

The Inevitable Spiral of Violence 19/9/17 - Richard Rohr

Dom Hélder Câmara (1909-1999) was a Brazilian archbishop and brilliant nonviolent activist who offered a model for understanding how structural injustice leads to greater violence. [1] I overlay Dom Hélder's teaching on the "spiral of violence" with traditional Catholic moral teaching which saw the **three primary sources of evil as the world, the flesh, and the devil—in that order**. If evil and institutionalized violence ("structural sin") go unrecognized at the first level, the second and third levels of violence and evil are inevitable. If we don't nip evil in the bud at the level where it is legitimated and disguised, we will have little power to fight it at the individual level.

By "**world**" we don't mean creation or nature, but "the system." It's the way groups, cultures, institutions, and nations organize to protect themselves and maintain their power. This is the most hidden and denied level of evil. We cannot see it because we are all inside of it, and it is in our ego's self-interest to protect the corporate deception. For example, I have yet to hear a sermon or confession concerning the tenth commandment: "Thou shalt not covet." It's almost impossible for an American to see colonization, capitalism, or consumerism as problematic. Our culture is built upon the idea that there's not enough, that we must always seek more—at others' expense. Lynne Twist calls this unconscious, unexamined assumption the "lie of scarcity." [2]

Historically, organized religion has put most of its concern at the middle level of the spiral of violence, or what we called "**the flesh**." Flesh in this context is individual sin, personal mistakes that you and I make. Individual evil is certainly real, but the very word "flesh" had made us preoccupied with sexual sins, which Jesus never talked about. *When we punish or shame individuals for their sins, we are usually treating symptoms rather than the root problem or cause: the illusion of separation from God and others.*

There is a deep and direct connection between "the world" or "the system" with its culture and corporations and the evil things private individuals do. The entertainment and business worlds celebrate people who are greedy, ambitious, angry, vain, prideful, deceptive in the name of profit, and "lustful" in many ways beyond the obvious (these were historically called the "capital sins"). We can't reward and promote evil at this level and then shame it at the personal level. It does not work. We can't romanticize war, but then rail against murder. As my friend, Cardinal Bernardin, put it, we have no "consistent ethic of life." [3] Because of our inconsistency, more and more people do not look to Christians for moral leadership. If we are to be truly "pro-life," we must defend life "from womb to tomb" and stand against all violence, including war, racism, capital punishment, hunger, lack of health care, the destruction of the earth, and all that impoverishes people.

At the very top of the spiral of violence **sits "the devil."** This personification of evil is hard to name or describe because it's so well disguised and even idealized. If "the world" is hidden structural violence, then "the devil" is *sanctified, romanticized, and legitimated violence*—violence that is deemed culturally necessary to control the angry flesh and the world run amuck. Any institution thought of as "too big to fail" or somehow above criticism has a strong possibility of diabolical misuse. Think of the military industrial complex, the penal system, banks, multinational corporations subject to no law, tax codes benefiting the wealthy, or even organized religion itself. We need and admire these institutions all too much. As a result, they can "get away with murder." Paul called this level of violence "powers, principalities, thrones, and dominions" (Colossians 1:16).

If we do not recognize the roots of violence at the first and disguised structural level ("the world"), we will waste time focusing exclusively on the second and individual level ("the flesh"), and we will seldom see our real devils who are always disguised as angels of light ("the devil"). (Remember, Lucifer means "Light Bearer.")

Evil only succeeds by disguising itself as good, Thomas Aquinas taught.

References: [1] Hélder Câmara, *Spiral of Violence* (Continuum: 1971). [2] See Lynne Twist, *The Soul of Money: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Life* (W. W. Norton & Company: 2017). [3] Joseph Bernardin, from the Gannon Lecture given at Fordham University on December 6, 1983. See *The Seamless Garment: Writings on the Consistent Ethic of Life* (Orbis Books: 2008), 7-14.