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Wessel Stoker

*IS GOD VIOLENT?
On Violence and Religion*

At the present time religion is often seen in connection with violence. Feminist theology has, however, alerted us for decades to the patriarchal concept of God with its corresponding effect of oppressing women. Environmental ethics has pointed to the theological roots of human violence against nature. Now postmodernism is showing the connection between religion and violence. Derrida speaks of God as war. In politics the theme of violence and religion is high on the agenda. In India Hindutva, Hindu nationalism, has left in its wake, through clashes with Moslems, a great many victims. Primarily because of Moslem extremists the topic of violence and religion has become a topic of discussion worldwide. These extremists commit terrorist acts on the basis of the holy war that they themselves want. Christianity has also been violent in the course of history. It gave, when it became the state religion in the fourth century, religious legitimation to the power of the king and emperor. In Christian iconography the original depiction of Christ as shepherd changed into Christ the imperator.¹ The cross functioned as the ruler's scepter and Christ as the president of the Roman senate or as the cosmic Christ, enthroned above the world.² For Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1646) religious wars were the occasion for attempting to achieve peace among the nations by means of natural religion rather than the violent positive religions (Catholicism and Protestantism). Missions were also often violent in their interaction with existing civilizations.

I will investigate the question of whether God is violent with a view to the question of the extent to which God can be used as a justification of acts of destructive violence. I limit myself here to the Christian tradition. The question of whether God is violent can be answered in at least two ways. The first answers in the affirmative: God is violent. Nonetheless, different conclusions can be drawn from this, as we will see in our discussion of Mary Daly and Paul Tillich. The other position holds that God is not violent---not even constructively so. This position is defended by, for example, René Girard, F.O van Gennepe, André Lascaris and Richard Kearney. We will analyze both positions for an answer to the question of whether God is violent and whether destructive violence can find its justification in God.

What is Violence and Power?

¹ Compare the mural "The Good Shepherd" at the beginning of the third century in Rome with the mosaic "Christ as the Good Shepherd among the Sheep" in the second quarter of the fifth century in Ravenna, the Mausoleum van Galla Placidia. Schmidt 117, 134f.

² "Christ amid the Apostles," apse mosaic of the mid-fifth century, Milan, San Lorenzo Maggiore. Cf. Schmidt 127.

We should first give a more precise definition of violence. The terms “power” and “violence” are closely connected but need to be distinguished from each other. “Power” is the ability to do something. Power has a physical side as well as a social side. We see something through with “might and main.” In the social sense power has to do with dominion over persons and groups. In that sense power, according to Hannah Arendt, is connected with the group, with the ability to act together. In the exercise of power one is dependent a group through whom one is given power. If the group disappears, the legitimation for that power also disappears.³ Power thus presupposes empowerment. In addition to empowerment, power also presupposes force in connection with the exercise of power. There can be no exercise of power without force, sanctions or penalties. The German language uses the term *Gewalt* in the sense of the exercise of power. I call that constructive violence. At the same time *Gewalt* can mean violence as the misuse of power. To do violence to (*Gewalt antun*) a girl is to rape her. That is destructive violence. Violence in this way covers a range of acts: violence in police actions by the United Nations in which the goal is to achieve peace and in which violence needs to be used *proportionally* is of a different order than the violence of criminals or terrorists in which the end justifies the means and the means are used arbitrarily. The former concerns force on the basis of a legitimate exercise of power, whereas the latter is a misuse of power, a disproportionate use of violence that is inhuman because of the destructive effect of the means. Borderline cases can be disputed. Police actions by the United Nations can deteriorate into disproportionate violence whereby the distinction between constructive violence inherent in the exercise of power and destructive violence as the consequence of the misuse of power becomes blurred. That does not detract from the fact that the distinction between constructive and destructive violence is very useful in general. In the latter violence is unmistakably an *evil*, a *malevolent act*. The oppression of women justified by a patriarchal biblical concept of God, violence through religious wars, violence as a result of Hindu nationalism and the terrorist violence of religious extremists fall unmistakably under destructive violence and are to be called evil.

Can the use of the God of Jesus Christ as a legitimation for acts of (the) oppression (of women) or of destructive violence in general be theologically justified? One could say yes if God himself is violent in a destructive way and people find in that a reason for acting in a similar way. Is God violent in the sense of destructive violence?

God as War

By way of introduction to the first position, which holds that God is violent, I will discuss Derrida’s speaking of the (metaphysical) God as war. I will examine of whether Derrida is of help with respect to our topic. In his *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida takes up the question of whether relationships can conceived of without violence. Here the term violence is used in a pre-ethical, transcendental sense. In my relationship with the other, in the appearance of the other to me, respect for the other cannot

³ Arendt (1970) 44.

ignore the intentionality and therefore the infringement of the subject on the other. The inaccessibility of the other *as* inaccessibility must be disclosed. Each encounter with the other is necessarily supported by an "I am." Respect for the being other of the other does not detract from the fact that the encounter with the other has the form of a phenomenon and occurs in my subjective consciousness. That is necessary violence and no encounter with the other can avoid it. Derrida calls the necessity that the other becomes an intentional phenomenon of my consciousness *transcendental violence*. It is violence because the other as that which cannot be represented is presented by me. It is *transcendental, non-ethical* violence because it determines the condition of possibility for the encounter with the other.⁴

Here we see how terms like violence and war are viewed pre-ethically. War here is of the same origin as phenomenality. All (linguistic) forms of meaning have in a certain sense a violent character, by which is meant that they undergo the violence of the disturbing influence of the other who intrudes from outside. 'War ...is congenital to phenomenality, is the very emergence of speech and of appearing.'⁵ 'Violence appears with *articulation*.'⁶ This analysis precedes our relationship with the other on an ethical level. It allows one to see clearly that ethical violence against the other entails a 'reduction of the other to a *real* moment of *my* life, ...on the contrary, to gain access to the egoity of the alter ego as if to its alterity itself is the most peaceful gesture possible.'⁷

Derrida relates God to transcendental violence: God as a designation for war and violence. According to many western metaphysicians since Parmenides, thinking and being are one. The metaphysical God is associated with this age of logocentrism and is, as absolute logos, its crown. It is in that way that Derrida sees God functioning as the guarantee of all understanding. Meanings derive their foundation in God as logos. As an alternative to this logocentrism Derrida proposes in *Violence and Metaphysics* thinking of God as Difference. The Other never coincides completely with its appearance or with my experience. The "difference" between them cannot be bridged. Talk about God stops at the border between our language and that which is beyond our language. Language refers to something outside of itself to which it cannot refer directly but which it invokes indirectly precisely in the *act* of referring. The difference between language and its "outside," the position between the signs and that to which the signs refer is, according to Derrida, "God."⁸ That entails that speaking about a *revelation* of God is, in fact, impossible, for then God is subjected to the violence of language. For Derrida God is in fact inexpressible and unnamable. What do we do then with the God who, according to the witness of the Old and New Testament, has revealed himself? According to Derrida, this witness is always subject to the violence of language and contextuality. Therefore Derrida's alternative, God as Difference (a God without revelation) is of little help with respect to

⁴ Derrida (1978) 125.

⁵ Derrida (1978) 129.

⁶ Derrida (1978) 147f.

⁷ Derrida (1978) 128.

⁸ Sneller (2003) 154.

the question of whether the biblical God is violent and whether people can find an excuse for their violent acts in God.

God is Violent (But Has Conquered It)

Is the biblical God violent? The feminist theologian Mary Daly says yes: 'If God is male, then the male is God.' With this statement she wishes to unmask the patriarchal character of the Christian tradition of which the symbol is God the Father. She sees the images of God as "Supreme Being with a fixed plan" and as father as projections and justifications of the tyrannical father in a patriarchal society: '...Images of God as jealous and vengeful, which historian Arnold Toynbee has judged to have had a devastating effect upon Christian civilisation, may well be projections and justifications of the role of the tyrant father in patriarchal society.'⁹ By "patriarchal" Daly understands the male domination of women. She makes use in *Beyond God the Father* of Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy*. Berger does a good job of pointing out how destructive violence could find its justification in God. Speaking of the role of the father Berger writes:

For example, the role of the father represents a wide variety of meanings ascribed to the institution of the family and, more generally, to the institutionalization of sexuality and interpersonal relationships. When this role is legitimated in mimetic terms---the father reiterating "here below" the actions of creation, sovereignty, or love that have their sacred prototypes "up above" then its representative character becomes vastly enhanced. Representation of human meanings becomes mimesis of divine mysteries. Sexual intercourse mimes the creation of the universe. Paternal authority mimes the authority of the gods, paternal solicitude the solicitude of the gods ...The role of fatherhood confronts the individual as a divinely given facticity, ultimately untouchable¹⁰

Religion legitimizes human behaviour by connecting situations in society with the ultimate transcendent reality. The social order is presented as a reflection of ultimate reality. Thus the relation between religious language and reality appears to be less a matter of interaction than of a one-sidedness. Language influences how we see things. If language about God is masculine, as Daly states, then she has found an explanation for the religious legitimation for the oppression of women. Purely masculine language for God and the image of God as the Supreme Power and as Supreme Being with a fixed plan confirm, according to her, reality, the patriarchal society. This has, as its converse, that power to name reality is taken away from women.

Daly agrees in *Beyond God the Father* with Tillich's critique of theism that views God as a Supreme Being who has power over people and thus becomes a tyrant.¹¹ She herself searches for the solution to the patriarchal image of God in a new language through which women themselves name "themselves, the world and God." Daly searches for her solution to the

⁹ Daly (1975) 188.

¹⁰ Berger (1967) 50f.

¹¹ Tillich (1980) ch. 6.

oppression of women no longer in a correction of the biblical image of God but develops a language for women outside the Christian tradition. Tillich, as a Christian theologian, does provide the following alternative to the image of the patriarchal God who subjugates human beings:

Tillich views the relationship between God and the world pan(en)theistically. Even though God and the world are to be distinguished from each other because of God's transcendence, that does not entail that God and the world are not closely related ontologically. God is everything; he can also be violent in a destructive way, even though, as Tillich claims, this destructive violence has been conquered. He appeals here to the Protestant mystic Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) who speaks of the "Abyss (*Ungrund*)" and to Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854) who assumes the existence of an unconscious principle in God. Schelling sees, on the hand, the dark principle in the ground of the divine, the principle of the will that is able to contradict itself. On the other hand, he sees the logos principle or the principle of light. In itself, the dark principle of the will could tear itself loose and act on its own, but this does not happen because the spiritual unity in the divine life holds the two principles together. Tillich speaks similarly of God when he points to a dialectical negativity in God. He writes: '... if there is no negative principle in addition to him which could account for evil and sin, how can one avoid positing a dialectical negativity in God himself?'¹² God is not only the creator of life but also the destroyer. People can experience the element of the abyss in the threat of non-being. The positive side of the mystery is, however, dominant and reveals itself in the actual revelation of Christ as the power of the (new) being that conquers non-being.¹³ God who has conquered destructive violence as evil in himself takes part through Christ in the human struggle against evil.

According to Tillich, one can thus never use the biblical God as a justification of destructive violence. He is, after all, the God in whom violence has been conquered and who in Christ lets people participate in the new being. By assuming (conquered) evil in God, Tillich heads off the (in my view) unsatisfactory answer of, for example, John Hick to the problem of theodicy. How is one to reconcile the notion of an almighty and loving God to the (physical and moral) evil in the world? Hick holds that God creates people who can choose for him in freedom. Therefore, they cannot be created as perfect beings. In order to have a real choice between good and evil and to have a free relationship with God. God creates us, according to Hick, spiritually and morally immature in a process of evolution in which evil is a challenge. God places us in a dangerous and ambiguous world in which we can develop into moral persons, so as to have a free relationship with God and in that way be on the road to the Kingdom of God.¹⁴ This Irenaean type of theodicy of the 'free will defense'¹⁵ of human beings and in connection with that wanting to make natural and moral evil understandable can never be an answer to the *existential* question posed by victims as to why they

¹² Tillich (1968) 1, 210.

¹³ Tillich (1968) 1, 122.

¹⁴ Hick (1981).

¹⁵ See for contrast and points of hidden agreement between the Augustinian and the Irenaean type of theodicy: Hick 1974 262-266.

have been struck by evil. Tillich sees the relationship between God and evil in a different way, i.e. *from the perspective of the struggle against it*. He does not give any theoretical answer to the question of the why of evil but a speculative and ethical answer. Speculatively, Tillich holds that the struggle is already present in God but has been conquered. God has overcome the evil in himself but struggles continually against it in the unruly world of creation---as is evident in Christ's power of the new being and the work of the Spirit.

Tillich's model of conquered evil in God stands and falls with his Christian framework of interpretation. Wherever this framework is no longer valid, this model of God in which evil is postulated undergoes a change, resulting in a two-faced God. That is the case with respect to the philosophical God of Weischedel as the "Whence of radically doubtful reality" ("Woher der Fraglichkeit") in which God is a hovering between being and non-being, between meaning and meaninglessness.¹⁶ Thus this God is the "Whence" of the ambiguous world of humanity and nature without any prospects for overcoming destructive violence. In polytheistic traditions in which God and the world cohere closely, two-faced gods can be encountered. Such a two-faced God can be found, for example in Nietzsche's Dionysus. Dionysus is a symbol of the eternal return and the god of wine who cuts the ripe fruit from the vine with his knife. He is the God of life and death, of the eternal building up and destroying being: "this my Dionysian world of eternally creating itself, of eternally destroying itself, this mystery-world of the double delight, this my "beyond good and evil"¹⁷ And can we not also mention here the Hindu goddess Kali? Kali is life that feeds itself with life.¹⁸ She is untamed sex and violence that holds the circle of existence together. There are different stories about her and the Indian culture has attempted to tame her by depicting her as the destroyer of demons and as a protective mother. Kali is also the goddess who requires human sacrifices.¹⁹ Joseph Campbell also pointed to the "monster God" who breaks with all "standards for harmony, order and ethical conduct."²⁰ With this we encounter what René Girard has called the holy violence of religion.

If evil is traced back to God, that does necessarily mean that adherents of a faith that worships a violent God will also act violently. That is not the case with Weischedel's concept of God as the "Whence" of radically doubtful reality.²¹ No more is it the case with those who worship Kali. The latter believe that it is precisely her destructiveness that protects them from threats to their existence. In the Christian tradition this is different because of the theme of imitation. If the biblical God is viewed as violent, as Daly shows, then his (male) imitators act that way as well. Something similar can be seen in Dionysus whom Nietzsche also claimed that he was to be imitated. Dionysus brings human beings to a realization of his contradictory

¹⁶ Weischedel (1972) II, Book 5 ch. 1.

¹⁷ "diese meine *dionysische* Welt des Ewig-sich-selber-Schaffens, des Ewig-sich-selber-Zerstörens, diese Geheimnis-welt der doppelte Wollüste, dies mein 'Jenseits von Gut und Böse'" Nietzsche (1973) 917.

¹⁸ Mohanti (2004) 137.

¹⁹ Mohanti (2004) 41.

²⁰ Campbell (1988) 22.

²¹ Weischedel (1977).

complexity and makes him “stronger, angrier and more intense ... than he is.”²²

In brief, the position that God/gods and goddesses is/are violent can be explained differently. Daly wants to unmask God the Father of the Christian tradition as violent and his (male) imitators act that way as well. Tillich holds that there is evil in God but corrects the theistic concept of God by proposing that God has conquered the violence within himself. In the philosophical tradition of Nietzsche and Weischedel the tracing of evil to God leads to a two-faced God. Nietzsche’s Dionysus is just as violent as the Hindu goddess Kali. If we trace violence as evil to God, then religion sometimes acquires violent characteristics. Is the opposite position, which claims that God (and thus religion) is not violent, not more convincing?

There Is No Violence in God

The weakness of Tillich’s view of God and evil is that he, by means of a speculative theory of God’s being, wants to provide insight into the relationship between God and evil. The strength of Girard’s theory is that it does not deal in speculation about the being of God. Girard approaches the problem of violence and evil by interpreting sacred and other texts on violence as a scholar of literature and as an anthropologist. He maintains that in the Jewish and Christian texts a radical opposition between God and evil, the satan, arises.²³ He shows how both traditions have broken with the traditional religion that strove for peace by bridling social violence via sacred violence. In his anthropological analyses Girard exposes the origin of violence by pointing to the mimetic relationships between people, how people imitate one another. He shows how traditional religion managed to bridle violence through violence that was ritually limited, i.e. through the scapegoat.²⁴

Girard explains it as follows. People cannot live with increasing violence and this violence must therefore, if a social crisis arises, be channeled. Therefore a solution is sought through attributing guilt and thus the cause of the violence to someone who is considered guilty of the crisis. He is killed as the scapegoat; he is sacrificed. Because of this “constructive” violence against one, the victim, peace returns. In Greek “scapegoat” means “he who wards off plagues” and in Hebrew “destined for Azazel,” the demon of the desert (Lev. 16:21f.).²⁵ At the same time the sacrificed scapegoat becomes a sacral being who is venerated. In this context arise prohibitions and taboos to regulate violence.²⁶ Girard supports this theory with many examples of the “scapegoat” from Greek and other myths and from Western literature. He also investigates how the scapegoat continues to exist when the traditional religion has disappeared. In this way he analyzes the so-called “texts of persecution” from European history.²⁷

²² Nietzsche, par. 295.

²³ Girard (2003) 162, 416-431.

²⁴ Girard, (2005) 81v., 84, 86v., 101, 104, 115, 267, 289-291; Girard (2003) Book 1 ch. 1; Girard (1982).

²⁵ Girard (2003) 131.

²⁶ Girard (2003) Book 1 ch.1.

²⁷ Girard (2003) 1 ch. 5; Girard (1982) chs. 1 en 2.

Girard is concerned with showing the change in Jewish and Christian texts, in which sacrificial violence is abandoned and therewith the violent God. There is opposition between Job's friends, with their God of the persecutors, the God of violence, and Job himself who gradually sees that God stands on the side of the victims and appeals to God as witness to his innocence: My Redeemer lives (Job 19: 25-27).

Any society in which the scapegoat resumes his immemorial role of founder and restorer of transcendence is totalitarian; but biblical and Christian knowledge has brought an awareness of the implications of the scapegoat that makes impossible the revival of the illusion of Job's friends, and of all those who believe they live in a flawless universe. The friends naively describe a universe governed by infallible justice, a universe that is undoubtedly atrociously cruel. Even without a lapse into neo-primitivism, we can admit that the unshakable conviction of those who inhabit such a world implies a kind of innocence and freshness lacking in the stifling totalitarian parodies of the modern world.²⁸

Girard acknowledges that in the book Job the concepts of God held by his friends and the non-violent God of Job are still overlapping.²⁹ This obtains also for other texts in the Old Testament, such as that of the suffering servant of the Lord.³⁰ In the Gospels and especially in the story of Jesus' suffering there is, however, a definite break with the notion of scapegoat. It is clear that the victim is not guilty. With that the notion of scapegoat loses its power of conviction. How can one knowingly continue to believe that it is a solution for the violence and unrest in society if the origin of the violence, the scapegoat, proves to be not guilty? According to Girard, one should therefore not read the story of Jesus' suffering as a sacrifice.³¹ That is necessary because the story itself indicates that the scapegoat, Jesus Christ, is innocent. In that way it breaks with the demand for sacrifice, as if God could demand an act of violence, i.e. the sacrifice of Jesus, to achieve reconciliation. In the Gospel the notion of the scapegoat, the channeling of violence by sacrificial violence, is thus unmasked. If the scapegoat is discovered to be innocent, one can no longer shift the blame for a social crisis to a scapegoat. Thus the concept of a God who wants to be avenged on human beings shifts to a God who rejects violence: 'The gospel text contains an explicit revelation of the foundations of all religions in victimage, and this revelation takes place thanks to a non-violent deity – The Father of Jesus'³² For the idea of the non-violent God, Girard refers, for instance, to the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and the parable of the tenants (Matthew 21:33-43).³³

This is the essential theme ...of Jesus' preaching: reconciliation with God can take place with unreservedly and with no sacrificial intermediary through the rules of the kingdom Mankind no longer has to base harmonious relationships on

²⁸ Girard (1987) 120f.

²⁹ Girard (1987) 120f.

³⁰ Girard (2003) 156f.

³¹ Girard (2003) 158-179; Book 2, ch. 2.

³² Girard (2003) 184, 195.

³³ Girard (2003) 197, 178.

bloodily sacrifices, ridiculous fables of a violent deity, and the whole range of mythological cultural formations.³⁴

The alternative of a non-violent God entails an alternative non-violent lifestyle. The Dutch theologian Lascaris, influenced by Girard, gives a good example of this in his *Het Soevereine Slachtoffer* (The Sovereign Victim). Girard himself points to Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God substitutes love for commandments and rituals which includes the whole range of rituals in the sacrificial religions. The message of the Kingdom of God is completely clear: 'It is always a matter of bringing together the warring brothers, of putting an end to the mimetic crisis by a universal renunciation of violence.'³⁵ We need to imitate God "who refrains from all forms of reprisal and makes his sun to shine upon the 'just' and the 'unjust' without distinction."³⁶ If one wants to avoid violence, the alternative, according to the Gospels, is to love one's neighbour. If Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God had been accepted, there would, according to Girard, have been no cross and the Apocalypse would not have been proclaimed.³⁷

This position claims undeniably that God is not violent and rejects every violent religion. What I miss in this position is a closer definition of God's power. The Christian tradition speaks of God's omnipotence, a term that is vulnerable to misunderstanding. Is an abstract view of omnipotence as "able to do everything that is logically possible" not also the reason why the classical theodicy is questionable? How is a loving, almighty person who is "able to do everything" to be reconciled with evil in the world? This formulation of the problem arises from the abstract concept of omnipotence. Daly pointed above to the patriarchal, dictatorial concept of God. The concept "power" has a negative connotation for many and is even a dirty word. If people like Girard and others, such as Lascaris and Van Gennepe, claim that God is non-violent, does this also entail that the only power God has is the power of love, the power of the suffering God?

In short, if we want to prevent religion from becoming violent, then this view will help greatly. However, it is not clear how we should understand God's power. Power presupposes force, constructive violence so as to maintain order. God is not violent in a destructive way and this position therefore differs from the former on this point. But should we also say that God is not violent in a constructive way, because the power of God is only the power of the suffering God?

Is God Non-Violent?

My critique of the first position---that God is violent (but has overcome it)---is that it traces evil back to God. Depending on the religious framework of interpretation, this can lead to a two-faced God. With the exception of Tillich this position holds that God is violent in the destructive sense. My critique of the second position---that God is non-violent---is that the rejection of violence in God leaves us with the problem of how to understand God's

³⁴ Girard (2003) 183.

³⁵ Girard (2003) 196.

³⁶ Girard (2003) 206.

³⁷ Girard (2003) 202.

power. I will defend the view that God is non-violent but that this does not exclude God's power. Given that power entails force and even constructive violence, I understand the proposition that God is non-violent in the sense that God is not destructively violent. I will first take up a closer definition of God's power and finally will remark on the uniqueness of God-talk when we are talking about God as powerful, as father and as lord.

Of those who hold that God is entirely non-violent, Van Gennep especially has expressed himself most explicitly on God's power. He distinguishes between the power of the word and the power over the powers. He emphasizes solely the first: the power of the biblical God who allows all the room possible to the free decisions of human beings and respects human freedom. It is the power of the suffering God who is powerful in a defenseless way. In the determination of this power Van Gennep is guided by Hannah Arendt's insight "that the communicative structure of power is its foundation. For that reason true power is power through the word."³⁸ Power needs empowerment by people. For that reason we speak here of the communicative structure of power. If Van Gennep views God's power as restricted to the power of the word that allows room for human freedom, is that not a power that, in fact, is not power at all? Sölle has been consistent in rejecting the term "power" with respect to God: for her God loses himself in love. Van Gennep uses the word "power" and calls God's love (defenselessness) powerful.³⁹ With this the word "power" is viewed in a very different way from that which we usually understand by power. It is the power of love that comes to expression in Jesus Christ---a power of love that, according to Van Gennep, will prevail ultimately precisely because of its defenselessness. Meerten ter Borg wonders correctly why the term power is used here.⁴⁰ The term lacks any relationship to what people usually understand by power.

However important the power of the word is, that does not affect the fact that the Bible also speaks of God's power over the powers, as in the Exodus from Egypt, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and it is power over the powers that emerges in the book of Revelation. The power of the word, the power of the suffering God, places all emphasis on God's defenselessness. This defenselessness is already present at the time of creation when God withdraws through allowing a world to exist opposite to him. God's plans with Israel fail without his, according to the Old Testament, wanting to have the power to force his partner to his will. Defenselessness is especially visible when Jesus refuses earthly power on his way to the cross. Defenselessness does not exclude, according to H. Berkhof, the active exercise of power in itself: 'it does exclude a forcible exercise of power which wipes out the power of the opposite.'⁴¹ In addition to the power of the word, the power of love, there is also power over the powers. In Jesus' life this power is also present in the force he used in healing the sick and in driving out demons.

³⁸ Van Gennep (1985) 411.

³⁹ Van Gennep (1985) 376.

⁴⁰ Ter Borg (1991) 86.

⁴¹ Berkhof (1979) 134.

If we see the two ways of power mentioned above as separate from each other, then they can conflict with each other. The one line speaks of the power of the word as the power of love as that comes to its deepest expression on the cross. The other line, God's power over the powers, can be explained as the "power of dominance," God as the dominant Other, the God of patriarchal culture, the combatant who punishes the godless with destruction and death. One can unite both lines with each other if we allow the latter to be stamped by the former. That happens in Berkhof's description of God as *the defenseless superior power*.⁴² This term does justice to both poles of God's being: his love and his power. God does withdraw in his defenselessness and allows human beings the space to act. But that is not the last word. The defenselessness is not an expression of lack of power but of superior power. "He can yield because he knows that he will win."⁴³ In this way we can acknowledge the second line of God's power: power over the powers. The cross, the power of love visible in Christ's suffering and in the co-suffering of the Father with the Son belongs together with the resurrection as the expression of God's power over the powers. It is from this that Christians derive the hope that the superior power of his 'love will melt away all resistance and will then be almighty, because then our God-given power will fully put itself into the service of this love.'⁴⁴ It is clear here that one cannot use God as an justification of destructive violence and at the same time God is not powerless but continues to exercise his power in a loving way.

The use of the term defenseless superior power as God's power contradicts the view that God's power is exercised only via people. Such a view emerges in Richard Kearney's *The God Who May Be*. Kearny speaks of a powerless God and cites Etty van Hillesum, who wrote in a Nazi concentration camp: 'You (God) cannot help us, but we must help you and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last.'⁴⁵ Kearny also emphasizes that God gives people power and puts them in positions to do good so as to help complete creation.

By choosing to be a player rather than an emperor of creation, God chooses powerlessness. This choice expresses itself as self-emptying, *kenosis*, letting go. God thus empowers our human powerlessness by giving away his power, by possibilizing us and our good actions – so that we may supplement and co-accomplish creation.⁴⁶

Here the term God becomes a designation for the power of people and God himself is powerless. It is forgotten how complex human history is with respect to power and that there are factors at play that far exceed human power. God's power over the powers also entails that power is given to people but that does not say everything, given the complexity of human history,

⁴² Berkhof (1979) 133ff.

⁴³ Berkhof (1979) 138.

⁴⁴ Berkhof (1979) 139.

⁴⁵ Hillesum (1996) 176.

⁴⁶ Kearney (2001) 108.

about the power above the powers. I therefore choose to speak of God's power as defenseless superior power.

In connection with this we should say something in conclusion about God-talk: How do we speak about God when we call him powerful, father or king?

Daly sees the language of God as father as influenced by patriarchal culture. The language of men creates the social order. God the father is then nothing more than a reflection of a hierarchical culture dominated by men. Ricoeur and McFague have pointed to the metaphorical character of the language about God as father and king, etc.⁴⁷ Metaphorical language is characterized by "is" and "is not." The biblical God does not thus coincide entirely with the patriarchal power of the world at the time. The same obtains for the parable as an extended metaphor. The father and the king in Jesus' parables are corrections in fact of the traditional concepts of father and king because they depict ordinary fathers or kings. The limit expression of excess and exaggeration points to that: Which father accepts his son unconditionally and gives him a place of honour in his house like the father of the prodigal son does (Luke 15)? And which king cancels the large financial debt of his administrator (Matthew 18: 23-35)? To call God father or lord is not a matter of concepts but of schemas, in the way that Kant talks about schemas of a concept: procedures to create images for the Name. These schemas are also models, rules to give shape to the Divine.⁴⁸ Speaking of God's power is also metaphorical. Van Gennep here emphasizes entirely the "is not," the lack of correspondence with what we usually see as power, whereas the "is," the correspondence, has disappeared from view. In the term "defenseless superior power" the metaphorical speaking of God's power emerges clearly, because it turns power and love into something new in our world.

In brief, God is not violent in the sense of destructive violence. Every use of God for destructive violence is therefore to be rejected, even though such use has often been made in the Christian tradition. God's power also implies power over the powers. Without this, Jesus' resurrection is unthinkable. The exercise of power entails constructive violence. Jesus' resurrection as the victory over the power of death is an example of this. God's defenseless superior power does not exclude constructive violence against the powers of evil. This power over the powers is the pole of God's power in distinction from the other pole: God's love. Both poles are present in Berkhof's term God's defenseless superior power. Christian ethics needs to elaborate on the violence between destructive and constructive violence. Can one appeal to God for justifying constructive violence? Given that people quickly misuse power, such an appeal should occur only in extreme circumstances such as tyranny. It is further a task of Christian ethics to provide orientation for acting from the perspective of God the liberator, the God of Jesus Christ.

⁴⁷ Ricoeur (1975); Ricoeur (1978); McFague (1983).

⁴⁸ Ricoeur (1995) 233.

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Summary

This article deals with the question of whether God is violent with respect to the question how far God (of the Bible) can be held responsible for acts of destructive violence. There are at least two answers to this question. The one answers 'Yes', God is violent, but different conclusions can be drawn from this, as can be seen in Daly and Tillich. The other position states that God is not violent (Lascaris, Girard, Van Gennepe, Kearny). I take a third position. The conclusion is that the God of the Bible is not violent in the destructive sense. God's power is also power over the powers. Without this Jesus' resurrection is impossible. God's defenseless superior power does not exclude constructive violence against the powers of evil.

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