

LIGHT FROM BEHIND THE BAR

True stories of terror, agony, and hope

PAULUS S. WIDJAJA

Direktur Program Pascasarjana (S2) Ilmu Teologi dan Dosen
pada Fakultas Theologia Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana, Yogyakarta

Abstract: This writing is not an article in its ordinary sense nor is it a book review. It is rather a reflection on a book entitled “Light From Behind The Bar” (Middlegreen, United Kingdom: St. Paul Publications, 1990). The book is a compilation of letters from members of the Red Brigades and other Italian terrorists to Father Carmelo Di Giovanni, an Italian priest from the Apostolic Catholic Society of the Pallotine. Some of these terrorists wrote the letters after they were released from prison, and some others wrote while they were still inside, spending 15 or 30 years of imprisonment, even life sentence. Here we can see that terrorism starts from a noble desire to pursue justice. But when the anger meets naïveté and arrogance it turns bad indeed. Only a spiritual encounter with God’s forgiveness, embodied by the church, can bring these youth back home to the right path.

Key Words: Red Brigades, Injustice, Terrorism, Forgiveness, Church

Abstrak: Tulisan ini merupakan sebuah refleksi atas buku berjudul “Light From Behind The Bar” yang diterbitkan oleh St. Paul Publications, Middlegreen, United Kingdom, 1990. Buku ini sendiri berisi koleksi surat-surat dari para anggota Brigade Merah dan para mantan teroris Italia lainnya kepada Romo Carmelo Di Giovanni, seorang imam Italia dari the Apostolic Catholic Society of the Pallotine Fathers, yang mengumpulkan dan mempublikasikan surat-surat tersebut dalam bentuk buku. Sebagian dari para teroris ini menulis surat-surat itu ketika mereka sudah dibebaskan dari penjara,

dan sebagian lagi menuliskannya ketika mereka masih di penjara di mana mereka harus mendekam selama 15 atau 30 tahun, bahkan untuk seumur hidup.

Dalam refleksi ini kita bisa melihat bahwa terorisme seringkali berawal dari kemarahan sekelompok anak muda atas ketidak-adilan yang terjadi dalam masyarakat. Kemarahan ini menjadi buruk ketika bertemu dengan arogansi bahwa mereka merasa bisa menyelesaikan semua persoalan yang ada. Hanya tindakan spiritual dengan pengampunan Allah, persekutuan dengan gereja, dengan mengembalikan anak muda ini ke jalan yang benar.

Kata-kata Kunci: Brigade Merah, ketidak-adilan, teror-isme, pengampunan, gereja

Introduction

Ever since the 9/11 attack on the then one of the most prestigious symbols of American way of life, “terrorism” has become a terrifying and yet most discussed word in the whole globe. For some people, terrorism is understood as an act of heroism by which a group of people try to make their point in what they believe as the pursuit of justice through extreme acts. But for some others, terrorism is understood as no less than criminal act that justifies any means to achieve the desired goals. Whether terrorism is praised or cursed, all agree that terrorism is illegal movement by a group of people that uses violence as primary means to spread fear and to impose their will to others. Therefore it is important to reflect on the process by which a person, even a good and pious one, turns into a cold-blooded terrorist. This is a reflection around the questions: How can ordinary persons become terrorists? What are the factors that influence or bring these men and women into terrorism? These questions are important because it is by answering them that we can try “to attempt to glance into the souls and minds of people who too often and too hastily have been labeled as monsters” (p. 16). This does not mean that we justify the evil that has driven the so called “terrorists” to do what they do, but it is important that we understand the dynamic of such a drive.

This effort, however, is not enough. Such reflection only brings us to better understand the process by which a person turns into terrorist without realizing that even a monster can change and not invariably by means of

plastic surgery. Hence it is also important to reflect on the process that has brought some of these terrorists into repentance and dissociation from the movement they used to associate with. This is a reflection on the turning point that has transformed them and an attempt to answer questions such as: How can they do that? What kind of power has changed and transformed them? What is the transformation process they go through? By answering these questions we can be aware that they,

“. . . are human beings who have changed, who have won back the right to be considered human beings, because the change they have suffered has been achieved by their own unambiguous recognition of their guilt and of the mistakes they have made” (h. 17).

The Beginning

To start the reflection, it is worth noting the fact that all the terrorists who give testimony in the book tell about a similar leitmotiv that has led them to become terrorists, namely, their desire for a more just society. It all began with anger sparked by injustices they saw in society. The wide gap between rich and poor, the unceasing repression from an authoritarian regime, the huge corruption evident in public officers, the hypocrisy found in society, and many other forms of injustice had ignited the anger in their hearts that gradually brought these people onto the path of terrorism. Whether they are men or women, left wing or right wing, it is the same anger toward injustices that has become the main leitmotiv and reason underlining the process of becoming terrorists.

Sante Fatone, a left wing terrorist who was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment in 1981 because of the murder of Torregiani, explains the anger that has become his motive to join terrorist acts, “I was made very angry by all the hypocrisy which I experienced too, in Milan itself, outside of my neighborhood I wanted to change things” (h. 82). Another terrorist, Massimiliano Bravi, who was arrested because of his involvement in the killing of an Air Force General Licio Giorgieri in 1987, expresses similar anger, “I looked around me, and my anger at my wasted youth ignited the spark” (h. 47). Still another terrorist, Bruno Laronga, who was one of the founders of the Prima Linea terrorist group and who was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1983, says, “The main emphasis of our action was either the desire to do justice or else they were directed at the promotion of proletarian combat” (h. 109). These examples show that these people began to get involved in terrorism because of their anger

against injustices that they saw in the everyday life of their society. What Domenico Magnetta has said is very true, “As long as this system stays the way it is, full of hypocrisy, injustice . . . there will always be people who will do these tragic deeds” (h. 117).

The anger against injustices in society, however, is not the only leitmotiv. Such anger might not be dangerous were it not coupled with arrogance. The feeling of anger against injustices in society might make a person very distressed but it would not automatically turn him/her into a terrorist. Many people, while having the same anger, feel the problem is just beyond their ability to overcome or should be overcome nonviolently. They do feel angry because of the injustices, but at the same time they also feel impotent to change those injustices and therefore keep their anger within their hearts, or they do something to change the situation but in nonviolent way. Such anger, however, becomes very dangerous when it is coupled with arrogance. It makes an angry person feel that s/he has the ability to change things by any means. One begins to believe that s/he can transform the world without looking first at her/himself and without giving attention to other values and other visions. With this disillusionment, one begins to see one’s own self as the centre of the universe, playing the role of messiah who brings redemption to the unjust world. The anger, coupled with arrogance, then turns a compassionate person into a cruel terrorist.

Viero Di Matteo, one of the terrorists who gives testimony in the book, tells about such arrogance,

“We scrutinized all the injustices . . . inveighed against them in every possible way and with all the ardor of our excitability youthful imaginations. The thing that amazed us wasn’t just having discovered what and where the ‘rot’ was, but knowing ‘how’ to resolve all the ills of this world” (h. 60).

Furthermore he says,

“All those illusions, that will for power, the huge arrogance of thinking I understood the truth about the world, led me to enter the ranks of the armed struggle, i.e. of terrorism They were the unjust, we were the avengers” (h. 61).

Another terrorist, Livio Lai, says, “Maybe that’s exactly how conflicts between men are born: the will to impose oneself in order to survive, the selfishness of life, the fear of looking too hard at oneself” (h. 98). And he admits that, “Everyone made the same basic error; the arrogance of believing you were the only ones to have chosen the right path and that this legitimized all your actions” (h. 103).

From the testimonies above we can see how dangerous a combination of anger against injustices in society and arrogance is, since it has all the elements to bring people into terrorism. That combination, in turn, makes these people get blinded by their ideology. They have reduced the whole question of what they want from life into political and ideological theorizing; believing that they know all the truths in the world and they know all the answers to the world's problems. It is therefore true what Livio Lai has said that, "an ideology is the product and not the basis of intolerant thinking" (h. 106). Any kind of terrorist ideology has resulted from the arrogance of people who are not satisfied with the conditions of society, and not the other way around. But how does the combination of anger against injustices in society and arrogance connect in the first place? What is the primary factor that makes it happen?

It is worth noting that all the terrorists who give testimonies in the book not only have a similar leitmotiv that has brought them into terrorism, but they also go through the same process. They all get involved in terrorism through a process that is gradual, very natural and almost automatic, due to their naiveté. They are not aware that they are involved in a very dangerous movement. All of them start their journey to terrorism at a very young age. It is precisely because of their young age that they are incapable of thinking critically about the orders they receive, and they therefore act without deep reflection. To some extent we may call these young people victims. The victims of young imagination and uncritical solidarity, even manipulation and indoctrination imposed on them by the abusive adults.

Massimiliano Bravi, for example, tells that his involvement in terrorism started with his involvement in political assemblies and collectives during his school years. Events which he admits in his testimony as then-valuable ones. He says:

"It all gave me an identity and a political awareness that carried me onwards by a natural, almost automatic process, to the point where I found myself involved in an illegal revolutionary movement" (h. 47).

Livio Lai, in the same manner, tells about how a strong sense of friendship among the members of the terrorist group led him to deeply engage in terrorism. He says, "My first approach was fundamentally human: a profound relationship of friendship won me over, a sense of togetherness I'd never known before" (h. 99). Another terrorist, Angelo Izzo, makes a decision to get involved in terrorism despite of his lack of

interest in politics. He says, “It was an almost casual decision because I wasn’t really interested in ideology or politics, although I did think I could resolve my existential problems with violence” (h. 95). For Paolo Bianchi, a fierce right-wing terrorist who was accused for 160 terrorist actions conducted by his group, it was an exploitation by a trusted-adult which brought him into terrorism. He says, “I had been exploited by society, by my school, and especially by a teacher from the youth club in Tivoli who first got me enter the tunnel of the terrorist adventure” (h. 38).

All of those testimonies clearly show how naive these people were; a naiveté which had made them fragile and easily trapped into the rhetoric way of terrorist thinking. A sense of self identity and solidarity found among a certain group, which a person in her/his young age is naturally looking for, easily attracts them into agreement with the political way of thinking of that group. A sentimental sense of togetherness within the group easily turns into blind loyalty and commitment to the terrorist ways. Even a person with no interest in ideology or politics can be transformed into a leader of a terrorist group. Here we see how the naiveté of young people has become a watershed which drags them into terrorism. A simple and sentimental human sense has become the watershed for a strong loyalty and commitment to the terrorist way of life. It seems odd but it is a fact.

Thus we can see there are several aspects that serve as the foundation for the beginning process of one’s involvement in terrorism. First, there is anger against injustices in society. Then there is arrogance. Added with the naiveté of the young people, this three-fold combination has become the natural good soil for terrorism. It only needs violence to change this combination into a brutal and cold-blooded terrorism. And that is exactly what happens to the people who give testimonies in the book.

These people believe that their aims can be achieved only through violence. It is the means that they believe are the only way to change the injustices in the world. They use violence to build their power for the purpose of changing the world. Silveria Russo, a woman terrorist who was arrested in 1980 because of various brutal actions including homicide, kidnapping, and assault, gives testimony about her terrorist group in which she says,

“There was the movement, the search for a better kind of life . . . and making more and more radical decisions until we reached the conclusion that nothing could be changed without recourse to arms . . . an exercise of violence beyond every human limit” (h. 130).

Angelo Izzo says that the terrorist group that exercises violent conduct has become “a closed and paranoid unit which thought it was ‘at war’ with the world”, an attitude that has gradually brought the group “into a spiral of ever increasing violence” (h. 95). Not only is the violence the only means to achieve justice in the world, it is even more tragic and ironic because that violence dehumanizes people, both the victims and the terrorists themselves. In their own words, terrorism is

“a perverse game which destroyed innocent lives because they’d been reduced to the level of symbols, and crushed our own existences because we’d reduced ourselves to the level of fighting machines” (h. 130).

The Turning Point

When we look at the process of how terrorists come to be, it is difficult to imagine, let alone to believe, that there are terrorists who repent and change their lives. Angelo Izzo, when telling about his struggle to stop his violent ways says, “I decided to tear off this tight-fitting suit, the ‘hard man’s’ suit, the suit of violence, it was very difficult, because . . . it was, after all, a comfortable suit” (h. 96). But they do. Therefore it is important to reflect not only on how an ordinary person can turn into a terrorist, but also on how a terrorist can transform her/himself into a new human being. What kind of power creates the turning-point? What are the fundamental thoughts in that transformation? And how do these ex-terrorists, after their repentance, perceive the reality of the world which they used to fight against? These are the crucial questions that we need to explore.

To begin with, Christ’s forgiveness has apparently become the central theme for these terrorists. They feel that Christ’s forgiveness has empowered them to reconcile themselves with God and the world they used to hate, and is the beginning of the path that leads them into faith. It is in this framework that these terrorists realize their mistakes and find new meaning for their lives. In Paolo Bianchi’s words, “Forgiveness of God can give a meaning, though not of course a justification, to one’s actions” (h. 37). It is also the same empowering forgiveness that gives them hope for a new life amidst their despair. Fulvia Miglietta, formally part of the famous terrorist group the Red Brigades, cannot hide her thankfulness to God whose empowering forgiveness has saved her. She says that she thanks God because He took her “by the hand at a time of profound despair, a time when suicide seemed the most natural course”. Further on she says, “my joy is renewed every time I think about how He has saved me and how

tenacious and persevering he has been in His immense love” (h. 120). It is understood that Christ’s forgiveness for these people has the power to change their viewpoint. It has helped them to see other people for what they are, without judging them.

The crucial message in the process of transformation of these terrorists is that Christ, through His love and empowering forgiveness, slowly and with much suffering alters the hearts of humans, even of terrorists. This belief has brought faith and hope to these terrorists. There is soon a strong confidence that “no wrong is completely irreparable and that out of the disgust they feel for their past comes a desire to seek a kind of equilibrium and to do something good” (h. 155). Mario Ferrandi, who, at the time of the publishing of the book, was still in the trial process because of the political crimes and several murders he committed, says, “Faith is my only salvation. At times it seems as if I am about to lose it, I am on the verge of despair, and suddenly a light appears” (h. 90). Massimiliano Bravi admits that,

“The only means of salvation we have is Faith and Hope . . . It gives us faith in ourselves and in our capacity to become better people, and faith that we can reach this goal, and the commitment to follow it to the end, and the conviction of our own strength” (h. 52).

Based on their faith and hope, they believe that there is a power from Christ that has enabled them to change their lives and there is a chance for them to live a new life and be reborn despite everything that society thinks about them. There is, after all, the sense of being reconciled with the world and themselves which sounds impossible at first.

Christ’s forgiveness has become the foundation for these terrorists to come to faith and hope. That, in turn, has enabled them to think about the possibility of changing their lives albeit the misery which they have created. What is next? Is the external power and grace from God enough to change these people? It seems not so because forgiveness, faith, and hope from God are meaningless unless these people respond to it in a proper way. Here comes the next step in the turning point, that is, remembering. The terrorists cannot forget things that they have done. It is simply impossible because terrorism not only destroys the families of the victims but the families of the terrorists too. Domenico Magnetta says that the evil of terrorism cannot be forgotten because “the results, the bereavement and the pain, were and are still visible to everybody today, in us who committed the crimes and in the people who suffered from them” (h. 117).

It is important for these terrorists to remember. It is by remembering that they are enabled to reevaluate their lives. It is by remembering that they are able to go into the path of self criticism, a painful process which has enabled Viero Di Matteo to confess, "I mistook evil for good, the spirit of this world for a spirit of love and true brotherhood and it's still hard for me to try and understand how it could all have happened" (h. 65). He continues his confession by saying, "I thought I could fight against injustice, but now I discover that I'm terribly unjust, and that makes accepting myself very difficult, even more difficult than loving others" (h. 67).

Through this self-criticism these terrorists realized the mistakes they made and understood that one's neighbor is not always the devil one imagines. Through this process they began to ask themselves about the right they thought they had in suppressing the life of another human being. It is a very painful process indeed. Nobody in the world likes to remember bad things, yet it is ultimately a fruitful and helpful experience because through this painful process one understands the suffering of others. Livio Lai admits that through self-criticism he became fully aware that "one cannot do anything to remedy the pain caused, and the pain suffered, to reconstruct the shattered lives of those I considered enemies and others whom I held dear" (h. 105). Paolo Bianchi says, "Through suffering . . . I asked myself who I was, trying to understand how to position my past violence. I saw that there was no position for it, that I didn't occupy a position" (h. 39). It is also through this suffering that they came to the conclusion that an apology for their mistakes to the survivors and the families of their victims is just not enough. Viero Di Matteo has very profound words related to this matter,

"How inadequate and insubstantial this word 'mistake' is for expressing the real, the terribly real enormity of what has happened! On one side, real blood (and lots of it!) and on the other, a noun!" (h. 72).

The turning point, however, does not end with self-criticism. Having realized that Christ loves them and has forgiven them and gives them faith and hope, albeit the terrible sins they have committed, and having realized the mistakes they have done in the past, they now realize that the most important thing is to live an everyday life, work, and take care of their children. These are the real heroic tasks. They have understood that violence does not cure evil but if anything aggravates it. If terrorism starts with anger toward injustices in society, coupled with arrogance by which the terrorists think they know all truths and have all the answers, repentance brings awareness and humility to acknowledge human limitation; the awareness

that there will never be a right system in the world no matter how hard we are working for it. Therefore, the most important task for human beings is to search for a concrete solution to a concrete problem. Silveria Russo says that, “The search for social solidarity . . . is one which still fascinates me, but I want it to be a comprehensible, day-to-day responsibility” (h. 133).

The awareness of human limitation has in turn brought another dimension to the transformation of these people, that is, respect of others’ visions and views. They no longer claim that they are the only persons on the right path, nor that they have all the answers. They now realize that human problems can be solved only if humans work together. Livio Lai proposes that human beings are “considering new hypotheses of dialogue and debate, of the understanding and openness needed to achieve collective and individual growth and maturity” (h. 106). Sante Fatone is even more optimistic. He says,

“I think contradictions in society have to be answered with dialogue, up to the point of exhaustion if necessary, and this is true even for the smallest little daily problems, only in this way can people grow and try to be helpful to others” (h. 82).

Earlier he says that it is time “to start thinking more about people for what they are, and try and understand that we all need each other, without ‘big political schemes’ or violence It would be great if we all understood each other a little better, perhaps the world wouldn’t be so screwed up” (h. 78).

To close this section, it is important to give attention to what Mario Ferrandi has said about the new path he now lives in, “My life is hard but it has a meaning, a light to lead me on. I’ll never turn back on this path, God’s path, and just thinking about it makes me forget the difficulties and gives me the energy to keep going” (h. 90). This is the expression which represents the conviction of all the ex-terrorists in the book. They realize that they used to live as the evil ones, but they have been changed. Their concern at present is how to start all over again the journey that has been interrupted; the journey to become human once again.

The Church

The transformation of the terrorist can happen because there is God’s sovereign grace by means of forgiveness, faith and hope on one hand, and, on the other hand, human’s positive response by means of self criticism. This combination of God’s action and human response has

changed these terrorists to become new human beings. There is, however, another significant element that has helped the process of transformation, namely, the role of Christian community. Carmelo Di Giovanni gives testimony about the church by saying that,

“The Church is a reality which becomes flesh in the lives of Christians. Christ founded his Church so that it could become a sacrament of salvation in the world and a light for those who have lost their way, for sinners, for people whose lives have lost their meaning” (h. 23).

Paolo Bianchi says that “outside the Church of Jesus Christ there is only darkness and death” (h. 37).

The credit given to the church by these terrorists shows how the church has become a positive instrument in God’s hand to give comfort and encouragement to these terrorists. This is very important because very few people want to get acquainted with a terrorist or ex-terrorist. These people, albeit their repentance, are too often treated badly by society, as if they are a disease that must be avoided by the community. Hence encouragement and compassion shown by the Christian community to these people have helped them in their process of transformation. It can provide a good environment within which these people are accepted and respected, albeit their past evil deeds. Paulo Bianchi gave testimony about how a compassionate Christian helped him to find Christ, “I found Christ gradually when I began to attend the neo-catechumenal community where my wife was already a member, encouraged by the example of a friend who came to collect me and take me to the meetings” (h. 40). The same encouragement was also found by Arrigo Cavallina, a left-wing terrorist who was sentenced to 23 years of imprisonment in 1985, “I have received marvelous encouragement . . . from the witness given by a Christian whose kindness has been directed simply and affectionately towards me, and not because of anything I might represent” (h. 156).

Not only does Christian community give these terrorists comfort and encouragement, it also changes the lives of these people. Piero Falivene says, “It is a community which fills me up and gives me something new every single day” (h. 76). Paolo Bianchi also notes how the church has helped him not only to find Christ but also to use Christ’s example as the standard for his life. In his testimony he says,

“The biggest discovery for me after my joining the Community was the figure of Christ, the Christ who died for me. My relationship with my brothers

and sisters and with the world is now filtered through Christ. With Christ, I am no longer afraid, I feel calm and view my past as my way of reaching him” (h. 41).

Earlier he admits how meaningful the church is in helping his transformation, “Without the Church I might have become worse than I was before But through the Church I found the forgiveness of God which has given back a meaning to my life” (h. 37). In more profound words, Viero Di Matteo cites Zevini:

“Faith cannot be experienced individualistically. It develops and matures within the Christian community. It is within the communal experience that the vocation of the individual comes to light, and there too that the preconditions for fully discovering oneself and one’s personal aims in life are satisfied” (h. 63).

Conclusion

In this reflection we have seen that terrorism often starts from the outrage of a group of young people caused by the injustices they see in society. The anger turns bad when it is coupled with arrogance by which these young ones feel they can solve all the problems in society. Added by youth naïveté, the combination of the three factors, namely, anger, arrogance, and naïveté, becomes deadly indeed. But these so-called terrorists can also change. Their reflection on God’s forgiveness in Christ has helped them to find faith and hope once again. When they respond to the grace of God in Christ with self-criticism, the path to repentance is widely open. Finally, the Church is also instrumental in this turning point. These so-called terrorists see the Church as a community that plays vital role in their repentance, because they find the Church as the only party who is willing to embrace and respect them, and it is within the Church that they know Christ.