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Violence from a psychological and theological perspective

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Abstract. As an instrument of shared hope, of care for others, the Church, by virtue of divine grace, must shape future generations to be true communities of peace, capable of living the word of the Gospel. Violence, aggressive behavior has both bio-physiological causes, but it is also a learned reaction; however, the will of man dominates over all and as the source of aggression we find the sin that produces an aggression on the person who commits it, but also on fellow humans and nature. Orthodox spirituality sees in a violent man, a sick man, his acquisition being a commandment, and this must be achieved through understanding and through the infusion of love.

Keywords. violence, aggressive behavior, sin, healing, Church

Conceptual boundaries

„Violence is the characteristic of what is violent (1), great power, intensity, strength (2); lack of control in words or actions; vehemence, anger (3). The act of using brutal force, coercion, violence; violation of the legal order"¹. Or in other words it is a behavior that has the intention of harming another person (physically, verbally or mentally) or yourself or of destroying property. The key concept in this definition is intention². Which means that this definition fits aggression just as well.

Aggressiveness being defined as a form of offensive behavior of the individual, which is consumed in an actional or verbal plan, constitutes his reaction to a real or only imaginary opposition on the part of others. The opposite of aggression is autistic, introverted behavior³.

If the two definitions say the same thing, it means we should put the equal sign between the two. But psychologists make a distinction between the two; for some psychologists aggression is of a "logical" nature, that is, the way of handling the aggression of some people has its root in the genetic part of the person, whereas violence is seen as pathogenic⁴, that is, a form of aggressive behavior that has been acquired by adopting some "anti patterns" of

¹ *Explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language*, 2nd Edition, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Universe Publishing House, 1998, p. 1163.

² Barbara L. Fredrickson, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Edward E. Smith, Geoffrey R. Loftus, *Introduction to Psychology*, XIVth Edition, Bucharest, Technical Publishing House, 2005, pp. 598-599.

³ Norbert Sillamy, *Dictionary of social psychology*, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1981, p. 19.

⁴ Gilles Ferreol (coord.), Adrian Neculau, *Violence. Psychosocial aspects*, Iasi, Polirom Publishing House, 2003, p. 37.

behaviour such as sociopathic and deviant behaviour⁵. For other psychologists, things are exactly the opposite⁶.

A distinction is also made between aggression and the aggressive act. Aggression is part of the psycho-affective behaviors of the human person, as a potential for action and activity⁷. The Holy Fathers also talk about this, but they call it the irascible part, having a positive role for the human being.

The aggressive act is a hostile "episodic event" that occurs through the discharge of aggression⁸. The aggressive act is seen by the Holy Fathers as a result of the perversion of the irascible part of man, as a negative manifestation of this perversion. Through perversion the irascible part becomes anger.

In the language of psychologists, when we talk about aggression, we also talk about "attack behavior", that is, the way in which aggression manifests itself in human actions and behaviors. It can be of two kinds. When it has an offensive character it is called "attack", and when it has a defensive character it is called "counter-attack"⁹.

Aggressive behavior ("attack" or offensive) is seen as a negative, destructive action with a pathogenic role. Whereas the counter-attack or defense is seen as a positive, reparative reaction, with a restorative role, related to the vital principle¹⁰. Even so, the aggressive behavior of counter-attack has a negative role not only on the person towards whom this behavior manifests, but also on the person who manifests it¹¹. So, this behavior cannot be seen as positive, as some psychologists see it, but as negative.

Manifestations of aggressive behavior

For J. M. R. Delgado, aggressive behavior manifests itself through the following aspects:

- a) posture, gestures, mimicry, these meaning external manifestations.
- b) a defense response from the aggrieved person;
- c) neurovegetative changes (cardiac, vascular, respiratory, muscle tone).
- d) endocrine-metabolic changes (thyroid, suprarenal, etc.)¹².

Constantin Enăchescu, starting from the fundamental drive theory, finds that in the course of aggressive acts or behaviors, the following four types of processes can be highlighted:

- ❖ displacement of the action onto other objects (for example the child shows his aggression when he hits his teddy bear using it as a substitute)¹³ - or self-mutilating behavior¹⁴
- ❖ the sublimation of aggressive energy in other forms of manifestation
- ❖ the reaction of aggressive energy purposes
- ❖ intricacy or libido¹⁵.

Manifestations of aggressive behavior can also be divided according to the types of reactions. Thus we have:

⁵ Constantin Enăchescu, *Treatise on psychopathology*, Second Edition, Bucharest, Technical Publishing House, 2005, p. 258.

⁶ Gilles Ferreol (coord.), Adrian Neculau, *Violence...*, p. 37.

⁷ Constantin Enăchescu, *Treatise on...*, p. 530.

⁸ Constantin Enăchescu, *Treatise on...*, p. 531.

⁹ Constantin Enăchescu, *Treatise on...*, p. 531.

¹⁰ Constantin Enăchescu, *Treatise on...*, p. 248.

¹¹ Hieromonah Gabriel Bunge, *Anger and its therapy according to Abba Evagrie Ponticul*, Sibiu, Deisis Publishing House, 1998, p. 57.

¹² Constantin Enăchescu, *Treatise on...*, p. 530.

¹³ Pavel Petroman, *Family psychology*, Timișoara, Eurobit Publishing House, 2003, p. 190.

¹⁴ Pavel Petroman, *Family ...*, p. 190.

¹⁵ Constantin Enăchescu, *Treatise on...*, p. 530.

❖ primitive reactions: immediately directly, through impulsive, instantaneous actions or through deep processes of hypobulic or hyponoic nature without engaging the whole personality; they are specific to children, to uneducated people, to those with affective immaturity, limited intellect, to alcoholics or psychopathic people¹⁶.

❖ superior reactions.

According to the ways of manifestation of aggression, it is not essential that this is physical or verbal, but it can be economic, moral¹⁷ or psychological.

Aggression in children manifests itself on several levels:

❖ impulsive-explosive behavior during the game.

❖ verbal and imaginary - as an aggressive fantasy with representations in the dream.

❖ fantastic - as aggressive fantasies, situations in which there is an imminence of action¹⁸.

From a theological point of view, I would divide the ways of manifestation of aggression in relation to:

❖ God, through sins or manifestations of hostility towards Him through swearing and ending with acts of denial of His existence.

❖ fellow men (Saint Siluan the Athonite says our fellow man is our life), from acts of physical manifestation of aggression to the most insignificant gestures of contempt or ignoring someone's very existence.

Gabriel Bunge even talks about an aggressiveness of ours that can also be transmitted through gestures, and these would be aggressive even if they are never spoken.

❖ nature: nature can light up through people or darken through them, there can even be a violence against nature

❖ one's own person - through things that are not in accordance with God's will, because human nature by its structure seeks to do God's will.

The causes of violent behavior

It was sought to find out the causes that lead to violent behavior so that such behavior does not exist in the future. As expected, several theories appeared, of which I will mention only the most important:

❖ Kanrad Zorenz's theory of innate aggression;

❖ Sigmund Freud's death drive theory;

❖ additional chromosome theory – Patricia Jacobs;

❖ saturnism theory – Brek Bryce Smith;

❖ malformations of the cortex;

❖ the theory of the influences of chemical substances;

❖ dispositions of the character that are built from the first years of childhood¹⁹;

❖ the theory of aggression as a learned reaction – Ross Bandura.

Freud's theory, which was also taken up by other theorists of psychoanalysis, regards aggression as a drive. This theory makes a causal link between frustration and aggression. The state of frustration occurs whenever the person is faced with a barrier or an obstacle that prevents him from satisfying his personal interests and goals; an aggressive drive is induced,

¹⁶ Constantin Enăchescu, *Treatise on...*, p. 252.

¹⁷ Pavel Petroman, *Family...*, p. 188.

¹⁸ Pavel Petroman, *Family...*, p. 190.

¹⁹ Gilles Ferreol (coord.), Adrian Neculau, *Violence...*, p. 39.

that motivates behavior aimed at harming the obstacle (person or object) that produced frustration²⁰.

According to this theory man is a poor biped animal over whom instincts are all-powerful. Which would mean that aggression is a basic drive, like hunger, and it would be expected that other mammals would show similar aggression patterns as humans. So, if this theory were valid, research on the biological basis of aggression in animals would provide evidence. Scientific evidence actually suggests that there is an aggressive drive, if not in all species, at least in some. Thus, some research has shown that weak electrical stimulation of a certain region in the hypothalamus produces aggressive, even murderous behavior in animals.

The same research showed that in some mammals these patterns of instinctive aggression are controlled by the cortex and this would be the reason why they are influenced more by experience than by instinct²¹.

Which means that Freud's theory is only partially valid. The theory that cortical malformations are the basis of aggressive behavior is based on some arguments provided by science. In this sense, I mention the fact that recent research has discovered that certain aspects of the prefrontal cortex are dysfunctional in individuals who have violent, impulsive outbursts. In people who do not suffer from this brain abnormality, the frequency of expression of aggressive behavior, the forms it takes and the situations in which it manifests itself are determined to the greatest extent by life experience and the influence of social factors²².

It must be mentioned that scientific research has concluded that even those people who had dysfunctions in the prefrontal cortex can eventually come to control their aggressive behavior.

In 1973 Ross Bandura, after some experiences, came to the conclusion that Freud's theory is false and proposed another theory that states that aggression is a reaction learned through observation or imitation and the more often it is reinforced, the greater the probability of its appearance²³. This theory emphasizes the influence of cognitive processes, as well as the role of models in the transmission of specific behaviors and emotional reactions.

Also within this theory of learning through imitation, several places appeared where man could learn to behave aggressively: a) the first place is the family; b) the second place is the subculture in which he lives; c) the third teacher is the symbolic models provided by the media²⁴. This theory would also explain why people in unpleasant situations have different reactions. But not even this theory fully satisfies us because the very fact that people respond differently in unpleasant situations shows that aggression is not only about what has been learned. Aggression can often occur when a person is frustrated, but it does not always occur after frustration. Many problems and social indicators increase and decrease a person's tendency to react aggressively²⁵.

Among the common causes of anger and aggression are loss of self-esteem or the perception that someone else has behaved incorrectly²⁶. In this case, as elsewhere, aggression must be seen as part of a language, i.e. being a way of expressing thoughts and feelings,

²⁰ Barbara L. Fredrickson, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Edward E. Smith, Geoffrey R. Loftus, *Introduction to...*, p. 598.

²¹ Barbara L. Fredrickson, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Edward E. Smith, Geoffrey R. Loftus, *Introduction to...*, p. 599.

²² Barbara L. Fredrickson, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Edward E. Smith, Geoffrey R. Loftus, *Introduction to...*, p. 601.

²³ Barbara L. Fredrickson, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Edward E. Smith, Geoffrey R. Loftus, *Introduction to...*, p. 602.

²⁴ Pavel Petroman, *Family...*, p. 192.

²⁵ Barbara L. Fredrickson, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Edward E. Smith, Geoffrey R. Loftus, *Introduction to...*, p. 611.

²⁶ Barbara L. Fredrickson, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Edward E. Smith, Geoffrey R. Loftus, *Introduction to...*, p. 611.

personality, the self in the last instance²⁷. For some, violence is a chapter of dementia, and this from the nihilistic conviction, and from here one ends up in a world of "survival of the fittest"²⁸. That is, when man no longer has the conviction that God exists or that there is something after death, the "social contract" for the nihilistic, disoriented man has no value, all that matters is his own person. He gets the certainty that he has to prove to himself that God exists. And he manifests this cry of pain through acts of violence that give him, at least for the moment, the feeling that he is "someone", that he exists.

Father Dumitru Popescu sees pride as the root of violence, this making to exalt the thirst for power in man, which leads to injustice, and injustice leads in turn to violence²⁹.

Doctor Dmitri Avdeev also considers sin as the origin of neurotic disorders. And these in turn having as effect outbursts of aggression³⁰. Neurosis, being the conflict between desire and reality, is like a cry of pain. "I talk loudly, scream, vegetative responses appear. I do not accept the reply, except - at most - as a confirmation. I have to convince myself and those around me, because otherwise the feeling I get is that my very personality is called into question"³¹. This is how someone expressed the state of neurosis. This state, even if it radiates uncontrollably, will always return to the one who caused it. The same Russian doctor also found among the causes of aggressiveness neurasthenia (this being described as nervous weakness, irascibility, impulsiveness, going up to the deep exhaustion of the man's vital forces³²), as well as rock music³³.

In the view of Father Boris Bobrinskoy, violence is a demonic usurpation of the Trinitarian Kingdom³⁴.

What we can conclude is that violence has biophysiological causes but it is also a learned reaction, but above all the will of man dominates, and as the source of aggression we find sin that produces an aggression against the person who commits it, but also against fellow humans and nature.

Curing aggressive behavior

Some psychologists find a remedy for aggressive behavior in getting the subject to put violence, with its traumatic experiences, in service of libido.

Therapy, in the perspective of these psychologists, should aim to alleviate the patient's sense of guilt, who would thus gradually become aware of the complications of his violent behavior, highlighting to him the normality of that behavior in any human being. The patient is helped to distinguish between destructive aggression and normal violence, prior to any psychic elaboration³⁵.

²⁷ Gheorghe Schwartz, *Philosophy of language in the spirit of transversal psychology*, Bucharest, Paideia Publishing House, 2004, p. 159.

²⁸ Monk John Marler, Monk Andrew Wermuth, *Youth of the Apocalypse*, Bucharest, Sofia Publishing House, 2002, pp. 26-28

²⁹ Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Gh. Popescu, *Theology and culture*, Bucharest, Publishing House of the Biblical and Orthodox Mission Institute, 1993, p. 138.

³⁰ Dr. Dmitri Aleksandrovici Avdeev, *When the soul is ill*, Bucharest, Sofia Publishing House, 2005, pp. 60-65.

³¹ Gheorghe Schwartz, *Philosophy of language...*, p. 157.

³² Dr. Dmitri Aleksandrovici Avdeev, *Nervousness: causes, manifestations, spiritual remedies*, Bucharest, Sofia Publishing House, 2003, p. 75.

³³ Dr. Dmitri Aleksandrovici Avdeev, *Nervousness in children and adolescents*, Bucharest, Sofia Publishing House, 2005, p. 77.

³⁴ Rev. Prof. Univ. Dr. Boris Bobrinskoy, "The Kingdom of heaven is taken by violence", in the volume *Violence in the name of God – a Christian response*, Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea Publishing House, 2002, p. 32.

³⁵ Gilles Ferreol (coord.), Adrian Neculau, *Violence...*, p. 37.

What is negative in the remedy of aggressive behavior is the attempt to induce the subject to place the aggressive manifestation and his traumatic experiences in service of libido. This is negative because it is based on Freud's theory, and Freud's conception of man is a false one: man is a bundle of instincts over which libido dominates.

P. Karli comes up with the idea that it would be possible to reduce aggression through educational measures by glorifying altruistic behaviors and moral values³⁶.

For some, healing from aggression would come through catharsis, or the release of an emotion through intense experience. Thus, in France, in 1971 several "parents' schools" were established in different cities. Telephone helplines where parents who can no longer bear their child have the opportunity to anonymously express their tension³⁷. Experiments have proven that aggression does not decrease after it is partially expressed, but remains at the same level or increases³⁸.

If this method does not work, instead *the confession has an amazing effect*, the difference between the two discoveries of the soul is that *the priest also has the gift of the Holy Spirit*.

Another remedy for aggressive behavior would come from learning to endure frustration, to be patient, to be deprived, to postpone the satisfaction of your needs³⁹.

According to others, a remedy against violence consists of three steps:

a) primary prevention, actions, programmes, campaigns aimed at larger populations (country, county, city) in order to raise their awareness and reduce tolerance to violence⁴⁰.

b) secondary prevention, consisting of the prevention of groups at high risk of displaying a particular behaviour or groups at risk of victimisation⁴¹.

c) tertiary prevention, where actions are targeted at groups already affected by domestic violence⁴².

It must be said that scientific healing is necessary because the conditions in which people live are different.

Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos states that even the psychologist can heal without being absolutely well himself, but in the Orthodox tradition, because healing means mainly that the person reaches deification, it is necessary that the therapist has the personal experience of divinity⁴³.

Paul Tournier sees the remedy for violence in our transition from an anthropocentric to a theocentric conception⁴⁴. Orthodox spirituality sees in a violent man, a sick man, and his recovery is a commandment, which should be achieved through understanding and the infusion of love.

³⁶ Norbert Sillamy, *Dictionary of...*, p. 20.

³⁷ Norbert Sillamy, *Dictionary of psychology*, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Universe Publishing House, 1996, pp. 81-82.

³⁸ Barbara L. Fredrickson, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Edward E. Smith, Geoffrey R. Loftus, *Introduction to...*, p. 604.

³⁹ Pr. Amedée Hallier, Dr. Dominique Megglé, *The Monk and the Psychiatrist*, Bucharest, Christiana Publishing House, 1997, p. 55.

⁴⁰ Monica Naum, Constantin Jurcă, *Domestic Violence in the European Union Perspective*, Constanța, Muntenia Publishing House, 2005, p. 166.

⁴¹ Monica Naum, Constantin Jurcă, *Domestic Violence...*, p. 167.

⁴² Monica Naum, Constantin Jurcă, *Domestic Violence...*, p. 168.

⁴³ For details see Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy - continuation and debates*, Bucharest, Sofia Publishing House, 2001, pp. 288-294.

⁴⁴ Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Dumitru Popescu, "Man without roots. Causes of violence and their spiritual therapy", in *Violence in the name of God - a Christian response*, Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea Publishing House, 2002, p. 73.

Aggression can be overcome by the spirit of gentleness⁴⁵, finding a reason, namely that Christ also died for the one who angers us⁴⁶. And St. Maxim the Confessor gives as a remedy for anger the contempt of the desire for glory, honor and material things⁴⁷.

The spiritual crisis of the contemporary world, in which violence is reaching alarming heights, is the result of the deistic conception which has broken the bond between God and man given in Christ and has isolated God in an inaccessible transcendence⁴⁸. According to others, the alarming levels of violence are rooted in the development of materialism⁴⁹.

Between 5 and 15% of real violence is caused by the short-term effects of television violence. In the long term from 12 to 15 years studies show a doubling of violence as a result of a maturing generation in contrast to the violent environment of the world⁵⁰.

Most of the research shows that violence on TV only increases the number of violent acts. Healing from aggression comes through Christ, through involvement in the life of the Church, through a rigorous personal programme, because this is how our personalities are shaped.

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⁴⁵ Hierom. Savatie Baştovoi, *Courage and Freedom in Orthodoxy*, Bucharest, Sofia Publishing House, 2002, p. 42.

⁴⁶ Hierom. Savatie Baştovoi, *Courage and Freedom...*, p. 45.

⁴⁷ Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, Timisoara, Resurrection Publishing House, 1998, p. 287.

⁴⁸ Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Dumitru Popescu, „Omul fără rădăcini...”, p. 73.

⁴⁹ Dr. Dmitri Aleksandrovici Avdeev, *Nervozitatea la copii...*, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁰ Virgiliu Gheorghe, *Efectele televiziunii asupra minţii umane şi despre creşterea copiilor în lumea de azi*, Bucureşti, Editura Evanghелиsmos, 2005, p. 287.

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