

# The Genealogy of Violence

*Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil*

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a demand upon him, then the self-preservation instinct of the natural life is aroused to such an extent that it becomes a regular fury, as happens through drinking, or as they say, a *furor uterinus*. In this state of derangement he demands the death of the man of spirit or rushes upon him to slay him. (JP, 4: 4360 [1854])<sup>6</sup>

Here we see, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, that the basic motivation for violence is the impulse toward self-protection on the part of the immature ego. This impulse is in turn triggered by the demand of the spirit to live in ongoing communion with God the Creator, a continual pressure on the individual that produces angst. The human attempt to calm the angst by doing away with its source is the starting point of violence. The drama of human rejection of the possibility of spiritual growth is most clearly revealed in the crucifixion of Christ. This event has a key place in history because it manifests human sin as directed against the Creator and motivated by the desire to avoid the ongoing process of creation. It is clear, however, that other acts of violence in history, such as the killing of the prophets and the apostles, have the same basic motivation. The Cross is thus seen by Kierkegaard as an interpretive key, rather than as an utterly unique occurrence that could be placed fantastically on the outside of human history.

### The Self's Violence toward Its Other

Our Kierkegaardian theory of violence needs to be refined one step further. We have established that the starting point of violence is resistance to the possibility of spiritual growth. But we can ask more specifically: Why does this resistance lead to the desire to do away with another human being? What is the connection between internal evasion and external violence?

Stephen Dunning's interpretation of *The Concept of Anxiety* is very helpful in this regard. He shows that Haufniensis's work analyzes angst as arising out of the ambiguous relationship between the self and the other. Using language that borders on René Girard's concept of mimetic desire, Dunning describes the "individual's search for self in the other," arguing that "the origin of anxiety is the search for self in another self." He continues: "Anxiety is a matter of the dialectic of self and other. It originates when the self seeks itself in an other, and it can be characterized as the state of a self that is other ('a stranger') to itself. Anxiety is the root and result of alienation, understood as a distorted relationship to oneself

6. Along similar lines, see JP, 3: 2921.

and to others."<sup>7</sup> Dunning turns our attention to the precise subject at the heart of a Kierkegaardian understanding of violence. The concept of angst expresses the misrelation of the self to itself, which is inevitably expressed in misrelations with others in the world. The "entangled freedom" of angst leads to the entanglement of human lives in the sin-distorted history of the human race.

Further light on this area of theological-psychological enquiry is found in Kierkegaard's early discourses entitled "The Expectancy of Faith" and "To Need God Is a Human Being's Highest Perfection." In the first discourse he describes the person who "battles with the future" as having a "dangerous enemy" since he is "battling with himself":

The ability to be occupied with the future is, then, a sign of the nobility of human beings; the struggle with the future is the most ennobling. He who struggles with the present struggles with a particular thing against which he can use his total energy. Therefore, if a person had nothing else with which to struggle, it would be possible for him to go victoriously through his whole life without learning to know himself or his power. He who battles with the future has a more dangerous enemy; he cannot remain ignorant of himself, since he is battling with himself. The future is not; it borrows its power from him himself, and when it has tricked him out of that it presents itself externally as the enemy he has to encounter. No matter how strong a person is, no person is stronger than himself. . . . When a person struggles with the future, he learns that however strong he is otherwise, there is one enemy that is stronger—himself; there is one enemy he cannot conquer by himself, and that is himself. (EUD, 17–18)

This discourse leads the reader to consider the idea that there is a relationship between struggles against various "enemies" whom a person perceives in the external world, and the person's struggles with his own spiritual future. If warfare and violence seem to be interminable in human history, this may have something to do with the inability of the self to overcome itself.

In the other discourse Kierkegaard draws a contrast between the "first self," by which he means the hardened shell of the anxious ego, and the "deeper self," which is the more mature self God is calling into being. The first self perceives the possibility that the deeper self represents, and it recoils in the desire for self-protection:

When a person turns and faces himself in order to understand himself, he steps, as it were, in the way of that first self, halts that which was turned outward in hankering for and seeking after the surrounding world that is its object, and

7. This and the previous quotes are found in Stephen Dunning, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 148–150.

summons it back from the external. In order to prompt the first self to this withdrawal, the deeper self lets the surrounding world remain what it is—remain dubious. This is indeed the way it is; the world around us is inconstant and can be changed into the opposite at any moment, and there is not one person who can force this change by his own might or by the conjuration of his wish. The deeper self now shapes the deceitful flexibility of the surrounding world in such a way that it is no longer attractive to that first self. Then the first self either must proceed to kill the deeper self, to render it forgotten, whereby the whole matter is given up; or it must admit that the deeper self is right, because to want to predicate constancy of something that continually changes is indeed a contradiction, and as soon as one confesses that it changes, it can, of course, change in that same moment. However much that first self shrinks from this, there is no wordsmith so ingenious or no thought-twister so wily that he can invalidate the deeper self's eternal claim. There is only one way out, and that is to silence the deeper self by letting the roar of inconstancy drown it out. (EUD, 314)

The first self, as resistance to creation, seeks to do away with (to kill) the deeper self and the possibility that it represents. It must either do this or admit that the deeper self is right and allow the claim of the eternal to come forward.<sup>8</sup>

The struggle between the first self and the deeper self is expanded upon in *Works of Love*. Here Kierkegaard describes preferential love as being, in reality, a form of infatuation with oneself. The person who thinks he has “fallen in love” with another is in error; he is actually in a solipsistic relationship with himself, because preferential love only loves the other insofar as the other fulfills the needs and desires of the self. Preferential love is not the genuine neighbor love that God commands; it is a form of egoism in which the neighbor is not truly encountered. The “first I” who loves in this manner is loving the “other I” in the other (WL, 57–58). In other words, preferential love does not allow an escape from the psychological prison of the immature ego.

But what Kierkegaard calls preferential or spontaneous love “can be changed into its opposite, into *hate*” (WL, 34–35). The individual who has not allowed his soul to become rightly ordered through hearing the command of God is an inherently unstable person. His self is entangled and conflicted. Therefore he may love the other one moment and hate the other the next, a vacillation that occurs because he may solipsistically love himself one moment and suicidally hate himself the next. Just as love of the other under these conditions is actually love of one-

8. Bruce Kirmmse echoes this idea: “One’s natural and spiritual selves are thus totally divided against one another. It is as though it were a struggle between two different people and the question was who one would become.” See *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 466.

self, so also hate of the other is actually hatred directed toward the self.<sup>9</sup> At this point we have reached the most profound core of the Kierkegaardian understanding of “man’s inhumanity to man.”

The call of God is the call of creation. The deeper, truer, more mature form of selfhood is a possibility toward which God is always drawing the individual. But insofar as the individual is actively resisting the call of creation, he is existing in a state of inner conflict. He loves himself and seeks to maintain control over his own selfhood, and he hates the pressure that is being placed upon him to become a more mature person. He hates this possibility. Because it is impossible to kill a possibility, or to kill the Creator, the sinful human being becomes immensely frustrated at his inability to prevent his creation.<sup>10</sup> In his anger over his inability to kill his deeper self, he develops a need to kill other human beings. He subconsciously construes the other person as a representation of that which he is trying to kill within himself. Instead of addressing his internal alienation as his own problem, he projects his anger out into the world. To attack the Other, the Enemy, becomes a psychological need for the sinful person, as he seeks to avoid becoming *an other to himself*, that is, a new self. *The most basic root of ill will toward others is ill will toward the self that one is in the process of becoming.*

When an entire society is made up of persons who exist in this psychological state, the society as a whole acts on the basis of this spiritual sickness. The society develops a need to identify and attack an Enemy. The society selects scapegoats and sacrifices them as a way of reinforcing its impulse to ego-protection. George Steiner develops this insight perceptively in his work *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, which shows clearly the influence of Kierkegaard on his thinking:

The Book of the Prophets and the Sermon on the Mount and parables of Jesus which are so closely related to the prophetic idiom, constitute an unequalled act of moral demand. . . . *We hate most those who hold out to us a goal, an ideal. . . .*

The genocide that took place in Europe and the Soviet Union during the period 1936–45 . . . was far more than a political tactic, an eruption of lower-middle-class malaise, or a product of declining capitalism. It was no mere secular, socioeconomic phenomenon. It enacted a suicidal impulse in Western civi-

9. Dostoevsky portrays this ambivalence profoundly, as René Girard notes: “Dostoevsky’s art is literally prophetic. He is not prophetic in the sense of predicting the future, but in a truly biblical sense, for he untiringly denounces the fall of the people of God back into idolatry. He reveals the exile, the rupture, and the suffering that results from this idolatry. In a world where the love of Christ and the love of the neighbor form one true love, the true touchstone is our relation to others. It is the Other whom one must love *as oneself* if one does not desire to idolize and hate the Other in the depths of the underground.” *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, trans. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 129.

10. See CD, 66–67 and 172–173, on humanity’s attempt to “kill God.”

lization. It was an attempt to level the future—or, more precisely, to make history commensurate with the natural savageries, intellectual torpor, and material instincts of unextended man. (42–46)

In other words, the killing of the social Other results from the internal alienation and spiritual sloth of the individuals who make up the society.<sup>11</sup>

In this light we can discern that the psychology of violence is a precisely inverted image of the Great Commandment, “You shall love God with your whole heart, and your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>12</sup> The violent person does not love God but lives with a fundamental distrust of God and the ongoing process of creation; he does not love the self that he is called to become; and he thus develops the need to turn his neighbor in the world into an enemy, an alien other which he must kill in order to preserve his own “life.”

My approach to understanding the roots of violence is not entirely original. I am happy to say that a kind of “cloud of witnesses” argue along similar lines. It remains the case, however, that this approach has not permeated human consciousness in general. If it had, the world would be a very different place. I recall, for instance, a news story about a disgruntled employee at the Connecticut State Lottery office who went on a shooting rampage. The governor, interviewed on television, said, “We will never understand senseless acts of violence such as this.” This sort of fatalism is not necessary.

I will present now a sampling of this theme in various authors, Owen Barfield discusses schizophrenia in the modern world in these terms:

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11. This idea is echoed by Karl Barth: “It is because man is not at one in himself that we are not at one with each other. It is because inner consistency and continuity are lacking in the life of the individual that there is no fellowship among men.” *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), II/2, 726–727. Sergio Cotta finds the roots of violence in the “dizziness” produced by modern nihilism and its exaltation of subjectivity in alienation from the human Other: “The Other, excluded from the participation in my own being and, therefore, from dialogue and no longer worthy of respect, is reduced either to raw material, a passive object of my calculating and dominating will, or to a nonredeemable enemy. No longer my like, he is really my hell, the source and target of a hatred that in reality is fueled by the innumerable defeats and frustrations of which the subject itself is the cause because it cut itself off from its indispensable partner.” Sergio Cotta, *Why Violence*, trans. Giovanni Gullace (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1985), 134. There are significant insights here, but I am uncomfortable with Cotta’s phrase “excluded from the participation in my own being,” given that the theory I am articulating locates the roots of political violence in an inability to separate the other from participation in my own (conflicted) being.

12. Stanley Moore suggests that “SK sees the transcendence of God, which he puts in the very sharpest of terms, as the eternal point of reference without which there is no love of neighbor, no genuine involvement, but only hatred, bloodshed, and chaos.” See “Religion as the True Humanism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 37 (1969): 20.

What the self of each of us feels isolated *from*, cut off *from*, by its encapsulation in the nakedly physical reality presented to it by the common sense of contemporary culture, is precisely its own existential source. The trouble is, that such an empirical self, founded as it were on its own physical encapsulation, is a false self, *without* reality. It is the kind of self which behaviorist psychology has to mention occasionally, in order to deny its existence. The true Self of everyone remains united—not co-extensive but united—with its original source in the spirit. And the mental illness now recognized as schizophrenia comes of the frantic efforts, sometimes aggressive, sometimes defensive, made by the imprisoned personality to fortify and preserve this fictitious self—which is really a nothingness—from destruction. Instead—and that way sanity lies—of taking the hint, as it were, and learning to abandon it in favor of the true Self. The resulting conflicts and the sickness, sometimes amounting to insanity, that those efforts may end in, arise from an invasion of this artificial self by the true, existential self. The personality remains subconsciously aware of its ultimate dependence on this real self for its very existence, while consciously resisting its still, small voice with every cunning device it can invent. The patient’s unstable behavior is thus a disguised form of evasive action. . . .

And if it is etymologically no more than a pun, it is nevertheless a profound truth, that it is only by remembering our source that we can hope to “re-member” our true selves in a truly human community, instead of building up all manner of defenses and strategies to defend our empty artificial selves by fortifying them in their isolation.<sup>13</sup>

From a very different corner of the intellectual landscape, we find Jean-Paul Sartre analyzing anti-Semitism in this way: “The rational man groans as he gropes for the truth . . . he is ‘open.’ . . . But there are people who are attracted by the durability of a stone. They wish to be massive and impenetrable; they wish not to change. Where, indeed, would change take them? We have here a basic fear of oneself and of truth.”<sup>14</sup> M. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled* precisely echoes the Kierkegaardian understanding of violence. In a passage that reminds the reader of Anti-Climacus’s description of the difference between the “despair of weakness” and the demonic “despair of defiance,” Peck writes this:

Some ordinarily lazy people may not lift a finger to extend themselves unless they are compelled to do so. Their being is a manifestation of nonlove; still, they are not evil. Truly evil people, on the other hand, actively rather than passively avoid extending themselves. They will take any action in their power to protect their own laziness, to preserve the integrity of their sick self. Rather than

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13. Owen Barfield, *History, Guilt, and Habit* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 52–53, 62.

14. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken, 1948), 18–19.

nurturing others, they will actually destroy others in this cause. If necessary, they will even kill to escape the pain of their own spiritual growth. As the integrity of their sick self is threatened by the spiritual health of those around them, they will seek by all manner of means to crush and demolish the spiritual health that may exist near them.<sup>15</sup>

Sebastian Moore echoes Kierkegaard's understanding of the cross:

What we are refusing is not, directly at least, "obedience to God" but some fullness of life to which God is impelling us and which our whole being dreads. Some unbearable personhood, identity, freedom, whose demands beat on our comfortable anonymity and choice of death. Further, something that at root we *are*, a self that is ours yet persistently ignored in favor of the readily satisfiable needs of the ego. . . . The crucifixion of Jesus then becomes the central drama of man's refusal of his true self.

Moore then argues that the presence of the exceptionally good person brings out a basic resentment in those who are rejecting the possibility of spiritual transformation. To be called to "full personhood" is a challenge to "our mediocrity"; its protection "will require murder."<sup>16</sup> Raymund Schwager, a Girardian theologian, says this:

As analyzed by Girard, the unfounded nature of aggression is the consequence of a groundless act, the willful falling away from God. . . . The reason why anger so easily leaps from one object to another is that ultimately it does not focus on any of these objects. It is, at bottom, resentment against God. Because the free rejection of God's love is groundless, humans must hide their own actions from themselves so thoroughly that they do not even notice the enmity they harbor in their hearts.<sup>17</sup>

Consider, finally, another Girardian theologian, James Alison:

The fact that people hate [Jesus] and seek to do away with him, *even though they have seen the works which he carries out*, suggests that these people are not just made uncomfortable by him, but that they are in fact locked into a profound aversion to creation itself. They are clinging on to a form, futile, useless, and shot through with death, of incomplete creation, and resisting being completely

15. See *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 377–378. Peck expands further on this idea in his next book, *People of the Lie* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983).

16. See *The Crucified Jesus Is No Stranger* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1977), x, 13.

17. See *Must There Be Scapegoats?* trans. Maria L. Assad (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 199.

created. . . . Jesus' self-giving up to death is the fulfillment of creation, the putting of creation into a state of labor, so that we also, by our creative imitation of him in the midst of the order of death can come to be the fully created creatures which God always wanted us to be, and with us, the whole of creation.<sup>18</sup>

This passage more closely parallels my central thesis in this book than any other passage I have found in the secondary literature on Kierkegaard and Girard.

We can now summarize the elements of a Kierkegaardian understanding of the roots of political violence: (1) creation is an ongoing process; (2) human beings experience the event of creation as the feeling of angst; (3) the root of sin is the attempt to manage angst by turning away from the Creator in an effort to stop the process of creation; (4) sin is not simply immaturity, but willfully reinforced immaturity; (5) the individual who is seeking to avoid becoming an other to himself develops the need to attack other human beings and turn them into scapegoats; and (6) the crucifixion of Christ is the historical event that most clearly reveals the roots of violence.

Thus far in my exposition I have focused on Kierkegaard's understanding of the individual's resistance to the possibility of his own spiritual growth as the most basic root of violence. I have referred in passing to the crowd as the collection of individuals who are seeking to evade the call of God, but this concept, which needs to be more extensively developed, is the subject of chapter 5. There I bring Kierkegaard's thought into dialogue with the writings of René Girard, who has made a major contribution to the task of understanding "the crowd" from a point of view informed by the New Testament.

18. James Alison, *Raising Abel* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 73–74.