predicament, when we are really free. Free with and for them.

6. Presuppositions, conditions of professional work with married people, couples living together and their families, whose life is shared violence.

6.1 The task to work professionally with these people can very easily be counterproductive as such. Being in the one-up position, having to work with people who are enmeshed in a hopeless fight to get out of the one-down position, only makes things worse. Even if the worker succeeds in stopping the physical violence, the underlying hopelessness is still there. So every professional “simply” with them. His/her assets are the freedom to be with them, out of his duty, the freedom as a human being, knowing about their own violence, the experiences and the phantasy, the creativity as a professional woman, man.

6.2 Everything said under 5; “We and violence in the marriage and the family” is true for every professional worker. That of course does not mean that she/he will not make faults. Most important is that everybody who works with families in which is violence knows that if she/he makes faults, it happened because he/she was not free in the situation, with the family. Good supervision of course, to watch over just this freedom, is very important.

6.3 Every worker must have a clear knowledge of the task, given to her/him by those who are in charge and agree with that task. Anyway when he is working with people he must be free of rivalry in the context of his work and this family. If not, she/he only makes things worse again.

6.4 The work only can begin and go on if the worker is sure, sure with his very being, that all in the marriage and the family are equally responsible for what happened and happens in the family. As soon as she/he takes sides, contact with reality is lost and the fight only gets new aspects. However, it is in practice worked through, by far the most important part of the work is done when everybody accepts their own responsibility, when the division between perpetrators and victims is left behind and all are together on one level. Only if the worker is absolutely sure about this from the onset, there is the possibility that the couple, the family comes in the mimesis with him, accepting it as the human reality, from which there is a way forward. Neither perpetrators nor victims have self-respect. Having self-respect is the first step for living in new ways together.

6.5 Given the inner certitude of the worker, to achieve this many intermediary steps might be and mostly are necessary. These steps have always to do with the reality of the family “of once”, in a manner suited for the family of our time. Structure, which means relationships instead of fascination, appointments, giving people again, however small in the beginning, their own places ritual that the members of the family, the couple enjoy themselves together in their home, or the small rituals which make life more predictable. Of course there is very much to write about this. In practice it all depends on the knowing of the worker, about the co-ordinates of living together on her/his wisdom, gathered in professional and own life, on the freedom which is contagious and which gives space for fruitful fantasies and ideas which are again accepted, just because they are offered freedom.