

# HOW CAN LOVE BE VIOLENT? REFLECTIONS ON RICHARD OF ST.VICTOR'S *ON THE FOUR DEGREES OF VIOLENT LOVE*

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**Abstract:** The following article focuses on Richard of St. Victor's most original treatise: *On the Four Degrees of Violent Love*. Although the topic of violence within the Christian view on ethics, politics and theology was not at all new by 1173, the major contribution of this short but dense mystical writing consists in developing systematically the violence as an inherent consequence of the infinite charity. The love is so powerful that it "wounds, binds, languishes and brings on a faint", but the same force may have different effects: if these four steps appear to be destructive when oriented to satisfy the "profane" desires, their infinite strength show providential effects when turned to the divine source of the charity.

**Keywords:** Richard of St. Victor, love, violence, degrees, infinity, mystics

## INTRODUCTION: LOVE AND VIOLENCE IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

Apparently, there is no compatibility between the Christian love and violence: on the one hand, the Gospels proclaim "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9) and St. Paul describes Christ as "being our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14); whereas St. Matthew leaves no place for any use of the sword on behalf of Jesus' disciples: "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52).

However, this statement is far from being as simple as it appears. First of all, because of the Scripture itself, where several assertions seem to indicate an inherent violence of the divine love: considering the First Testament, God doesn't hesitate to present Himself as being jealous (Ex. 20:5), He seduces his prophet Jeremiah with the unstoppable force similar of a rape (Jer. 20:7), while His enemies are

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destroyed by the divine “wrath” through endless series of wars, punishments and plagues. It is then even more surprising to discover within the New Testament sentences where the otherwise so highly praised peace seems to be challenged by the violence: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). But above all stands the reality of “sacrifice” mentioned – though in various ways – throughout the Bible, whose connection both with the violence, on the one side, and with other religions, on the other, raise the question of its relevance within the Christian faith and therefore the latter specificity.

Being aware of both the enormous hermeneutical difficulties and the historical consequences of these biblical affirmations, it is then understandable that their interpretation varied during the centuries. While during the first period of the Church – when, against the Roman Empire’s persecutions, rose the reaction of the Apologetic Fathers – only the martyrdom as a non-violence resistance was praised, with St. Augustine<sup>1</sup> started however a new trend in the ecclesiology, trying to defend the right of the “just war” against the non-believers and subsequently, the use of force and violence for concrete religious purposes.

This very complex panorama of the relations concerning the paradox of the coincidence between charity and violence within the Christianity allows the study of the subsequent topic under different points of views. If in the moral realm different ascetic trends and movements (either orthodox or heretical) sometimes saw the violent mortification as a solution in order to tame sexual passions<sup>2</sup>, the political issue has dominated for centuries the relation between the “two swords”<sup>3</sup> or “two the reigns”<sup>4</sup>, i.e. the religious power in front of

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<sup>1</sup> While commenting the parable of Lk 14, 16-24, St Augustine fixed on the words *impelle intrare* (“compel them to come in”). By doing so, he justified the persecution of heretics and later *Decretum Gratianum* (*Corpus Iuris Canonici* 1), based on his arguments, give an official authority to this teaching for a long period in the history of the Church.

<sup>2</sup> One of the striking examples in this sense is the famous self-mutilation (castration) of the greatest name of the Alexandria’s Patristic School, Origen (see EUSEBIUS, *Hist. ecle.* 6.8.2-3). One of the best surveys upon the Ancient Christian vision of sexuality is found in PETER BROWN, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> The Catholic Church of the “two swords” has been formulated in the bull *Unam Sanctam*, issued by Pope Boniface VIII. In this bull, Boniface teaches that there is only one Kingdom, the Church, and that the Church controls the *spiritual sword*,

the civil one<sup>5</sup>. Yet another dimension of this contrast is represented by the crusades as the prototype of the wars which opposed the Christian and Muslim armies during the centuries<sup>6</sup>. But perhaps the most discussed topic in this connection was the one concerning the problem of evil in connection to the theodicy (“justice of God”)<sup>7</sup> with its anthropological counterpart in the theory of sacrifice<sup>8</sup>.

The present article aims instead to present one of the most surprising articulations of the Christian love with the violence within the frame of mystical writing of Richard of St. Victor, “On the Four Degrees of Violent Love”<sup>9</sup>. If the “wound of love” and its effects were well known in the spirituality of the first millenary through the enormous quantity of *Commentaries to the Song of Songs*, no one until 1173 described the “violence of love” so carefully within a systematic approach.

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while the *temporal sword* is controlled by the State, although the temporal “sword” is hierarchically lower than the spiritual sword, allowing for Church influence in politics and society at large.

<sup>4</sup> It can be considered the protestant version of the catholic “two versions”: Martin Luther's doctrine of the “two reigns” teaches that God is the ruler of the whole world and that he rules in two ways. Under the opposition of the two kingdoms one discovers the Lutheran theological contrast between “grace” and “law”.

<sup>5</sup> In the same category should be included the controversial defense of tyrannicide on behalf of theologians like Marina and Suarez in XVI-th century (cf. Javier Esquivel, “Assassination and Tyrannicide” in *Crítica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía* Vol. 11, No. 33 (Dec., 1979), pp. 3-17.

<sup>6</sup> A good presentation on how the religious orders understood and preached these wars can be found in MAIER, CHRISTOPH T., *Preaching the crusades: mendicant friars and the cross in the thirteenth century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> While Gottfried Leibniz is universally acclaimed as the first author of one Theodicy (1710), trying to justify the evil and thus the violence in the world, Max Pohlenz approached in the beginning of XX century the specific problem of the “wrath of God” in his study: MAX POHLENZ: *Vom Zorne Gottes. Eine Studie über den Einfluß der griechischen Philosophie auf das alte Christentum*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1909.

<sup>8</sup> René Girard is the modern philosopher who most reflected on the connection between the violence and religious context. See: RENE GIRARD, *De la violence à la divinité. Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque; La violence et le sacré; Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde; Le bouc émissaire*, Paris, Bernard Grasset, D.L. 2007.

<sup>9</sup> *De quatuor gradibus violentae caritatis* (Introduction and Translation by ANDREW B. KRAEBEL), in H. FEISS OSB (Ed.), (2011). *On Love. A Selection of Works of Hugh, Adam, Achard, Richard and Godfrey of St. Victor*, Brepols, pp. 263-298.

## VIOLENT DYNAMICS OF LOVING IN RICHARD'S *FOUR DEGREES OF VIOLENT LOVE*

Belonging to the last generation of Victorians, Richard shared with his predecessors - and notably with Hugh, his teacher and perhaps the most significant member of St. Victor's School – the predilection for “scholasticism”, a theological method which tried to take profit of the scientific and pedagogical requirements of their time.

Thus he examines within a very original treatise the dynamics of loving – the most basic and most forceful of all human drives - understood both as love relationships between human lovers and the love between God and human person. With the Scripture in one hand and the book of "experience" in other, Richard achieves an unexpected transformation of the theological language of love, naming it in terms of the experiential dynamics of interpersonal relations.

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH: WHEN THE SUBJECT OF LOVE DOESN'T MATTER

The starting point of his considerations is the bride's exclamation in the *Song of Songs*: “I am wounded by charity” (Song 2:5), where the love appears as the reason of the wound and thus, the principle of the violence itself. Following the scholastic way of exposition, he approaches this surprising relationship through the different stages encountered by experience:

Behold, I see some wounded, some bound, some languishing, some fainting away, and all from charity. Charity wounds, charity binds, charity languishes and charity brings on a faint (n.4).

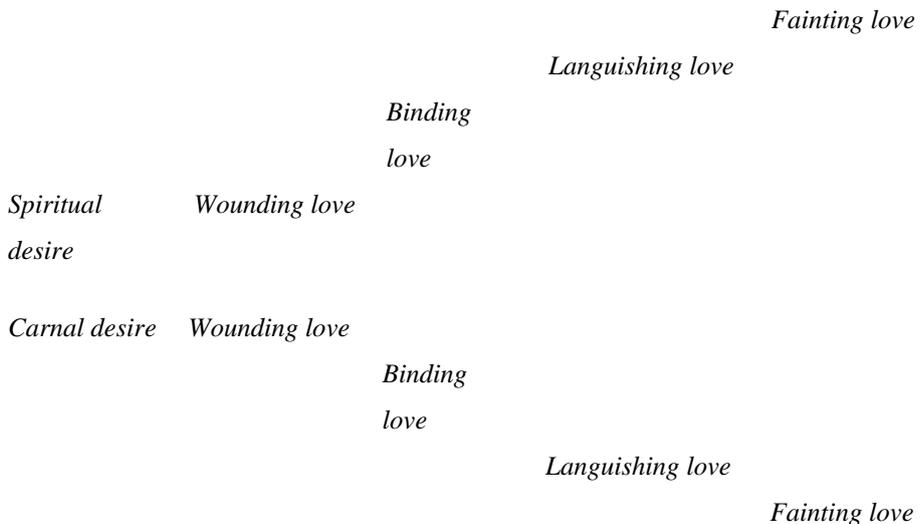
It is striking that in Richard's approach, these four degrees pertain without distinction to all kinds of violent love, both sacred and profane. That's why he insists in the first part of his treatise (nn. 6-17) on the psychological state induced by each of the four levels, without paying attention to whom is love actually oriented. The first touch of this love will be felt as a wound, which pierces the soul and makes it burn with feverish desire for the beloved. Then comes the binding love, capturing the lover within a constant and preoccupation with thoughts of the beloved. The next stage, of the languishing love, is actually a state of tyranny where the experienced love excludes everything else. And the fourth step could be named only improperly the final one, because the love that causes one to faint away or even to die is an ongoing desire unable to be satisfied: "it always finds

something still to desire...It thirsts and drinks, but is drinking doesn't extinguish its thirst" (n. 14). So far was what might be called the Richard's "phenomenological" description of the violent love.

**ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND MYSTICAL APPROACH:  
WHEN THE SUBJECT SHAPES THE LOVE**

It is only by weighting the effects of the sacred and, respectively, profane love that one measures how affects the person to whom they are directed: "In spiritual desires the greater the degree of desire the better; in fleshly desires the greater the worse" (n. 18).

The next label tries to represent schematically Richard's overall view corresponding to his previous statement:



According to this assertion, Richard states that only the first degree – the “wounding” (or “insuperable”) love - is appropriate for the human love, whereas all the others become increasingly destructive. Thus, the binding charity, also called “inseparable”, doesn't allow the lovers to full their responsibilities to other legitimate loves. Even worse appears then the languishing or “singular” love, because it frustrates the lover and so the latter cannot enjoy the beloved as much as he or she would wish. Finally, the experience identifies the fainting or “insatiable” love as being the worst of all, whose negative force threatens and can actually destroy both lover and beloved.

On the contrary, when the same violent love is directed towards God as Divine Lover, the love's logic described above reverses itself

and so brings the human lover to an unexpected result: the higher and more “insane” is the love, the more satisfying and creative it becomes (nn. 21-27). Richard is so convinced by this truth, that not only is content to contrast at each level the carnal love with the spiritual and divine desire in their opposite effects, but he dedicates the final section of his treatise entirely to the description of the latter.

Nonetheless, the shift he realizes in this last part is quite remarkable. Whereas previously the two loves were presented almost drawn in a radical contradiction and incompatibility, now the process of human love – with the steps of betrothal, wedding ceremony, sexual consummation and the children birth - converts itself into an allegory for the progression of the sacred *eros*. In the so-called “betrothal stage”, the human person, whose affections are enflamed by the divine grace, turns away from all kind of earthly desires (nn. 30-33). The second phase, symbolized by the marriage celebration, consists this time in an intellectual illumination that enables the soul to contemplate the divine mysteries (nn. 34-37). The moment of the “sexual union” between the Bride and Groom also has its significance in this allegory, because it evokes that stage where human mind is united with God by “being rapt into the abyss of divine light” (nn. 38-43). While for many non-Christian mystics the moment of ecstasy - with its correspondent in the integration of human within the divine - marks the climax of the spiritual process, Richards extends, along with a large Patristic Tradition, this development with the phase of “childbirth” (nn. 44-46). This emphasis on the new generation shows that the mystical experience - far for being oriented towards a self achievement – hints to the growth and fulfillment of the whole human community.

But a death is necessary in order to achieve the goal proposed above. And this is the moment where Richard shifts the emphasis of this discourse from the “violence” to the “madness” of the love. “Bearing children”, in mystical sense, means for the soul to pass through the ecstasy of mystical death in order to be reborn with Christ, and thus to take part at His saving work of love in the world. And only a mad would agree – the allusions to the first Corinthians and Philippians brief are here obvious - to give up the pleasures of the mystical marriage in favor to the duties of self-denying mother:

Doesn't it seem the height of madness to reject true life, to bring a case against the highest wisdom, to resist omnipotence? Didn't he (Paul) reject life who was willing to be separated from Christ for his brethren? (n. 46).

Two fundamental messages of the Gospel are linked together in Richard's allegation. First of all, the theologian of St. Victor applies to the mystic lover the truth concerning the gratuity of life: no one can gain his life without losing it (Matt. 10:39). For instance, the madness of this love demands to give up even the sublime experience of divine love itself in order to turn back to the ordinary life made of sacrifice and serving other people. But whoever does this walks on the footsteps of the Divine Lover – and this is the law of the discipleship, the second major affirmation in Richard's understanding - who emptied himself to bring his saving charity to humanity.

Thus the "Four degrees of violent Love" are able to formulate briefly their goal, at once divine and yet deep rooted in the ordinary life, both individual and social: God is never sought for our sake alone, but always in order to build up the Church, the "mystical body" of the Divine Lover.

#### CONCLUSION:

#### VIOLENCE NEITHER HAS THE FIRST NOR THE LAST WORD

Several conclusions may be drawn after presenting a treatise with such an unusual topic, the degrees of the violent love:

- a. First of all, and perhaps this is the most important, the violence – as Richard clearly puts it already from the title – *has no consistence in itself, but is an attribute of love*: in other words, violence shouldn't have the first nor the last word in any relation, simply because originally is rooted in charity, for how unbelievable it may appear.
- b. Related with the first conclusion results then the "violence" - as dynamics of loving - is a violence that is suffered and therefore never wished for itself or imposed, neither by the one who loves nor by the beloved. Instead, it is the love itself the one which "wounds", "bounds", makes one to "languish" or causes one to "faint". This mysterious "violent love" introduces itself as if it were an unexpected "third" actor – even if doesn't make number with the protagonists themselves - within the most intimate feelings and relations.
- c. For this reason, according to McGinn, one cannot understand properly this treatise without paying attention to Richard's

most acclaimed writing, *On the Trinity*<sup>10</sup>: “The latter work sets out what we can know of the mystery of the infinite interpersonal love in the Trinity and thus provides the basis for understanding the violent, yet paradoxically also ordered, love with which a finite subject can express and also love it directs the three infinite subjects who are the Trinity”<sup>11</sup>. It is then the same “spirit of charity” who enables all the lovers and the beloved ones, both human and divine.

- d. Although Richard is not explicit on this in his treatise on the “violent love”, we cannot understand his distinction between the corresponding effects of its degrees in the “spiritual desires” and the “fleshly” ones without taking into account the role of Holy Spirit in both. Despite the widespread medieval prejudice among many theologians against human love and sexual desire, we consider that according to this treatise, the dynamic drive of love rooted in the humans express nothing less than their participation in the infinite love of the divine persons. Therefore, the main criterion to distinguish between a “good” violence from a bad “one” is the infinity of charity, to which any limit means a menace to the life itself.
- e. In the fact, far from opposing the love of God to the love of humans, Richard identifies the last and utmost degree of violent love not in the ecstatic union with the divine, but rather in the capacity of “bearing children”, that means in loving and taking care of real people through humble and concrete service until they get also “wounded” by the love of God. The real difference between the two violent loves consists finally not into a difference of persons, but in a difference of “spirits” (understood more in an existential sense than mythological): the enlivening spirit of sharing without limits against the killing spirit of putting egoistical conditions to the charity. Richard’s question of “violent love” cannot be translated into the classic ontological and theological alternative: “to be or not to be” (God or human),

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<sup>10</sup> *De Trinitate*, ed. J. Ribaillier, TPMA 6 (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958); ed. and tr. G. Salet, *La Trinité*, SC 67 (Paris: Cerf, 1959) [On the Trinity, tr. C. Evans, VTT 1:209-382].

<sup>11</sup> B. MCGINN, (2003). *Modes of Contemplation: Richard of St. Victor*, in B. MCGINN and P. MCGINN, *Early Christian mystics: the divine vision of the spiritual masters*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York.,pp. 125-132, p. 127.

but rather in the mystical and yet the incarnated one: “to limit or not to limit” the infinite drive of love planted in us as we are, body and flesh, individuals and yet forming a society.

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