

Overcoming modernity's individualism: Becoming a community of peace in the face of violence

Author:

Andrew G. Suderman¹

Affiliation:

¹Department Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to:

Andrew Suderman

Email:

aksuderman@gmail.com

Postal address:

PO Box 100594, Scottsville,
3209 Pietermaritzburg,
South Africa

Dates:

Received: 03 Mar. 2011

Accepted: 31 Aug. 2011

Published: 16 Nov. 2011

How to cite this article:

Suderman, A.G., 2011, 'Overcoming modernity's individualism: Becoming a community of peace in the face of violence', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32(2), Art. #507, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v32i2.507>

Note:

This article was prepared for the 'Violence in the Democratic South Africa: A Challenge to Theology and the Churches' Conference, held by the Centre for Public Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa. Andrew Suderman is a research associate in the Department Dogmatics and Christian Ethics at the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

© 2011. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS
OpenJournals. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

Modernity's understanding of the primacy of the individual represents a significant challenge to a holistic understanding of the vocation of the church. Furthermore, individualism, that is the understanding of oneself as separate and apart from others, is often the foundation for violence against the other as the interconnectivity, and therefore the dependence and vulnerability inherent within a relationship, is lost. When the church is relegated to serve individuals as private and individualised belief systems, it is banished to a cold, dark cell of isolation. In order to respond to violence, the church needs to create communities that restore and reconcile relationships, thus embodying peace.

Introduction

Violence exists in different forms. Although this may be an obvious statement, I fear that we often do not pay much attention, or perhaps not as much attention as we ought to, to the different manifestations of violence. We are aware of and pay attention to the overt, interpersonal, or 'subjective'¹ manifestations of violence; crime, assault, physical, verbal, mental degradation and abuse, and the use of force over and against the other being the most obvious manifestations of this overt violence.

There are, however, other forms or manifestations of violence, ones that are less obvious or overt. Systemic violence, that is violence that exists inherently within a given system, occurs on a daily basis and, although it is less overt and perpetrators of this form of violence are more difficult to recognise, is very much an interpersonal form of violence as well.² Both subjective and systemic violence strains the ability for right relationships between people.

In this article I will argue that in order to respond to violence, both subjective and systemic, we as the church need to create and be communities that embody peace, that is working to demonstrate, restore and reconcile right relationships. This pursuit, however, requires us to overcome the individualistic tendency inherited from modernity so as to be able to be a community that embodies a different form of being.

To help us in this pursuit we will turn to three sources, namely William T. Cavanaugh, John Zizioulas and the Anabaptist tradition, as they can, I believe, help us understand the nature of the church and the implications of being church as we strive to overcome modernity's individualism by becoming communities that respond to and embody peace in the face of violence.

The problem

If violence is understood as the straining or severing of right relationships, a response to it would entail the restoration and reconciliation of these relationships. Modernity, however, introduced certain notions that have made it difficult to first of all recognise violence, systemic violence especially, and second of all to respond to it. The very pursuit inherent within modernity, namely the modern liberalist pursuit based on the notion of individual autonomy and the general principle of freedom derived from it (Huebner 2006:148),³ not only leads to violence itself, but denies the ability to create communities that witness to peace. The modern liberalist project is, as Judith Shklar defines it, a political doctrine where the primary goal is 'to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom' (Shklar 1998:3). Furthermore, it is assumed that the state, through the use of force and coercion – practices that are the antithesis of

1.A term Slavoj Žižek uses in *Violence* (2009:1).

2.Slavoj Žižek (2009:1) provides us with a good reminder: 'At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance.'

3.A pursuit that has also in many ways continued within the different modes of discourse and ethical enquiry in postmodernity.

peace – is the body who can secure these necessary political conditions. For an individual, that is someone who, based on the very meaning of the word, is separate and apart from others, to be free inevitably means they must be free *from* the other. An antagonism exists from the very beginning. Individual freedom in the modern liberalist sense, therefore, means being free *from* others, and individual means being separate and apart *from* others. The etymology of these two words, individual and freedom, when conceived together do not allow for a community to come together and embody peace.⁴

Viewed theologically, the very notion put forward and sought after in modern liberalism fails to understand the nature and character of the church and the Christian gospel itself. The dilemma being that the Enlightenment ideals of individual autonomy, that is the ontological existence of oneself independent from others, along with the principle of freedom or freedom from constraints and restrictions including others, have been so thoroughly embraced that the Christian message has been molded and distorted in order to fit with and embrace the modern liberalist focus on the individual – the salvation of the individual being the ultimate goal. With the individual as the focus, the church simply becomes a vehicle or a tool for the individualised message of salvation to be preached whilst providing the emotive experience needed so that individuals may come to experience, believe, and be saved by this ‘gospel’. The whole Christian imagination, therefore, becomes shaped by these modern notions which have infiltrated and corrupted the church and its witness, the most extreme being the relegating of the religious to the private realm. In submitting to the modern liberal agenda we fail to understand the true nature of the church as an alternative political body that, unlike the state’s use of force and coercion, is called to live according to the ethic of peace as it seeks to reconcile the brokenness of the world.

We now turn to three sources that I believe can help us overcome this problem.

William T. Cavanaugh

We begin by turning to a Catholic theologian – William T. Cavanaugh – who explores the alternative political nature and witness of the church. Cavanaugh, in his book *Torture and Eucharist* (1998), focuses on the use of torture as a social strategy used during the Pinochet regime in Chile and in how the church responded.

Cavanaugh begins his argument by noting that human rights language has failed to stop acts of torture. This failure, he argues, is caused primarily because of the misunderstanding of the nature of torture itself. Ethicists can and have, almost universally, declared that ‘torture is bad’ and have denounced

4. Unfortunately, due to restrictions in scope and focus, I will not be able to explore and provide the necessary argumentation needed to satisfactorily explain how and why the modern liberalist project and its notion of individual autonomy and freedom lead to violence and the inability to respond to violence. For a cogent argument that calls into question the Enlightenment project as a foundation for ethical enquiry, see MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1984).

it as a grave moral evil that should not happen and should be stopped (Cavanaugh 1998:2). The reason behind such a declaration has as its foundation the *right* of each individual. Each person has a right to personal integrity because they are made in God’s image or, if Christian reasoning is not desirable, because we share a common humanity:

Whether or not rights are grounded in universal rationality or are more culturally specific, torture is usually treated as a violation of individual integrity, and the prevention of torture tends to rely on the proper formulation of *why* exactly torture is wrong, so as to convince potential torturers that they ought not do it.

(Cavanaugh 1998:3)

This approach, however, has failed to stop the use of torture.⁵ One of the reasons is that rights language is incredibly malleable. Rights language assumes the inherent dignity of all persons. This assumption, however, is not universally held. It is often the case that those who are or will be tortured are referred to as less than human by those who try to justify the use of torture. In other words, there is no disagreement, even by those who participate in the use of torture, that torture should not be used on fellow human beings. Torture tactics are used only on those who are less than human.⁶ Indeed, a particular logic exists that acknowledges torture as a grievous act, but that in order to protect the rights of others, the state has to participate in such atrocious tactics against those who would infringe upon the rights of others.⁷ Thus the recipient becomes someone, or something, that is deserving of such tactics:

Torture reinforces an imaginative distancing between us and the tortured. Not only the actual torturer but the rest of society must guard against identifying with the tortured body. The sympathy we might feel toward another body in pain is cut off by the beastly extremity of torture. The tortured person is not like us ... So we make believe it is not happening, or call it an aberration, or think darkly, ‘They must have done something to deserve it’.

(Cavanaugh 2006:314)

Another reason, argues Cavanaugh, as to why rights language has failed is because it assumes the atomisation (i.e. the separation) of the body politic as its foundation. In other words, rights language also assumes the separation of one from the other.

Which leads us to the last and most important reason why rights language has failed to stop acts of torture. Cavanaugh argues that ‘[w]hile certainly individual bodies suffer grievously, the state’s primary targets in using torture are social bodies. Torture is not merely an attack on, but the creation of, individuals’ (Cavanaugh 1998:3). Torture was in fact a social strategy performed and scripted by the state

5. Cavanaugh provides an interesting article where he compares the use of torture in Chile during the Pinochet regime with the different methods of interrogation used by the United States provided by a 2004 Red Cross report on the treatment of detainees by US forces in Iraq; see Cavanaugh’s ‘Making Enemies: The Imagination of Torture in Chile and the United States’ (2006:307–323).

6. Ironically, our convictions about the equality of all people lead us to regard ourselves as ‘different and better’. In his defence of American virtue, John McCain strips the enemy of normal human sensibilities, stating, ‘Al Qaeda will never be influenced by international sensibilities or open to moral suasion. If ever the term ‘sociopath’ applied to anyone, it applies to them’. See Cavanaugh’s ‘Making Enemies: The Imagination of Torture in Chile and the United States’ (2006:317).

7. Thus fulfilling some Kierkegaardian ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ form of logic.

which conscripted and trained its citizens into a complex performance – a performance that atomises the citizens through the installation of fear thereby dismantling *social bodies* that would rival the state's authority over *individual bodies* (Cavanaugh 1998:2). Torture seeks to destruct social bodies and construct walls around the individual; confining and separating one from the other, thus making it easier for the state to exert its power and control. The problem, therefore, is that even in challenging and advocating against the state's use of torture by clutching to rights language, it fails to understand the nature of torture itself.

This notion of state exertion of power and control over the individual is a problematic development that arose in modern political history. It has often been assumed that the state arose in modernity primarily to address the presumably inevitable conflict that would arise between individuals. The state, therefore, was viewed as a mediating objective entity. Cavanaugh, however, argues that the problem was in fact that the state assumed to be the only legitimate social body. The assumption that became present in modern political history was one where the individual surrendered a portion of their rights to the impersonal center of sovereignty – the state. The state, therefore, would be the entity that could provide peace by resolving conflicts in civil society – a society that remains a realm of unorganised atoms, where even associations are only composed of like-minded individuals who pursue the self-interest of the group. As Cavanaugh (1998) states, it is believed that:

[t]he relationship between the individual and the state is in fact unmediated, and the person only gains 'objectivity, genuine individuality, and an ethical life' as a member of the state.

(Cavanaugh 1998:7)⁸

Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, argues that the state provides the best possibility for peace and justice as it provides the best balance amongst the conflicting self-interests of civil society (Cavanaugh 1998:8).⁹ The state, in other words, provides the centralised, objective entity predicated on the transfer of authority from particular associations to the state in an effort to work with one another through the mechanism of contract. The church, argues Cavanaugh, in agreeing to focus on the individual and to stay out of the political realm, has bought into the state's monopoly of coercion and power (Cavanaugh 1998:9). The church, as Cavanaugh makes clear, is not called to reimplicate itself into the use of coercive power, or in other words, into becoming the state, but to question the very distinctions as fraudulent inventions (Cavanaugh 1998):

The true story of the world as revealed in the Scriptures is not one of the restraint of a primordial violence, but of a peaceful creation fallen and restored in Christ's self-sacrifice. A true social order is based not on defeat of enemies but on identification with victims through participation in Christ's reconciling sacrifice.

(Cavanaugh 1998:11)

The challenge that faces the church, therefore, is to question and overcome the modern assumption that to enter the

8.Cavanaugh quotes Hegel (1952:156, 257).

9.See Niebuhr's *The Children of light and the Children of Darkness* (1944).

political realm is to somehow leave the liturgical. Liturgy [*leitourgia*], notes Cavanaugh in referring to Alexander Schmemmann, is 'an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals' (Cavanaugh 1998:12).¹⁰ Torture is an example of perverted liturgy in that it organises bodies in society into a collective performance of an atomised group of mutually suspicious individuals rather than into true community (Cavanaugh 1998:12). The eucharist, on the other hand, provides an alternative liturgy; a true liturgy. Through the eucharist we are given a foretaste of the counter-political witness of God's Kingdom:

A Eucharistic counter-politics is not otherworldly or "sectarian" – it cannot help but be deeply involved in the sufferings of this world – but it is in sharp discontinuity with the politics of the world which killed its savior.

(Cavanaugh 1998:13–14)

The eucharist, concludes Cavanaugh, is true politics. It recreates the social bodies and offers a new performance, and therefore imagination that rivals the atomising performance of the state by drawing people together into true community. The church in Chile countered the Pinochet military regime by fulfilling its counter-political liturgy of gathering, rather than scattering, a body through the eucharist. Through the eucharist, the church responded to the state's emphasis and practice of disappearance by making visible the body of Christ, that is the communion of believers. Furthermore, the church, through its practices, embodied and witnessed to the eschatological nature of its very being – an already present communion (body) that witnesses an alternative political imagination; not an alternative politic that simply tries to reassert dominance over the state as in Christendom, but rather a politic based on the giving and self-emptying of itself as Christ demonstrated and as witnessed through his bloody confrontation with the powers of the world and as seen through his wounds marked by the cross.

John Zizioulas

To help us understand the significance of being part of the church, and of the church itself, we turn to a Greek Orthodox theologian – John Zizioulas.¹¹

Zizioulas begins his argument by noting some of the contemporary questions asked as people seek meaning and significance in their lives: 'What am I?' and 'Am I special or unique?' These two existential questions guide Zizioulas as he seeks to understand what it means to be a person.

In order to be able to answer those questions, however, one must first establish as to where significance and meaning comes from. In other words, to what or to whom do we look to in order to receive meaning or significance? The ultimate source, argues Zizioulas, from which we receive significance and meaning is God. God is the source of all being (ontology), and is therefore the source of all ontological significance

10.See Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World* (1988:25).

11.The two main works by John Zizioulas that I will refer to are *Being as Communion* (1985) and *Communion and Otherness* (2006).

(Zizioulas 2006:215).¹² And so, in the human quest for meaning and significance, we must turn to the One who is the source of all being and significance.

In receiving ontological significance from God we naturally look to God in order to understand the nature of this significance. In looking to God's very being we find a God that is triune, that is a God who lives in relationship: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus the very being of God, God's ontological nature, exists in a communal, relational manner. To put it another way, God's very being exists only insofar as the three persons of the immanent Trinity are in relation with one another. God who exists as Triune exemplifies true ontological being in its communal form. The Holy Trinity, argues Zizioulas, through its communal form serves as an example for humanity (Zizioulas 2006:166). The very being of God, God's ontological state, is found in the communion of the three *persons*, as opposed to three separate *individuals*.¹³ God, therefore, is a relational being (Zizioulas 1985):

It would be unthinkable to speak of the 'one God' before speaking of the God who is 'communion,' that is to say, of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Trinity is a *primordial* ontological concept and not a notion which is added to the divine substance or rather which follows it ... The substance of God, 'God,' has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion.

(Zizioulas 1985:17)

It is the three persons of the Trinity that allow God to have true ontological content, as they *are* three relational beings; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all relational terms. One cannot be Father without offspring as one cannot be Son without a parent, and so on (Gunton 2007:98). Ontological significance, argues Zizioulas, can only be found through these relationships (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), thus demonstrating its relational character, as opposed to an overarching concept (i.e. God) (Zizioulas 1985:17).

In describing the relational beings that form the triune God, Zizioulas is very careful and deliberate to describe them as 'persons' as opposed to 'individuals'. True ontology, argues Zizioulas, arises from God who is relational as God is Triune, the communion of three *persons* (Zizioulas 1985:40–42). 'Person' therefore possesses some form of ontological reference that 'individual' is not able to possess. This, argues Zizioulas, is due to the difference in their existence; 'individual' refers to a human being in their biological state of existence, an existence that leads to individualism, whereas 'person' refers to a human being in an ecclesial state of existence, an existence that is defined through relationship (Zizioulas 1985:50–59). Everyone, he argues, is born into the biological state of existence. In other words, everyone is born into the world as an individual, but not everyone becomes a person as personhood can only come about when one becomes part of the church.

12. In some ways Zizioulas is working to retrieve a pre-modern cosmological understanding, an understanding present most notably within Aquinas' thought, in that the source of all being comes from the transcendent. See Pickstock's *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (1998) for a unique and interesting dissection of the development of the Modern mindset and its move away from the transcendent.

13. Understanding that the etymology of 'individual' refers to being 'separate', 'single', or 'autonomous'.

To enter the ecclesial state of existence one must shed the biological state before entering into the ecclesial, which occurs through a new birth–baptism. The *individual* must die so that the *person* may be born. Baptism leads to a new mode of existence and a new *hypostasis* (Zizioulas 1985):

Jesus Christ does not justify the title of Savior because he brings the world a beautiful revelation, a sublime teaching about the person, but because He realizes in history *the very reality of the person* and makes it the basis and 'hypostasis' of the person for every man.

(Zizioulas 1985:54)¹⁴

The adoption of humanity by God, and the identification of the person's hypostasis with that of the Son, is the essence of baptism (Zizioulas 1985:56).

In becoming part of the church and fulfilling the relational character of what it means to be a person, the relationships had within the church replicate the relationships within the Trinity; a relationship of love. Love, argues Zizioulas, is not a property of the substance, or nature, of God but rather is *constitutive* of God's substance as it exercises ontological freedom through the relationship that exists amongst persons (Zizioulas 2006:166–67). In other words, love becomes the very essence of God through his personal existence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Love is not only the very essence of God but it also expresses the very ontological freedom that constitutes the type of relationship that flows from God. It is through love, argues Zizioulas, where each person exists as a concrete, unique, and unrepeatable entity, as her particular relationships allow her to both love and be loved (Zizioulas 2006:166–67). In this way, therefore, personal relationships provide each person with an existence as a concrete, unique and unrepeatable entity. One's relationship with the other provides the basis for one's personal being. Even the existence and the survival of God as a personal identity can exist, not on account of substance, but on account of his Trinitarian existence (Zizioulas 1985):

14. Authentic personhood, argues Zizioulas, contains two elements, namely *ekstasis* and *hypostasis*. *Ekstasis* is the discovering one's being in the other. *Hypostasis* (when paired with *ekstasis*) is the discovering one's being in one's own particularity, that which a being is itself and thus is at all. The former requires 'the other' in order to possess true personhood. One is free for the other. The latter is understood as freedom for the whole, which is also freedom for oneself in one's own particularity as bearer of the whole (see Farrow's "Persons and Nature: The Necessity – Freedom Dialectic in John Zizioulas" [2007:110]: 'The two terms thus work together to delineate a concept of personhood, and of communion, which posits a perichoretic capacity for catholicity'. In other words, personhood possesses a sense of God's very being in its catholic or universal form in its communal nature that is bound with 'the other' rather than bound by nature.

The term *hypostasis* has a rich and deep history that could, if we are not clear about its meaning, lead to confusion. The term *hypostasis* has evolved throughout history from being understood as 'sediment', to 'underneath' or 'the hidden part of any object'. Later, *hypostasis* began to be understood as 'basis' or 'foundation', which led to the assumption that it was describing 'raw material', 'stuff', or 'matter' itself. This led *hypostasis* to be equated and synonymous with *ousia* or essence. It became more theological when *hypostasis* began to be applied to the 'content' or 'substance' of God. *Hypostasis* and *ousia* at one point amounted to the same thing. These terms, however, continued to evolve, especially in light of the doctrine of the Trinity. *Ousia* eventually was understood to denote a single object, whereas *hypostasis* implied different and separate objects. Hence, *hypostasis* began to be understood as a positive, concrete, and distinct existence, which later was applied to and understood as person. See Prestige's *God in Patristic Thought* (1952:163–178).

Zizioulas uses two concepts to articulate his account of ontology and both can be translated as *hypostasis*: (1) *hypostasis* [ὑπόστασις] means that which makes a being is itself, that by which this being is itself and thus at all; and (2) *hypostasis* [*prosopon*] which means that which can be designated by personal pronouns 'I', 'you', 'he' or 'she'. This is distinct from that which can be identified as 'it'. See Brown's "On the Criticism of Being as Communion in Anglophone Orthodox Theology" (2007:51).

If God the Father is immortal, it is because His unique and unrepeatable identity as Father is distinguished eternally from that of the Son and of the Spirit, who call Him 'Father.'... The life of God is eternal because it is personal, that is to say, it is realized as an expression of free communion, as love.

(Zizioulas 1985:48–49)

The church is a community whose biological existence has been shed in order to be re-born as persons who express free communion through love of the other. They do this simply because once they enter the church they portray the image and being of God himself:

From the fact that a human being is a member of the Church, he becomes an 'image of God,' he exists as God Himself exists, he takes on God's 'way of being.' This way of being is not a moral attainment, something that man *accomplishes*. It is a way of *relationship* with the world, with other people and with God, an event of *communion*, and that is why it cannot be realized as the achievement of an *individual*, but only as an *ecclesial* fact.

(Zizioulas 1985:15)

The church becomes an entity where personhood is embodied as an attempt to replicate the free personal love and existence of the Holy Trinity with one another as ecclesial beings who are not bound by a common essence (i.e. humanity) but by a different type of relationship, one of sacrificial love. The church is an image of the way God exists. It is in participating in this existence, the ecclesial existence, where one can achieve true personhood and therefore true ontology as a being who is a concrete, unique and unrepeatable entity; one who is no longer focused on oneself (the individual) but on the other due to one's free loving personal relationship realised within the church.

If we take the thesis of Zizioulas seriously, it has serious ethical implications as to how we relate with others within the church as well as those outside the church. If upon entry into the church we replicate the relationship had within God himself, this determines what kind of relationship we are to have with others within the church, one based on sacrificial love. Yet, this also shapes the way we act, the type of relationships we have, and the way we are outside of the church as well. Embodying personhood, as described by Zizioulas, would entail a relationship where death serves as a life-giving example of one's sacrificial love towards the other. In receiving true personhood, by becoming part of the church, one receives and is given the opportunity of embodying the innate vulnerability that exists when one enters into a relationship with the other.

Anabaptism

The third and final source we will look at is the Anabaptist movement.¹⁵ There are two pillars within Anabaptism that we will want to pay attention to as they relate to our given topic: (1) being a visible, disciplined community that assumes

15. It is interesting to note that the Anabaptist movement, a movement with such a strong emphasis on community, began less than 100 years before the emergence of modernity, assuming that Rene Descartes (b. 1596) was the one who inaugurated the Modern Era. This is not to say, as Pickstock rightly and cogently argues in *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (1998), that certain events prior to Descartes helped pave the way for the Modern mindset.

a conscious and deliberate decision to become part of this community – that is, believer's baptism; and (2) being a visible community that witnesses to and embodies peace. These two particular themes will become apparent as we briefly review the emergence of Anabaptism.¹⁶

Anabaptism emerged in 1525 as a response, or perhaps better stated as a continuation of the reformation already in progress from its inauguration in 1517. The 16th century was a tumultuous time, especially in the life of the church with many seeking its renewal and reform. The inauguration of the Reformation with Luther posting his 95 thesis was a strong challenge against the Catholic Church and some of its practices and doctrines.¹⁷ The concern being that the Catholic Church at that time was relying more on the authority of tradition than on the authority of scripture.

The early Anabaptists celebrated the work Martin Luther had done, but saw it only as halfway towards true reformation of the church (Dyck 1993:31). Of particular disappointment for the Anabaptists was the failure to separate the life of the church from the state and vice versa. The assumption within the Catholic Church since the rule of Constantine where a synthesis emerged between church and state¹⁸ was that to be born into the state meant that one was born into the church as well. The true church, therefore, was understood as invisible.¹⁹ This synthesis between church and state continued as an inherent element within the emerging Protestant traditions of the Reformation. In other words, this state–church synthesis continued to be assumed within the Lutheran, Anglican and Reformed traditions. Those born within a given state were born into that particular state's ecclesial paradigm. The two pillars of power within these different traditions assisted one another; the state assisted the church in quelling potential rivals, the church benefited from the assurance that all within the state's prescribed territory belonged to its mandated church, the church provided justification to those who fulfilled ones moral duty of state sanctioned and directed violence, and so forth. In Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli relied on the state itself to reform the church (Dyck 1993:32).²⁰

Anabaptism, literally meaning the 're-baptisers', believed that in order for one to be part of the church one had to

16. The reader should be aware that a conversation has been taking place as to whether it is possible to speak about a unified Anabaptist understanding (i.e. univocal) or as separate voices (i.e. multivocal) based mostly as to the location particular Anabaptist groups emerged (e.g. Switzerland, Netherlands, Germany, etc.). Although this discussion is very important and interesting developments have emerged as to the birth, spread, and understanding of Anabaptism, it is, I believe, possible to acknowledge several themes consistently held including, and most importantly for our purposes, the notion of being a visible community.

17. The most grievous of these, at least for Luther, was the selling of indulgences – blessings that could be purchased in order to limit the amount of time a person spent in purgatory.

18. What Yoder (1998:57) describes as the Constantinian Synthesis or shift: 'We have seen that for the early church, "church" and "world" were visibly distinct yet affirmed in faith to have one and the same Lord ... The most pertinent fact about the new state of things after Constantine and Augustine is not that Christians were no longer persecuted and began to be privileged, nor that emperors built churches and presided over ecumenical deliberations about the Trinity; what matters is that the two visible realities, church and world, were fused. There is no longer anything to call "world"; state, economy, art, rhetoric, superstition, and war have all been baptized' (in "The Otherness of the Church"). See also Yoder's "Christ, the Hope of the World" (1998:192–218).

19. A widely held belief since Augustine. See chapter 49 in Augustine's *City of God* XVIII (1972).

20. Otherwise known as the Magisterial Reformation.

make a voluntary, conscious decision to become part of this community through baptism, thus Believer's baptism.²¹ In choosing to become part of this community meant that they were willingly and knowingly putting the priorities and mission of the church over those of the state. In other words, they did not assume that the church and state shared a common goal, and where a difference existed, members of the church were called to live according to the ethic of Jesus rather than fulfilling one's duty of participating in state affairs that conflicted with the Bible or contradicted the ethic of Jesus. The most prominent of these differences being the use of violence. Because membership within the church assumed a commitment to live according to the ethic of Jesus, which presumed living a life of peace even when confronted with violence, Anabaptists renounced the use of 'the sword'. Menno Simons, the person from whom Mennonites were named after, wrote in 1552:

The Scriptures teach that there are two opposing princes and two opposing kingdoms: the one is the Prince of peace; the other the prince of strife. Each of these princes has his particular kingdom and as the prince is so is also the kingdom. The Prince of peace is Christ Jesus; his kingdom is the kingdom of peace, which is his church; his messengers are the messengers of peace; his Word is the word of peace; his body is the body of peace; his children are the seed of peace; and his inheritance and reward are the inheritance and reward of peace. In short, with this King, and in his kingdom and reign, it is nothing but peace. Everything that is seen, heard, and done is peace.

(Simons in W. Klaassen 1981:280)

The implication of the Anabaptists' decision to be re-baptised and to be people of peace was both serious and severe. For many years after its emergence, the Anabaptists were persecuted and killed for their defiance against the established practices of the day through their practice of adult baptism along with their unwillingness to participate in war and violence of any kind.²² Persecution and martyrdom came from many directions – from the Lutherans, the Catholics, the Reformed and the Anglicans – once Anabaptism reached England.²³

Ultimately, there were a couple of underlying reasons as to why Anabaptists believed in and began to practice Believer's baptism. First of all, Anabaptists were interested in creating a community of believers who were dedicated in walking according to the ethic of Jesus as demonstrated in the Bible and the early church. In other words, they sought to live a life of discipleship based on the life and teachings of Jesus. Second, their interest was to be a visible community that sought to witness to the already present Kingdom of God

21. It should be noted that Anabaptists believed in one baptism, a baptism based on a conscious, voluntary decision to become part of the church—Believer's baptism. The reason why they were called Anabaptists, or re-baptisers, was because the first Anabaptists had been baptised as infants as they emerged from the Christendom tradition where all people were baptised as infants. Thus the baptism they received as adults was their second baptism.

22. Stories of those early Anabaptists who were persecuted, tortured, and killed were collected and bound in a classic volume called *Martyrs Mirror* (1938) written by Thieleman J. van Braght and first published in 1659.

23. It is noteworthy of the historic step that occurred on 22 July 2010 where the Lutheran Church, during their Lutheran World Federation Assembly, asked the Mennonites for forgiveness for their past persecutions and wrongdoings towards Anabaptists in the 16th century and beyond (see article posted on LWF Assembly website, "Lutherans take Historic Step in asking for Forgiveness from Mennonites").

on earth, albeit not yet fully fulfilled. To participate in the church, therefore, was to participate in this already present Kingdom.²⁴

Thus, Anabaptists believed that to be part of this community meant that one would be an active member in the redeeming and reconciling work of the Kingdom. In other words, to make the voluntary commitment to become part of the church and to live a life that is based on and reflects that of Jesus meant to work for and demonstrate the alternative politic of God's Kingdom on earth, one where peace and justice are but an eschatological sign of what is to come.²⁵

Becoming a community of peace in the face of violence

If violence is understood as the straining and/or severing of relationships, then a response to violence will inherently need to restore and reconcile these severed relationships. Indeed, this call to reconcile and restore lies at the very heart of the gospel – reconciling relationships between one another and between God (2 Cor 5:17–20; Col 1:19–20; Eph 1:10, 2:16). This restoration and reconciliation can serve to demonstrate how to live in loving relationship even in the midst of conflict. Responding to violence, therefore, is a theological quest in that we participate in God's work of reconciliation and restoration; a theological quest that would be unintelligible if not part of a community from which it derives. So, responding to violence is necessarily an activity where the church needs to be an active participant as it ought to be a peoplehood that seeks to restore and reconcile the brokenness that exists within our world, a brokenness that requires a healing of relationships in order to embody peace. It is the church, in fact, that holds the solution to violence (Eph 3:10).

Cavanaugh, Zizioulas and Anabaptism can all help us in understanding the nature of the church better so as to imagine how we might be able to respond to violence. Cavanaugh reminds us of the political nature of the church. He reminds us that the very act of coming together, communing and uniting has political consequences – the practices of the church

24. Bernhard Rothmann (1534) states, 'The Scriptures say that everything must be finished on earth. The Lord our righteousness will do justice and righteousness on earth. The mouth of the godless must be stopped on earth. All evil, and everything that the heavenly Father has not planted must be rooted out and done away with ... In summary: God's people which survive and which must remain unspotted and clean in all obedience will inherit the earth and will be at the service of Christ the King over all the earth. All this will happen in this time and on earth where righteousness shall dwell. Those who understand the Scriptures to say that this will happen after the judgment day and that it must be fulfilled then do not understand. For the Scriptures are written for men for the time of this life upon earth about which Christ says that every dot will be fulfilled.' Menno Simons (1539) also states, 'Therefore I and my brethren in the Lord desire nothing ... than that we may to the honor of God so labor with his fallen city and temple and captive people according to the talent received of him, that we may rebuild that which is demolished, repair that which is damaged, and free those who are captives with the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. And we would bring it back to its earlier estate, that is, in the freedom of the Spirit to the doctrine, sacraments, ceremonies, love and life of Christ Jesus and his holy apostles.'

25. Menno Simons, for example, states 'True evangelical faith is of such a nature that it cannot rest ... it clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute; it aids and comforts all who are depressed of heart; it does good to those who do it harm; it serves those who wrong it; it prays for those who persecute it; it teaches, admonishes, and judges us with the Word of the Lord; it seeks those who are lost; it binds up what is wounded; it heals the sick; it saves that which is strong; it has become all things to all people ...' (excerpt from "Discipleship" in *Spiritual life in anabaptism* edited by Dyck [1995:88]). This statement has, I believe, become one of the foundational statements with regards to the Anabaptist notion and understanding of faith.

provide an alternative politic. Rather than succumbing to the separation and dismantling of social bodies, as the use of torture was doing in creating individuals, the church builds, or re-builds, the social body. This very practice of coming together provides an alternative political witness, a witness where unity rather than separation, love rather than hate, trust rather than mistrust, are the fruits of this true political imagination.

Zizioulas helps us understand that it is through relationship that we find meaning. Entering into these relationships is meaningful precisely because we mimic the inner relations of the imminent Trinity. The church, as it replicates God's inner relations, therefore provides true meaning and significance as those within the church have become persons in that they have entered into a relationship based on sacrificial love with the other. This is what constitutes true personhood and thus true being. Zizioulas reminds us that the gospel is unintelligible apart from this communal, ontological reality that provides true personhood through relationship.

We can also, I think, learn from the Anabaptist tradition as they emphasised the priority of being a visible community of disciplined members who embody the habit of peace in their daily lives. What is more is that in being a visible community that lives according to an ethic based on the life and teachings of Jesus, the church demonstrates the already present Kingdom of God on earth.

Although the modern liberalist agenda of individualism has made it difficult for us to respond to violence as we are encouraged to focus on ourselves, our own salvation, and ultimately our own quest for individual autonomy and freedom, a quest that inevitably isolates one from others, we have an opportunity to overcome this agenda by committing ourselves to being an intentional community that demonstrates what it means to live in true relationship based on sacrificial love. If we want to pursue peace, we need to overcome modernity's individualism and liberate the Christian message, and even the Christian imagination, held captive in the cold, dark cell of isolation, so that we can create communities shaped by the reconciling message of Jesus. Only by recapturing the visible, communal, alternative political witness of the body of Christ will we be able to truly be a community shaped by the good news that is the cross of Jesus Christ.²⁶ In this way we can demonstrate, restore, and reconcile relationships as we embody the communal, counter-political Kingdom of God that is already present on earth.

26. See Yoder's *The politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (1972:51).

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Augustine, 1972, *City of God*, ed. D. Knowles, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, UK.
- Brown, A., 2007, 'On the Criticism of *Being as Communion* in Anglophone Orthodox Theology', in D.H. Knight (ed.), *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church*, pp. 51, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Hampshire, UK.
- Cavanaugh, W.T., 1998, *Torture and eucharist*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, UK.
- Cavanaugh, W.T., 2001, 'Dying for the Eucharist or Being Killed by it? Romero's Challenge to First-World Christians', *Theology Today* 58(2), 177–189. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/004057360105800205>
- Cavanaugh, W.T., 2006, 'Making Enemies: The Imagination of Torture in Chile and the United States', *Theology Today* 63(3), 307–323. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/004057360606300303>
- Dyck, C.J., 1993, *An introduction to Mennonite history*, 3rd edn., Herald Press, Waterloo, ON.
- Dyck, C.J., 1995, *Spiritual life in Anabaptism*, Herald Press, Waterloo, ON.
- Farrow, D., 2007, 'Persons and Nature: The Necessity–Freedom Dialectic in John Zizioulas', in D.H. Knight (ed.), *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church*, p. 110, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Hampshire, UK.
- Gunton, C., 2007, 'Persons and Particularity', in D.H. Knight (ed.), *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church*, p. 98, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Hampshire, UK.
- Hegel, G.W.F., 1952, *The philosophy of right*, transl. T.M. Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford, UK.
- Huebner, C.K., 2006, *A precarious peace: Yoderian explorations on theology, knowledge, and identity*, Herald Press, Waterloo, ON.
- Klaassen, W., 1981, *Anabaptism in outline: Selected primary sources*, Herald Press, Waterloo, ON.
- Lutheran World Federation Assembly, 2010, *Lutherans take Historic Step in asking for Forgiveness from Mennonites*, viewed 25 July 2010, from <http://www.lwf-assembly.org/experience/lwi-assembly-news/news-detail/article/461/8/>
- MacIntyre, A., 1984, *After virtue*, 2nd edn., University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN.
- Niebuhr, R., 1944, *The children of light and the children of darkness*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, NY.
- Pickstock, C., 1998, *After writing: On the liturgical consummation of philosophy*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, UK.
- Prestige, G.L., 1952, *God in patristic thought*, S.P.C.K, London.
- Schmemmann, A., 1988, *For the life of the world*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY.
- Shklar, J.N., 1998, *Political thought and political thinkers*, S. Hoffmann (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Simons, M., 1981, 'Reply to False Accusations', in W. Klaassen (ed.), *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 280, Herald Press, Waterloo, ON.
- Van Braght, T.J., 1938, *Martyrs mirror*, Herald Press, Waterloo, ON.
- Yoder, J.H., 1972, *The politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Yoder, J.H., 1998, *The royal priesthood: Essays ecclesiological and ecumenical*, M.G. Cartwright (ed.), Herald Press, Waterloo, ON.
- Žižek, S., 2009, *Violence*, Profile Books Ltd, London.
- Zizioulas, J.D., 1985, *Being as communion*, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, London.
- Zizioulas, J.D., 2006, *Communion and otherness*, T&T Clark, New York, NY.