

The Church as Therapeutic Community

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Transforming Violence: Cult, Culture, and Acculturation

1. The question

“Violence transforms persons and communities. Violence is also transformed by those same, affected persons and communities, as they struggle to live in its wake or under its continued threat. [...] What determines whether or not a cultural form puts violence to rest, keeps it at bay, perpetuates it, or awakens its reappearance in yet another, related form? Can the ‘art’ of violence become the ‘work’ of peace? If so, how and under what conditions?”

In my paper I want to address these questions – asked by the organizers of this year’s COV&R conference. And I am going to focus on the question: How can religion – in my case especially the Christian tradition in its Catholic shape – foster peaceful unity, help transforming violence and rehearse nonviolent relationships?

Thereby Mimetic Theory will serve as fundamental paradigm guiding and structuring our whole inquiry. Concretely, I will presuppose some assumptions – particularly within our Girardian community: 1. René Girard’s anthropology: His analysis of the mimetic nature of all human beings, which he described as ‘intrinsically good’ as it opens the human person toward other human beings and also towards transcendence, but which also opens a gateway to conflicts and violence. 2. Girard’s theory of cultures and religions, especially his understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition: i.e. his hypothesis that the biblical tradition unveils mythical violence and – in the long run – aggravates or even renders impossible the functioning of the scapegoat mechanism. 3. Apocalyptic thinking: Being aware that unveiling the scapegoat mechanism doesn’t automatically bring about peace, but – especially where people don’t engage in the new logic of the Kingdom of God - rather apocalyptic escalation.

And this is exactly the point, where we have to ask how religious communities can contribute to the overcoming and transformation of violence. Or – going back to Raymund Schwager: How can profound, true and lasting peace, which is not based on the exclusion of a third party, become possible?¹ What are the basics for this to happen? To come to the point: Schwager was convinced that – wherever such peace was realized – this was a clear indication that the Divine Spirit was at work. But *how* does the Spirit work? What is the human reality corresponding to the work of the paraclete?

In order to delve even deeper into these questions I now invite you to a rather uncommon experiment, I am taking you to my laboratory – what I am presenting today is really work in progress – creatively connecting neurobiology, theology and mimetic theory in order to gain new insights or to see well known facts within a new light and thus learn to understand them anew. I will draw upon two sources of knowledge: On one hand on the findings of modern neurobiology as they are presented by the two German neurobiologists Joachim Bauer and Gerald Hüther. On the other hand on the theology of Henri de Lubac, who decisively contributed to the renewal of theology in the middle of the 20th century – the so-called *nouvelle theologie* – by going back to and learning from the Church Fathers.

¹ Cf. Schwager/Niewiadomski 2003, 64.

2. Neurobiology and Mimetic Theory

Neurobiological basics

„Not only can our facial expression, but also the emotions related to it easily be transmitted from one person to another. [...] Like with some strange infectious disease one person can cause spontaneous and involuntary emotional reactions of the same type within other persons.“²

For those interested in Mimetic Theory the findings of modern neurobiology are especially interesting, as they present the biological and physiological basis for our mimetic behavior. Thus they are able to show how imitation is a phenomenon characterizing human beings even physiologically. Joachim Bauer, Professor for psychosomatic medicine at the University Clinic of Freiburg, speaks about mirror- and resonance-phenomena, which are very important or even necessary for our daily life, for example by supplying us with intuitive and immediately available knowledge about the further course of events: “Without our intuitive sense of the expected further motions of other people one wouldn’t even be able to walk through a pedestrian area without collision.”³ The discovery of the so-called mirror neurons for the first time made it possible to explain these phenomena on the grounds of neurobiology.

Discovering the mirror neurons

The mirror-neurons were discovered in the course of research done on those brain neurons, by which humans and animals control their actions. In the process two types of neurons were distinguished: the scientists found intelligent cells disposing of programs to control purposeful actions and “knowing” the whole course of action (Handlungsneurone); these intelligent neurons interact with less intelligent cells (Bewegungsneurone) which just control muscular movements and do what is “told” them by the first type of neurons. This is important, because not each activity of the first type of neurons leads to the actualization of a corresponding action – it is also possible that the notion of the action is all that follows.⁴

In his famous experiments with monkeys the Italian Neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti placed electrodes to the monkey’s neurons and recorded their response to certain actions, for example reaching for a piece of food placed on a tray before them. They were able to isolate the cells which controlled this and only this action. Then the researches around Rizzolatti made an astonishing discovery: the same neuron which fired when the monkey’s hand reached for the nut in front of him, also fired, “when the monkey *observed* how someone else reached for the nut on the tray. [...] The observation of an action performed by another person or animal activated within the observer an own neurobiological program, in fact exactly the *same* program which could also lead to the performance of the observed action by himself. Neurons which are able to realize a certain program within one’s own body, but which also fire when one observes or learns how another individual realizes this program are called *mirror neurons*.”⁵

Mirror neurons and human relationships

What Rizzolatti was able to investigate experimentally with primates was in consequence also detected within the human brain: human beings also dispose of mirror neurons. But, when it comes

² Bauer 2009b, 11f. As the literature used was only available in German, all quotations have been translated by the author of this paper.

³ Bauer 2009b, 14.

⁴ Allerdings gilt: „Handlungsvorstellungen, über die häufig nachgedacht wurde, haben eine bessere Chance realisiert zu werden, als solche, die vorher nicht einmal als Idee vorhanden waren. Was sich auch experimentell beweisen lässt.“ Bauer 2009b, 21.

⁵ Bauer 2009b, 23. (vgl. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror_neuron: A **mirror neuron** is a [neuron](#) that [fires](#) both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another. Thus, the neuron "mirrors" the behavior of the other, as though the observer were itself acting.)

to humans – further possibilities are added: What human beings observe someone else doing, but also what they are only talking about, is so to speak replayed on their own neurobiological keyboard – most intensively in cases when the action is simultaneously imitated, but even if only a short sequence of the action is observed or talked about.⁶

An action observed for the first time evokes intense ideas about it and is adopted as potential program into one's set of possible actions. In cases an action is observed frequently the probability of the observer to carry out the same action is increased accordingly. Or, to make it even clearer: By observing the deeds of others a readiness to act in the same way is physically created and increased – a fact that plays an important role within our question when it comes to acts of violence.⁷

However the resonance phenomena based on mirror neurons are not restricted to actions, but also expand to feelings and bodily sensations. Therefore the activation of mirror neurons can actually change people: the good or bad mood of one person can very easily be transferred to another.

Interhuman resonance phenomena are experienced as especially heartening, when two persons fall in love with each other and feel very much seen and deeply understood by the other person. In these cases the mirroring behavior becomes very evident (like within successful communication between mother and child).

The opposite experience is that of social death: Being excluded from the social resonance field has serious neurobiological effects, which can result in illness and even in physical death. For the person affected, the systematic denial of mirroring behavior, of resonance in body language or the denial of reciprocal reactions within communication mean a psychological catastrophe, which effects even his or her biology. In their brain, the pain-centre is activated, stress hormones rise to gigantic levels and the regulation of the cardiovascular system can be completely derailed. The actually deadly consequences resulting from the total exclusion of the social resonance field can be found in phenomena like Voodoo-death reported from archaic societies as well as among children who died very soon when deprived of face-to-face relationships and care.⁸

The transforming power of the social environment and interior images

What I just addressed referring to love and social death is true for different fields of life: social interactions, our social environment and the notions we have of them, do not only shape our actions but even our biology and our genes. "The reason for this is that events, experiences and lifestyles control the activity of our genes and change structures within our brains. [...] Whatever we learn, hear or experience, happens in connection to human relationships. Human relationships and the emotions and learning experiences they bring about, are memorized in the neuronal networks of the brain."⁹ How a person thinks, feels and acts, but also her inner notions are "decisive for fact which neuronal connections are developed and stabilized and which of them are loosened and dissolved due to insufficient use"¹⁰. And in some cases this bodily imprinting is even passed over to the next generations.

In the context of the structuring power of social plausibilities and inner images the neurobiologist Gerald Hüther also mentions the importance of religions (very well aware that by doing so he transcends the borders of his discipline): He compares religious traditions to a huge river bed, "in which the thinking, feeling and acting of people was – like pebbles – formed to their typical shape

⁶ Of course mistakes or misinterpretations are possible in this case: They are caused by the equivocality of everyday-scenes, by biased schemes of interpretation rooted in individual experiences as well as conscious deceit. Cf. Bauer 2009b, 33f.

⁷ Only biological actors (as well as representations of living persons in films and computer games) do cause this effect, it is not provoked by episodes going back to technical gadgets or nature. Cf. Bauer 2009b, 38f.

⁸ Cf. Bauer 2009b, 105-116.

⁹ Bauer 2009a, 7.

¹⁰ Hüther 2009, 9.

over generations“¹¹. And he speaks about the visions of individuals, which passed over to the brains of many others thus being condensed to collective inner orientations and guiding principles. The thus developing action-guiding principles in consequence coined the way people shaped their lives as well as the world around them and helped them to overcome uncertainty and anxiety. Thus they helped – according to Hüther – to create a space where solutions to the upcoming challenges could be found. Where the guiding principles are lost in our days, people only have the possibility to go back to phylo- or ontogenetic more basic neuronal programs. Hüther calls contemporary animalistic or infantile behavior a result of this loss of inner guiding principles.¹²

Another field, where the impact of the social environment and the inner notions becomes especially visible, is the field of learning: neurobiologists found out, that fear, tension and stress reduce the functioning of mirror neurons and thus aggravate empathy but also the capacity to learn. “Stress and fear are counterproductive in all fields, where people should learn something. [...] Also in difficult interhuman relationships, in situations of conflict and crisis, solutions only can be found when there is no atmosphere of fear. Only then the persons involved are able, to adopt new aspects into their horizon of experience, i.e. to learn.”¹³

Preliminary results

On the basis of this, what can be said about our question at the beginning?

- Neurobiology speaks about a fundamental interwovenness of all human beings: This can be shown biologically as we share 99,9% of our genetic code with all the other human beings, but it also becomes evident as people are fundamentally reliant on social resonance phenomena. The need for resonance is not only a psychological one, it is so fundamental that the lack of resonance leads to mental and physical illness, even death.
- Neurobiology also shows the interwovenness of mental and physical phenomena, showing the intense interdependence of body and mind – I just want to mention this without dealing with the body-mind-problem at this moment.¹⁴
- „Was wir im Auge haben, prägt uns. Worauf wir schauen, dahinein werden wir verwandelt.“ „What see, coins us. What we look at is what we become.“ This sentence by the German philosopher and theologian Heinrich Spaemann is confirmed by neurobiology: Images of destruction and violence are memorized in the brain as well as pictures of the good and beautiful. Whatever we observe leaves traces in our brains and causes a readiness to act.
- This means that the social environment is substantial for human development, even for their biology. Interhuman relationships thus turn out to be of highest importance for development, learning and change. Joachim Bauer speaks about therapeutic relationships and communities, where new ways of acting can be experienced and tested and new dispositions to act can be developed.
- Gerald Hüther shows, that learning and the acquisition of new capacities happens most easily, when people are enthusiastic with what they are doing, when they are emotionally engaged, when they love, when thinking, feeling and acting converge. People don't learn when they are forced or urged to act in a different way, but when they are invited and discover within themselves the desire and joy to unfold their potentials. Therefore Hüther talks about a necessary shift from a society based on the exploitation of resources to a society based on the unfolding of potentials. Supportive leadership is the attitude that fosters people to develop their

¹¹ Hüther 2009, 11.

¹² Cf. Hüther 2009, 38-40.

¹³ Bauer 2009b, 35.

¹⁴ In this context the question of biological reductionism has to be raised, even though reductionism is no necessary consequence of the results presented.

potentials, by offering to them connectedness and rootedness as well as freedom and the opportunity for individual development – in our everyday-language we call it simply love.¹⁵

3. Theology: de Lubac's Catholicism

How are these neurobiological findings connected to theology, especially ecclesiology, as Henri de Lubac presented it in his fundamental work *Catholicisme*?

First of all de Lubac himself offers connections of understanding to the insights of social and natural sciences: their understanding of the deep interwovenness of humanity, of the rootedness of the individual in humanity as well as their secular efforts for unity form a helpful background for the understanding of Catholicism.¹⁶ These lines connecting theology with other disciplines seem to be legitimate also from a theological perspective, as the Judeo-Christian tradition isn't a religion of escapism. Rather it shows how all of creation, the whole cosmos and especially the human person is oriented towards an end, thus attributing radical meaning and gravity to the concrete history: This worldly history is the space where the history of salvation takes place, where the cosmos grows and matures into its final shape.¹⁷

Another aspect that is especially important for de Lubac is the social dimension of Christianity: In his view (and going back to the church fathers) Catholicism is not an individualistic religion, but essentially social, social "in the most profound meaning of the word: not only by its effects in the fields of natural life, but within itself, in its mystical center, in the essence of its dogmatics"¹⁸. Starting from this point, astonishing resonances to the insights of neurobiology can be found.

Of course, neurobiology and theology are two different approaches to reality, which must not be intermixed in an unreflected way. At the same time they are referring to only *one* reality so that in different disciplines isomorphic structures of thinking have developed – making a too inflexible separation seem outdated. Already in 1997 Raymund Schager showed in his Book *Banished from Eden*, "that the concept *original sin*, which ostensibly confuses separate realms in a mythological way, preserves a deeper and critical synopsis of what the 'dogma' of modernity has on the surface artificially separated."¹⁹

What new insights do evolve from the synopsis of neurobiology and theology?

Profound interwovenness of humanity

A first resonance concerns the deep knowledge about the profound unity of all of humanity, which we also found within neurobiology, but which is already there among the Greek Church Fathers. For them this natural oneness forms the basis for the supranatural unity in the universal body of Christ, which is the final aim of all of creation.²⁰ Theologically speaking this natural unity is grounded on the creation of every human being in the image and likeness of God, it is destroyed or at least constantly threatened by sin and reestablished in the salvation process. Especially St. Paul and St. John speak about a unity within (redeemed) humanity that is so profound, that they use organic imagery to describe it: Paul talks about the mystic body of Christ, who is the milieu, the atmosphere into which the baptized immerse themselves and by which they are deeply transformed. John uses the notion of the mystic grapevine, within which people are narrowly connected to one another and to Christ.²¹

¹⁵ Vgl. Hüther 2009, FOKUS 07.11.2009.

¹⁶ Cf. de Lubac 1992, 310-327.

¹⁷ Cf. de Lubac 1992, 121-144.

¹⁸ De Lubac 1992, 15.

¹⁹ Schwager 2006, 7.

²⁰ „To bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ“ (Eph 1,10) is according to de Lubac (and Paul as well as the Church Fathers) the „‘mystery’, in which the whole revelation is summarized“.

de Lubac 1992, 40.

²¹ Cf. de Lubac 1992, 40f.

The church as expression and ferment of unity

The task of the church is to be expression and ferment of the unity among all people, which was established by creation but disturbed by sin. It is this task that makes her really catholic. "Humanity is one, organically one through its divine creation, and the mission of the church is, to reveal anew to those who have lost it, their original unity, as well as to reestablish and complete it."²² Thus, according to de Lubac, the church isn't catholic in a quantitative meaning, but due to a "profound universalism" which already Tertullian knew. Insofar the church is able to "touch people at the core of their existence and evoke of them their very own harmonies"²³, she becomes the universal mystical body of Christ. Thereby de Lubac distinguishes between the visible church and the church that is the mystical body, even though the two of them cannot be separated.²⁴

The profound knowledge concerning the interwovenness of humanity was preserved within the catholic tradition – let us as an example listen to Catherine of Siena, who said: "Every soul protects, by cultivating her own vineyard, also that of her neighbor. Both are so conjoined that nobody can serve or harm herself without serving or harming her neighbor at the same time. All of you together are one vineyard."²⁵

Sin then means separation, isolation, disconnection of the unity aimed at from the beginning, a unity that includes diversity.

Sacraments

The sacraments are of especial significance in this context: they are the signs and instruments of the unity of humanity and their union with God (here de Lubac uses the same terms that were later adopted by *Lumen Gentium*). That is true for baptism, the sacrament of reconciliation and especially for the Eucharist. All three sacraments address a social, interpersonal reality that goes along with a mystical reality without being identical with it.

„Being baptized means joining the church, which is an eminently social reality even in the formal sense of the word. The effects of baptism are not simply legal, but also spiritual, mystic, as the church is not merely a human society: thus [...] the sacramental grace of rebirth.“²⁶

About the sacrament of reconciliation he says: "The whole procedure of public repentance and absolution shows clearly that reconciliation of the sinner at first means reconciliation with the church, and that this consists the effective sign of reconciliation with God. [...] the cleansing of the soul is but the natural consequence of the re-immersion into the sphere of grace, or more precisely into the 'communion of saints'."²⁷

Nevertheless it is the sacrament of the Eucharist that expresses most clearly the dimension of unity, as its name – communion – already indicates. In a sermon for the newly baptized St. Augustine said – regarding the Eucharistic body of Christ, that they should be, what they see and receive what they are: body of Christ. And he did this in order to clarify the transforming and unifying power of the Eucharist.

²² de Lubac 1992, 48.

²³ de Lubac 1992, 45.

²⁴ „Without being coextensive with the mystic body in every respect, the church cannot adequately be separated from it. Therefore it is understandable that between the church and the mystic body of Christ – like within the mystic body between the head and the limbs – a kind of *communicatio idiomatum*, an exchange of mutual attributes takes place: *Corpus Christi, quod est Ecclesia*. , I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.“ de Lubac 1992, 65.

²⁵ Quoted by de Lubac 1992, 68 (FN 87).

²⁶ de Lubac 1992, 75.

²⁷ de Lubac 1992, 78f.

Eschatological unity

Also the Christian eschatological hopes, the Christian vision of the end of history – is profoundly social. There is no individual completion without salvation for the whole of humanity. And also the type of unity de Lubac refers to is important – it is a kind of unity that we also come across in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin: it is unity in diversity without fusion or extinction of the individual. De Lubac mentions the paradox that “the difference between the parts of one being become the more evident, the closer their unification becomes”²⁸. And he points to an insight, which neurobiologists like Gerald Hüther also recall from their perspective of natural science: “a creature ascends in the hierarchy of being and gains more inner unity the more its functions and organs differentiate.”²⁹ This addresses a constant in the history of creation which converges with the eschatological images of Paul, but also with Trinitarian images: The deeper peculiarity of the parts serves the stronger unity of the whole. The consummate unity of the end therefore is – like the unity of the triune God, a loving unity in lasting difference.³⁰

Mission of the church

When all of creation aims at this unity including diversity – why do we need an explicit Christianity? De Lubac asks this question and argues for the necessity of the church on the basis of the fundamental unity of all humanity and humanity’s incapacity to generate true unity by itself. Within the church, people work together with God to unify all of humanity. Therefore the mission of the church is universal: All human beings shall be transformed according to the image of Christ, that is they shall become loving, and in the core of their existence unified persons. The church is the instrument of this unification.³¹

According to de Lubac the universal mission of the church is to restore universal peace and unity. Thus the attitude of the church towards other religions must not be one of simple condemnation or destruction. Rather she should try to complete within them what they are still lacking in order to foster their growth and maturing.

4. The Church as therapeutic community – Summary

At the end, let me take up the different strands of thought from neurobiology and theology and concentrate them to some hypotheses:

- Both – Christian-Catholic tradition as well as neurobiology – share a profound knowledge of the unity and interwovenness of all of humanity for good and for evil. A unity that goes as deep as the common genetic material and as high as the common calling for a unity that is realized in maximum differentiation and development of individual potentials. It is the knowledge of the forming and transforming power of the social environment that even coins people biologically.
- Already at her very beginning the Church understood herself as a therapeutic community – as a space where the divine will for unity starts being realized. A social field, where people can experience new kinds of relationships and are transformed by them. In this sense the Church is a holy – healing – space. She is a healing space as *coinoia*, in the different dimensions of her life: in what she lives (*diakonia*), in what she tells (*martyria*) and in what she celebrates (*leiturgia*)
- The Church’s most important „therapeutic instruments“ are the sacraments. As visible signs for an invisible reality, they tell about the profound insight into the connectedness of body

²⁸ de Lubac 1992, 290.

²⁹ de Lubac 1992, 291.

³⁰ Cf. de Lubac 1992, 289-311.

³¹ Cf. de Lubac 1992, 189-215.

and soul and mediate healing experiences: The experience of belonging and connectedness in a common social field of resonance, the experience of resumption after a painful and pathogenic disturbance in this field of resonance and finally the experience of a nonviolent, inclusive community in the Eucharist.

- Insofar every person is seen as an image and likeness of God and thus with his / her maximum potentials – as God has created and wanted him / her – a space is generated where people can grow and develop – where their own harmonies unfold their beauty.
- Knowing that we become what we see (without understanding this sentence as simple copying) the church always focused on the life, the passion and resurrection of Jesus – enriched with the examples of St. Mary as the “prototype of the consummate creation” as well as the saints.

Of course in many fields the church doesn't meet her claim, to be a holy and thus also a healing community and she is painfully aware of her own deficiency. Probably it is just this consciousness of being an *ecclesia mixta* that ensures a kind of “quality assurance” that the modern therapeutic scene sometimes seems to lack.

If the Church as therapeutic community, however, wants to learn from the insights of neurobiology, especially three areas come to mind:

- Moral pressure, a climate of fear and coercion is not beneficial but rather paralyzing when it comes to adopting new and evangelical practice – like e.g. nonviolence. If the Church thus wants to be a therapeutic community she must render possible the experience that people are *unconditionally accepted* as they are and that they are free. This will in consequence facilitate conversion, growth and learning.
- Knowing about the huge significance of interpersonal relationships, such healing relationships within the church should be fostered and strengthened. And church structures should be adapted to fit this need.
- The profound theological knowledge of the interconnectedness of mind and body within the human person – contained in such difficult concepts as original sin or original salvation, but also in the sacraments, is a treasure worthy of being safeguarded and cultivated in a spirituality embracing both – body and soul.

Let me – at the end of my paper return to a thought mentioned at the very beginning: Whatever the church can learn and do, to be a therapeutic community, she must never forget that it is God, God's Holy and healing Spirit who acts in a healing way. This means that as the Church or as human beings we can cooperate with God, but that – wherever conversion and healing take place, wherever a peaceful and lasting unity exists, this is more than human work, it owes itself to divine grace.

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