

Silence, Collusion and Sin: Domestic Violence among Christians.

‘Wives, be subject to your husband as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife.’ Eph, 5: 22-23

‘I hate divorce,’ says the Lord the God of Israel, ‘and covering one’s garment with violence.’ Mal, 2:16.

I could start this essay with the apposite quip: ‘evil happens when good people stay silent,’ for everyday violence by a husband against his wife is an evil, and a sin, about which too many church leaders, seminary teachers, and members across the world are silent. While this essay will consider theological, biblical and cultural perspectives on domestic violence in Christian contexts, let me first comment on the texts above. One conclusion from my recent ten-nation, twenty-site exploration of the issue¹ is that this verse from Ephesians is *shockingly* expectable when discussing relations between husbands and wives. Indeed, the first six words of verse 22 are too often used as shorthand validation for an abusing husband’s attack on his wife in contexts where Christianity has long influenced history, law and thus the implicit view of the person. Where other scripture-based ways of being a person - Confucian, Muslim, Hindu - underlie and inform Christian faith, less or indeed no effort may be necessary to validate violence.²

Malachi, the Hebrew Bible prophet, might seem out of place. Yet this verse was quoted by a victim of domestic violence in Malaysia as God’s rejection of such acts, the speaker equating ‘one’s garment’ with the wife. This alternate view (rarely if ever cited) is also given as footnotes by both by the NIV and the conservative and scholarly Lutheran Study Bible, which would make it the only Bible verse clearly opposing spousal violence.³ No reputable modern New Testament scholar agrees Ephesians 5:22 supports a Christian man’s right to hit and beat his wife. Yet the jump from the right of a husband to make and be responsible for the final decision in family discussions and disagreements to that of asserting his right as family head to attack his subordinated partner is just that: a leap of false faith. With the occasional and by no means enduring exception, in the fourteen countries in which I have held discussions, meetings and lectures on this topic over four

¹ Supported in 2011 mainly by the Carnegie Trust for Scottish Universities and also the Edinburgh University Moray Trust, research in 2011 took place in Trinidad, Montserrat, Dominica, India, Malaysia, Taiwan, Korea, Australia and Tonga. Previous work has been done in Burma-Myanmar, the USA, and UK: Germany and Ghana are to come. Discussions were held with lay and ordained individuals and groups drawn from Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Church of North India, Church of South India, Independent Baptist, Lutheran, Mar Thoma, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, and True Jesus congregations. Without the help from former Edinburgh University Centre for World Christianity students in all but Malaysia and Australia, the research could not have been done. This essay is based on lectures given between Dominica and Tonga in 2011, as well as earlier work from 2007: the direct nature of a lecture rather than the less challenging one of a written text is intentionally retained. Special thanks are due to my colleague Dr Paul Foster for advice and comment.

² I differentiate between text and oral traditions because the latter include ones where equality of being between males and females is a given: gross inequality is present in some locally-limited traditions

³ NIV, note 2:16 “*or* ‘covering his wife with violence.’ ” New International Readers’ Version: ‘I hate it when people do anything which harms others.’ *Lutheran Study Bible*, St Louis: Concordia, 2009, footnote p 1547: ‘covers his garment with violence.’ Spattered with blood. A grim description of how a husband’s hatred of his wife might play out.’

years, there is an effective silence in churches and seminaries. The presbyter who blithely noted, 'You are educated, but my wife is not, so she only understands if I hit her,' was stupid, but at least honest. But are theological educators who comment, 'What an interesting lecture: I've never thought of putting domestic violence together with theology and the Bible!' more moral creatures of God?

Physical violence between spouses is the sole point under discussion here, emotional abuse, and parent-child or child-parent violence being excluded.⁴ This is not because these are unimportant, but rather because in largely intensive multi-site research, they are less accessible or comparable. A dead or bruised woman is the same everywhere. So is a dead or bruised man, I hasten to add, being weary of the immediate and very defensive comment by too many discussants that 'women hit men too.' But while women do indeed hit husbands, the incidence is small (5% being common and above 10% not found⁵), and the cycle of potential violence derived from continued power over the other is very different.⁶ Moreover, the lack of religious or societal validation for an abusing woman is total, whatever the context. No female attacking her partner can look to a Biblical text or theological theme for support - however flimsy that may actually be for the male abuser. I repeat: without whitewashing female violence or emotional manipulation by either partner, this essay is looking at violence in Christian contexts by husbands against wives, and the way in which Christian texts and social contexts are brought into play as weapons of attack and of defence.

Worldwide, most churches in most countries are generally silent about a husband's violence against his wife, although individual ministers do act.⁷ Any ecclesial references to wife-beating or even occasional stances taken against such actions tend to be more concerned with the *social welfare* outcome of a beaten frightened wife seeking shelter with her children. They may also concern the unwanted *legal* outcome of divorce which is seen to create 'broken families,' rather than divorce being more commonly the outcome of an already broken family. Neither of these outcomes automatically imply the need for clerical involvement with the easily marginalised victim. Where there is a legally mandated response for a pastor who has been told of a violent event, as in

⁴ One event of violence which led to immediate regret, accepted apology and no recurrence or associated threatening behaviour by the man or fear in the woman is not counted here as domestic abuse. Abuse is the endless cycle of increasing threats, jeering, terrorising, physical attack, honeymoon, and more threats.

⁵ Female violence to males is indeed underreported, through shame, but so is male to female, from fear.

⁶ Stephen Lukes' *'Power, a Radical View'* (London: Macmillan, 2005) offers an excellent discussion of the way power over another is exerted most efficiently and economically when it is rarely if ever used it: that the subordinated know it can be used suffices, as does their internalising of that knowledge. This is neatly exemplified by a Lutheran man in South Australia who said to his younger nephew on the latter's wedding day 'Early on in your marriage, thrash your wife for no reason. When she asks "why did you do that?" just say: "You watch out." That will keep her in order.'

⁷ In the field research on which this paper is based, the Uniting Church in Australia appeared the most engaged and proactive group. Those few individual clergy or laity in the ten countries and twenty sites who had a theological and practical proactive commitment to the issue came from various churches, and came to their views through personal experience and reflection which fed into theological action. The Lutheran Church of Australia did have a clear statement rejecting Domestic Violence on theological grounds in 1993, 'Whereas Domestic Violence [clearly only wife-abuse] has been defended on the grounds of Christian discipline and the legitimate exercise of Christian authority, we now condemn it,' but failed to incorporate the necessary and admitted theological correction in training or preaching. Without such work, involving as it would the embarrassing admission that earlier teaching had been wrong, the statement is worthless. It is awkward for a church to admit colluding in sin: it is tragic for people to endure the consequences.

Australia, those who do not wish to engage with the issue may well be relieved the state has stepped in – even in contexts where ‘the state’ is scorned for being decidedly secular. Where a church sees any recourse to courts as sinful, as do some Pentecostal and Baptist groups, pastors can still ignore the issue. Any woman who ‘breaks rank’ by going to court places herself beyond the ecclesial pale, thereby enabling her pastor to ignore the issue.⁸ The same side-stepping ploy is used by the Lutheran pastor who says, ‘There’s isn’t much of a problem with domestic violence here, [in a South Australia parish] and it’s only marginal Christians who go for counselling.’ He saw them as the only abused local women and thus not part of his brief to support.⁹ This frequent lack of interest does not stop women as mothers and wives being adored and adorned in church once a year on the local equivalent of Mothering Sunday.

Clearly domestic violence easily becomes a social welfare issue, and may well also involve legal services in dealing with one possible outcome of distorted, even perverted, relations in marriage. But I shall argue that the practice of marital abuse among Christians of *any* brand and context reflects a core *theological* problem. The core problem is the nature of male and female in relation to God and its improper realisation. It therefore represents an ongoing *ministry* problem relevant to all people and all ministries.

Either we are, as Genesis 1: 27 points out, all made in the Image of God, ‘male and female he created them,’ *or we are not*. If we are not, then Christianity has a major, indeed an insuperable, problem. If it is the former, then the problem is also serious though potentially redeemable, and *not* by prayer alone. Where does the core of the problem lie? Let me offer one image which remains with me. Discussants world-wide would say, holding out the left hand, ‘Yes, of course we are all equal before God but...’ and the right hand comes forward, ‘it’s our culture!’ This oh-so-useful ‘culture’ as the potential abuser, active or complicit, understands it, is *always* a culture which allows acting against the *Imago Dei* with respectable impunity: it is a ‘culture’ which allows us to be silent about, or to ignore, the slapping, demeaning, kicking, beating and even killing of wives.¹⁰

Where culture or ‘the proper way’ strongly influences how we reflect on sins against the body and soul of a person, we may need to consider whether a particular and piecemeal

⁸ The Assemblies of God in Tonga, for example, more or less forbid members from going to court. This means firstly that they are underrepresented in that country’s ‘domestic violence by denomination’ statistics, and secondly that the issue can be more efficiently hidden. Those women who go to court are regarded as flawed. In an area of predominantly AoG members, an informant noted that there would be an ‘event’ even couple of nights, which supported NGOs views of incidence.

⁹ It was unclear whether ‘marginal’ meant women from families which did not contribute to the pastor’s salary, or women who rarely attended church: but talking to the counsellor, as well as relying on my close knowledge of that context in South Australia, it was clear his view was unrelated to the incidence. Women in that small town from church-involved families hesitate to go for counselling lest news gets out, as do women from large properties lest articulating the violence lead to divorce, division of the farm and loss of patrimony in a region where its maintenance and inheritance has taken on ethical-religious tones. See S. Wendt *Domestic violence in Rural Australia* Annandale: Federation Press, 2008, and for a US parallel, N Webscale’s *Rural Women Battering and the Justice System* Thousand Oaks: Sage 1998

¹⁰ Fascinatingly, while pastors, priests, ministers and members in areas of high spousal violence saw no problem in hitting their own wives, they thought if a future son-in-law hit their daughter, they would hit him, presumably on the grounds of prior possession.

reading of that very slippery concept ‘culture’ is approaching worship if it becomes a more important arbiter of behaviour and understanding. It may indeed be ‘part of our culture [as the speaker sees it] to hit women.’ Having two wives or mistresses, or bedding casual conquests may be too, but churches which are totally silent on domestic violence tend not to be silent on *those* cultural traits. One logical consequence of ignoring Genesis 1:27 in favour of worshipping a local commandment based on inequality is that we effectively reject the First Commandment to worship God alone, Culture being our preferred and less challenging idol. As an old and wise Jesuit in Chennai said, in citing this passage as crucial to decent, and decently Christian, relations in marriage: “of course my church doesn’t take this on board as taken logically it leads to the ordination of women.” Be that as it may, Genesis 1:27 is surely a crucial foundation of our faith.

The problem of ‘Culture versus Christ’ has long been discussed, from Paul onwards, and is indeed a much debated undercurrent in the current arguments about contextualisation which, despite it being inevitable, tends to be rejected where actors hold to their ‘pure’ church.¹¹ But one intrinsic element too often ignored, especially where culture is still imagined as a list of items differentiating one imagined closed and cosy group from another, is that of relative power, to which I have already alluded above. The defining by the speaker of a ‘cultural trait’ which s/he upholds or holds about others can itself be an exercise of power over others who commonly, to keep sane if not healthy, may well acquiesce to and internalise that opinion.

Let me explain with an example usefully, perhaps, for many readers one taken from another time and place, that of the Lutheran war-time experience in Australia. Lutherans of distant German origin were not enemy aliens, but were so treated in Australia. The only other ‘enemy-’ linked religiously identifiable group, Italian Roman Catholics, belonged to a much more powerful church which included many acceptable, indeed allied, ethnicities. Did these Lutherans, almost all citizens of Australia,¹² complain loudly at their treatment? They did not, assisted no doubt by the interning of some which did help to silence others. Did they complain after the war? They did not, for that shame-filled silence became normal, shaped by an inability to reject the power-holders’ view through a mixture of anger, fear and internalisation of the victors’ view. Moreover, the post-war church wanted to get back to ‘normal,’ and to work with the newly arriving Displaced Persons and, with hatred of all things ignorantly seen as German still strong, silence seemed best. Was that good for individuals and thus for the long-term prophetic voice of the church? It was not.

This very ordinary, even banal, process of internalising dominant opinions, including processes specifically related to pastoral and ecclesial silence over spousal violence, is strengthened when accompanied by pressure from the dominant force to maintain the social order of the faith as defined by its ethnic, gender, caste or class elite and avoid new and therefore for some necessarily bad secular influences. There are two points here: rejecting the secular world and maintaining the image of Christian virtue.

¹¹ Niebuhr’s 1951 seminal ‘Christ and Culture’ was based on the anthropological concept of essentialised internally unified and discrete culture held until the 1970s. For a critical discussion see Craig Carter’s *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006.

¹² German Lutherans came to Australia from 1839 and, having lost Prussian citizenship by leaving, took British from 1841 onwards. See my *Food Friends and Funerals: On Lived Religion* Muenster: LIT 2008.

In much of Christian Asia and indeed parts of Australia, anxiety about ‘pollution’ from the secular world can easily reach fever-pitch in churches, perpetuating a carefully-chosen culture-worship. One interesting outcome, which is indeed fundamental to my point of the priority of culture over faith, is that where local concepts of *gender equality* do not suit the ecclesiology of a gender-differentiating church, as in Malaysian Borneo, they are set aside as being ‘part of secular culture.’ However, where local concepts support *gender inequality*, ‘secular culture’ usefully backs up ecclesial lack of interest in marital abuse, as in India, Taiwan, Tonga and Korea.¹³ This process, of skilfully making use of ‘culture,’ with secularism as the useful bug-bear as necessary, is how silent support for and actual marital violence endures among clergy and laity, whether regular or sporadic worshippers.

Church institutions, and even congregations, may be unwilling for pastoral violence to be spoken of in public, preferring silence, especially where the minister is seen, and wishes so to be seen, by members as their ‘family’ head. It was interesting to discover, when travelling across India recently, that there are seminaries in which at least one ordained male member of staff was known to hit his wife regularly.¹⁴ None were disciplined. Complicity linen is thus not merely that of the pastor, but indirectly his people, this seminary, that denomination. I need hardly mention that it was such a concern for collective reputation over individual integrity which led the Roman Catholic Church to be silent over the abuse of children. The Pentecostal Bishop in the West Indies who demanded over 14 pain-filled years that the abused wife of a pastor stay and keep silent ‘for the sake of the reputation of the church’ was doing the same thing – as the now divorced wife made clear during discussions in Montserrat. This masking of the knowledge of violence to maintain an immaculate face is felt by some weary Korean Christians, concerned about marital violence, to contribute to the problem, quite apart from male pastors’ propensity for such violence against their wives in their own lives. Korean Protestant churches easily feel defensive given their stagnating numbers, though a prophetic voice is not helped by colluding with evil. One outcome of institutional silence is the conflict between preaching the enfolding love of God in Trinity for all people while perpetrating or colluding in the hitting or demeaning of women (or children for that matter) with impunity. That is not a ‘paradox,’ as is rather often said: it is a hypocrisy, in fact a blatant blasphemy

But there are some pragmatic reasons, quite apart from ethics or the Bible, why Christians need to reflect on spousal abuse theologically, and more important reasons than ever for Christian pastors and priests and the places which train them, and the organisations and members which support and pay them, to act holistically. Silence can leave churches appearing to support family violence against the tide of the practical and legal recognition of the equality of all people.

Attacking a spouse is no longer the legal right of a husband in an increasing number of countries around the world in the wake of the UN Conference and Convention on Violence against Women held in 1993 and 1994. This Convention, unusually and

¹³ Australian churches have a split position, marital violence in indigenous groups being largely ignored.

¹⁴ While Madras Christian College (not a Seminary) did teach on Domestic Violence in its excellent Social Work department, other seminaries did not, despite one, APTC in Hyderabad, having experienced the self-immolation of the wife of an abusive ordinand on campus in 2005. Abuse of wives on campus by ordained ministers also occurs in Korea and Tonga, and doubtless elsewhere

sensibly, dealt with the extraordinary freedom very specific readings of ‘culture’ and religion give to those seeking support for what others may see as abuse in Article 4: *States should condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination.*

Considering the Practice

Thus far I have discussed ‘cultural’ trappings, cunning feints, and the new legal framework in many countries which names and opposes such violence. Let me now introduce some ways, in this cursory setting out of observations from 104 days of intensive field-research in addition to three years work, in which ordained persons (OP) and lay persons (LP) respond to individual or group discussion on the topic. A very common response of both men who have hit their wives and people –including OPs – who do not like the issue, is either to joke about it;¹⁵ or to say immediately when the phrase ‘domestic violence’ is uttered, ‘verbal violence is very hurtful too;’ ‘I know a woman who hits her husband;’ or, ‘a lot of women hit their husbands.’ None was as blunt as the Baptist pastor in Burma, whose ‘I know a woman’ tale applauded the husband who hit his wife for not making food properly. The ‘I know a woman’ trope waxed very tedious. Another all-too common comment, especially from clergy, was ‘Oh, we do not have much of that here.’ Probing might elicit, ‘There’s very little of that, and in forty years of ministry no one has come to me about it.’ Such a cleric may be saying more about his pastoring style – or his memory - than the fact, for no sane woman talks about such painful issues if she is aware from others or her own observation that the response is likely to be the banal three Ps of ‘prayer, patience and perseverance.’ Nor will she talk if she sees that the way that OP treats his wife suggests she will get short shrift.¹⁶ Sadly, even if an OP is genuinely ready to listen, react and act, if an earlier incumbent was not, anxiety will linger. This can be the case in a stable rural community even if the *Imago Dei*-denying OP was in post thirty of forty years ago. It can also be the case if the School Chaplain blabbed to parents about issues discussed in confidence by a former pupil or her friends in years past, an OP failed to support a relative who came for help, or intentionally or inadvertently passed on information or gossip about abuse.

An appreciable number of people in congregations of my readers will have direct experience of violence in the home, even if leaders are not, or prefer not, aware of this: some will themselves be perpetrators.¹⁷ Even if church-goers were to be a little less violent than others men, or the husbands of church-going women to be a little less violent,

¹⁵ The domestic violence joke of the Trinidad Presbyterian of South Asian origin at a January 2011 meeting embarrassed younger pastors, who apologised later but had not felt able to speak to an older pastor. But I was somewhat dispirited throughout the research by the number of OPs as well as LPs who began with a quip, or early on in our discussion said something like ‘Well of course some women ask for it,’ ‘They say sex is better after it,’ ‘Well, my wife would squash me if I hit her.’

¹⁶ The Independent Baptist church in Rockhampton, Queensland, derived from South Carolina, forbids a pastor from talking to a married woman unless her husband has given explicit permission, which makes it unlikely she will be able to seek help from the pastor. A seriously abused woman was told to remain with her husband. However, when he came to the church, threatening all with his gun, she was allowed to leave him on the understanding she would return when it was ‘safe’

¹⁷ The research of Lesley Orr on spousal abuse by Scottish OPs and LPs is essential reading for this issue: *Out of the Shadows: Christianity and Violence against Women in Scotland*. Research Project in the Faculty of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, 1995-7

that may typically still mean at least two women in every ten in each congregation has been hit: in some contexts this number will approach five out of ten.¹⁸ Where does the church stand in this attack on what God has made in His Image?

The historical background

We have established there is no statement in the Bible supporting the right of a man to hit his wife: texts in the Qur'an and the Vedas clearly allow it. Early scriptures of Buddhism do not support spousal violence, but later interpretations do either directly or by implication. Similarly some early Christians also reframed or revised the view of the person, and thus the relative place of the male and female in the proper order of things. There are statements in some church fathers, such as Augustine, suggesting a husband *should* discipline a recalcitrant wife. However, a contrary view is given by John Chrysostom who suggests a woman should not return to an abusive husband. There is some evidence from medieval RC church records indicating priests and friars sometimes trying to intercede at local level to prevent or critique violence. Yet the very influential 12th century Laws of Gratian, the basis of Roman Catholic family law until 1959, explicitly allowed a husband to discipline his wife with a thin stick. Women were seen in Aristotelian thought as failed males, a view maintained by Aquinas, embedded in legal codes, and inculcated by both education and church attitudes and practice.

Different thoughts, or at least actions, on the issue were evident in German and English church courts, especially English, from late 15th century, which penalised the violent spouse by a fine, or formal separation. Courts acted more to maintain social harmony than take a theological stance on the place of male and female before God, although the Anglican Homily on Marriage from 1563 states clearly: 'a man who hits his wife should be ashamed at his action, and hope the earth will open up and swallow him rather than be seen in the market place again.' It also makes the explicitly theological point that as among the Panims' [heathen] a man is not allowed to hit his wife, 'Surely it is a shame that Panims should be wiser then we, who are commanded to resemble angels, or rather GOD himself through meekness?'¹⁹

But Church Courts, or Church-influenced civil courts, in Europe, died away because the free movement of population made the sanction of excommunication difficult to effect, and to a lesser extent because the Enlightenment loosened the hold of the church on members. After a century and more with few controls over marital violence, states on both sides of the Atlantic began, gingerly for the first hundred and fifty years after 1829, to put such controls in place, with very little input from the churches and in some instances opposition from churchmen.

The practice of violence

Domestic Violence occurs world-wide, and it kills, maims, hurts and frightens the victims. Let me move on now to give examples of the incidence and outcome of marital violence, mainly from Asia, with responses of relevant churches.

¹⁸ Depending on denomination, church-going men are either more violent or less violent than the regional average, tending towards slightly less: the Canadian figure, for example, is around 20% overall and 17% for church-goers N. Nason-Clark *The Battered Wife: How Christians confront Domestic Violence*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox 1997.

¹⁹ www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/ret/homilies

A *Korean* government report to the UN gave a figure of 40% Domestic Violence incidents in 2007, with 22% of women having been attacked physically in the preceding year. Korea has had a law criminalising spousal violence since 1997 and 25% of the population is actively Christian. Help centres have been set up all over the nation, 11% being run by churches though largely (up to 93%) government financed. However, church-run centres in rural areas do not always carry out agreed advice but may stress the obligation to women to stay in the marriage and not complain.²⁰ This is legally and theologically questionable. On a personal note, the despair of a Korean woman theologian at the utter dismissal of the issue by churches keen to defend their public face sticks in my memory, as does the woman in a shelter who left her husband after he caused bleeding to brain after breaking her skull, eye socket, nose and teeth. Explaining the damage, she was calm: describing how her Presbyterian parents rejected her for leaving her Head led to tears. Roman Catholics appear to be more active in this area but, as elsewhere in the region, this is spearheaded by nuns and is not part of theological education.

Violence in *India* varies according to area: Meghalaya –with a female land-holding system- has under 10%; South India has upwards of 50%, Kerala being the highest.²¹ Christian men beat their wives rather less than do Muslim and Hindu men, but more than Buddhist and Jain. Arguably the position for beaten Dalit Christian women is now worse because their previous capacity to leave an abuser and start again is removed where marriage is seen as indissoluble. Yet they are much more ready to make abuse public, and get neighbourhood support, so are in a better position than their more middle class sisters. One reason, apart from economics, why Indian women stay in violent marriage is some at least feel protected from rape by other men as long as they live with their husband. In churches which ban divorced people from any leadership role, the killing of an unwanted wife by a pastor or elder is not unknown, though is usually passed off as accident or suicide.

In the ethnically-split island of *Trinidad*, there are higher rates in East Indian than African-origin households. Discussions there suggest that Indian women in the Presbyterian Church²² do not speak up or leave due to often intense family pressure to stay and avoid the shame which might affect the marriage chances of younger sisters. Shame, it must be noted, affects not the abuser but the abused, who must have been a ‘bad wife’ to merit such treatment. Instances of an abused woman returning home did not always endure not for the common economic and affection reasons, but the weight of pity was debilitating. African-origin Methodist women in other islands noted that the churches did little or nothing to help them negotiate a violent marriage, though they were more likely to leave and to have family support in so doing.

Violence in *Malaysian Borneo* affects 30% over the life of marriages, but 60% of households have been affected by it directly or indirectly.²³ Spousal violence was illegal pre-Christianity, marriage not affecting the jural position of males or females. This

²⁰ Personal communication from Dr Byun, of the Korean Women’s Development Institute.

²¹ See ‘Domestic Violence in India, PROWID report (International Centre for Research on Women), Washington DC, 2000

²² South Asians came as indentured labourers for the British to work in the sugar industry, and those were became Christian were assisted by the Canadian Presbyterian Church.

²³ See my ‘A Tale of Three monkeys: A Social History of Domestic Violence in East Sabah’ in *Sojourn*, Vol. 18 Singapore: ISEAS 2003

pattern lasted until the 1950s, when internal movement, post-war dislocation, Christianity, education, and mobility reduced the capacity of a headman to rule and to be followed. Before Malaysia made such violence a criminal offence in 1994, much wife-abuse occurred: few women complained to the headman in the 1965-84 period, and none to the priest. While no churches appeared to teach publically about this issue, those giving pre-marital counselling discussed it, though as a personal rather than also a theological problem, the approach taken by the main Protestant seminary.

Talking to Christian women in Sabah in 2011, their immediate reaction to my question, 'would you let your daughter marry a man whose older brother beat his wife?' was as resounding a 'No!' as the question, 'Would you let a beaten daughter come home?' elicited a resounding 'Yes!' The man as head of the household was a far stronger image for Chinese than for indigenous women, in accordance with cultural norms.

Burma-Myanmar is the epitome of violence, coming both from the state and from the individual, and therefore also through the churches which as ever reflect the context. Teaching a 10 days pastoral ministry course based on Galatians 3:26-29 in 2009 to fifteen Chin and Karen ministers and ministry educators, the following comments were written by them at the end of the course:

a) 'Scripture says that God made human beings in his own image. Both men and women are in the image of God. We have equal rights and dignity. When we look around there is domestic violence in every family. Our society does not count it as committing a sin. Our church does not take action on that issue; it remains unsaid and ignored. Most women often face domestic violence in their lives such as beating, hitting, scolding etc. Women never bring it up publically. They shut up their mouths and suffer patiently. Being a pastor, we represent the church. If it is needed, the church should excommunicate a person who commits domestic violence, like we do if someone commits adultery.'

b) 'It is good to talk about spousal violence. It is physical and verbal. An example: in a Chin theological college, one staff member's husband is a pastor and she is often hit. Should the church be silent? We are: we do nothing. Everyone holds back. Verbal violence is very common; if there is a quarrel, the husband says: 'Don't speak back to me: you are my property, because I paid the bridewealth. So shut up or I'll hit you.' The church doesn't support violence against women, but because it does not see it as a theological problem, and is often silent, it looks as if it does.'

In *Far North Queensland*, Domestic Violence is recognised as a problem in both the indigenous and white communities, more openly in the former. The Uniting Church is engaging with the issue and the underlying view of humans in sermons, and in group or 1:1 teaching. Alcohol exacerbates the issue but is not the cause, indeed an abusing man may drink in order hit, using intoxication as an excuse. In an Independent Baptist church there, however, a husband's right to discipline her is clear, as is her obligation to forgive. In indigenous communities in both Queensland and Central Australia, with an appreciable number of Lutherans, there is little overt effort to face up to domestic violence, that insidious 'culture of the other' taking precedence.

I have written of *South Australia* a little already. The Lutheran Church of Australia did have a clear statement rejecting Domestic Violence on theological grounds in 1993: 'Whereas Domestic Violence [clearly only wife-abuse] has been defended on the grounds of Christian discipline and the legitimate exercise of Christian authority, we now condemn it.' However, it failed to incorporate the necessary and admitted theological

correction in training or preaching. Without such work, involving as it would the embarrassing admission that earlier teaching had been wrong, the statement is worthless. It is indeed awkward for a church to admit colluding in sin: it just as awkward for individuals to endure the consequences.

The Lutheran Church is an example of picking up the problem after the event, doing a good deal for victims who present themselves but ignoring the implications of the *Imago Dei* in theological education at all levels. I appreciate that, as my Chennai Jesuit said, this could become entangled there too with the still vexed issue of women's ordination: but is the prophetic voice and the integrity of the church, is mutual honour and respect in the family based on Genesis 1 rather than the commonly held Genesis 2 and 3, to be strangled by this squabble?

Finally, one of the few clear statements of the theological offence domestic violence causes was made by the Roman Catholic Bishop of *Tonga* in 2010: "It is important for those who misuse their authority within the family to know that not only is what they are doing wrong, but it is a sin before God; those who destroy the dignity and rights of another are guilty of sin as also of breaking the law."²⁴ But this is in a context of 40% domestic violence in one of the two countries of the world which are Christian, the other being Zambia. The largest denomination, the Methodists, had no policy or seminary teaching on the issue, though are working on it.

Some contemporary pastoral reactions to violence.

In Malaysia and India, Taiwan and Australia, Korea and Trinidad, there are some common reactions to exposure of domestic violence across all churches, but these are rather more marked in certain churches. If women do complain to their leader, various strategies are employed. These did include occasional though often private outright support for the woman to leave,²⁵ an immense and consistent support for the woman who stays, and (least often) a continued strategy by individual OPs to oppose all forms of family violence. Less pastorally useful reactions including the following approaches which I can only note briefly here, a deeper analysis needing rather more time.

A first mode is to spiritualise the abuse, telling the abused woman 'This is part of God's plan for you, and you will grow in faith through it.' That the victim should be happy, even keen, to acquire virtue through the sin of others seems an odd logic. And what does this make God? What is the purpose of women being sacrificed, risking death? That Christ's sacrifice was a once-only event is surely a rather basic point of faith.

The second follows a somewhat similar trend, which largely exonerates the husband by saying; 'The Devil has been allowed into this marriage and it is he who is causing your husband to beat you, so you both need to push out the Devil.' This mode may also include blaming demonic attack or inadvertent involvement in childhood with 'evil' things from other traditions. This came up among both Protestants and Roman Catholics in India, Trinidad and Malaysia.

²⁴ Editorial in *Tanumu'a Lelei*, Newspaper of the Diocese of Tonga, 320/2010, p6. However, in a recent conversation, Bishop Soane insisted, incorrectly, that canon law excludes a divorced unattached person from the Eucharist, which may be a constraint on abused Catholic women seeking a formal end to a violent marriage.

²⁵ The courage of the ordained in divorce-rejecting churches, whether Presbyterian in Korea or Roman Catholic elsewhere, to admit openly that they advised divorce in some cases of violence was exemplary. Anglicans in each place allowed a woman divorced after violence to remarry in church.

A third is to counsel long-term patience to the suffering woman to ‘bring the husband round,’ and the careful avoiding of anything which will ‘set him off.’ I need hardly say that a man who wishes to use violence to control his spouse will do so on any grounds, including her wearing a dress he has ceased to like, the coffee being finished, her smile being wrong. This advice for patience may also include reference to her emulating Christ’s suffering, or to enduring the burden which God ‘clearly’ knows she can manage.²⁶

A fourth reaction, and the commonest, is to ‘pray it away!’ This is often the advice given to the presenting woman herself, but it is also the indirect way domestic violence may get a coded mention in church. But, as women in a shelter in Bangalore said, and discussants in other contexts agreed, ‘We do not want the minister to say in church on Sunday, “some families here have problems so let us pray for them.” No, we want him to say: “some women here have been kicked, slapped, scalded and punched this week, which is an offence against God.”’

Yet I must reiterate: public silence is the most usual outcome. It may be because, as one Korean pastor noted, to the dismay of his international listeners, it is ‘not a sufficiently important topic to talk about publically;’²⁷ because it can come too close to everyday reality for too many church leaders; because they do not know what to say if they are privately sympathetic especially in context where divorce is seen as part of the sinful secular world; because it is as ordinary as the sun rising in the east, and because, unlike various other gender-linked issues, the Bible does not (Malachi possibly apart) spell out the sinfulness of spousal violence in words of one syllable, and so it need not be mentioned.

The Bible.

Let us therefore look at how the Bible is referred to in discussion about spousal violence: which texts come up most commonly? I offer these verses as hints rather than a carefully situated discussion, that again demanding far more analysis and reflection than is possible now. Ephesians 5:22 is the commonest, (ignoring both 5:21 and 5:25,) along with 1 Peter 3, ignoring 3:7, and 1 Corinthians 11, 3,9. One OP in Pakistan came up with an interesting validation from Paul. Explaining that marriage indeed makes husband and wife one flesh, he cited Paul’s metaphorical use of ‘striking a blow to his body to make it his slave’ from 1 Cor 9, 25-27, to validate his beating of his own wife. 1 Timothy 2:14 also came up regularly in discussions and surveys, though rarely with reference to Eve as solely responsible for the Fall being noted as incorrect. Another verse defending spousal violence in the West Indies and elsewhere is: ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’ derived from Proverbs 13:24. Odd though it is to use this to validate spousal violence, it is little odder than using Ephesians 5:22, unless ‘Head of the House’ ineluctably includes the right to hit. Of course this makes nonsense of the end of that Ephesians passage urging loving behaviour on the husband ‘as Christ gave his life’: but textual cherry-pickers tend not to see context as relevant to their harvest.

²⁶ If a sick, oppressed or abused person wishes to see their suffering as emulating that of Christ, that is for them to decide, and may in the first case, as in martyrdom, be helpful: it is not for another to advise, much less demand.

²⁷ Several listeners took him to task -in vain- including one who three years earlier had had similar views.

Another line to support male power in marriage – and thus by sleight of hand enabling their right to violence over a delinquent wife– is Sarah’s ‘and she called him [Abraham] Lord,’ in 1 Peter 3:6. That phrase is followed by ‘Yet you are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear,’ fear meaning not ‘being afraid of the dark’, but rather: ‘not letting yourself be intimidated, not being afraid of anyone.’ Yet fear is the constant companion of an abused wife.²⁸ Finally for the New Testament is an interesting example from Tonga is Jesus using a scourge to rid the Temple of money-changers (John 2, but not in the Synoptics), the argument of a group of men in a Bible Study being ‘Jesus whipped those people, so we can hit our wives.’²⁹

An interesting pattern emerged in the choice of Hebrew Bible texts relating to position of and relations between husbands and wives. Genesis 1:27 and much of Genesis 3 were the most usual choices. However, those who chose Genesis 1:27 were also likely to link that to Ephesians 5:21, or Galatians 3:27, and to be interested in or even doing something about inequalities between spouses in their teaching and preaching. Those who chose Genesis 3 did not pick up on 2:17 and, moreover, took the Genesis chapter as a statement of fact which, fitting their cultural expectations, needed no discussion.

Beyond the Bible

It is a smooth glide from the Bible to the marriage vows, given by female respondents the world over as a prime reason to remain with an abusive spouse. ‘In good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until death do us part’ is rather often seen solely as a covenant from each to God, not also as a *contract* between two consenting and equal children of God before God. Clearly using the word contract for what is in law precisely that would strengthen the view that failure to keep to the terms to ‘love, honour and respect’ could be seen as a contractual breach. The Roman Catholic possibility of annulment if the intention at the time of marriage did not accord with the vows taken, is rarely applicable to domestic violence, since few husbands begin the attacks on the wedding night, the lot of one Syrian Orthodox woman in India.³⁰ One problem evident in both Roman Catholic and True Jesus churches when the marriage contract is broken after domestic violence is the difficulty for the woman to remain in her church as a full member. In neither church do women feel easily able to take Communion if they are divorced, even though neither church sets that down. Canon law only prevents a remarried person communicating, although I came across an otherwise well-inclined Bishop insisting a divorced woman was excommunicated. Even the canon lawyer who knew the correct version still said ineffectually: ‘We do tell them they can take the Eucharist, but they do not understand.’ Where that is the case, one presumes little effort was made to teach and preach clearly, lest that shake the status of marriage. The likelihood both that a devout Christian who assumes divorce means exclusion will remain in danger, and that the public marital

²⁸ An odd and unhelpful assumption that Philippians 2:3 mandates the subordination of women to men can preclude complaint, a faithful Christian knowing she is less than all others. This is no odder than understanding Ephesians 5:22 to mean ‘Wives must be sexually available for their husbands at all times,’ both of which emerged during this research project.

²⁹ I cannot go further into this example here, but do note that the famous Indian-made ‘Jesus’ film currently still making the rounds includes a scene where Jesus does indeed whip the men, reading more into John than is actually there, quite apart from the issue of making the husband the ‘righteous one.’

³⁰ Certain Marriage Tribunal judges are considering this issue, and some do appear to try to consider the 12 grounds for annulment ‘generously’ in dealing with continued violence: but this is still optional.

success of the majority takes precedence over the suffering of the few seem points for further thought.

Indeed this leads to the core problem, tied up with 'culture' but getting back to a particular take on theology, is that a women's suffering at the hands of her husband can be a gold star on the road to heaven. For Protestants in general (as well as post Vatican II Roman Catholics) and Lutherans in particular, such involuntary salvation by works for women should be anathema: but it seems to have functioned in precisely this manner. Suffering for Christ, suffering for the faith, seeing the husband as her Lord (the explicit line of some American evangelical writing from the 1970s-1990s,³¹ recently reappearing) has a very old history. Of course the fact that Domestic Violence is not specifically outlawed in the Bible allows some to argue that there Christians do not need to preach teach and reflect on it. Yet where there is a will, a considerable number of extra-Biblical topics, such as smoking or fast cars, *are* part of teaching. Interestingly, while world-wide scarcely any congregation and pastor I have talked to recollecting preaching on or hearing about domestic violence, *all* listeners have heard about adultery and close to all clerics have talked on it. Adultery is indeed a wrong against the betrayed spouse: domestic violence is a wrong against the spouse and the children's children and is the obvious candidate to exemplify the 'sins of the fathers' of Deuteronomy 5:9-10. Those who attack a partner made in God's image surely have problems loving God, let alone self. Maybe clerics are keener to focus on adultery as they may be more certain they are not guilty this month: treating the spouse with disdain or abuse may be too close to home!

Practical Paths to a conclusion

An abuser hits a human being made in the image of God: he hits that of Christ. This is and must be seen as a sin which permeates churches across the world, too often hiding behind so-called cultural norms which, if Jesus had followed those of his day, would have made for a very short Gospel indeed. From the first year of Sunday School onwards, in Confirmation, in regular preaching and teaching, in the marriage homily for the benefit of those marrying and the congregation witnessing the marriage, the fact and the revolutionary implication of Genesis 1:27, Ephesians 5:21 and Genesis 1:27, have to be part of our foundation, lest that foundation be founded on the cultural idolatry of unequal creation. Discussing this in some parts of Asia, in areas with 30-60% domestic violence, the response to this point was often 'oh, the children are too young to know about that!' Yet by the law of averages, a fair number of children in each Sunday School will have seen violence at first hand. Do we leave them to manage as they will, and to copy that pattern in their future lives, because *we* need *them* at least to be innocent of the knowledge of parental violence? *We* may not want to deal with the implications of *Imago Dei*: does that make it ethically acceptable to leave children to muddle through? Let me note here that driving home in Malaysia in February 2011 with a devout Chinese Anglican woman after a 2 hour discussion with twenty such women, I was shocked when

³¹ *The Christian Family* L Christenson Minneapolis: Bethany, 1970, incorporated long sections from H Thiersch, a 19th century German theologian. *The Total Woman* M Morgan. Old Tappan: Revell 1973, and more recently D Pearl's No Greater Joy Ministries 2004. Initial evangelical reactions came in the 1980s with *Battered into Submission* J and P Alsdurf. Intervarsity, 1989 and *In the name of Submission*, K Strom, Portland: Multnomah, 1986

she said: 'That was such a good afternoon: I am so happy to realise now that men and women are made equal.' 'Now?' when she has attended church all her life?

It is possible to act, not to change the world but, for one moment which can join up with another, to stop colluding in this sin through silence. An Indian priest in the Church of South India heard me giving an early truncated version of this essay one morning in Chennai, including the above points for reorienting theological teaching for congregations, (one of which came from Trinidad) after a couple of days of private discussion with her. That afternoon we travelled together to a wedding she was taking, way off in the countryside. On the journey, she said she would give the homily in such a way that it included reference to violence in marriage. Let me summarise her homily as she explained it immediately afterwards.

God created us all equal, men and women, rich and poor, and loves us all equally. God loves relationships, and he loves marriage as the recognition of this particular relationship.....and in future, I hope that when someone in this town asks, 'who has a good marriage here,' people will point to you two. Why might they do that? Because in living a good relationship, a good marriage, you will not talk badly of each other to others, you will never, ever, hit slap or kick each other nor will you scream at each other, and you will respect, honour and care for each other, the one who is less tired helping the other, the one who is cheerful helping the other, the one who is healthy caring for the one who is sick.

At the wedding, this had an effect, as the mostly women attending stopped talking and listened with rapt attention. The couple's future? Who knows! But all those there, just as at a baptism, witnessed her say that hitting was out for that couple, and those words may well have caused them to recognise, to *re-witness* as we all do when witnessing a baptism, the promises made by the principle actors, in this case promises of loving mutual respect. If the reader says scornfully, 'oh, that's pointless, they wouldn't change just by witnessing,' what is the point of congregations across the world witnessing baptisms? If such a homily can be given in India, where nothing even marginally inauspicious should be said or done on the wedding day, would that not be possible in any place?

In summary, let me reiterate reasons why I am interested in this issue, which is *not* a social welfare issue *nor* or a feminist issue, but one of absolutely *basic* theology with *universal* applicability.

Firstly, legal systems are now acting on behalf of women. The silence of ministers, as the Burmese pastor noted, appears to support archaic violence against women in the face of secular change: is that what Christianity stands for? Certainly national laws are increasingly supporting women: does that mean Galatians 3:27, or Genesis 1.27, is to be left to the state?

Secondly, as an anthropologist, a theologian, and indeed as a priest, I am interested in the issue of contextualisation and inculturation in every context, even city, every country of this world, whether expressed in the self-actualising, blessed-by-wealth-and happiness congregations of the meritocratic American Mid-West and congregations discussed so far here. An intentional, elite-controlled contextualisation easily risks the retrospective worship of culture,³² including culturally given and often unequal relationships between

³² In Korea church life, it is the image of the *yanbang* which is taken as the yardstick of Korean culture, or even an imagined *minjung* – but not the *baekjeong*

men and women, sanctifying a profound and even salvific difference between males and females at the deepest cultural level. Our collective aim as Christians is surely inculturation from within, from the whole body of Christ's people in a place, intended not to merge culture and faith but to deepen what each understands as faith itself by drawing on, challenging *and being challenged* by the deepest structures of thought and meaning.³³ How often have we failed! Nineteenth century Roman Catholics and Protestants brought their contextualised domesticated versions of EuroAmerican faith to Korea, presenting that as eternal and uncontaminated by 'culture:' modern-day Korean missionaries take twentieth century Seoul to the farthest ends of the earth, presenting that as the pure uncontaminated Gospel.

Ecclesial focus on translated or local songs or hymns, imported or local melodies, robes or ties, grape juice, coconut milk or wine, organs, bands or silence, may become a focus on superficial though essentially unimportant issues. But if women and men are culturally seen as different in quality and salvific capacity, despite apparently being made in the Image of God, how is this paradox played out in faith lives? By ignoring the violent denigration of one section of believers, important however few they are? Can a church based on such practice have any integrity, and if it has little integrity, how can it maintain a prophetic voice?

The Last Voice

Let me end with the 2009 Burma Workshop comments in response to the following end-of-course question: What stands out in the last nine days?

'Silence feeds power and allows power. That shocked us. It is a new issue, power over family members, power in church, power over people. We are usually passive in church; we accept what is said and done. Culture, the military, the church hierarchy; they silence us, and we do not want to see that, and we are angry. But we do the same: we preach and teach on peace and justice as if other people should make it happen. We must stop being silent, for that it is active and colludes with power. Domestic violence is not far from our society: it is all over. If we are silent, we support making a difference between God's children, and that is sin.'

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³³ See A Gittins, 'Beyond Liturgical Inculturation' in *Irish Theological Review*, 2004