Escaping the Conflict Spiral: A Gospel Approach

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Religion is often blamed for conflict, whether within a family, within a country, or between countries. Yet history and personal experience show that religious conflict is not what it seems to be. Conflict is laden with past hurts and persistent grievances. It seems at times unstoppable. This quality is a result of what is sometimes called an escalation pattern or conflict spiral, and it's a result of two human characteristics: the need to form an identity and the capacity for memory.

Escalation works by a simple and seemingly inescapable mechanism. Briefly put, once a conflict starts, instead of seeing each action that another performs in isolation, we tend to see others' actions as part of the conflict. To use a simple example, we believe the person next to us on the bus is sniffling because he is angry that he no longer has a double seat, rather than because he has a cold. That simple situation is hugely multiplied when we have some emotional skin in the game; hence the fabled bitterness of family fights and civil wars. Conflict, once begun, tends to escalate rather than defuse. Even when it is latent, unresolved conflict is still present, and has a way of rearing its head whenever the other party does something that can be read in light of the conflict. This cycle feeds off itself; each action is seen as hostile and breeds a reaction of anger and fear.

As part of this escalation spiral, people start to see themselves as the just and justified parties. This is where the confusion about religion as the source of conflict comes in. In secular societies, it is hard to see religion as something intrinsic to a person's identity, rather than something chosen, but for most committed religious people in the world, religion is something people are, rather than something they choose to be a part of. Religious differences sometimes become part of the justification process: we are just and the other group is unjust, because they have the wrong religious identity. Political, ethnic, and other social identities are also used this way: our party is the right sort of people and theirs is the wrong sort of people. The problem with this tendency to bind up conflicts with personal or group identity is that it adds a stubborn, emotional element to the conflict. Everyone needs to belong to a social group. No one likes to feel their social group is under attack. Most people will act defensively when attacked. These things are a matter of instinct.

Conflict escalation is a theological problem, as all interpersonal problems ultimately are. We are always called to see Christ in others. The Gospels offer us a window into these behaviors, and a roadmap for escaping an escalating situation. For Orthodox Christians, there are two particularly

instructive passages. The first is the story of the Publican and the Pharisee from the Gospel of Luke. This most familiar of parables contrasts two men. One is an expert at justifying his sin by looking both to his religious identity and to the difference between himself and others. The second, whom we are meant to emulate, looks only at himself and sees where he falls short. Here, Christ is telling us that identifying with the "good people" and following the rules is not enough. Instead of looking at others and seeing their sin (a practice that makes us look better), we must look at ourselves and see our own sin (a practice that makes us look worse). This is uncomfortable and, when we feel ourselves being attacked, it runs against everything instinct tells us is right. Yet this is an essential first step to escaping a cycle of conflict. A gaze inward at our own faults, rather than outward at those of others, brings us compassion and understanding of the other and his or her actions. Forgiveness becomes possible.

The Beatitudes are also highly instructive in the context of conflict escalation. They ask us to be poor in spirit, rather than to look for ways in which we are right. They tell us that pain and mourning are part of life, and that we should in fact mourn how we fall short of who we are called to be. Mercy, meekness, a capacity to see others as God's beautiful creations, making peace in defiance of one's group, bearing up under persecution—these are what Christians are called to do, as we are reminded each week in the Liturgy. The Beatitudes read almost like an instruction book on de-escalation, and they emphasize, again and again, the importance of compassion and forgiveness, even when we are persecuted, indeed especially when we are persecuted.

One result of the Gospel message is the emergence, over the past few decades, of the idea of restorative justice. This is a process championed by a Christian leader, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a driving force behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. The commission later formed part of the basis for the Rwandan Gacaca courts. In both circumstances, wrongdoing was widespread and systemic, and a punitive justice approach was impractical. Both relied heavily on a process of truth-telling and forgiveness to bring communities torn apart by violence back together. Both used explicitly Christian wording: reconciliation, mercy, community. The pursuit of restorative justice is becoming more widespread, even in some American schools. It is not easy; it requires discipline and self-control. Yet its effects are stabilizing and give people a way to move into community with former enemies.

Approaches like this one, based on radical forgiveness, are championed by Catholic and Anglican leaders as well as by Anabaptist "Peace Churches." It is important for Orthodox Christians to be seen as part of this solution based on radical forgiveness, not because it raises our profile or betters our reputation but because mercy, peacemaking, and purity of heart are intrinsic to the Christian calling. ✻

Gacaca court in Rwanda, 2006. Photo © by Elisa Finocchiaro.

Further Reading

Dean, Pruitt and Sung Hee Kim. *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement*, 3rd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

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Desmond, Tutu. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

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