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## Violence against Women - the Lesser Sin? On Religious Legitimation of Violence against Women - A Christian perspective

*Can you call yourself a Christian  
if you kick your wife  
continuously*

*many have done that*

*Can you live in communion  
with Christ if you kick  
your wife year after year*

This is a poem originally written in Swedish by Catherine Granlund, a deacon in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland, who for many years was married to a man who abused her. The violence happened in a Christian family and Catherine has written poems about her experiences and her thoughts about faith in the midst of violence.

Can you call yourself a Christian and at the same time use violence against a family member? The poem raises questions about what it is to be Christian and what the relationship is between Christian theology and violence. In this lecture I will discuss some aspects of this subject.

### **Gender dualism in Christian theology**

There are plenty of voices in Christendom and in the Bible. The voices of love, freedom, inclusion and liberation but also the voices of patriarchy, exclusion of others and violence. There are texts and traditions that have been used to justify or condone violence against women. It is important to dismantle these traditions and texts. But we can also ask: is there a further task to be undertaken? Feminist theologian Grace Jantzen suggests this is the case when she puts focus on conceptual foundations of traditional Christian thought, which make gender violence in fact inevitable. According to Jantzen (quote): “Until these conceptual models are destabilized, reinterpretation of this or that biblical passage or Christian practice will deal with symptoms rather than causes.” Jantzen wants to go further than explicit biblical passages and instead investigate a landscape of concepts and views that can shape an environment where violence against women can continue unchallenged.

What conceptual frameworks is Jantzen thinking of? Jantzen finds the idea of the covenant and the forensic metaphors in Christian theology problematic. In her view the covenants of the Hebrew Bible speak of a God that is a judge and a redeemer and where the people keep or break the law. At the very heart of this narrative a patriarchal gender structure is produced. God is presented as a male deity and the covenants are made primarily with men. Jantzen shows how the idea of the covenant is taken up in the New Testament, or the New Covenant, and how the masculinist gender construction continues with Father God, Christ, his son and the fact that the religious rituals have been in male hands.

The important question from our point of view is of course in what way this connects to gender violence? Janzten answers that “male domination is not of itself a licence for gender violence”. Nonetheless, (I quote) “by constructing a gender dualism in which women are inferior (or invisible), the new covenant, like the old, sets up a structure in which gender violence becomes plausible in attitude and action.”

Other feminist theologians give several examples of construction of gender dualism in Christian theology: Thomas Aquinas among others adopted Aristotelian biological theories which claim that women by nature are misbegotten males. In doing so Christian theology has contributed to the view of women’s subordination and continues to do so through the kind of teaching that presupposes women’s subordination. This maintains and supports an abusive patriarchal culture. Another example is the historical reality of witch-hunting in Church history. Theologically this persecution of women was based on the view that women had a natural inferior moral status and were more corrupted by sin than men.

Feminist theologians sometimes use the word “justify” or “legitimise” when trying to describe the link between Christianity and violence. However, it is rarely defined how one should understand words like “justify” or “legitimise”. It is probably simplified to interpret the words in terms of “lead to”. What I understand feminist theologians are doing is drawing attention to that the link between Christian theology and men’s violence against women exists, rather than how the link is constituted. The latter has no single general answer; instead it must be scrutinized from case to case.

### **Direct, structural and cultural violence**

In my own research – that mostly has dealt with how the members of Finnish parliament talk about violence, perpetrator and victim – the Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung’s “triangle of violence” has been of important help when it comes to understand conceptual frameworks’ connection to concrete violence. The triangle depicts three levels of violence: direct or personal violence, structural violence and cultural violence. The main difference between personal and structural violence is that in personal violence there is an actor who commits the violence while in structural violence no such can easily be found. Galtung gives the following example: when a husband beats his wife, there is a clear case of personal violence: a person commits direct, manifest violence against another person. But when millions of women get lower wages for their work than their male counterparts, it is structural violence. However, the point is that different aspects of violence within the triangle support each other. Direct violence does not happen in isolation from structural and cultural violence. With cultural violence Galtung understands “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence.”

The features Galtung mentions, like religion and ideology, are not to be understood as entire cultures, and as such violent. The point is that they are aspects of culture. Accordingly, not all Christian theology legitimates men’s violence against women – only such theology that justifies and legitimates personal and structural violence. From this follows that it is a question of interpretation which Christian theology can be identified as doing that.

Furthermore Galtung’s triangle seems to extend the range of responsibility. Obviously the perpetrator to the direct violence is responsible, but with Galtung’s image in mind the responsibility stretches further and the question arises: when and in what sense am I and every person involved as actors that uphold cultural violence?

Even in a secular society Christian theology and Christian churches cannot easily escape the question of responsibility since Christianity has played an obvious role in the creation of Western culture.

If gender dualism, the conceptual frameworks of the idea of the covenants and forensic metaphors are examples of topics that has been criticized from a feminist point of view, another widely discussed topic is the question of suffering.

### **The interpretation of suffering – understandings of the atonement**

This spring fifth-graders have visited the Cathedral where I work as a Lutheran minister and we have talked about the ecclesiastical year and the most important feasts. I asked the pupils which feast or day of the ecclesiastical year is the most important in Christendom. No one seemed to know until a boy raised his arm and answered: “It’s Good Friday, isn’t it?” This was of course only one boy and one answer, but it made me think. In what extent do we have a theology that stresses Good Friday, the day of Jesus crucifixion? Do we create a picture or view that this is the most significant day in Christianity? And most important: What is really said about Jesus’ death – the meaning of it – in churches and congregations?

I struggle myself with an ambivalent feeling every Sunday when I partake of or officiate at the Holy Communion. Before the words of institution (the words Jesus said when he at his Last Supper consecrated bread and wine) there is an initial prayer where the minister prays to God: “We thank you for the salvation that you’ve prepared for us through his [Jesus’] complete sacrifice on the cross. He paid our debt and made peace between you and us.”

There are alternatives to this order of Mass, but they all include a word or two that goes in the same direction: that Jesus’ death was necessary as a payment to God, a payment for the sins of the whole of humanity. These words are read every Sunday when Holy Communion is celebrated. (Our order of the Mass was renewed in the late 90’s, so I am a bit surprised that the language that connects sacrifice to payment and debt still seems to be a general feature).

Both in the New Testament and in the history of Christendom there are many variations of the understanding of Jesus’ suffering and death or the doctrine of atonement, as it came to be called. Among feminist theologians Rita Nakashima Brock has written a lot on the theme of atonement. She criticizes especially the anselmian interpretation (the substitutionary atonement theology) from the late 11<sup>th</sup> century (I quote): “In 1098 Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury claimed the crucifixion of Jesus was willed by God to save the world. He claimed that the only purpose of Jesus being born was to die. Humanity’s sinfulness had dishonored God and carried a magnitude of debt from sin that was impossible to pay. God sent Jesus to be tortured and murdered as the only way to atone for sin and deliver salvation. Anselm also taught a piety of stark terror of hell to drill the point home.”

After Anselm his opponent Abelard set out another interpretation. He pointed at Jesus’ willingness to die and reconcile humanity to God by forgiving all sins. When we understand the horrible extent of sins and Jesus’ sacrifice, Abelard believed our hearts will be changed. We will turn to God and love him as Jesus loved us. Self-sacrifice becomes an important element in this understanding of the atonement and in the consequences it has for a Christian life.

Theologian J. Denny Weaver helps us with a closer look at the first atonement doctrine developed by Anselm. Weaver highlights how this satisfaction atonement accomodates violence and he identifies three levels:

1) The image of God and Jesus: God becomes someone who saves by violence (crucifixion) while the innocent Son seems to passively submit to the Father’s violence. If people believe God uses

violence to promote something good (salvation), why can't they do likewise? And if Jesus voluntarily submits to innocent suffering – maybe a Christian should do the same? It's not difficult to understand how the images of God as abusive Father and Jesus as an innocent and passive victim are especially harmful to a child violated by her parent or a woman that has experienced abuse from her partner. The Christian call of "being like Jesus" becomes in itself an abusive call in this context with its risk to glorify victimization and suffering.

2) Satisfaction atonement assumes the violence of retribution – a view that doing justice or righting wrongs (in this case sins) – depends on retribution. This is also a view accommodating violence.

3) Finally, when we look at the relationship between humankind and God in the light of satisfaction atonement it structures a relationship that is abstract and ahistorical. Satisfaction atonement needs only the death of Jesus, not his birth, life, teaching and resurrection. Weaver points out that this creates (quote) "an image that implies little or nothing about ethics and contains nothing that would challenge injustice in the social order." This is an understanding of atonement that is separated from ethics and I find it very problematic. Theology can never be separated from ethics. Instead ethical questions, questions about a good life, about how we can create liberation, peace and inclusion in our lives and societies, must continually be present in the encounter with theology.

My own suggestion is not that Christianity should get rid of the cross or what happened on Good Friday, but as many feminist theologians I ask: What cross do Christians preach? What is the role of God in the story of Jesus' suffering and death? I think Christians need to make essential distinctions between an abusive and a constructive use of the cross. A constructive use can include both God's identification and solidarity with human suffering and also the cross as a symbol of empowerment and resistance to evil.

Speaking of this it is interesting to notice that the earliest images of the cross from the mid fourth century symbolize resurrection, the tree of life, paradise in this world, and the transfiguration of the world by the Spirit. Sacrifice or debt repayment are not present in these crosses. The tendency can be found during the first millennium when Christians filled their churches with images of Christ as a living presence in a world full of life. What is striking is that he appears as a shepherd, a teacher, a healer, an infant and so on, but he is never dead. If he appears with the cross, he is not nailed on it but stands in front of it, resurrected. When we reach the end of the first millennium, Rita Nakashima Brock identifies a change and describes it like this: "But once Jesus perished, dying was virtually all he seemed able to do." According to art historians the oldest existing image of Jesus' death on a cross is actually to be found here in the cathedral in Cologne. It is the Gero Cross from the year 960-970.

I will now turn to some other aspects of Christian theology that has come under sharp critique from feminist angles when discussing domestic violence.

## **Forgiveness and marriage**

Forgiveness is one of these aspects. The pitfall – for example in pastoral counseling – is to use premature forgiveness as a Christian value, and bypass the important stages of anger and grief that must be a part of a battered woman's recovery. Forgiveness is the very last stage of the healing process, and may take years, or may never be appropriate.

It is striking that the theological concept of forgiveness is the one which often comes to the fore when discussing violence against women, while another theological concept – remembrance – might be forgotten. However, remembrance can be as important or even more important than forgiveness. The way to healing goes through remembering – that is true both for victim and offender. Nevertheless, much of Christian theology has failed to recognize remembrance as a theological concept. But as feminist theologians have pointed out: when the Bible tells the stories of

women and children who have suffered violence it refuses to obey the order of keeping silent or forgetting. Instead it fosters a culture of remembrance, not in a bitter manner, but as a call to take seriously what is serious.

Other theologians have called for a theology of resistance (instead of forgiveness). With that is meant a theology that doesn't fear anger, but encourages women to be angry and encourages them to value themselves enough so they can see and feel that a life including violence is not something they have to endure.

Another pitfall in pastoral counseling with battered women is trying to preserve the marriage at all costs because it is an unbreakable – and in some Christian views – sacramental union. What is missing in this analysis is that the covenant of marriage has already been broken by the violence. In my own PhD research I have analysed ten narratives written by women who have experienced violence. In many of these stories it becomes obvious how marriage isn't something which is taken lightly. Instead the women struggle with the promise of marriage: "I have promised fidelity before God and people", as one of the woman says. In my view, Christian theology needs to be clear on the fact that violence means destruction of love, security, fidelity and trust – as a consequence a destruction of marriage itself.

We have now reached the conclusion of this lecture where I would like to highlight some future challenges in the work against domestic violence from a Christian perspective. These challenges will also reflect my own Finnish context but hopefully they can be fruitful in a wider sense.

### **Future challenges for Christian theology and the practice of the churches**

- 1) Is Christian theology relevant for people in our contexts? Does Christian theology help people to interpret their lives? Does it spring out from people's experiences, from women's experiences or in to what extent does it start in dogmas, norms or ideals of how it should be instead of looking at how life really is? If a Christian theology doesn't start in ordinary life it will also fail to recognize problems like violence against women. Or as Andrea Lehner-Hartmann says: "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 oriented 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 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."
- 2) I have not mentioned biblical exegesis that much in this lecture, but this is of course another important aspect in overcoming violence against women. Which stories in the Scripture can be harmful for people with experiences of domestic violence? What do these stories say and how are they used? Some feminist theologians have suggested that these stories should be removed from the canon, but is that the best solution? I'm doubtful.
- 3) What does the Church say about forgiveness? One of the Christian revivalist movements in Finland is known for its emphasis on forgiveness. However, some years ago it turned out that several cases of sexual abuse against children had happened inside the movement and that forgiveness had been used as tool to put the lid on and forget the deeds. Also in light of my own research I find it important to critically examine our theology of forgiveness since some of the women in the research especially mentioned forgiveness as something they struggled with while they felt a demand from others to forgive.
- 4) Religion – a source of comfort or a support for women liberating themselves from all kinds of violence against women? In my PhD research I asked the women if they had experienced

their faith as a burden or as a comfort when facing violence from a partner. The small material of ten narratives spoke of experiences of both comfort and burden. Afterwards I have thought of how I formulated the question. Today I state that a religious community should offer more than just comfort. If the aspects of liberation and empowerment are not present we only reach halfway in the work against violence.

One important question is: Does Christian theology in our contexts make it possible or hard for women to leave violent relationships? It is crucial to understand that violence which continues year after year often follow a specific cycle and that violence inevitable causes a trauma. The victim more or less adapts to the violent reality. It can be very hard to seek help and to leave. Christian theology must examine the ways in which it might keep women in violent relationships. Glorifying suffering, a patriarchal view on gender based on biblical passages and an understanding where marriage must be sustained, can make it very hard for women to leave. In order for religion to be liberating a critical analysis of its doctrines and practices is needed.

- 5) Is violence against women “the lesser sin”? Do we connect violence in close relationship with sin at all? How much awareness exists about sin as both something personal and structural? If we look at how Christian churches have acted we can see that they’ve more easily spoken up for victims of torture under political regimes than for victims of domestic torture. The road is evidently long from the year 1878 when the Irish suffragette Frances Cobbe Power argued that the correct name of domestic violence should be “wife torture”. Many after her have tried to put the focus on the gravity of domestic violence and highlight its political nature. It is hoped that terms like “domestic torture” or “domestic terror” could function as eye-opener for the society, churches and religious institutions included (it is no mere wordplay).

Coming back to the question of sin I would like to remark that sin can also be described as a refusal to deal with another’s suffering. From this perspective, as a bystander my passivity is exposed.

- 6) What characterizes Christian ethics? I find it of utmost importance to hold up the concept of responsibility when doing and discussing ethics. At the core we have the perpetrator’s responsibility for his or her acts, but following Galtung’s triangle of violence the responsibility goes further. In what ways do I or my religious community maintain violence either by neglecting or justifying it?
- 7) Education, breaking the silence and the victim’s right to be taken seriously. The first half of the year 2012 has started very tragically in Finland with several homicide in families. This has led the Government to initiate a special investigation. In an interview earlier this summer one of the researcher reported an apparent problem: The authorities don’t manage to identify the risk factors for violence and some of those who seek help are not taken seriously. In my view this message is also directed to the church. The church has both a preventive task and an intervention task regarding violence. Knowledge is needed for both. The membership in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church is still high in Finland: 78 percentage of the population are members of the church. Most Finns come into contact with the church every year for family occasions like wedding and confirmation. The church’s family counseling centers are used not only by active members, but are well known places for support and help. The arenas and occasions for encountering people who have experienced violence are therefore several. This in turn creates a responsibility to bring the theme of violence to the fore, to clearly condemn it, to make the church a safe place for victims and to educate oneself so it is possible to realize all this. The need for this is supported when hearing this woman’s story: “When we had told about our problem to the pastor he turned to me and said that he doesn’t think my husband has hit me and that I only imagined it.” Every case where a woman meets a pastor who gives her the advice to go home and pray and

forgive, or consider if the violence really was that serious (or happened at all) is one case too much.

- 8) Engagement. During ten years I have been involved in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church's of Finland work against violence in close relationships, and especially men's violence against women. We have arranged days with lectures on the theme, we have written appeals and letters to decision-making bodies in the church and to the press, we have published books and offered further education in form of courses. Most of the time the response – if we have got some – has been positive. However, I have also wondered about the lack of engagement. We have had to cancel several courses due to few attenders. At the same time is nothing new or hidden that violence against women is a serious and fairly common problem in Finland. On average twenty women are killed every year by their partner and studies show that violence exists in 8 percent of all partner relationships. 20 percent of the women have experienced some form of violence after they've turned 15.

The World Council of Churches announced the period 2001–2010 “The Decade to Overcome Violence”. In the final report they discern the same trend, on a more global level, as I just mentioned – that many churches do not want to be so engaged. According to WCC this is true among Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other religious communities as well. At the same time it is true that we can find allies from other religions. We can stand together for peace in the home when people from our own religious contexts will not. This conference is one example of that.

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