

# Familial Violence against Women as a Challenge for Theology and Ethics

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Family violence is not a popular topic for reflection – neither in politics, nor in social institutions such as schools or universities – and hence not in theology and ethics either. This may be caused by the fact that when people concern themselves with such overpowering matters as violence, they are not left untouched but are trapped in the victim's experience of powerlessness. As Wolfgang Sofsky puts it:

There is no more dominating occurrence than violence. It is so dependable as a means of domination because the victim's pain is inevitable. (...) The persons are not broken as a result of the physical injury and disfigurement but the victims' positions in the world are completely shaken. They are helpless and unable to escape the violence. It affects them in their innermost beings and subjects them in their totality<sup>1</sup>.

An unwillingness to become more closely involved with this experience is a natural and self-protective reaction.

In academic reflections, it can happen that the topic is kept at a distance as a result of abstract analysis. For this reason, I would like to introduce my thoughts by relating a personal experience in order to make it quite clear that my subsequent reflections cannot be understood independently of what actually happens to real people.

<sup>1</sup> W. SOFSKY, *Traktat über die Gewalt*, Frankfurt, S. Fischer, 1996, p. 70. Original quotation: "Kein Ereignis, das bezwingender wäre als die Gewalt. Als Mittel der Herrschaft ist sie so verlässlich, weil der Schmerz für das Opfer unabwendbar ist. (...) Es ist nicht nur die entstellende Verletzung des Körpers, die den Menschen zerbricht, seine Stellung in der Welt wird insgesamt erschüttert. Hilflos ist er der Gewalt ausgeliefert. Sie trifft ihn in seinem Innersten und unterwirft ihn als ganzen, in seiner Totalität."

*A woman came to my house so that we could prepare a Bible study for a group. She worked part-time as a secretary in the parish and was a neighbour of mine. I knew her and was aware – first of all from rumours and then from what she told me herself – that she was abused by her husband. She always talked a lot and liked talking with the result that other people in the parish did not always take her seriously.*

*We started to plan the Bible study. A normal situation, and yet it was different. All the time that she was talking to me, she kept looking around the room and also through the window at the square in front of the house. When the wind moved the branches of the trees in front of the window, she went rigid with fear. When I asked her what was the matter, she only said that she was frightened, because she thought that her husband was prowling around the house. This situation led her to tell me about her fears at that time: that she was afraid of her husband, and of what he might do next. Above all she was afraid to go to sleep at bedtime and so she put a large knife under her pillow. She told me about the last time she had suffered a serious attack: on the day before Christmas Eve her husband had twisted her head around so violently that she thought she was going to die. At the same time she thought: I will not be able to give people my Christmas presents. Her family – all of them committed members of the parish – knew about her situation and her fears. But, apart from one sister, none of her family had shown her any understanding. On the contrary, her mother threatened to commit suicide should her daughter dare to get divorced because she believed she would not survive the scandal in the village. Her mother told her that she should have thought about this before she married; now she simply had to put up with it.*

*After she had described what had happened to her, she attempted to interpret these experiences from a Christian point of view. At that time she was attending a theology course and was trying to find an answer to her situation from what she heard in the course. And she eventually decided to see her suffering as united with Jesus' suffering on the cross.*

Against the background of this example, I will first interpret the behaviour of victims – which often seems illogical to outsiders – in the light of trauma research. The next step will be to consider the

phenomenon not only as an individual problem but, above all, as a social problem, which we will interpret primarily in the light of the knowledge gained in gender research. Thirdly, this will lead us to consider how ethical and theological reflections can be adequately formulated, and we will take as an example what is said about marriage and the family, and about the concept of forgiveness. Throughout the text I will give short summaries in order to stress important findings and recommendations for pastoral practice.

### The reaction of victims in light of trauma research

Traumatised people have to live their lives in the face of their overwhelming experiences of powerlessness, which means that they live in constant fear. In order to be able to live with these experiences, they develop various psychic patterns of reaction that are intended to protect them from further violent attacks or from being overwhelmed by their feelings, but which also keep them trapped in them<sup>2</sup>. One of the first signs of traumatisation is the person's exaggerated startle response, he or she is 'hyper-vigilant'. In the case mentioned above the woman checked all the corners in and around the house. Through this behaviour, she was trying to keep everything under control for as long as possible in order to be able to react immediately in the case of danger.

As well as hyper-vigilance, there are two other signs – memory distortions that can be either intrusive or constrictive. By their nature, intrusive memories can be described as a fixation. The moment of the traumatic event seems to be frozen in time. Many intrusive memories are so strong that the victims experience the violent attacks again in so-called flash-backs. This often happens when one sits down somewhere to relax quietly or the intrusive memory may occur at night in the form of nightmares. As a result, many victims develop hyperactive behaviour in order to avoid intrusive memories as much as possible – but they are rarely successful. The fact

<sup>2</sup> J.L. HERMAN, *Die Narben der Gewalt. Traumatische Erfahrungen verstehen und überwinden*, München, Kindler, 1993, 56-76.

that the woman in our example talked a great deal could be seen less as an individual characteristic than as a consequence of traumatising, which served to keep her active and her mind occupied. Intrusive memories can occur with specific smells, sounds, music, places and so on, which are linked with the traumatic event. In the case of intrusive memories, traumatised persons are overcome by intense feelings of fear and anger which stem from the violence experienced and overtax the normal capacity to tolerate feelings.

In order to avoid intrusive memories, many victims react with constriction, a kind of psychic freezing, so that feelings of fear and anger as well as feelings of pain disappear. Because physical fight or flight are not possible, traumatised persons develop the ability to put themselves in another state of consciousness. They dissociate – that is to say that victims report their experiences as if they were not involved, as if they were onlookers, standing outside their bodies. These symptoms can appear in acutely threatening situations as well as afterwards – as a means of avoiding intrusive memories.

Although intrusive memories and constriction are opposites, they do not occur in traumatised persons as either the one or the other but one as well as the other. These reactions can be understood as a desperate attempt to achieve a psychic balance. But this is exactly what is prevented. What actually happens is that intense realistic reproduction alternates with the loss of memories, emotion-flooding with numbness, hyperactive behaviour with the loss of the ability to act. The feeling of helplessness and powerlessness increases. Unfortunately the symptoms of traumatising do not end with the end of the traumatic situation. Many victims continue to be haunted by their offenders in their dreams even after the latter have died.

Even when outwardly the lives of traumatised persons seem to be normal again, they experience themselves as lacking drive and, frequently, as being remote-controlled<sup>3</sup>. Their relations are characterised by emotional distance. Above all, many traumatised

<sup>3</sup> L. EITINGER, *The Concentration Camp Syndrome and Its Late Sequelae*, in J.E. DIMSDALE (ed.), *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators. Essays on the Nazi Holocaust*, New York, Hemisphere, 1980, 127-162, p. 154 and 136.

persons have great difficulty coping with aggression and intimacy. Trauma victims feel they are alienated and different from other persons. They have no clear self-image and risk becoming isolated. Victims frequently feel totally alone. A quotation from a victim, whom Diana Russel described, may make this clear:

I'm my husband's wife and my children's mother and my mother's daughter. But I don't have a clear definition of who I am as a person. The only definition of myself that I have, and the only way I have of relating myself to anything, is as a survivor. My grandfather raped me. That is the only quality I have that is concrete and clear. That is my identity. (...) Intellectually and from an adult perspective, I can see that my grandfather was the perpetrator. But the real me inside thinks it was my fault. (...) I have two children who I really love, but I never get a really warm feeling about them. And even with my husband, I love him but I don't *feel* that love<sup>4</sup>.

In the course of traumatising, the system of values and convictions very often breaks down. We know from reports that rape- and war-victims cried out for God or for their mothers. Both were experienced as absent in this situation. From what I have described up to now, it should be clear that trauma victims have to make a tremendous effort to cope with their everyday lives. Suicide is a last resort for many. A study of rape-victims showed that nearly every fifth woman attempted to commit suicide<sup>5</sup>.

From knowledge gained in trauma research, we can state that the reactions of maltreated victims have nothing to do with their personality traits but are to be seen as the result of the extraordinary situation of violence. Battered women and children do not submit to their fate in a non-active way but they actively look for ways of avoiding greater danger and of identifying survival strategies – even though this intention is not obvious from the outside. Knowing that other persons would have reacted in a similar way in the same situation and would have developed the same symptoms could help

<sup>4</sup> D.E.H. RUSSEL, *The Making of a Whore*, in R.K. BERGEN (ed.), *Issues in Intimate Violence*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 1998, 65-77, p. 72-74.

<sup>5</sup> J.L. HERMAN, *Die Narben der Gewalt*, p. 75.

the victims and the people around them to identify their behaviour as normal.

*First recommendation for action in practice:*

Those who are involved with traumatised persons need a) to know about these reactions and b) to be aware of the power of the dialectic of remembering and dissociation, which does not just dominate the victim but also overwhelms the listeners and pressures them into rejection and denial.

**(Family) violence as a social problem as a result of hierarchical gender relations**

In the case of family violence, it is primarily women who are the victims and men who are the offenders. Throughout society as a whole, 70% of violent acts are committed by men against men. Although men are more often subject to traumatising acts of violence, nevertheless women suffer more frequently from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Only recently has academic interest been aroused by this fact and research undertaken into the different patterns of reactions and coping strategies in women and in men.

The self-in-relation theory provides explanations for the higher risk of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in women. According to the self-in-relation theory, a woman's sense of herself is very closely related to relationships with others and particularly to the reciprocal caring in relationships. "A woman's self-esteem is thus highly related to the quality of her relationships and is based on the sense that she is 'a part of relationships and is taking care of relationships'"<sup>6</sup>. In contrast to this, a man's self-esteem is determined more by individuality and therefore by what he has achieved in life or what he possesses, such as success in his job, positions in public life, and his status in the family.

<sup>6</sup> G. SAXE & J. WOLFE, *Gender and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*, in P.A. SMITH & D.J. BREMNER (ed.), *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. A Comprehensive Text*, Boston, MA, Allyn & Bacon, 1999, 160-179, p. 169.

Most of the traumatising experiences mainly suffered by women – domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse in childhood – are precisely those experiences that are so laden with relational significance. Interpersonal trauma leads to profound reappraisals of relationships with others. For women, the feeling of not having any contact to others is particularly difficult to bear. Therefore they are very often afraid to disclose their experiences.

A further important factor is that women tend to blame themselves for the assault, whereas men are more likely to attribute blame to the perpetrator. Such differences in attribution have significant implications for the consequences of a traumatic event. A self-in-relation perspective would explain such differences as women's greater need to maintain, restore, and repair relationships<sup>7</sup>.

*Second recommendation for action in practice:*

"The experience of support and belonging that individuals acquire through membership in a community is a critically important factor for recovery after trauma"<sup>8</sup>. Church communities can play an important role in this. However, a question remains open: will the communities be experienced as protective and supportive in the sense that victims feel accepted as victims or only if the victims keep silent about their experiences?

This gender-orientated psychodynamic perspective can be profitably complemented with a gender-orientated sociological perspective that examines the question, what is the significance of acts of violence for women and men.

Michael Meuser sees the different forms of interpersonal violent behaviour of males in our society as the result of dominant constructions of masculinity<sup>9</sup>. In his opinion, masculinity is

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>8</sup> M.R. HARVEY, *An Ecological View of Psychological Trauma*, in *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 9/1 (1996) 3-23.

<sup>9</sup> M. MEUSER, "Doing Masculinity" – Zur Geschlechtslogik männlichen Gewalthandelns, in R.M. DACKWEILER & R. SCHÄFER (ed.), *Gewalt-Verhältnisse. Feministische Perspektiven auf Geschlecht und Gewalt*, Frankfurt, Campus, 2002, 53-78.

constructed as a demarcation from women as well as from other men. Demarcation creates asymmetry, which means that demarcation happens in the context of dominance-relations. Male violence has therefore not just an order-disturbing function but also an order-(re)producing function.

Meuser's view differs therefore from other approaches – mainly from the pedagogical sphere – in which male violence is seen as a deficient form of masculinity. Violence is then understood as a reaction to frustration, to feelings of fear of failure, rejection, inferiority, a lack of recognition or as a compensation for insecurity in interaction with girls. In contrast to this, Meuser emphasises that a deficiency-orientated perspective fails to consider the 'productive' functions that constitute social order. Homo-social male violence can, on the one hand, be intended to degrade another human being and, on the other hand, it can have the function of acknowledgement and integration into a community in a male world that is determined by competition. Male violence is less a violation of than an extension of the norm, as Carol Hageman-White puts it<sup>10</sup>.

Michael Meuser differentiates between hetero-social and homo-social violence relations and between reciprocally structured and one-sided structured violence relations. He states that reciprocally structured violence often happens in a triadic constellation in which the roles of offender, victim and spectator are not fixed from the start but can blur or can change. Michael Meuser makes a clear distinction here between reciprocal homo-social violence and violence against women. The violent conflict between men may result in serious physical injury and severe pain for the loser, but it does not necessarily mean his degradation as a person. It may be possible to present the injury proudly as a proof of masculinity, like the duelling scars of the members of certain male student societies, or an injury resulting from a brawl between gangs of youths such as hooligans. In contrast to this, a battered woman does not have the possibility to interpret her injuries as an identity-empowering

<sup>10</sup> C. HAGEMANN-WHITE, *Strategien gegen Gewalt im Geschlechterverhältnis. Bestandsanalyse und Perspektiven*, Pfaffenweiler, Centaurus, 1992, p. 10.

resource. Rather she bears these injuries as a sign of experienced degradation. I would remind you here of the statements made by the woman who is struggling to find her identity as wife and mother, because she is predominantly and almost exclusively aware of her identity as an abused girl who has been raped by her grandfather. Of course, there is also a clear distinction between the roles of victims and offenders in specific homo-social violence-relations (e.g. rape in prison). Meuser points out that the distribution of the power to hurt and the receptiveness for hurt is often situation-specific and context-specific in homo-social constellations, whereas the receptiveness of hurt for women is (socio-)structural and related to gender status.

Violent behaviour is not contrary to traditional concepts of masculinity, but it is contrary to traditional concepts of femininity. There is an exception – acts of violence perpetrated by women against children. In this case, mothers use violence as a power resource serving specific images of education. However they possess this power resource only in the context of traditional gender and education-concepts, which are characterised by a clear relationship of domination and subordination (men-women and parents-children) and in which violence exists as a genuine male resource. Violent acts perpetrated by women against children happen therefore in participation with or as delegated by the male power system. Parental/male acts of violence have the function of (re)producing order – in so far as they guarantee the maintenance of boundaries between the generations in the context of hierarchical gender-relations. Violence against children is a one-sided structured violence-relationship<sup>11</sup>.

#### *Third recommendation for action in practice:*

Violence against women and children is not just a problem of individual men, it is also a social problem, which is nurtured by

<sup>11</sup> A. LEHNER-HARTMANN, *Die alltägliche Gewalt gegen Frauen und Kinder: vom Kavaliersdelikt zum sozialen Problem*, in *Theologisch-Praktische Quartalschrift* 153/2 (2005) 138-148, p. 140-141.

a traditional hierarchical understanding of gender and generation relations and which strengthens this understanding. This aspect must not be forgotten when working with real victims and real offenders.

### Consequences for ethics and theology in words and deeds

Against the background of what has been said so far, we should bear in mind that churches, like all societal institutions, are not only involved with victims but also participate in the maintenance or elimination of unjust structures. They are challenged in the work of prevention as well as intervention. Therefore questions arise: What images of marriage and family will be presented here? What will victims hear about sin, forgiveness and reconciliation? And what will the offenders hear, likewise?

### *Structural implications from the example of images of marriage and family*

If you look up the word 'family' in encyclopaedias of ethics or moral theology, you will discover any number of idealistic images of marriage, family and sexuality. You will search in vain for the fact that violence presents a threat to children and women. The important features of marriage and family that are primarily stressed are love, trust, fidelity and security<sup>12</sup>. While traditional theological approaches try to give explicitly theological reasons for domination and subordination relations between women and men and between parents and children, modern approaches at least stress that women and men have the same dignity. At the same time they do not go beyond individualistically conceptualised insights, and consequently the success of this ideal becomes the responsibility of the individual person. Therefore we find hardly any analyses of the system of marriage and family that point out, from a

<sup>12</sup> S.A. BOASOTTI, *Violence, Power, and Justice. A Feminist Contribution to Christian Sexual Ethics*, Uppsala, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1998.

gender-sensitive perspective, the different opportunities and obstacles for women and men which are predetermined by the structure of marriage and the family and their normative implications. In their idealistic perspectives, ethical and theological concepts tend to cling – often unconsciously and unintentionally – to romantic ideas of a bourgeois marriage, that is to say a marriage with a hierarchical structure. Almost as a matter of course, they are based on a traditional distribution of duties in the private and the public sphere: women are perceived primarily via their caring and educational activities in the private sphere of the family; and men are perceived via their world-shaping activities in the public sphere.

Societal changes such as women in employment are often attributed to individual choices and efforts; they often gain acknowledgment as such, but this has no effect on concepts of marriage and family. Women's employment is accepted but without any discussion about a change in the duties in the family (especially an egalitarian distribution of caring and educating activities, or paternity leave...).

As we could observe in the psychodynamic concept of the self-in-relation theory, many women define their identities by means of relationship, which means that women seek within themselves the reasons for failing to meet the ideal of marriage and family as a place of love, security and safety. They see themselves as failures: in their own eyes, in the eyes of their husbands/children/parents and in the eyes of God. Like the woman that I mentioned at the beginning of this article, religious women will often endure their experiences of suffering as a way of participating in the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Together with the notion that undeserved suffering leads to salvation, an important role is played above all by the notion of obedience. Just as the Son of God was obedient unto death on the cross, Mary, as the prototype of woman, also submitted herself to the will of God. Hence for many women, religious obedience can be the source of alienation and oppression<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> I. GEBARA, *Die dunkle Seite Gottes. Wie Frauen das Böse erfahren*, Freiburg, Herder, 2000, p. 141f.



In the context of such notions, the Roman Catholic ideal of the permanence of marriage can be a further violence-stabilising factor. When stressing the permanence of marriage, one could forget that this permanence may establish circumstances that facilitate violence. Against the background of a traditional hierarchical understanding of man-woman relations, the presentation of such ideals bears different meanings for victims and offenders, which may indirectly contribute to the maintenance of violent relations.

If we consider the treasures in our biblical tradition and in the tradition of a Christian life, this unholy alliance between violence and religious justification need not exist. What is needed is a change of perspective in theology: a change from an idealistic perspective which is based on the individual to a perspective which is orientated towards real life and opens our eyes to unjust structures and ways of getting rid of them. If we focus on the concrete experiences of victims, for example as in liberation theologies and feminist theologies, we are not necessarily compelled to give up our ideals. However, if we focus on idealistic images, we are in danger of losing sight of real life and therefore of losing our base for the realisation of ideals. The ideals of the Bible are also measured against real life, and there is an intervention in cases of injustice (e.g. the story of Jesus and the woman found in adultery, who is to be stoned).

If one focuses on real life and therefore on women's experiences of violence, then one cannot overlook the injustice in gender and generation relations in the course of history when formulating one's concepts of marriage and family, but one must take this as a subject of discussion. This cannot be achieved with gender-neutral language (as often happens in present conceptions, where the term 'person' is used). Gender-neutral vocabulary suggests that women and men have the same access to material, social and power resources, but this is not in fact the case<sup>14</sup>. With recourse to the

<sup>14</sup> Solveig Anna Boasdottr stresses (in *Violence, Power, and Justice*, p. 55): "Marriage cannot be spoken of as gender neutral, but has to be approached as an institution which divides power unequally between the sexes (...). Taking this seriously means that love and power have to be problematized within an adequate Christian sexual ethic."

knowledge gained from gender research, one has rather to name the different opportunities women and men have for their development, and one has to work out guidelines for living together in marriage and the family in accordance with gender justice. Justice does not make the previously important features of marriage and family – such as love, security, fidelity and trust – meaningless, but instead makes it possible to see their different significance for women and men, and to re-formulate them in a gender-just way. An example will make this clear: battered women experience love in close connection with violence, through which their trust in their partners and their convictions about marriage and the family as a safe and secure place are disturbed. They need advice and orientation, so that they can realise that violence can never be the price for love but that it means the destruction of love, security, fidelity and trust, and therefore the destruction of marriage itself. A necessary separation or divorce is then not a failure to meet the ideal of marriage but the result of violence, which destroyed love and the marriage. Abusive husbands also need orientation in the way they think and behave, so they can realise that violence can never be a legitimate way achieve their aims. They need an unmistakable sign that their behaviour is contrary to a modern understanding of marriage as well as contrary to a Christian understanding of marriage. To express it in theological terms, they need to hear that their behaviour is sinful and that they are responsible for it.

This was stated very clearly in a joint letter from the *Conference of European Churches* and the *Council of European Bishops' Conferences* in 1999, in which they named violence against women as sin. In a similar statement in 1992 and then again in 2002, the Catholic Bishops of the U.S.A. write:

Finally, we emphasize that no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage. Some abused women believe that church teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. They may hesitate to seek a separation or divorce. They may fear that they cannot re-marry in the Church. Violence and abuse, not divorce, break up marriage. We encourage abused

persons who have divorced to investigate the possibility of seeking an annulment. An annulment, which determines that the marriage bond is not valid, can frequently open the door to healing<sup>15</sup>.

*Fourth recommendation for action in practice:*

Societal institutions, especially churches, have high moral authority so victims look there for orientation as to how they should assess their experiences before other human beings and before God. Since family violence is not first and foremost an individual problem but a social and structural problem, it is not a case of changing a few men, parents or women but of undertaking preventive measures by installing just gender and generation relations.

One of the first important contributions of ethics, theology and pastoral work in the area of prevention is to be aware of the aspects which stabilise violence or which reduce violence on a structural level. Buttressed by this structural perspective, one may venture to be aware on the interactional and individual level. The work of counselling and pastoral care demands action on an individual and interactional level. In this final part, reflections on the meaning of remembrance and forgiveness will show us the way.

*Remember and forgive: two important categories for theology*

As we can observe from knowledge gained in trauma research, forgetting and denying play an important role in the lives of victims: they enable victims to cope with the situation so that they can somehow go on living. Forgetting, denying, minimising play an important role in the lives of offenders: so that they do not have to take responsibility, or at least not the whole responsibility, for their deeds. Moreover, forgetting and denial also play a role at the social level: by identifying that these unpleasant things are

<sup>15</sup> *When I Call for Help. A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women*, Tenth Anniversary Edition. A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., USCCB, 2002.

non-existent, we are not forced to deal with them and consequently we need not initiate changes in society<sup>16</sup>. That means that anyone who deals with the issue of family violence is first faced with a culture of forgetting and keeping silent.

The Bible does not conform to this culture of forgetting and keeping silent in every case. It also testifies to another culture, a culture of remembrance, as we can observe from the example of Tamar in the First Testament: Absalom urges his sister Tamar to keep silent about the fact that she was raped by her half-brother Amnon when he says: "And now, my sister, keep silent". But the Bible, by preserving and telling this story, refuses to obey this order. It remembers the fates of women and children who have suffered violence. These "texts of terror", as Phyllis Trible<sup>17</sup> calls them, testify to the fact that offenders and oppressors do not have the last word<sup>18</sup>.

Through the biblical culture of remembrance, theology gains a connection to trauma research, because trauma research also knows no other way for healing than to remember. In a therapeutic setting, victims learn to remember the event and to work it through in a protective and supportive atmosphere. That means that they learn to integrate their experiences into their lives and that they learn to live with what has happened. Healing takes place most successfully if work on memories – and this is literally hard work – is buttressed by good social contacts. Besides professional help, many individuals and communities can also take on a healing function.

Johann Baptist Metz considers the remembrance of suffering, the *memoria passionis*, to be a basic category of Christian discourse on God. He says: "Speaking about this God means speaking about another's suffering and deploring neglected responsibility and

<sup>16</sup> A. GODENZI, *Gewalt im sozialen Nahraum*, Basel, Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 21994, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> P. TRIBLE, *Texts of Terror. Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 21985.

<sup>18</sup> I. MÜLLNER, *Sexuelle Gewalt im Alten Testament*, in U. EICHLER & I. MÜLLNER (ed.), *Sexuelle Gewalt gegen Mädchen und Frauen als Thema der feministischen Theologie*, Gütersloh, Kaiser, 1999, 40-75, p. 73ff.



refused solidarity”<sup>19</sup>. Sensitivity to suffering can be clearly observed in the person and in the behaviour of Jesus. Metz again: “Jesus’ first look was not directed at another’s sin but at another’s suffering. Sin for him was a refusal to deal with another’s suffering...”<sup>20</sup>. The fact that Jesus focused first and foremost on suffering and not on sin, has often been overlooked in the history of Christianity, and with fatal consequences. Whereas sensitivity to suffering does not block our view of the sin but often sharpens its contours, a fixation on sin and blame does not create an increased sensitivity to suffering. As Metz remarks: “Christian preaching became above all a heuristic of guilty conscience and fear of sin. That paralyzed their sensitivity to the suffering of the just and darkened the biblical vision of the great justice of God...”<sup>21</sup>

*Fifth recommendation for action in practice:*

Christian work on remembrance is first and foremost committed to remembering the suffering of victims, which must not be confused with the glorification of suffering or with downplaying suffering, but helps one realise the kingdom of God.

The question of forgiveness emerges very often in connection with interpersonal violence. Offenders as well as victims can express

<sup>19</sup> J.B. METZ, *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie 1965-1997*, Mainz, Matthias Grünewald, 1997, p. 201. Original quotation: “Von diesem Gott reden heißt fremdes Leid zur Sprache bringen und versäumte Verantwortung, verweigerte Solidarität beklagen.”

<sup>20</sup> J.B. METZ, *Im Eingedenken fremden Leids. Zu einer Basiskategorie christlicher Gottesrede*, in J.B. METZ, J. REIKERSTORFER & J. WERBICK, *Gottesrede*, Münster, Lit-Verlag, 1996, 3-20, p. 11. Original quotation: “Jesu erster Blick galt nicht der Sünde der Anderen, sondern dem Leid der Anderen. Sünde war ihm vor allem Verweigerung der Teilnahme am Leid der Anderen...”

<sup>21</sup> J.B. METZ, *Theodizee-empfindliche Gottesrede*, in J.B. METZ (ed.), *“Landschaft aus Schreien”. Zur Dramatik der Theodizeefrage*, Mainz, Matthias Grünewald, 1995, 81-102, p. 87. Original quotation: “Christliche Verkündigung wurde vor allem zu einer Heuristik der Schuldgefühle und der Sündenangst. Das lähmte ihre Empfindlichkeit für das Leid der Gerechten und verdüsterte die biblische Vision von der großen Gottesgerechtigkeit...”

the request for forgiveness and desire it as a first step towards healing. When we are called upon to make a pastoral response, we must take into consideration that victims often ask for forgiveness because they feel guilty for what they have experienced. They feel that they are also guilty for the rape because they did not sufficiently resist the rapist; they feel guilty for the battering because the offenders told them that their behaviour provoked it. If one had served the meal on time, if one had not looked at the man in the supermarket, etc., one would not have been battered. Victims have the feeling that liberation from violence – for themselves, the offender and the world – depends entirely on their readiness to forgive. Real life tells them another story. For many victims the act of forgiveness is accompanied by the subjective feeling of being unable to truly forgive. Only the offender and the people in their social environment are relieved. However, for the victim, the abuse continues on another level: it continues to occur in the inner life of the victim. Wanting to forgive but not being able to forgive increases the powerlessness and isolation of the victim. Liberation as a genuine moment of forgiveness fails to occur. Forgiveness merely becomes cheap grace for the offender. With reference to the New Testament, I will now try to present whether and how we can work out a theological concept of forgiveness in connection with family violence against women and children.

In his exegetic analyses, Frederick W. Keene points out two remarkable facts in the New Testament<sup>22</sup>. On the one hand, he makes us aware that forgiveness in the New Testament is primarily described as an act of God towards human beings. On the other hand, he states that the few reports of forgiveness in human actions reveal a specific structure. Interpersonal forgiveness is possible only when the forgiver is more powerful than, or at least the equal of, the person being forgiven. This hierarchical structure is found in the Lord’s Prayer in

<sup>22</sup> F.W. KEENE, *Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament*, in C.J. ADAMS & M.M. FORTUNE (ed.), *Violence against Women and Children. A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, New York, Continuum, 1995, 121-134.

Matthew 6:12 and Luke 11:4<sup>23</sup>: “And forgive us our debts (sins), as we also have forgiven our debtors.” God as the powerful one is asked to forgive us our debts or sins. And we forgive everyone who is indebted to us, that is to say we forgive those over whom we have power. In the structure of forgiveness, we can identify a progression from over to under. Nothing is said about those who have power over us and against whom we might have a grievance. Nobody demands that they should be forgiven because such a demand cannot be made according to the logic of this argument.

One of the few cases where, instead of an absolute hierarchy, there is an equal relationship is found in Luke 17:3b.4, where Jesus tells us that we should forgive our brother or our sister seven times a day. But forgiveness here is linked with a change in behaviour. “If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3b). Rebuking the offender, which means confronting the sinner with his offence, and the concrete change in behaviour precede forgiveness. In the other narrative complex Matthew 18:21-35, Peter asks Jesus: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him: “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:21-22). Forgiveness in this context is seen as a boundless preparedness as regards this duty but it is not an unconditional duty. It is linked to specific conditions, as the text in Matthew clearly indicates:

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that *by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed*. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17, emphasis added).

This quotation makes it unmistakably clear that interpersonal forgiveness does not exist unconditionally. This passage testifies to the

<sup>23</sup> All the quotations in this text are taken from the NAU Bible.

fact that the sinner forfeits his membership in the community by his refusal to repent. The multi-staged programme, which the Bible proposes here, protects the sinner to the greatest possible extent from arbitrary justice.

This demand for continuous forgiveness precedes the warning against leading the powerless and weak astray, as depicted by the image of a child. The abuse of the small and weak is presented as a serious crime. The one who causes others to stumble is given no hope of forgiveness. “It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble.” (Luke 17:2 and Matthew 18:6). The fact that there is no hope of forgiveness in this case is also connected with the asymmetry of power. The powerful who commit a sin against the small and weak only have a chance of forgiveness when the power relations are changed: the fact that it would be better for the person who causes others to stumble to be thrown in the sea with a millstone round his neck shows very clearly that God himself is on the side of the small and weak. “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10).

This progression from the powerful to the less powerful is maintained in Jesus’ plea of forgiveness from the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). In this situation, when he is dying on the cross, Jesus has no more power. Jesus speaks here as one without power to those whose power and influence enabled them to crucify him. Frederick Keene commented: “This is the one place where, if Jesus wanted the weak to forgive the strong, he could have indicated it. He did not. He asked the strongest to forgive, and, being the less powerful did not offer the forgiveness himself”<sup>24</sup>. Against the background of these observations, it is no longer surprising that only a few passages speak of interpersonal forgiveness and that much more is said about God’s forgiveness of human beings.

<sup>24</sup> F.W. KEENE, *Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament*, p. 128.

If we orient ourselves by this message of the New Testament, we can identify as wrong the demand that battered women or abused children forgive their perpetrator. In order for forgiveness to be possible, power relationships would have to be changed. Frederick W. Keene concludes: "It would also mean that if a man beats his wife, the battered woman not only is not required to forgive her husband, but in fact *should not* forgive him so long as the hierarchical power relationship exists within the marriage (...) A wife can forgive a marital wrong only as a marital equal"<sup>25</sup>. The guilty man cannot receive forgiveness until he has given up his position of power as a sign of repentance, as a sign of *metanoia*. The basic conditions are acknowledgement of his deed (its full extent) and taking responsibility for it. The question of balanced power relations probably arises in its most extreme form in the case of sexually abused children. Forgiveness is not possible until the power relation is reversed, that is to say, until the child is grown or when the constellation of power has changed in such a way that the abused child is no longer dependent upon the abuser. Because of the power of psychological dependence or psychological patterns of survival such as denial or forgetting, forgiveness is frequently not possible until a much later stage in the victim's life.

*Sixth recommendation for action in practice:*

These reflections would seem to demonstrate clearly that forgiveness has nothing to do with cheap grace. Interpersonal forgiveness must be preceded by the elimination of unjust power relationships in order that victims as well as offenders are able to experience liberation.

When conceptualising forgiveness, we need the perspective of justice. Marie Fortune considers that three important aspects constitute preconditions for forgiveness<sup>26</sup>. The first aspect is the acknowledgement

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123

<sup>26</sup> M.M. FORTUNE, *Forgiveness. The Last Step*, in C.J. ADAMS & M.M. FORTUNE (ed.), *Violence against Women and Children. A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, New York, NY, Continuum, 1995, 201-206, p. 202.

that harm has been done to one person by another. It requires that the offender admit his guilt and acknowledge his responsibility for the harm done – supported by family members, priests, police or others who confront him and hold him accountable. As a second aspect, repentance is required. Repentance demands more effort than just remorse. Repentance in the sense of *metanoia* demands a fundamental change. And this is not accomplished through good intentions; it requires time, hard work and therapy. Repentance has to lead to the third aspect, which Marie Fortune calls restitution, a concrete act of justice for the victim. It is the responsibility of the abuser to provide materially for the restoration of those harmed, e.g. paying for medical treatment or therapy. Only when these three preconditions have been fulfilled is something like interpersonal forgiveness possible.

Forgiveness has different meanings for victims and offenders. For offenders, forgiveness means getting a chance to start a new life, provided that they are willing to change. For victims, forgiveness also means getting a chance to start a new life, in so far as the demons of traumatic memories are banished. Forgiveness requires the beginning of healing. Therefore remembrance as opposed to forgetting is a precondition for victims as well as for offenders. Victims cannot forget because they bear the scars of violence on them. Offenders must not forget because this would endanger the possibility of a change in behaviour.

Within the process of remembering, it is possible to maintain an option of forgiveness<sup>27</sup>. Forgiveness as the result of a successful story of liberation cannot be demanded by anybody, because it is a gift. Human life can be damaged through violence to such an extent that forgiveness is only possible before God and through God, when the victim is finally in safety, and forgiveness also has its valid place there<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> D. POLLEFEYT, *Ethics, Forgiveness and the Unforgivable after Auschwitz*, in D. POLLEFEYT (ed.), *Incredible Forgiveness. Christian Ethics between Fanaticism and Reconciliation*, Leuven, Peeters, 2004, 121-159, p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> A. LEHNER-HARTMANN, *Wider das Schweigen und Vergessen. Gewalt in der Familie. Sozialwissenschaftliche Erkenntnisse und praktisch-theologische Reflexionen*, Innsbruck, Tyrolia, 2002, esp. p. 237-243.

Oriented by the Bible, we have to bear in mind that the oppressed and abused are not only those to whom God's message is addressed but also those who are privileged to bear his message. In and through the victims of oppression and abuse, it becomes clear that God is on their side, he takes their side and lets himself be found with them: "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40).

Consequently, in solidarity with victims and in order to overcome family violence, theology has to intervene in word and deed wherever repressive concepts of education, traditional beliefs in a God-given dominance and subordination of genders or generations, sexism and discrimination of all kinds are propagated, practised and given a religious basis. This intervention means that the violent behaviour of the individual as well as ideological and social structures of violence are unmasked as "idols of death"<sup>29</sup>, which block the remembrance of the God of life, who promised all humans "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

<sup>29</sup> P. RICHARD, *Die Anwesenheit und Offenbarung Gottes in der Welt der Unterdrückten*, in *Concilium* 28 (1992) 299-306, p. 299.