

3

Gospel Nonviolence



“The crucifixion is what highlights the victimary mechanism and explains history.”

René Girard: Battling to the End, 196

As the Girardian scholar Wolfgang Palaver attests: “The uncovering of the scapegoat mechanism in the Gospels necessitates the repudiation of all sacrificial theologies on which this mechanism is based. According to Girard, the Gospels contain no comparative reference of Jesus’ death on the cross to any form of sacrifice.

On the contrary, he argues that Jesus fully accepts the words of the prophet Hosea, who claimed that God preferred ‘mercy over sacrifice’ (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 12:7). This renunciation of sacrificial theology - which any violent divinity ultimately requires - emanates from the image of the New Testament God. In the sermons about the Kingdom of God and above all in the Sermon on the Mount -

which Girard considers as central to the New Testament texts - Jesus rejects all forms of interpersonal violence. The challenge to love one’s enemy found in Matthew 5: 43-45 is based on the desire of a God to whom revenge is entirely foreign, one who “makes the sun rise of the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

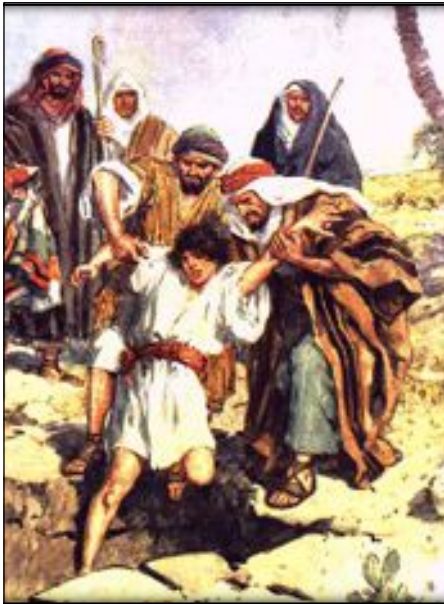
According to Girard, even the apocalyptic tests in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 24: 1-25, 46; Mark 13; Luke 17: 22-37; 21:5-33) have nothing to do with a violent God. The violence expressed in these texts, he argues, is brought about by the humans themselves who refuse the message of the Kingdom of God.”

Biblical reversal of myth

“When you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; I will not accept the animals you have fattened to bring me as offerings.
Stop your noisy songs; I do not want to listen to your harps.
Instead, let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.”
(Amos 5:22-24)

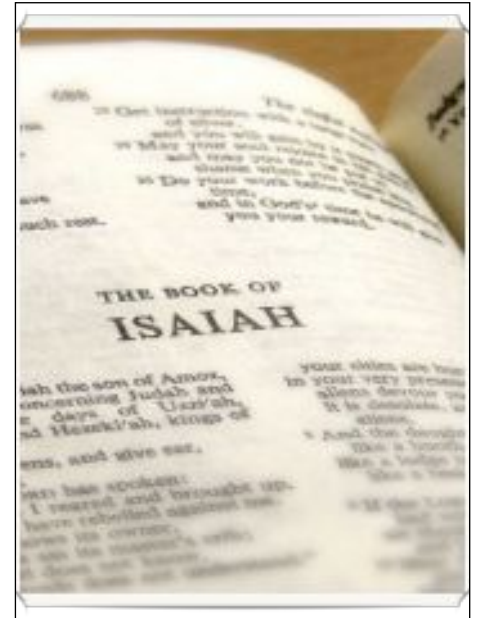
It was during his study of myth in the writings of antique cultures that Girard eventually discovered in the Hebrew scriptures the voices of the prophets decrying the sacrificial mechanism and supporting the innocence of the victim.

God is shown as often taking the part of the victim in the Book of Job, and Isaiah. Many psalms show God as being on the victim's side. In the Jewish scriptures, Girard detected the beginning of a movement towards realising the innocence of the victim.



The bible shows Joseph as the innocent victim of his brothers, of Pharaoh, of Potiphar's wife.
(Genesis 31-50)

There is no attempt in the narrative to cover their crime or exonerate them.



The Gospel reveals the innocence of the scapegoat

In the Gospels Girard detected the complete reversal of the scapegoat mechanism.

Ancient cultural myths had woven narratives which disguised scapegoating. The great myths depict victims as guilty and their persecutors as fine, upstanding members of the community. But the Gospels present the total opposite.

The Gospel narrative tells the truth - Jesus was innocent and it was the political and religious leaders, and the crowd, who were the guilty ones. In his death, God becomes the victim, sacrificed to the insatiable appetite for violence of the real "angry god" - we human beings.

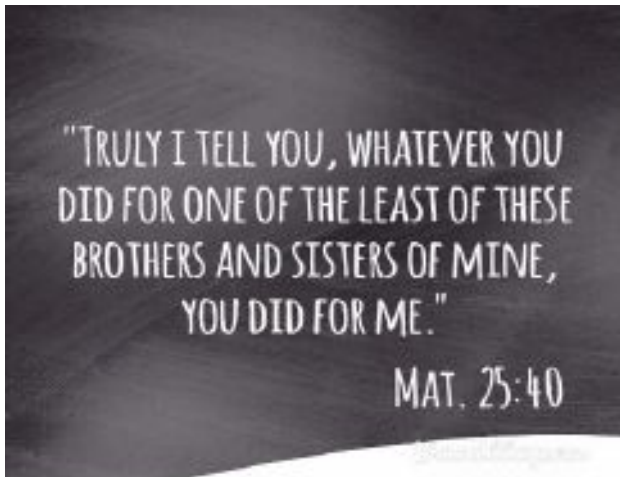
As a result of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can now recognise that scapegoating is a lie. This is the new consciousness which continues to quietly infiltrate humanity.

Scapegoating is understood throughout the world, but particularly in societies influenced by the Gospel. The perception of the innocence of the victim is a result of the Gospel. Through the Gospel humanity has begun to understand the innocence of the victim. The scapegoating process has not totally gone, but when we do scapegoat, it is far less likely that we are unconscious of it.

Understanding the innocence of the scapegoat is not just an intellectual exercise in seeing something which humanity could not see before.

This new insight presents us with the responsibility of siding with the victims, as Jesus did. And in fact, that is what is happening in our world, despite the violence and horror we see around us.

Jesus and Scapegoats



Jesus identified with all the scapegoats of the system, to the extent of claiming that what was done to them was done to him. He identified himself with all the victims of his society, and met the same fate as many of them.



The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-8) How likely would it have been in that society for a shepherd to leave 99 sheep to rescue one?



The Adulterous Woman (John 8)

A classic scapegoating event. The one who “casts the first stone” at a scapegoat makes it easier for the second stone to be thrown, then the third, and so on.

Jesus undermines the whole scapegoating mechanism by challenging those present not to throw the first stone.

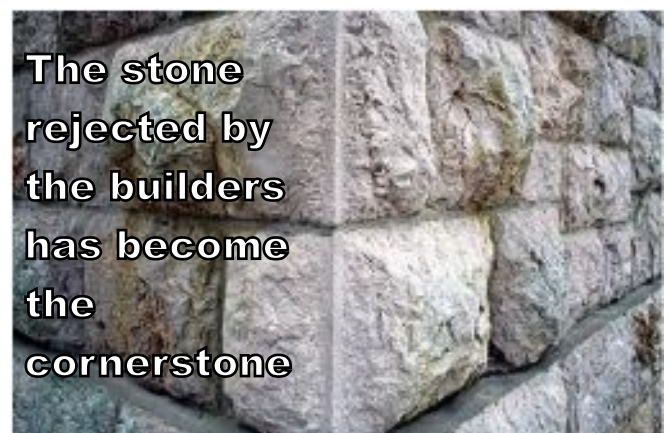
His challenge has become proverbial. It is the quintessential nonviolent act.

The multiple biblical references to the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone indicates the ongoing revelation of the reversal of the age-old view of the scapegoat.

Myth conceals. Gospel reveals.

In myths, the victims are to blame and the communities are always innocent.

In biblical texts, the victims are innocent and collective violence is to blame.



Psalm 118:22; Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17; Act 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7

The Gospel's profound and unyielding championing of the poor, the oppressed, the victim, is a total subversion of the age-old belief that all we need to do to quell our violence is to violently attack another.

Despite its own terrible history of backsliding, Christianity has gradually brought to the world this new consciousness of where our violence comes from, and demonstrates the complete dependability of Jesus' teachings regarding human relationships. We can more readily see that those with power are able to displace their fears, cover their inadequacies, and evade responsibility by blaming others. We can now see that the weak, the vulnerable, the ones who "lack a champion" are not responsible for the crises which afflict their persecutors.

Even though it is still attempted, scapegoating no longer has the power it once had, because of humanity's new comprehension of it.

The Jews were not responsible for the collapse of Germany after World War I, and we can readily see that they were made scapegoats. The millions of refugees worldwide are not responsible for the wars inflicted on them by numerous nations in both the East and the West, and yet they are the ones suffering.

We can feel powerless in the face of the blaming of the innocent, but the fact remains that we are not unconscious of it: we can see it. The extraordinary nature of this new consciousness mostly eludes us.

The situation has many challenges. The Cross is the revelation of the innocence of the scapegoat. Acceptance of this revelation is an enormous leap in human consciousness.

But as a result of its unveiling, scapegoating does not work as it once did. We don't have that tried and true method of bringing peace any more. The result? More and more violence, like the drug addict who needs a greater dose to attain the original high.

It is a great paradox: the Gospel revelation of the genesis of violence opens up the possibility of more violence, if we so choose.

Girard's conclusion is stark: if we do not imitate Christ or Christ-like models, we will continue to fall back into scapegoating and its constant shadow: violence.

"Our society is the most preoccupied with victims of any that ever was.
Even if it is insincere, a big show,
the phenomenon has no precedent.

Examine ancient sources, inquire everywhere,
dig up the corners of the planet,
and you will not find anything anywhere
that even remotely resembles
our modern concern for victims.

The China of the Mandarins,
the Japan of the samurai, the Hindus,
the pre-Columbian societies,
Athens, republican or imperial Rome –
none of these were worried in the least little bit
about victims,
whom they sacrificed without number to their gods,
to the honour of the homeland,
to the ambition of conquerors, small or great."

René Girard, "Things Hidden" p.429



The shoes of Auschwitz



Further reading, viewing, listening

Audio:

Canadian Broadcasting Corp: The Scapegoat
[Paul Kennedy - 5 episodes of 1 hour each.](#)

Video:

[Peter Robinson interviewing Girard 2009](#) 36 minutes

Text:

René Girard: ["Are the Gospels Mythical?"](#) 1996.
René Girard: ["Scapegoat"](#) from *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, Ch 12.

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