

## A Clay Army: Acid Attacks in Europe

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*Europe of ancient culture, a forge of religious traditions, proud of its Christian roots, the cradle of refined philosophies, presents widespread symptoms of gender-based violence. Here it is reflected on the attacks with the acid mostly on women's faces. These gestures cannot be dismissed as import attacks that are extraneous to Europe in substance. Their alarming increase challenges all branches of knowledge and highlights distrust towards the woman and her way of relating to life outside the home. This contribution reads the issue from the point of view of theologies: are there any points of contact between the two terms of the matter, the acid attacks and theologies? The following reflection runs through this question.*

**Keywords:** acid, gender violence, identity, religions, social redemption, vitriol.

### Introduction

In 2012, the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for having fostered the transformation of Europe from a continent of war into a continent of peace. Without wanting to diminish the value of this recognition and its motivations, we cannot deny the persistence of conflicts, exasperated forms of dissatisfaction ready to explode, nostalgic references to an ancient world made up of provinces if not of fiefs, of nationalist sentiments, of old and new borders, of screen fears. Some of these wars are fought in the public eye on a battlefield never went out of the body of women. Faced with the resurgence of aggression with acid, the brutal synthesis of atavistic and at the same time subtle evil that expresses, neither ideologies nor politics nor religions can declare themselves extraneous. This form of ancient terror and unprecedented trauma for each victim represents an expression of negative cultural contamination. It is also the proof of how even symbolic weapons can be exported and assimilated, at the very moment when one tries to cancel the different from oneself. The dimensions of the phenomenon in Europe are such that classifying episodes as cases of private and extemporaneous violence would be reductive. This in-depth analysis also questions the incisiveness that these exercise on religions, on the religious vision of life, on the perspective of religious subjects. In fact, the link between the two terms can be established not only with regard to the final outcome of violence condensed in aggression but also in the way in which the role of women is considered alongside that of man in their own organizations. Faced with the cultural emergencies of present-day Europe, religions do not seem to share their resources nor take due account of how one can work to prevent trauma that often results in violence on women's faces. This particular gender violence remains a sign of the times it calls for.

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## As Clay Pots

In recent years in Europe, acid attacks have increased by 120%, between 2012 and 2016 in London there were 1,500 cases, recording an increase of 250% between 2015 and 2016 (Cavestri 2017, Le Point 2017), even the United States is immune (Jarocki 2010). We may feel that brutality unites more than faiths.

When the acid does not kill, it alters the features, dissolving the parts of the body with which it comes into contact, hindering expressiveness and movement. The attacks, voluntary and premeditated, aim to affect not only the person, his identity but also the sphere of his relations. Identity and sociability are compromised. A criminal hand has reached out to the injured person, stealing his or her form, completely remixing it, even making it impossible to recognize himself or herself in the mirror.

In the Bible, we read: *Says the Lord. Indeed, like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand* (Jr. 18:6).

Some Quranic verses say: *We created man from an extract of clay. And also: I am creating a human being from clay. When I have formed him, and breathed into him of My spirit, fall prostrate before him* (Qur. 23:12).

Those who attack with acid assert dominance, arrogance, are cloaked in the omnipotence of depriving form, which refers to harmony, to life as a finalized project. In the creationist vision of many religions God creates, offering a form, which he himself appreciates and exalts for his attractiveness:

*God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good* (Gn. 1:31).

As an unlawful antithesis to the creation, a shameful aggression like the *vitriolage* (the term *vitriol* commonly refers to sulfuric acid. *Vitriolage* is the French word that expresses the use of vitriol to attack) is therefore qualifiable as *dis-creation*, that is, as the *disintegration* of divine creation. It manifests the total contempt for a fundamental and transversal theological message in the religions. In addition to the personal tragedy of every person affected, besides the social significance, this type of violence (so well and sadly engulfed by rich and educated Europe) also directly calls into question religions and their impact with the wider dimension of cultures.

As harmony predisposes to openness, the brutality produced by violence arouses disgust, fear, sometimes shame, embarrassment, all feelings that make every contact more difficult. The same scarcity of studies (Lewis 2017) on the victims, especially on their psychological trauma, despite the consistency of the phenomenon, could be a proof of this. In a society morbidly paid to the plurality and speed of contacts, the low-cost violence of acid conquers the prison of isolation for the victim. It is commonly thought that this type of attack is imported from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India (Avon Global Center 2011), where it is a widespread phenomenon, studied, equipped with specific tactics. Indeed we know how this kind of attacks has spread in Europe since the nineteenth century (Dasgupta 2008), if not a few centuries earlier (Welsh

2009). As a variant of leprosy, aggression easily scores a real stigma for the victim. On closer inspection, it is cruelly well combined with western societies, following different paths.

### **The Sensitive Nerve of Emancipation**

A sinister and illicit claim lurks in the aggressor's purpose with acid, the arrogance of exclusivism. The evil that claims to avenge is the emancipation, preferably of the woman (Lewis 2017, BBC 2017a, 2017b). The relationship shall be classified by the frame of possession, of the intolerance of real or presumed rivals. In some cases, also registered in Europe, the acid has been thrown against male subjects considered dangerous rivals in career advancement or in possession of a property. In substance, these are cases matured in the emotional or working environment, behind this weapon hides the desire for uniqueness. That refers, once again, to the fundamental idolatry of replacing the One of the monotheistic religions. The monstrous flooding of the ego advances absolutist demands and ignores any form of positive relativism, of the agreement, of discrepancy with respect to egocentric and paranoid logic.

Attack with acid is an extreme manifestation of supposed control of the other, of idolatrous revenge, because it alters connotations that manifest the work of God, in the creationist reading of many faiths. Their incisiveness and numerical growth do not exempt from a cultural analysis of a context that at least does not sufficiently feed a different reaction to frustration. The religious code considerably nourishes the social fabric, penetrates the formation processes: what kind of relapse has these circumstances? Theologies contribute to defining the high value of individual physiognomy as an expression of creation, exalting the person in itself from an aesthetic point of view.

On the other hand, it is appropriate to focus on the difficult relationship of religions with gender equality. In some areas of the world, including Europe, equality is accompanied by equal opportunities, the possibility of universal access to the functions of the modern world, progressively distancing each pre-comprehension of established roles. But that does not always find continuity in the specifics theologies, in the interpretation of sacred texts and traditions. Many religious confessions mark clear boundaries between the tasks assigned to man and those assigned to women. Many confessions admit only men to the ministry. In many cases, the distinction is poured into ritual, both as regards the type of practice and sometimes as regards the reserved places in the temples. These are gestures and rites handed down through the centuries. The communities of faith often consider them untouchable, bearers of values in themselves, not subject to historization, the result of dynamics far removed from the object of this study.

Yet, with a view to that part of the world wishing to decline equality in the sense of total practicability of the boundaries associated with tradition to man and woman, making a threshold to a genus accessible and denying it to others

is perceived as a discrimination. And to the part of the world that does not digest this kind of modernity, postmodernism and their outcomes, those traditional prohibitions, selected at least formally according to gender, may seem a justification of a natural order. According to that interpretation one gender predominates over the other that must accept it. Even starting from simple considerations such as these, one can see how religions enter in every case into social and cultural dynamics, which sometimes also produce extreme phenomena.

Moral codes continue to propose models, largely inspired by religious teaching: they propose universal ideals, which are valid for everyone, men and women. By going into the specifics of the behavior, do they also promote the same expectations? Do they derive the same seriousness from any infractions? Or do they apply the criteria also on the basis of gender distinctions? Although a religion may not be practiced, its teaching has been handed down through family pedagogy, of the community of faith, of part of society, and it is known and represents a point of reference.

Another meaningful and cross-cutting topic is female sexuality and the way it is also represented in the media. The debates on the full veil, and in some cases, the ratification of specific laws, flash here and there political environments and TV talk shows. The continuous overexposure of the female body in the banalest circumstances should not be underestimated. To claim a total exclusiveness on the image of the woman or to consider normal the reduction of her body to a sexual object are not they two sides of the same coin? Without boiling in either a positive or negative sense, neither one can ask why one does not observe analogous phenomena, with the same frequency, concerning men.

Nowadays, in globalized societies, where there are many small worlds, each with its own baggage of morals, traditions, and convictions, it is more than ever difficult to find shared principles. In many European countries information campaigns have been undertaken and legal initiatives have been taken against practices such as child marriage, infibulation, honor killing, forced marriage: they are seen as a violation of fundamental rights. Indeed the attack with the acid causes multiple rights at once. Deepening these issues in a synoptic way, looking at the same time as cultures and religions declined in the plural also fosters awareness that some consolidated imbalances do not place their roots outside, but in the heart of Europe. That calls different agencies to the urgency of find common paths for the welfare of companies as well as individuals. In the woman seem to emerge ancient and new boundaries able to tragically sculpt a hierarchy of roles. That does not find rational or theological justification, but which reveals certain anthropologies and traditions still reluctant to be overcome.

And the theological reflections? Do they assist women in emancipating from the cultural diving suits that others try to make them wear?

## The Face of God and the Theologies

In the Judeo-Christian Bible, hundreds of recurrences contain the *face*. With the exception of the incarnate God Jesus, approaching God's face is a contradiction in terms. No image could fully represent him. Yet the relationship with God, the presence of the believer in front of him, the need to sense his presence, is often condensed in the notion of *face*:

*When you said, "Seek My face",  
My heart said to you, "Your face, Lord, I will seek".  
Do not hide Your face from me (Ps. 27:8-9).*

A desire is projected onto the face of God, and that has the flavor of the relationship, of immortality, of finality. The idea of the face suggests contact, the possibility of interacting. The absolute sacredness of the face of God is such that it does not let itself be looked upon as any other face. Indeed, to Moses who wishes to scrutinize the appearance, the Lord says:

*You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live (Ex. 33:20).*

Jewish theology highlights the complexity of the theme, in which the revelation connected to the face is accompanied by its concealment. For the believers that remains a motive for research and finds no synthesis in the figurative representation.

Within each religion and among religions, a large part of the theological debate is dedicated to the lawfulness or otherwise of the representation of the divine. The outcomes are different, ranging from the image, which incorporates rituality and is interpreted as a divine presence, to the total prohibition of iconoclasm. It is a sign of how complex the subject is and how interconnected it is to holiness, which is offered, but which, at the same time, remains inaccessible because God expresses it in totality.

Christianity itself, which indicates in Jesus Christ the *image of the invisible God* (Col. 1:15), does not reduce the difficulties, but keeps them all intact within, covering a variety, ranging from refined iconology to the total prohibition of becoming an image. Beauty in Christian art is expressed happily in the human figure, with particular reference to the features of the face.

In contrast, the Islam universe places the decoration and the art of writing, calligraphy, in an exceptional position. The foundation of the absolute uniqueness of God is most easily reflected in the abstraction of geometries, in the momentum of minarets and towers. Each geometric figure is a sequence and an intelligent combination of points and each point refers to God, who is everywhere. More than realistic representation, Islamic figurative art stimulates the association of ideas, the leap, as well as bridging the gap between human and divine, that is other than human beings:

*... wherever you might turn, there is the face of Allah ... (Qur. 2:115)*

From the human perspective, the face of God is the purpose of every movement and of every gaze of man, who in every situation seeks God and needs him. The form is a derivative, it is the prerogative of the creatures and the work of the Factor:

*... your Lord, the most Generous ... He Who created you, and formed you, and proportioned you ... in whatever shape He willed, He assembled you.... (Qur. 82:6-8)*

The image is a direct expression of God's creation, therefore God is appointed to forge a form, some features. In the Quran, the image is the result of God's action. And, in return, the form is a sign of the divine spirit.

The religious background earlier than Islam gave ample space and value to images as an instrument of relationship with the divine. Islam, presenting itself with a break in continuity, empties the image of the value of the religious medium, which the pre-Islamic Arabia, on the contrary, recognized. As a result, Islamic places of worship are inaccessible to icons and statues, considered as distraction and danger of idolatrous substitution. This elaboration developed in the Sunna leads to the particular condemnation of the painters on the day of the Resurrection when they will be challenged to make alive what they have created (Bukhari 7557).

Giving a shape analogous to the animated one, looking human being or animal, can be understood as trying to create, substitute for God, being idolaters and facilitators of idolatry. It is not equivalent to underestimating the image, but to recognize the unique value of God's work, due to him alone.

In articulating his relationship with God in a known language, the human being preaches the face of God and the sacred text welcomes this desire and takes up its formulation:

*Everyone upon the earth will perish, and there will remain the Face of your Lord... (Qur. 55:26-27; 28:88)*

A symbolic or effective place in the eternal dimension, it remains the reason and stimulus of the healthy tension of the believer towards God. It is despicable and out of place to take the absence of the vision as a pretext for one's own infidelity (Qur. 25:21). The text, instead, supports the intimate and deep desire of the vision of the face to promote submission to his will.

*... you do not spend except seeking the face of Allah ... (Qur. 2:272)*

The believer follows an approach movement to God that is reflected in his daily actions, which, in turn, are so invested with the value of the right faith.

## The Sacredness of the Human Face and the Theologies

The face of God brings with it the finality of the movement and the gaze of the creature. By extension in Islam the human face is characterized from the fact that he moves towards God:

*We have certainly seen the turning of your face, toward the heaven, and We will surely turn you to a qiblah (the arabic word qibla means direction) with which you will be pleased. So turn your face toward al-Masjid al-haram. And wherever you [believers] are, turn your faces toward it (Qur. 2:144).*

The Islamic concept of the face is dynamic and imbued with a human-divine relationship. The face of God is the aim of the search for the human being, the subject who researches. The orientation movement is typical of Islamic prayer, it belongs to the design of the mosques and to the arrangement of the bodies. But in the end, it is the bearer of an all-encompassing meaning. And, once again, the face in the culminating act of canonical prayer prostrates itself to touch the earth, when it turns obediently to God and searches his face. The face combines the person and fully expresses its ability to interact with otherness, to tend towards the divine otherness. However, this is something else, so that the face is hidden, matching with the earth while invoking God. Furthermore, the face multiplies its expressiveness by counting on a series of veritable holes, eyes, mouth, and ears. The Quran itself indicates in the eyes the reflection of the intimate feel (Qur. 25:74, 40:19, 10:26). God also arrogates the cancellation of the face. That can be interpreted as a condition that makes it impossible to follow the way of God, typical of a moment from which those who have not converted before can no longer do so:

*O you who were given the Scripture, believe in what We have sent down ... before We obliterate faces and turn them toward their backs ... (Qur. 4:47)*

The dramatic metaphor reaffirms the identification between being alive and having a face. Obliterating it by overturning means losing the fundamental ontological prerogative, that is the orientation towards God, for Islam, the path in its direction.

Buddhism has reflected a lot on the form in general, especially in relation to its transience. The representation of the Buddha, that is of the awakened one, encompasses many symbolisms more attentive to the transmission of relevant contents than to the disclosure of an image for itself. For this reason, it is all the more interesting that we reflect on the search for the primordial face or the original face, a typical expression of Japanese zen and the issue of traditional *koans* (*Koan* is a term that Japanese Zen Buddhism has taken from the Chinese. Litterally and originally it indicated the *public notice*. In Zen spiritual life it is equivalent to statements and stories proposed by the master to the disciple to meditate). When we meet the profound nature of the self, we finally come to contemplate the original face.

Catholicism has always given ample space and value to the representation

of the face of Jesus Christ, often called holy. Son's face is at once a painful, glorious, transfigured face. The fully expressive face of the Son is experienced as a mirror in which every creature can find himself or herself until he or she plunges into a mystic correspondence. The theological pillar of incarnation generated a dense anthropology inspired by the theology of the true God and true man. The face of Christ in Orthodox iconology is more hieratic, but no less honored. This is why in every creature, in every animated face, the Christian recognizes Christ, an expansion of the Jewish theology of creation in divine image and likeness.

### **The Disfigured Face**

The contribution of theologies on the theme of the face converges on considering it a particular expression of creation. This the prerogative of God in theistic and creationist visions, and in any case a representation of origin and authenticity. The criminal action, which disfigures the face purposely, or ignores or supplants the consequence of theologies, achieves an idolatrous behavior in its deepest substance. Similar behaviors mostly affect female identity, as if God did not exist. They act as if there were no other plan of reality that is not the abnormal and unbalanced ego of those who commit the crime: this is a challenge to religions.

Criminology has long investigated the aggressor's face, physiognomy (the most direct reference is obviously to Cesare Lombroso, 1835-1909) has been applied to forensic criminology. What is the face of the attacked person? It is no longer possible to recognize it after the acid attack. It is a life in a state of suspension, with the killing of previous expressions, which composed the rich array of the non-verbal language of the face. Often, at first sight, only the reaction of repulsion can remain. It is as if a mechanism of retribution arises for which the rejected individual becomes an aggressor and condemns the other to be rejected for life because of his non-face.

Acid is a cheap weapon and offers the cruel revenge to leave alive with terrible and permanent damage. It must be assumed that many aggressors prefer acid because of its cheap price, remaining much more indifferent to all its implications. This kind of aggression contains a sort of contempt, for which the victim is not considered worthy even to die. The aggressor prefers to condemn her to a life sentence, a life stolen from a non-neurological but aesthetic and emotional Alzheimer's, with the aggravating circumstance of a painfully intact memory and sometimes irreparable damage to sight or other faculties. The moral sense of the aggressor is completely silenced, or, more or less consciously, *breached*, erasing every kind of limit, self-limitation, inhibition. Every type of regulatory, moral conditioning is in fact irrelevant. At the moment of aggression, the only imperative is dictated by the aggressor's desire to do evil.

The aesthetic of the revenge dominates the scene in the impotence of the theological substance of any provenance. This does not mean that theologies

must ignore the situation. The face is a sensitive place of theology, connoted by the sacredness, emblem of creation in itself. The divine can take many faces, leaving the authentic face unknown or invisible, too holy to be distinguished as a common face. The breakthrough of morality is due to the substitution of the divine with the ego of the aggressor, to a desensitization of the creatural sentiment, which makes recognize a creature in the other that one pretends to disfigure. Education for the recognition of the divine and his work in creation, the refinement of the sense of beauty, are tools available to theologies to counteract the eating-face counterculture. The current situation should encourage theologies to nurture anthropology to promote respect for the divine and morality in the other person.

### **Moving on from the Clay**

The believing perspective deals with evil does not allow itself to be won by it. In the many faces of the divine, also the one disfigured by evil appears. The loose face loses its original features, is disoriented from perceiving itself as clay without form and model.

*Svetaketu asked: "What is that instruction, venerable Sir?" "Just as, my dear, by one clod of clay all that is made of clay is known, the modification being only a name, arising from speech, while the truth is that all is clay; "Just as, my dear, by one nugget of gold all that is made of gold is known, the modification being only a name, arising from speech, while the truth is that all is gold; "And just as, my dear, by one pair of nail-scissors all that is made of iron is known, the modification being only a name, arising from speech, while the truth is that all is iron—even so, my dear, is that instruction." (Chāndogya VI, 1, 4-6).*

Theologies in the face of the victims are a substance of rebirth that relativizes the form and projects towards a new design, full of difficulties, pain, new things to be faced. All that is known, with a loose face, similar to clay, is not given, but always conquered. The title *clay army* wants to allude to the number of people, whose shape has suffered a remodeling, as if it were made of clay. But it also refers to their exceptional strength, comparable to that of an army fighting for their own dignity for their rebirth. The stories of acid attacks in Europe deliver pages of extraordinary courage to history, capable of even giving light to our times often dark and fragile. Theologies are called to meet each other around the slits of scars, on the theme of the beauty of clay. That is not modeled, but it is able to emerge in the new force that is often the merit of women and their energy. The current state of affairs recalls the urgency of linking the faiths to the experience, of taking responsibility for the spirituality of the human being. Many theologies recognize him or her as the work of God. Body and its spirituality, the sacredness of the other and of his or her will need greater theological attention. Along with the thread of fragility, combining theologies in the plural, is more than ever necessary. If the divine is recognizable in the faces of clay, everyone can identify a little and reach a

more profound form of his or her spirituality as a common and mutual antidote to violence.

## Conclusion

The spate of acid attacks in Europe clashes strongly with the idea of civilization and progress, that is something the continent relate to. The phenomenon is often connected to the desire for emancipation of women from the family context, drawing a typical expression of gender violence, though men are not totally spared. The two factors are mixed, indicating an underlying difficulty in conceiving the feminine and the masculine in well organized societies for equal opportunities and much centered on individual freedom. This paper has set itself the aim of exploring the issue in the light of the theme of beauty and face in religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), that developed a more comprehensive discussion and are deeply rooted in the European context. From the point of view of theologies the face is an emblem of the relationship; it is the privileged door that connects the heart of each person with the outside world. In addition, the work is creative privileged manifestation of God. Clear it, as is the effect of the acid, is from the theological point of view not only a form of murder of the person affected, but also a serious idolatry, since it presumes the facts to erase what God has done. The acid attacks therefore also reflect a proof of the weak social relapse of religions with regard to their deepest core. On the other hand we must recognize that the victims of the attacks originate important evidences of redemption, identity reconstruction around a renewed concept of beauty. That is able to rise from the ashes of the violence, even feeding on spirituality. This also invite you to see the true source of beauty interiority, in its spirituality and especially in its ability to scroll through the continuous flow of creation.

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