Karma and Redemption: A Religious Approach to Family Violence

JAMES L. COX

ABSTRACT: Violence within the family is becoming so widespread that its treatment cannot be left to specialists alone, but increasingly will be faced by the helping professions generally. The Hindu concept of Karma and the Christian theory of redemption together provide a religious understanding for those who seek to help both the perpetrators and victims of family violence. Karma holds the truth that actions bear consequences, whereas redemption suggests that the evil consequences can be altered for good. The result is a new Karmic law which provides a fundamental starting point for family abuse counseling.

Violence within the family has become a growing concern within our society, partly owing to the increased awareness of its prevalence and the acknowledgment that intervention is necessary. Violence is usually defined in terms of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and drawn on a continuum from the less severe to the most severe forms. Private and public agencies have begun to focus on this problem through community education, victim assistance, treatment intervention, and political action.

Since efforts to create public awareness around the issue of family violence have gained momentum, the reporting of abuse has increased. Statistics now show, for example, that one out of three girls and one out of six boys in the United States will experience some form of sexual abuse before they reach eighteen.¹ Many experts believe these are conservative estimates.

As reporting statistics demonstrate the widespread occurrence of violence in the family, crisis and long-term intervention no longer is limited to those agencies specializing in abuse issues. Counselors, social workers, ministers, health care professionals, teachers, psychologists, in short, all members of

¹ James L. Cox is the South West Regional Training Officer for Scripture Union in Bristol, England. Formerly, he was Assistant Professor of Religion at Alaska Pacific University in Anchorage. Prior to taking up his post with Scripture Union, he worked in Anchorage as Adult Education Specialist for two agencies dealing with sexual abuse and domestic violence. This paper formed the basis for his presentation at an Alaskan conference on violence in the family held in Anchorage in October 1985.
the helping professions, increasingly will be dealing with these problems. Because this is true, I am convinced that a philosophical-religious starting point is necessary for those treating both the victims and the perpetrators of violence. I find such a starting point through a comparison between the Hindu concept of Karma and the Christian idea of redemption.

The idea of Karma

Within Hindu Society, Karma fits into an overall view explaining the meaning of life and the goal of existence. Karma means simply that deeds yield appropriate consequences with the emphasis on appropriate. In a just universe, everything a person does receives a deserved consequence whether for good or evil deeds performed. Thus, if a person does good deeds, a fair system rewards that person with good experiences in life. Conversely, if a person does evil deeds, the same system of justice punishes the offender appropriately. Karma constructs a strictly judicial view of the universe.

Clearly, people do not experience the world in this way. Many people suffer innocently. The suffering of children exemplifies this vividly. Moreover, many people who perform obviously evil actions do not suffer in life, but instead seem to go through life with ease and comfort. In this world, Karma apparently does not work.

Higher Hinduism, therefore, created the further concept of the transmigration of souls or, as it is commonly called, reincarnation. Souls are born and reborn so that in future lives pain and pleasure can be attributed precisely to preceding actions, whether those actions have been performed in this life or previous ones. In the larger picture of the universe, therefore, a system of justice actually operates eliminating both innocent suffering and undeserved reward.

The theory of Karma was created to allow people in the midst of pervasive suffering to affirm goodness and justice in the universe. It explains why the innocent suffer and how among widespread disease and death people still can maintain hope. Theologically, it enables people to vindicate charges against God that the divine power not only is insensitive to human suffering, but has devised a cruel system of injustice which literally sanctions innocent suffering.

Moreover, Karma affirms the universal truth that actions result in consequences, that causes produce effects. Individuals do bear responsibility for their actions. Karma refuses to allow people to blame others for their problems or to try to avoid appropriate punishments for what they have done.

Earlier in this century, the Hindu philosopher, S. Subrahmanyi Sastri, defended the Hindu concept of Karma against criticism from Christian missionaries. Writing in the Madras Christian College Magazine, Sastri described Karma as the critical belief in Hinduism uniting the transcendent religious