Violence against LGBT+ communities in Uganda[1]

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Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a rise in legislated homophobia across Africa. In 2013 the Pew Research Centre reported that an overwhelmingly large proportion of people in Africa disapproved of homosexuality. The Pew Research Centre poll found that 98% of people surveyed in Nigeria, 90% of people surveyed in Kenya, and 96% of those surveyed in Uganda, Senegal and Ghana disapproved of homosexuality (Baker 2015: 28). The past six years have seen an increase of anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) sentiment in Uganda. The rise of homophobia has been linked to religious groups. Religious leaders in Uganda have launched a campaign, supported by politicians, to rid Uganda of homosexuals (Baker 2015: 28).

Between October and December 2010, two prominent popular magazines in Uganda (*Rolling Stone* and *Red Pepper*) published lists divulging the identities of prominent homosexuals in Uganda, and calling on readers to kill homosexuals. Headlines such as "Hang them; they are after our kids" (*Rolling Stone*, Oct 2010) enticed members of society into acts of violence against LGBT+ communities. This led to increased harassment of, and assault on, members of LGBT+ communities in Uganda between 2010 and 2014. In 2009, 12 cases of assault of LGBT+ individuals were reported in Uganda, but by 2014 the number of reported cases had risen to 300 in Kampala alone (Baker 2015: 28). Public shaming of LGBT+ individuals included social discrimination, physical assault, verbal abuse, threats, eviction from homes, work dismissals and even being disowned by families.

The new violent forms of discrimination are motivated by religion. Since 2009 conservative church leaders in Uganda have expressed concern about the "increasing influence of liberal Western values" on Uganda. In 2009, church

1 The complete article was published as follows: Beyers, J., 2016, Insights on violence from Hans Achterhuis applied to the violence on LGBT communities in Uganda, *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 29(1).

leaders invited evangelical preachers from the US to speak at a seminar in Kampala entitled "Exposing the homosexuals' agenda" (Baker 2015: 30). The evangelical pastors were drawn from conservative Christian ministries considered hostile to homosexuality. Their campaign focused on exposing and combating alleged gay efforts to break down the traditional family and destroy civilisation (Baker 2015: 30). US preachers claimed that there was a gay conspiracy to take over the world. Local communities were encouraged to prevent gays from introducing their value system of "sexual promiscuity" and inculcating a new generation with foreign values, and posing a threat to children, traditional marriage, and society at large. These messages were widely accepted by Ugandans already afraid of losing their cultural identity to modernisation and globalisation (Baker 2015: 30) and having to accommodate European Christians' apparent acceptance of homosexuality (Baker 2015: 31).

Six weeks after the US pastors left Uganda, the Ugandan finance minister introduced a parliamentary bill which sought to impose the death penalty on gay people. Colonial laws still in force in Uganda, already banned homosexual sex (Baker 2015: 31). The proposed bill was debated over several years and finally approved and promulgated in 2013. Criticism regarding the passing of the legislation referred to it as a form of political opportunism. Politicians deliberately sided with the majority against a misunderstood minority,[2] to gain political support in the 2016 elections (Baker 2015: 31).

In February 2014 President Museveni of Uganda signed the Anti-Homosexuality Act into law, enabling courts to sentence gay people to life in prison. The motivation for promulgating the discriminatory legislation was explained by President Museveni as being that homosexuality was clearly an example of the West's "social imperialism" (Baker 2015: 31). However, in August 2014 a Ugandan court overturned the Act on the basis that a quorum had not been present the day that the bill was passed in Parliament. Many observers saw this as a form of reparation, as the contentious Act had attracted international disapproval, expressed via cancelled economic contracts and sanctions imposed on Uganda (Baker 2015: 28). In November 2014, the Minister of Ethics

2 In addition to Uganda, homosexuality is outlawed in the following African countries: Algeria, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Mauritania, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Somaliland, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This is due to both religious beliefs and anti-Western sentiment.

and Integrity submitted a revised version of the bill, entitled the Prohibition of Promotion of Unnatural Sexual Practices Act, making it a criminal offence to publish any form of "propaganda" supporting LGBT+ communities in Uganda (Baker 2015: 31).

On 5 May 2021, Takambou reported on the news site of DW.com regarding responses in Uganda to the newly promulgated law. With effect from May 2021 same-sex relationships were prohibited, which reminded many members of the LGBT+ community of the similar bill of 2013. The 2021 law did, however, have a broader application as it also sought to address the issue of sexual violence. The law proscribing "unnatural offences" created anxiety, as it was understood to refer to homosexuality as "contrary to the order of nature" and, therefore, as illegal. Many churches and church leaders supported this legislation as they felt that homosexuality should be banned.

There is an increasing number of popular narratives that link homosexuality to violence, particularly violence directed at young people. Much of the resistance to transgender or gender-neutral bathrooms is that people might use this space to commit "criminal acts".

The discriminatory and oppressive legislation in Uganda is influenced by a fundamentalist reading of the Bible. By arguing that homosexuality is against the natural order, advocates of legislation criminalising homosexuality superimpose their interpretation of biblical understanding of sexuality on an African context in the most uncritical way. What exacerbates the situation is that it fuels an increase in violence directed at homosexuals. This suggests not only discrimination in terms of limiting the freedom of expression of homosexuals, but also legitimisation of violence against them.

Religions should act as lightning rods to prevent discrimination that culminates in violence.

When Joas and Knöbl (2009) discuss occurrences of violence and conflict within society, they emphasise the theory of Lewis Coser, who draws attention to the positive effects of conflict. Conflict in society is a sign of a stable community (Joas et al. 2009: 177). A community has an opportunity to release tension via conflict. This corresponds to Burkert's suggestion of violence as relief of anxiety (Segal 2008: 31). When conflict is suppressed, tension increases. A healthy society is permitted to vent anger or "clear the air" (Joas 2009: 177). Furthermore, conflict may lead to opportunities to learn and change existing social norms and institutions (Joas 2009: 177). If conflict is not permitted, societies cannot gain

insight from others and they cannot learn and adjust to new situations.

Conflict here should be understood to refer to confrontation that does not lead to violence, but resolves tension through debate and discussion. However, violent conflict cannot be justified.

This perspective provides material for reflection when applied to LGBT+ communities in Uganda. Will conflict truly bring about (positive) change? Will those "venting their anger" truly gain new insight and adjust to a new environment, in which LGBT+ communities are tolerated? Or will the opposite apply: will LGBT+ communities understand their "wrongful" deviation from traditional ways and return to the norms set by society? Of course occurrences of violence can never be accepted, but if they restore equilibrium to a community[3], there might be some meaning to the violence. Both parties (anti LGBT+ and the LGBT+ communities) should be able to express their discomfort. In a tolerant community, people feel free to express their opinions without fear of being shut down or oppressed.

A type of "lightning rod" that may help defuse such forms of violence would be the creation of discussion forums in society. Such forums might present opportunities for learning and venting anger. Learning about the other is just as important as learning about oneself (Achterhuis 2010: 23). In a discussion forum one is not only confronted by the other, but also confronted by one's own convictions. In discussion with others, one has to be critical with oneself. Stephan (2009: 55) suggests, as a countermeasure, how to deal with immanent threats in order to engage in dialogue. Forums supporting dialogue between opposing parties create opportunities to learn from oneself and the other, as well as to vent anger. Churches and religious communities may serve as agents creating safe spaces where healthy debate about these matters can take place on the basis of equality.

By creating opportunities to discuss sensitive issues, a stable community is created. This might not prevent violence but it could defuse aggression, alleviate anxiety, and create reciprocal understanding. The situation in Uganda proves the point: brewing violence directed at LGBT+ communities in Uganda was the result of bringing the issue of homosexuality into the public domain and compelling

3 This is what Achterhuis identified as goal-orientated violence: violence in order to achieve a bigger goal.

society to think about it. A Ugandan lawyer who defends many LGBT+ individuals formulates this clearly: "When something is in the public domain, it is no longer a taboo" (Baker 2015: 32).

Conclusion

Violence in society should not come as a surprise to anyone. Just as lightning is an extraordinary, natural phenomenon to be expected from time to time, so violence seems to be an extraordinary but natural phenomenon that should be anticipated. However, humanity can never be complacent about violent discrimination; hence, the description of violence as extraordinary. In this article an attempt was made to view the occurrence of violence from different perspectives. The recent violent discrimination against LGBT+ communities in Uganda served as a case study.

What is evident is that violent discrimination should always be contextualised. Violence manifests differently in an African context than in a European or Asian context. Understanding and explaining violence needs to take the local context into account. Magic and dynamism for example, still function to some extend in an African context and influence how violence is perceived. Violence does not have one or two just causes and just as few solutions. Violence is a complex matter. Philosophical perspectives identified by Achterhuis (2010) provide some perspective for general and universal truths about violence: goal-oriented violence, struggles for recognition, the polarity of us versus. them, mimetic desire, tension between morality and politics, and barbaric human nature. Being able to explain the phenomenon of violent discrimination does not provide a solution to it.

The solution to violent discrimination seems to involve being pro-active. By installing "lightning rods", growing aggression and anger can be vented in responsible ways to prevent uncontrolled outbursts of violence. Open and unbiased dialogue seems to be one such lightning rod. The effectiveness of dialogue does, however, still need to be proven. There should never be a feeling of helplessness that prevents humanity from seeking ways to stem violence. The suggestion Achterhuis makes in this regard encapsulates the appropriate human attitude to violence: it is better to spend energy preventing violence than spending energy understanding it (Achterhuis 2010: 53).

Universities can lead society in this regard rather than mirroring society. If universities generate widespread discussion and debate regarding sexualities and diversity, tolerance and acceptance, then they contribute to graduates being "ready for work" in the sense that they have the skills to be leaders in their places of work, to challenge intolerance, to debate religious ideas and to provide safe places for discussion in their professional and private lives.

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Why do you see my ethnicity, gender and class, instead of my need?

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Imagine going to a place where your intonation, language and style of dress speak louder than your being. The famous story of the Syrophoenician woman found in Mark 7:24-30, reveals discriminatory tendencies seen in the overlap of attitudes to gender, sex and ethnicity. One's first question is: how does the practice of discrimination play out in this story? To discriminate is to create a social discourse through which bodies are accepted or removed, accommodated or rejected, and loved or hated. Back then and even today, this process is played out through the cultural beliefs and practices, which provide the ideological husk that enables certain privileges and practices to be maintained. What makes the story of the Syrophoenician woman more interesting is that it involves Jesus in the role of the discriminator. In examining this story, it is interesting to tease out cultural and ethnic discriminatory practices and the liberating strands underlying this story.

Seeing the woman from afar, one imagines that Jesus ruminated on two important questions: why is she alone and where is she going? Like most ancient patriarchies, the Jews understood that the private space belonged to women while the public space belonged to men. One of the reasons given for such conception of space was the belief that it "protected" women. Protected women from whom? The idea that public space belonged to men while private space belonged to women derived from a cultural practice that regarded women as weak and defenseless. Implicitly, anything regarded as weak has less social value. Such cultural beliefs that regard women as the "weaker sex" who require men's collective protection survive even today. Gender-based violence in South Africa and across the globe is sustained by the devilish belief that women are weak and their bodies available for men's exploitation. One can imagine that as the Syrophoenician woman walked towards the house where Jesus was, she endured the male gaze and the cultural stigma associated with her body being in the public space.

After entering the house and observing cultural practices of greeting, she proceeded with her noble request concerning her daughter's health. "Sir, I heard

that you are a famous folk healer and I kindly request that you heal my daughter who is lying sick at home", she pleaded. In many social settings, a woman's request ends up as a barter with a man's request for sexual favours. However, in this case the woman's body as a sex object is not part of the narrative. Instead, what becomes a thorny issue is her ethnicity – she is Greek. Besides skin morphology, ethnicity is mediated through language, intonation, name and clothing, which become visible identity markers and the basis for discrimination against certain people.

For example, within the academic setting, one's intonation, style of dress and name may be the bias determining whether or not one is hired. In a similar way to racism, ethnicity conceals a cruel practice wherein a particular group is privileged as the inner circle based on subjective categories, while other groups are excluded. Another example is the extended debate about language policy at most South African universities. While overtly the debate is about the preservation of certain languages as a medium of instruction, the discussion actually relates to racial realities in South Africa, in terms of which Afrikaans is predominately spoken by white students, while English is used mostly by black students. Ideologically, those who benefit from strong identity markers based on language, intonation, or clothing fight to keep cultural markers intact.

An important lesson to be drawn from the Syrophoenician woman's story is that ethnicity can be used as the basis for others being given or denied resources, and being accepted or rejected. In this case, the woman requested Jesus, the famous folk healer, to restore the health of her child. Jesus' rejection of her request was most unfortunate. In the story, ethnicity is used as a discursive and subjective reason for denying life and wellbeing. Ethnic categories create the divide of us-versus-them. This goes as far as labelling outsiders in pejorative terms. Because outsiders are different to insiders, they are viewed as enemies or labeled in denigrating ways such as evil, dirty, or less human. Such social categorisation has been practised for a long time; when unrestrained, it can be the justification for outbreaks of ethnic violence. In the case of the Syrophoenician woman, on the basis of her ethnicity she is denied equal treatment.

Comparable practices can be seen in our health-care system, in which income is the factor that determines access to health care. Even when close to dying, private hospitals will not treat a sick person without visible income, and hence be altruistic. The unfortunate part is that owing to historical factors, most of the sick people who do not obtain access to medical aid are black and from an

under-privileged background. Thus in South Africa, in the context of health-care, the issue of income conceals several overlapping discriminatory factors: race, ethnicity and class.

However, rather than ending on a tragic note, the Syrophoenician woman's story concludes in a prophetic liberating fashion. After having been discriminated against on the basis of her gender and ethnicity, the woman claims an identity based on common being. She refutes Jesus' negative labels, asking "Why do you see my ethnicity, gender and class, instead of my need?" It is her prophetic protest that reverses the engrained negative labels. Discriminatory labels will not fall away until we identify their discursive pejorative origins and uproot them. For the most part, we are conditioned to see people based on race, culture and gender, and to overlook their needs. Consequently, instead of asking what we can do to help, our treatment of people is based solely on our understanding of their identity. The prophetic and liberating message of this story is that cultural bias should not cloud our judgement and thereby cause us to miss the Great Commission.