

Facing past hurts Christianly, in the present day – Ed Walker

How can we in Sudan come to terms with the atrocities committed in our country, against our people, tribe, clan, friends or family?

The savagery and brutality which have occurred in Sudan can leave us suffering a range of emotions: numbed, stressed, sickened and shocked. An estimated 2 million died in the North South war and 200,000 in Darfur. As an outsider I cannot begin to understand what it must be like to have a close relative killed. But having lived and worked in Sudan (the lakes, Bhar el Ghazel, Upper Nile, Khartoum, West and South Darfur) for over 6 years, I can offer a few reflections which I pray maybe of help.

When back in England, I am often asked why there is so much fighting in Sudan. I have also had Sudanese ask me if their nation is somehow “cursed” or whether God is punishing them by inflicting these wars. Sometimes it feels like the subliminal question (even if people don’t always realise it) is whether there is something unique or different with the Sudanese. One of the aims of this chapter is to show that in a given set of circumstances we are *all* capable of extreme acts of violence. Similar incidents have occurred on every continent, in every war, which suggests they are the result of a certain combination of stresses. It suggests that war has a power that pushes people to their most carnal extremes. Reading a few books on the psychology of killing and rape has helped me understand more fully how humans get to such a point. And understanding helps us learn how to forgive.

I have also worked in and visited other war zones (Burundi, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Northern Ireland, Rwanda) and read about many others from Europe and across the globe. I have drawn from these countries, in part to show that these are experiences common to war everywhere and *not* something unique to the Sudanese experience!

In Burundi, a matter of miles from my base in the north of the country an attack occurred on an Internally Displaced People’s (I.D.P.) camp. The attackers, armed with machetes, hacked indiscriminately against anyone they could find, including women and

children. I believe the number killed was seventeen. Casualties were also carried to the hospital with large chunks hacked out of their heads, limbs and bodies.

In southern Sudan a colleague confessed he had held a gun and watched as a fellow tribesman threw a baby of a different tribe into a burning hut. In Darfur a woman was gang raped in front of her brother, then her genitalia mutilated and thrown into her brother's face. In case you think this would never happen in Europe, in Croatia a man had his throat slit from one ear to another with a tool. In Germany nearly 6 million Jews were slaughtered. In Northern Ireland there are people who specialise in smashing knee caps with a sledgehammer. In London an eighty year-old patient was raped in her toilet cubicle.

Similar stories seem to have occurred in every war zone I have read about. I find it easier to see how someone can pull a trigger at a faceless human-shaped target some distance away rather than attack an innocent female or kill a baby.

I once read an article in a respectable newspaper, propagating the theory that humans in central Africa could achieve such staggering depths of savagery because they were lower down in the human evolutionary chain. That article was wrong. Human beings are human beings. Incidents such as My Lai in Vietnam¹ or even, to a lesser extent, Abu Ghraib in Iraq,² suggest that such savagery is not an unfortunate side-effect of war, but an unavoidable result. Savagery is created by the negative energy of war. The combined mix of corruption, dehumanising the enemy, the addiction and adrenaline of killing, peer pressure and the intoxicating power of evil, might help explain why these events occur.

Corruption

In the book "Captain Corelli's Mandolin"³ the author describes the effect of the 2nd World War on a young man called Mandras. Before the war he is a lovable, charming, kind, young rogue. During the war he is sent to fight the Italians invading Greece where he suffers hardships almost unimaginable: frostbite, hunger, terrible sanitation, and war in its most brutal. He left

¹ the massacre of more than 500 Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers in March 1968.

² the abuse, torture, sodomy and killing of prisoners held in prison in Iraq by American soldiers in 2003/2004.

³ a musical instrument, played by plucking the four strings.

home utterly unprepared for war and returned scarred emotionally and physically. He became a wayward layabout and was taken in by misguided rebels who poisoned his innocent mind with perverted philosophies. They forced him to beat an old man. He was reluctant at first but then: "it became an exhilaration. It was as if every rage from the earliest year of childhood was welling up inside him, purging him, leaving him renewed and cleansed."⁴ Later he was forced to shoot the man in the head. Once innocent blood was on his hands, without reprisal, there was no turning back. He was a rapist and a killer. The author shows how easy it is, in a matter of months, for an innocent, likeable young lad to be turned into a killer.

How can someone kill another man? Chris Hedges, a war correspondent for fifteen years, writes: "It takes little in wartime to turn ordinary men into killers. Most give themselves willingly to the seduction of unlimited power to destroy and all feel the heavy weight of peer pressure. Few, once in battle, can find the strength to resist."⁵ An American soldier in Vietnam came to the same conclusion: "You put those same (American) kids in the jungle for a while, get them real scared, deprive them of sleep and let a few incidents change some of their fears to hate. Give them a sergeant...add mob pressure, and those nice kids who accompany us today would rape like champions."⁶

Dehumanising the Victim

Children captured by the Lord's Resistance Army, after being repeatedly raped, "were forced to stab corpses. They were only allowed to stop when their captor decided he had seen enough blood spurring on to their clothes and bodies."⁷ In order to turn them into killers "they have to be brutalized, their nascent sense of what is right and what is wrong erased ...overcome by guilt and self-loathing, they subsequently shut out reason and emotion. In this numb state they do their masters bidding, however gruesome the task."⁸

A question explored after the Second World War was how so many Germans could have killed so many Jews. It must be the same for all massacres. One of the explanations put

⁴ Louis De Bernières Captain Corelli's Mandolin (London: Vintage, Random House) 1995.

⁵ Chris Hedges War Is A Force that Gives Us Meaning (London: Anchor, Random House) 2003, page 87.

⁶ Quoted in Lt. Col. Dave Grossman On Killing, (New York: Hachette, Little, Brown and Co.) 1998, page 191.

⁷ George Alagiah A Passage to Africa (New York: Time Warner, Little, Brown and Co.) 2002.

⁸ George Alagiah A Passage to Africa (New York: Time Warner, Little, Brown and Co.) 2002.

forward was that the victims were dehumanised. The leaders managed to dehumanise their victims and, crucially, convince their followers to do so as well. The killers no longer related to the humanity of those they killed; they objectified them and reduced them to something far lower than themselves. Their victims had become stigmatised, despised, hated, blamed for all their ills and so were almost deserving of their punishment. Somehow the reality of these killers had become distorted, they had lost sight of truth. (Of course by dehumanising others they dehumanised themselves. A part of their own humanity was lost and, importantly, they too became victims of the war and of their own crimes).

The Thrill and Addiction of Killing

In Sierra Leone we were infested by rats. My natural reaction to such a problem was to pretend they were not there. My colleague Janet, with whom I was sharing the accommodation, didn't share my feelings. Janet's senses appeared to be honed in to detecting exactly where the rats were. I would stagger from my room bleary eyed in the morning, to see Janet staring behind some cupboard claiming: "He's behind here, I know he is."

Finally after Janet had awoken with rat poo on her pillow I had to agree she could no longer simply cohabit with the furry foes. Rat traps were not working, a change in policy was needed for normal sanity levels to prevail. I got my large shoes on and Janet, with courage only bestowed on brave hearted Scots, chased the rat into the open where I trembled with a large club. The first rat came – I missed with the first shot but stamped hard with my left foot. My boot thudded down on the rat and it was no more! Success. With confidence high we followed the second rat into the office until it scurried out; one sharp jab to the head finished him off. The adrenaline pumped through our veins as we declared the victory of man over rat.

We felt a sense of relief, pride and joy because of our bravery, intelligence, and skill. Give me another rat – we could kill anything now. We were on a high. I realised later they were the first mammals I had ever killed.

After the war in Sierra Leone, child soldiers confessed their stories: They told how initially they resisted harming anyone, but then, under enormous pressure, they committed their first kill. Soon it was a handful, and later they became both immune to their wrongs and almost attached to the power that killing brought. And they are, for a moment, gods, swatting down powerless human beings like flies.”⁹ The adrenaline and high and power they received from killing became almost addictive. As a result they became detached from themselves and almost disintegrated as the cycle of evil took greater control of their lives, overcoming their humanity.

This high is not unique just to those in Sierra Leone. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman studied the psychology of killing (mainly in Vietnam) and concluded: “Immediately after the kill the soldier goes through a period of euphoria and elation.” Grossman quotes a soldier from the First World War, who after killing a Turk, wrote, “I had a feeling of the most intense satisfaction.”¹⁰

Once the natural resistance to killing is overcome, men find there is something in the act of killing which has an addictive power.

Peer Pressure

As well as the thrill and addiction to killing, the power of peer pressure is significant, especially when mixed with the recipe of extreme, intense or vulnerable situations. I read an account of a young man in his late teens, conscripted and taught to kill as part of a militia. He did it purely out of peer pressure from his country’s Government and from his own tribe. The pressure on him was so great!

An experience I had in Burundi taught me how vulnerable we all are to such pressure. There was a military curfew at 10.00 p.m. across the city of Bujumbura, which meant we had to be home by 9.30. It was 9.15, and were heading for our car and saw above us what looked like shooting stars. An instant later we realised what it was, and we ran inside. The sight was

⁹ Chris Hedges *War Is A Force that Gives Us Meaning* (London: Anchor, Random House) 2003, page 171.

¹⁰ Lt. Col. Dave Grossman *On Killing*, (New York: Hachette, Little, Brown and Co.) 1998, page 111.

tracer bullets,¹¹ the sound was the crack of a gun. The first sounds were followed by many more. The crack of the gun was joined by the cackle of a machine gun and then the boom of mortar fire. We agreed to stay the night at Stefan's home.

Stefan was a large, loud man with a strong character and powerful presence. Myself and Paula (also working for Tearfund) were to spend the night at his house with a few of his other friends. The sound of guns intensified and at times seemed very near. His house was not 50 yards from the president's palace and it was conceivable this was under attack. It was the first time I had heard a battle like this and it was unsettling. Stefan had heard it many times before and seemed to revel in it. It excited him – he disappeared into a room and marched out with his AK-47 rifle. He handed a pistol to one of his friends and came to me, as the only other male, with another cased pistol. "You might need it" he said with certainty and assurance. I stared at the silver pistol. I was now completely unsettled. I had no idea how to react or what to do. I fingered the gun. Was I to carry it? What was I to do in this situation? It was a scenario I had never been in before, nor imagined I ever would be. I was lost and overloaded and did not know how to react. After a while the shaken kaleidoscope that was my mind returned to order and I could see once again. I replaced the gun in its box and timidly said, "No thanks". We watched a video and eventually went to bed.

My point is this. Here I was, a man in my early twenties, fully convinced of my principles, a Christian all my life, educated to degree level from a British university, someone with more than average self-confidence and self-esteem, and yet for a while I did not know what to do. It is perfectly obvious to me now that I should never have touched the gun, but at the time it wasn't. Imagine if the scenario had been even more intensified and I had been more vulnerable: imagine if the shooting had been nearer. Maybe if there had been no women in the room, the peer pressure on me would have been much greater. What if there were more men, all of them wielding guns and imploring me to do as well. Would I have said no then? It is not impossible that I would have bowed to the peer pressure.

¹¹ Tracer bullets are bullets which light up their path and so show the shooter or an advanced sniper how near they are to hitting their target.

If that is true for me, imagine a child in Darfur or perhaps the rural clans 100 miles north of Rumbek growing up with no school. He grows up with myths about great battles against neighbouring clans or tribes. Maybe he has seen some of his relatives killed, maybe not. Certainly he could not have escaped the stories of death which must rattle around the cattle-camp fire or dreary evenings in a lonely Dhamra.¹² Living as a near naked nomad traipsing through the toic¹³ or over long desert sands he is regularly hungry. With no education he is bored and illiterate. He is not so much conscripted into joining the older men but more forced into it from a lack of choice. Staying at home with the women and children is not an option. All the causes of his sufferings, he is told, are due to the other tribe. He is shown a gun and taught how to use it. Killing chickens, goats, sheep, cows, camels, and wild animals is part of his everyday survival. Humans are only the next step up. Somehow war fills a spiritual void within him. For redundant adolescents in a depraved area, be they bored Arab nomads in Darfur, impoverished youths in Equatoria, disaffected Dinka in Bhar el Ghazel or uneducated Nuer in Upper Nile, war gives them all something to believe in. It becomes something to get up for, something into which they can channel their anger and their energy. War is a force that gives them a meaning.¹⁴ Those that survived the first gun-fight or cattle raid have tasted the adrenalin of battle and maybe the power in killing. Having killed your first victim, a psychological threshold is breached and your next is that much easier. Turning back becomes that much harder. The soldier is speeding along a slippery slope to becoming a murderer. Soon this child is very capable of shooting someone at close range and throwing a child into a fire.

The Intoxicating Power of Evil

Finally there appears to be something in killing and war that grips people with an evil power. Even secular writers notice this: "(In the Second World War) mass murder and execution can be sources of mass empowerment. It is as if a pact with the devil has been made and a host of evil demons (are released)...empowering its nation with an evil strength as a reward for its blood sacrifices. Each killing affirmed and validated in blood the demon of Nazi racial

¹² A Dhamra is a small nomadic village in Darfur (and elsewhere).

¹³ Toic is dry season cattle grazing land around the Lakes and Bhar El Ghazel. It becomes swampy in the rains.

¹⁴ In a parallel way war also gives meaning to others involved in the war. Experienced war reporters and even aid workers admit to being attracted to the thrill of war.

superiority.”¹⁵ “Killing unleashes within us dark undercurrents that see us desecrate and whip ourselves into greater orgies of destruction.”¹⁶ If secular writers recognise this, then how much more should we as Christians understand some of the spiritual powers at play behind – for example – some of the Nuer attacks on the Dinkas in the early 90’s, and also behind the retaliation by Dinka on Nuer?¹⁷

Rape is harder for me to understand as nothing in me can relate to it. I think all the above factors also come together in rape. (For example rape most often occurs in gangs where peer pressure is a factor.) The above factors break down long-established prohibitions against violence and at the same time, in a similar way, sexual prohibitions are broken too. This is why one often sees the crumbling of sexual and social norms when the domination and brutality of the battlefield is carried over into personal life. “Rape, mutilation, abuse and theft are the natural outcomes of a world in which force rules, in which human beings are objects.”¹⁸ “The linkage between sex and killing becomes unpleasantly apparent when we enter the realm of warfare.”¹⁹ When “life becomes worth nothing, when one is not sure of survival, when a society is ruled by fear, there often seems only death or fleeting, carnal pleasure.”²⁰ What terrible alternatives! There is something in war that inverts all moral order and hierarchies. The moral universe is turned upside down. In a functioning society criminals are put in jail. In a dysfunctional society (war), these criminals are often the ones who rise to the top. Perhaps readers can think of people from their own settings who were once criminals and yet are now seen as heroes by those who have hired their violent skills?

It is said that 2 per cent of a population have a tendency for psychopathic behaviour. War provides an environment for these behaviours to be expressed. When these guys are wielding power, people follow them. Only the very exceptional seem to have the moral courage to resist. In such an environment, sex becomes less about lovemaking and more about exercising power and gratifying base instincts.

¹⁵ Chris Hedges War Is A Force that Gives Us Meaning (London: Anchor, Random House) 2003, pages 208-209.

¹⁶ Chris Hedges War Is A Force that Gives Us Meaning (London: Anchor, Random House) 2003, page 89.

¹⁷ Ephesians 6:10-13.

¹⁸ Chris Hedges War Is A Force that Gives Us Meaning (London: Anchor, Random House) 2003, page 104.

¹⁹ Lt. Col. Dave Grossman On Killing, (New York: Hachette, Little, Brown and Co.) 1998, page 136.

²⁰ Chris Hedges War Is A Force that Gives Us Meaning (London: Anchor, Random House) 2003, page 168.

Walking as Jesus walked, even after atrocities

So perhaps our insight into these inter-related factors – corruption, dehumanising the victim, peer pressure, the addiction of killing and the power of evil, can soften our emotions? Instead of anger and disbelief we begin to understand and maybe feel pity? There but for the grace of God, I may have gone. Once our hearts and our wills reach this point, perhaps forgiving may become easier for us?²¹

From this point one can build upwards and begin to understand how families, clans, and tribes have risen against one another. The pressure to hate can be so great it can build towards a massacre! The majority of the rebel movements in Sudan and elsewhere have begun with good ideologies, but they lack the discipline and organisation of western armies and so are more susceptible to the lure of indiscriminate killing and rape.

So where does that leaves us as Christians? How should we respond? Whatever one's view, it is certainly a terrible tragedy that a child or young man can grow up learning to kill. I once met a militia soldier. He was no more than 19. I could read the shame in his eyes. They revealed someone who had exchanged the joys and freedom of childhood – games, education, and parental love, for hopeless loss, intense hatred and mind numbing trauma. Maybe those who forced them into fighting were themselves earlier victims of the same abuse? Should we see them as delinquents that require justice or should we treat them as people in need, captives who need freeing? Should we consign them to live on in their hell of an existence, expecting divine vengeance, or should we show them the merciful forgiveness God shows to us? Are they killers or are they victims? Are they both?²²

Maybe we are all to blame – maybe none of us are.²³ Alexander Solzhenitsyn grappled with this question when he wrote: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing

²¹ 1 John 1:5-2:6.

²² Romans 12:1-3.

²³ Genesis 6:5-13.

evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”²⁴ ²⁵

I have heard of rulers, rebels and despots who have established “training camps” for children. Perhaps those who set them up with cold hearted calculation, driven by a lust for power, should carry the greatest responsibility? “Woe to you who *make* unjust laws.”²⁶

I met one man who had interviewed a number of such ideologists. He said on one occasion he had to end the interview early as he felt physically sick and reviled by the man. Maybe we can hold onto the fact Jesus also felt a similar distress, but strongly hinted at a hope of future justice: “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but *woe to the man through whom they (the things that cause people to sin) come!*”²⁷

As a Christian who believes in the God of love, the subject of hell is not my favourite topic, and it is one I instinctively shy away from. It is, however, one referred to by Jesus, and by Paul: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”²⁸ When staring at the darkest evils of perverting children, the fact everyone will have to give account to God might be of some comfort. Atrocities got away with on earth, will be justly dealt with in heaven. I still do not fully understand who should receive justice for the crimes we are discussing. I am not sure who should shoulder the blame for turning humans beings into killers. Since “the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them”²⁹ then maybe we are each responsible for our own actions? If I murder or

²⁴ Alexander Solzhenitsyn [The Gulag Archipelago](#) (New York: Harper Collins, Harper Perennial Modern Classics) 2002 edition, page 75.

²⁵ Jeremiah 17:9-10.

²⁶ Isaiah 10:1, emphasis mine.

²⁷ Matthew 18:6-7, emphasis mine.

²⁸ Romans 1:20.

²⁹ Romans 2:15.

rape, I am accountable to my Maker. And if I refuse to forgive, I am accountable to my Maker too!³⁰

I do know this! We can all repent from the sin in our own hearts and try to encourage others along a similar journey. None of us know what will happen when we die, but whilst living, we can encourage others towards repenting of the darkness that holds them back from the freedom of God's love and forgiveness.³¹

No one is beyond hope or redemption. Nelson Mandela's watertight logic is full of understanding, grace, forgiveness and hope: "No child is born hating another man because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished."³²

We can all trust in God's forgiveness, grace, understanding and love for ourselves, and we can encourage all others around us to follow a similar path. We cannot condemn anyone to being irredeemable, as Jesus reminded us from the cross. A thief crucified alongside Jesus repented. He could make no restitution. He could not even ask his victims for forgiveness. But the thief was promised an immediate personal appointment in paradise with our Lord Jesus.³³

God appears predominantly a God of grace. He likes to transform the most hopeless of cases. He took the murderous Saul and changed him from a religious killer to grace-spreading saviour.³⁴

³⁰ Matthew 12:36; Romans 14:12; Hebrews 4:13-16.

³¹ Romans 3:21-26.

³² Nelson Mandela *A Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Abacus, Little, Brown and Co.) 1995.

³³ Luke 23:39-43.

³⁴ Acts 9:1-19.

Like Jesus, our task is to associate with all others and reach out in love across enemy lines. As we warmly embrace across the whole variety of ethnic groups, regardless of history, we show we trust in His transforming power.³⁵

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. Share some of the hurts you have experienced from the conflicts in Sudan.
2. List the factors that may work together to turn any person into a wartime killer or rapist.
 - How does knowing this change your view of the people who have hurt you?
 - How can the dangers of these evil influences be taught to forewarn young people?
3. Reading 1 John 1:5-2:6
 - what does it mean to “walk in the light”?
 - whose sin threatens to stop a Christian living as they should?
 - is anyone said to be beyond the forgiveness of God?
 - Does this make a difference to how you view people who have hurt you?
4. What can we learn from the conversion of Saul (Paul) about God’s grace towards those who aggressively oppose Christianity? Acts 9:1-31.
 - What can we learn from Ananias and from Barnabas?
 - Since God forgives, how should we respond to those who have hurt us?
 - 1 Corinthians 15:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17.
5. Since people learn to hate or learn to love, how can we promote the Christian way?
6. Consider why an understanding of the grace of God helps Christians forgive.
 - Ephesians 2:1-10; Ephesians 3:7-11.

³⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17-19.