

Hidden in Plain Sight – The Violence That Surrounds Us

An Invitation to Reconsider the Meaning of Violence

Introduction

I write this in the aftermath of the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel which once again brought the complex and tragic situation of Israel – Palestine to the world's attention.

Some days after the attack, the UN Secretary General stated that 'It is important to ... recognise that the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum', a comment for which his resignation was demanded by the Israeli Ambassador to the UN.

Yet the attack did not happen in a vacuum. Nothing can justify the killing of innocent civilians, but it is important to be aware that the violence did not start on October 7 2023. Arguably, the violence goes back to 1947, or before that, when it was decided that 'a land without people' would be given to 'a people without a land', forgetting entirely that the land was in fact already inhabited.

Such an understanding requires a wider definition of violence, and it is the aim of this brief study course to open up this wider definition, and to ask whether we have defined violence too narrowly and, in doing so, have allowed manifestations of violence to be, in effect, hidden in plain sight.

I hope that you will find these studies helpful. They are designed for group use but can be read and reflected on by individuals too, and / or adapted for use in your context.

Peter King
January 2024

Further Reading

Helen Paynter, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: A Biblical Theology of Human Violence* (Harper Collins / Zondervan Academic, 2023).

Helen has also produced a video Study Guide to accompany the book:

<https://masterlectures.zondervanacademic.com/blessed-are-the-peacemakers-helen-paynter>

Session One
What is Violence ?

In this first session we will share our thoughts on what violence is. There is no preparatory reading. You are invited to come prepared to contribute to discussion on the questions below.

1. **Opening Discussion**

- In your group, share together your various understandings of what violence is.
- As a group, can you put together a list of examples of violence from recent events both in your community and society and in the wider world ?
- How would you define violence ? Can your group come up with a definition on which everyone agrees ?

2. **A Dictionary Definition**

- A cursory look online for a definition of violence produces the following:

'behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something', with the example given: "violence erupted in protest marches"

Oxford Languages

- Are you satisfied with this definition ? Why (not) ?

3. **Dimensions of Violence**

- Reflect together on the following questions:
- Does violence always have to be physical ? Are there non-physical forms of violence ?
- Would you consider sexism, racism, classism (for example) to be manifestations of violence ? Why (not) ?
- Do you think that violence can be manifested in the ways society is structured (eg institutional obstacles to the flourishing of certain groups) ? Why (not) ?
- Can everyday language reinforce violence ? If so, how ?

Session Two

Hidden in Plain Sight

For Reading & Reflection Before the Session

You see before you a declining representative of a declining social group. We lower middle class artisans who toil with our humble jemmies on small shopkeepers' cash registers are being swallowed up by big corporations backed by the banks. What's a jemmy compared with a share certificate? What's breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank?'¹

The quote above comes from Bertold Brecht's play *Threepenny Opera* as the character Macheath tries to justify himself to the audience. Perhaps more credible coming from the author than from his disreputable character, Brecht here challenges our conventional understanding of theft, in much the same way as some of Jesus' parables might be said to question "common sense" views of the world and the way things are.

Whatever you make of Macheath's attempted defence of himself, it questions our conventional understanding of theft. And indeed, nearly a century on from Brecht's play we are even more aware of the fallibility of banks and other financial institutions, and the ways in which they can serve anything but the common good.

But what has this to do with violence?

I would suggest quite a lot. For, in the same way that the only crime most of us associate with banks is the robbing of them, so too we often only notice violence when it spills out onto the street, and it was very telling that the example of violence given in the Oxford Languages definition quoted in the last session was "violence erupted in protest marches". For we often talk about violent protests but forget the hidden violence that has itself provoked the protests. We need to be challenged on our conventional understanding of violence in the same way that Brecht, the Marxist, sought to challenge his audience's understanding of theft.

Other Ways of Looking at Violence

Helder Camara was Archbishop of Recife in Brazil from 1964 – 1985. In 1971 his book *Spiral of Violence* was published in English translation. Writing of the injustice of whole societies and social structures, Camara observed how the hidden violence that surrounds us provokes the protest, faced with which, for the first time, we find ourselves speaking of violence:

This established violence, this violence No. 1, attracts violence No 2, revolt, either of the oppressed themselves or of youth, firmly resolved to battle for a more just and human world.

2

And then, of course, as the authorities crack down on the protests of the oppressed, we see what Camara refers to as violence No. 3 wielded by the powers that be in defense of the *status quo*. In this way, the violence that surrounds us can be maintained, and the whole spiral starts again.

Camara's point is that violence surrounds us in the very structures of our societies, yet we look for it only in situations of conflict, so we notice the violence of protest (No. 2), and condemn it, whilst failing to see the violence of the social structures (No. 1) which provoked it. Violence No. 1 is like the founding of the bank for MacHeath - taken for granted, part of the fabric of society, violence hidden in plain sight.

As we look around us at the world it is clear that Camara was on to something in his observation and identification of what he terms violence No. 1. Nowadays we would speak of "structural violence", a term popularised by the theologians of liberation but still perhaps not widely understood or appreciated in the churches or in wider society.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek speaks of Subjective and Objective violence. For Zizek, subjective violence is akin to Camara's violence No.2, very obvious situations of conflict, what most people consider to be violence. By contrast, objective violence, (like Camara's Violence No. 1) is the violence built into the very structures of society.³

Zizek suggests that there are two forms of objective violence: Systemic Violence and Symbolic Violence. Systemic violence is the violence of systems and structures. Symbolic violence is the violence of language. We will reflect on these two manifestations of violence in Sessions Three & Four.

So, with the help of Camara and Zizek, we have seen that much of what we commonly refer to as "violence" is merely the tip of the iceberg, and that much of the violence in our world is hidden in plain sight in structures and language that are largely taken for granted. As Roman Catholic theologian Rosemary Ruether puts it,

*[We live in] a world that we inherit and that biases our opportunities either as oppressed people or as privileged people, even before we have been able to make personal choices.*⁴

In theological terms this is what is understood by the word "sin". It is clear that there is a very real social and political dimension to sin, and that the violence we are exploring here is a manifestation of sin just as pervasive as more traditional understandings.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. How do you react to the suggestion that much violence in the world around us is in fact “hidden in plain sight” ?
2. Does Camara’s three-point classification of violence make sense to you and help you to understand the world ?
3. Are there any situations in your community or society or the wider world which you feel are directly informed by Camara’s schematisation ? How might it help you to better understand what is going on ?

Reflect together on some of the situations you have identified.

4. Does the way that Camara and Zizek (and others) look at violence give added meaning to Jeremiah’s lament that:

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying “peace, peace”, when there is no peace. Jeremiah 6: 14 (NRSV)

5. Are there situations where the church risks following the way of these false prophets ?
6. What is the opposite of violence ? Share your thoughts and suggestions.

Session Three *Pax Romana* or Shalom ?

For Reading & Reflection Before the Session

*It is impossible to ignore the reality that this “peace” [Pax Romana] was established through warfare and conquest, and maintained not through the absence of violence, but through the exercise or threat of it. Thus violence, at its most basic definition of intentional physical injury, was an undercurrent of daily life for many residents of the Roman Empire, including the authors and earliest audiences of the New Testament. Beyond this physical threat, societal factors like social stratification, ethnic marginalization, and economic inequality also threatened violence, in various forms, to the personhood of anyone not rich, freeborn, male, elite, and Roman.*⁵

If violence refers to more than simply situations of obvious conflict, then peace must surely also mean more than simply the absence of conflict. Jesus and the Early Church lived and worked in the context of the Roman Empire, during a 200-year period when the empire appeared to prosper. The powers that be spoke of what they termed the *Pax Romana* – the Roman Peace. With its promise of ‘peace and security’, it proclaimed that ‘the benefits of imperial rule were more valuable to conquered peoples than their freedom and independent rule’,⁶ yet whether the conquered peoples agreed is another matter, as historians remind us of ‘the sheer terror and ruthless destruction that marked the acquisition of the Roman Empire’⁷

The *Pax Romana*, therefore, heralded peace, but a “peace” maintained by violence and oppression. So significant was this that:

*To better understand the New Testament ... we must better understand this violence both as a foundational part of the Roman Empire, and as a constant in the background (and sometimes foreground) of daily life in the first century.*⁸

Pax Romana, therefore, might more accurately be viewed as a false peace, violence masquerading as peace, a superficial peace maintained by deep structural violence. And arguments in favour of *Pax Romana* at the time bring to mind arguments in favour of empires more recent and closer to home. Again, we are reminded of the words of Jeremiah, quoted in the previous session:

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying “peace, peace”, when there is no peace (Jeremiah 6: 14 NRSV)

For peace means much more than simply an absence of war but rather points to something much deeper and more profound.

Shalom

Scholars of the Hebrew Bible tell us that the Hebrew word for peace, *Shalom*, speaks of a vision of wholeness, flourishing and interdependence:

*that all creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature. ...*⁹

This is the vision of the Hebrew prophets, such as Isaiah's image of the Peaceable Kingdom where:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

* * *

*The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*¹⁰

More widely, since WW2, Western peace researchers have begun to widen their own understanding of the nature and meaning of "peace" to encompass much of what scholars have discovered in the Hebrew Bible's concept of *Shalom*. As Peace Researcher Johannes Galtung put it

*Peace is, of course, absence of violence of all kinds, direct (physical, and also verbal), structural, cultural, directed at the body, mind, or spirit.*¹¹

So it is increasingly becoming clear that "peace" is much more than simply the absence of Camara's violence 2, or Zizek's subjective violence. Peace in its fullness describes a situation marked by human and planetary flourishing, and right relationships between both humans and the whole of creation.

*The marvelous vision of the peaceable Kingdom, in which all violence has been overcome and all ... live in loving unity with nature, calls for its realization in our day-to-day lives. Instead of being an escapist dream, it challenges us to anticipate what it promises. Every time we forgive our neighbor, every time we make a child smile, every time we show compassion to a suffering person, every time we arrange a bouquet of flowers, offer care to tame or wild animals, prevent pollution, create beauty in our homes and gardens, and work for peace and justice among peoples and nations we are making the vision come true.*¹²

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. How do you react to the discussion above of the *Pax Romana*? Does it help us to understand the context of both Jesus and the New Testament writings?
2. Can you identify aspects of the *Pax Romana* in our own world? If so, where?
3. Were you surprised by the Hebrew Bible's vision of Shalom?
4. How might an understanding of the meaning of Shalom help us to address the violence in our world? Can you think of any specific situations where peace means more than simply the absence of war / conflict?
5. How would you sum up the meaning of Shalom for our world today?
6. As you conclude, reflect together on the passage above from Henri Nouwen. How might you / your church begin to make peace in your context?

Session Four

The Power of Words

For Reading & Reflection Before the Session

The power of cultural hegemony lies in its invisibility. Unlike a soldier with a gun or a political system backed up by a written constitution, culture resides within us. It doesn't seem "political," it's just what we like, or what we think is beautiful, or what feels comfortable. Wrapped in stories and images and figures of speech, culture is a politics that doesn't look like politics and is therefore a lot harder to notice, much less resist. When a culture becomes hegemonic, it becomes "common sense" for the majority of the population. ¹³

Coined by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937) the term "cultural hegemony" refers to those things which people take for granted as common sense even when they know little about why they are so universally accepted nor what the alternatives are.

Common Sense is 'basically conservative, not innovative, and can be oppressive' writes one scholar. ¹⁴ Another observes that 'sociologists have ... pointed out what common sense treats as "facts" – self-evident, unadorned descriptions of an objective reality – often disguises value judgments that depend on the subjective experience of the person making the evaluation as well as on the (supposedly objective) nature of the thing being evaluated.' ¹⁵

Therefore, there are certain things about our world which we accept as given, yet which could be questioned and challenged, especially when they have detrimental effects on human, or planetary, wellbeing and flourishing. And many of these might be seen as examples of what Zizek terms symbolic violence.

As well as social structures, words too can embody and express violence. Much of the rhetoric of populism, with its claims to articulate "common sense" programmes and policies, can be said to be rooted in symbolic violence. For example, the language used to refer to refugees and asylum seekers is often dehumanising, and the same can be said of the language used to describe many other marginalised or disempowered groups. These are all examples of symbolic violence. As one study puts it, symbolic violence

refers to non-physical violence that is often an expression of power differentials between social groups and manifests along the lines of gender, sexual orientation or ethnic identity ... symbolic violence is not always a deliberate action but rather an unconscious reinforcement of the status quo. ¹⁶

Questioning Common Sense

And so the talk continued ... None of them really understood the subject: not one of them had ever devoted fifteen consecutive minutes to the earnest investigation of it. The papers they read were filled with vague and alarming accounts of the quantities of foreign merchandise imported into this country, the enormous number of aliens constantly arriving, and their destitute conditions, how they lived, the crimes they committed, and the injury they did to British trade. These were the seeds which, cunningly sown in their minds, caused to grow up within them a bitter indiscriminating hatred of foreigners. ... The country was in a hell of a state, poverty, hunger and misery in a hundred forms had already invaded thousands of homes and stood upon the thresholds of thousands more. How came these things to be? It was the ... foreigner! ... It was all quite plain--quite simple. One did not need to think twice about it. It was scarcely necessary to think about it at all. ¹⁷

Robert Tressell's novel, first published in 1914, illustrates just how "common sense" can be manipulated and take hold of public opinion and lead it in some toxic directions, as we know all too well in our own time.

Many commentators would suggest that the life and teaching of Jesus goes against much of the common sense of his time. Jesus' parables are generally stories illustrating what the Kingdom of God is like, what it means to live under the rule of God, and many of them subvert the conventional wisdom of his time and of our own – for example: Matthew 20: 1 – 16; Luke 16: 19 – 31; Luke 15: 11 – 31. Much of Jesus' direct teaching does this too, for example: Luke 6 :20; Luke 13: 30.

Like the Old Testament prophets, he [Jesus] called "injustice" "injustice", "wrong" "wrong", and "sin" "sin". And his calling such things by name he passed on to his disciples, to Christians, to the church as our mission. ¹⁸

So said German pastor and theologian Gerhard Ebeling at the Memorial Service for a man who had been murdered by the Nazis under their *Aktion T4* programme of involuntary euthanasia, by which those who were considered "unworthy of life", usually because of some form of mental illness, were put to death, supposedly for the greater good. Hidden as it was under a veil of euphemism, for Ebeling the murder of this man compelled him to speak up about God's love for the "little ones" and God's call to stand with them.

We too, like Ebeling, are called to state the truth to power, to uncover the realities concealed by misuse of language in the public square. And in the church, too, we sometimes use language which conceals rather than reveals. Think about the ways in which religious language can be used to conceal violence and injustice. Somehow the mention of "God" can be used to justify all sorts of things that on their own would be seen for what they are - unjust, oppressive, dehumanising.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Can you think of examples of apparent “common sense” which cause harm to those around us ?
2. Read and reflect on the Gospel passages referred to above. Do you agree that much of Jesus’ teaching subverts “common sense” ?
3. Can you identify examples of symbolic violence in our own world ?
4. How do you think we should identify and address symbolic violence in the world around us ?
5. Inspired by the extract from Gerhard Ebeling’s sermon above, what might it mean for our churches to speak truth to power ?
6. Reflect on ways in which the church, too, uses language which conceals rather than reveals. Can you think of situations where religious language conceals injustice ?

Session Five
Bystanders or Upstanders ?

For Reading & Reflection Before the Session

We have the word "bystander", meaning a person who is near but does not take part in what is happening. Yet we lack a word, at least in English, for its opposite. Or we have long lacked such a word, but one has recently been invented. "Upstander" is the word ... The term upstander gives recognition and approval to people who stand up for their beliefs. ... An upstander may speak out publicly against bigotry and injustice. An upstander may be a whistle-blower, who exposes wrongdoing in the hope of stopping it. An upstander may resist the temptations of silence and passivity by expressing and offering support directly to victims of bigotry and injustice. ¹⁹

In 1966 Trappist Monk Thomas Merton published a book of reflections entitled *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Reflecting his own growing commitment to peace and social justice issues, Merton acknowledges that living in a monastic community he is something of a bystander to the events unfolding in the wider world, and one can guess from the title of the book that he felt some measure of guilt over his position.

We all know what it is to be guilty bystanders, and we can all think of occasions when we did not say or do what the situation demanded. But there will also be occasions when we were upstanders. The term was unfamiliar to me until I was writing this study guide, ²⁰ but it occurs to me that this is exactly what we should be in this world of Systemic and Symbolic Violence. Being an upstander means identifying the hidden violence in our world, calling out the false peace of empire, questioning the common sense which accepts an unjust *status quo*.

But it is not always easy to be an upstander. Minow sets out a number of 'reasons for bystanding': 'Passivity is Easier than Action'; 'Peer Pressure'; 'Fear'; 'Denial'; 'Being Overwhelmed'; 'Diffused Responsibility' (Why me?). Her final reason is simply that 'It Seems to Take Remarkable Courage and Commitment' but as she adds, 'This Is Not Always The Case'. ²¹

Faced with these 'reasons for bystanding', the Christian community owes it both to itself and to the world to create a context where upstanding is encouraged, supported, and inspired. As a monk of Gethsemani Abbey, Thomas Merton struggled to hold together his vocation to monasticism and his growing commitment to social justice. In the end, his community did not encourage him in his calling to be an upstander. Looking at our own lives, how much do our church communities encourage us to be upstanders not bystanders ?

Making Peace in a Violent World

Those who see the precarious status quo as anything but peaceful, and work to bring about changes in attitude and in the structures of society, are apt to be labelled agitators and trouble-makers. Yet for followers of Jesus it must be the case that to be a peace-maker is not the same as to be a smoother away of anxiety; it may indeed be to reinforce it. ²²

We are called to be peacemakers, and the more we become aware of the ways in which violence manifests itself in our world, the more we will see opportunities to heed that call. Being peacemakers may involve far more than attempting to mediate in situations of conflict, as it invites us to question the very structures of our society and the language we use to describe and address one another.

For this final session you are invited to reflect together on what you have learned so far in the course, and then to identify a particular situation of violence (either individually or as a group) and share your thoughts on how you might address it.

1. Reflect together on your experience of the course so far. Share what you have learned and also any questions about anything you have read or discussed.
2. Do you think that a more expansive definition of both violence and peace is helpful in understanding and addressing the violence both in our day to day lives and in the wider world ?
3. Can you think of specific situations where your understanding of what is going on is aided by what you have read and discussed over the course ? Share your thoughts with the group. As a group you may wish to choose one situation and engage in an extended discussion on it.
4. Identify together a scenario where you, individually or corporately, might be peacemakers. What would it involve ?
5. Was the term 'upstander' familiar to you ? How might the church more effectively inspire, form and support upstanders ?
6. As you conclude this session, and the course, you might like to reflect together on the quote above from Grace Jantzen.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Threepenny Opera* (Penguin, 2007, Originally pub. 1928), pp. 78, 79
- ² Helder Camara, *Spiral of Violence* (Sheed & Ward, 1971), p. 30
- ³ See Slavoj Zizek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (Profile Books, 2008), pp. 1-2
- ⁴ Rosemary Ruether, *Disputed Questions* (Abingdon, 1982), pp. 100-101
- ⁵ Amanda C Miller, 'Wrestling With Rome: Imperial Violence and Its legacy in the Synoptic Gospels' (*Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 42:1, Spring 2015), p. 284
- ⁶ Miller, p. 283
- ⁷ Christopher Kelly, *The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 14. Quoted by Miller, p. 285
- ⁸ Miller, p. 284
- ⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, (United Church Press, 1982), p. 15
- ¹⁰ Isaiah 11: 6 – 9 NRSV
- ¹¹ Johan Galtung, 'Cultural Peace: Some Characteristics' in *From a Culture of Violence to a Culture of Peace* (UNESCO, 1996), pp. 75 ff
- ¹² Quote from Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*
<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/quotes/quotations/view/9992/spiritual-quotations>
- ¹³ <https://beautifultrouble.org/theory/cultural-hegemony/>
- ¹⁴ M G Singer, 'Ethics & Common Sense' (*Revue Internationale de Philosophie* Vol 40 No 158, 1986), p. 222
- ¹⁵ Duncan J Watts, 'Common Sense & Sociological Explanations' (*American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 120 No. 2, September 2014), pp. 315 – 351. Quote from p. 314
- ¹⁶ <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/iris/2021/conceptualising-experiences-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-across-the-refugee-journey.pdf>
- ¹⁷ Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (Hastings Edition, 2014), p. 13

¹⁸ Gerhard Ebeling, 'A Sermon for a Victim of Aktion T4' (July 17, 1940, Berlin-Hermsdorf,) in Dean G Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow* (Eerdmans, 2013), pp 140 ff

¹⁹ Martha Minow, 'Upstanders, Whistle-Blowers, and Rescuers' (*Utah Law Review*, Vol 2017: No 4, Article 9), pp. 815-816

²⁰ I am indebted to my daughter Felicity who introduced me to this word, having encountered it through her work with bullied and traumatised school students, which is its primary context at present.

Further information on the term can be found here: <https://www.facinghistory.org/upstander>

²¹ Minow, pp. 825 ff. The entire article is well worth reading and is freely accessible at: <https://dc.law.utah.edu/ulr/vol2017/iss4/9/>

²² <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0040571X8909200601>