

# The End of Scapegoating

B Y S . M A R K H E I M

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Violence is lodged at the center of the Christian gospel, in the crucifixion of Jesus. Does this mean that violence is likewise intrinsic to that gospel, accepted as a necessary part of the path of salvation or at best sublimated as a symbolic spiritual image of forgiveness and reconciliation? In some Christian theologies, a focus on a “heavenly,” transactional meaning of the cross is reinforced by an inability to see any earthly revelatory value in Jesus’ death. Jesus’ insistence on walking the path to Calvary seems unconnected with the specific dynamics of his brutal execution. By contrast, modern critiques of Christian atonement theology, inside or outside the Church, focus overwhelmingly on its role in inciting or condoning violence in worldly interpersonal and intrapersonal realms. They object that the core pattern of the gospel encourages Christian anti-Semitism (by endorsing the deicide charge), nurtures passivity in the face of oppression (by exhorting victims to accept their lot as Jesus did), exalts a religious masochism (by suggesting the highest reaches of spiritual attainment require pain), and deforms our understanding of God (by making God a cruel model demanding innocent blood for restitution).<sup>1</sup>

René Girard’s work dramatically reshapes this picture, emphasizing the relevance of the cross precisely at the points most at issue.<sup>2</sup> He argues there is already an intrinsic anthropological significance to Jesus’ death that is given in the passion narratives’ empirical account of its occurrence. These accounts also contain an explicit counter-sacrificial theology built on that descriptive ground. According to the first, the cross is scapegoating sacri-

fice, and the revelation is that it is known as such. According to the second, the cross is God's identification with the victims of such violence, and resurrection is an overturning of its legitimacy, a definitive severing of the sacred from sacred violence. Girard audaciously challenges those in the humanistic sciences to reconsider the cross as a source of empirical insight.<sup>3</sup> He challenges theologians to embrace the descriptive unity of Jesus' death with numberless others.<sup>4</sup>

This is the crucial reference point for the wider meanings theologians may rightly find in the passion. In other words, the reconciliation of God with humanity is of one piece with God's costly engagement to rescue us from our entanglement in violence and self-deception. From this perspective, the many criticisms of atonement theology have things exactly reversed. The care for victims that funds these critiques is effectively grounded in the cross and its visible victim, however theology may have lost track of the connection. The cross can only be understood in light of a prototypical pattern of violence in human culture: scapegoating sacrifice. And the biblical tradition and the passion accounts are themselves momentous steps in bringing that pattern to light.

#### **HOW THE PATTERN OF SCAPEGOATING BEGINS**

In brief, the story of scapegoating sacrifice is this. Particularly in its infancy, social life is a fragile shoot, fatally subject to plagues of rivalry and vengeance. In the absence of law or government, escalating cycles of retaliation are the original social disease. Without finding a way to treat it, human society can hardly begin. The means to break this vicious cycle appear as if miraculously. At some point, when feud threatens to dissolve a community, spontaneous and irrational mob violence erupts against some distinctive person or minority in the group. They are accused of the worst crimes the group can imagine, crimes that by their very enormity might have caused the terrible plight the community now experiences. They are lynched.

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The sad good in this bad thing is that it actually works. In the train of the murder, communities find that this sudden war of all against one has delivered them from the war of each against all. The sacrifice of one person as a scapegoat discharges the pending acts of retribution. It "clears the air."

The sudden peace confirms the desperate charges that the victim had been behind the crisis to begin with. If the scapegoat's death is the solution, the scapegoat must have been the cause. The death has such reconciling effect, that it seems the victim must possess supernatural power. So the victim becomes a criminal, a god, or both, memorialized in myth.<sup>5</sup>

Rituals of sacrifice originated in this way, as tools to fend off social crisis. And in varied forms they are with us still. The prescription is that divisions in the community must be reduced to but one division, the division of all against one common victim or one minority group. Prime candidates are the marginal and the weak, or those isolated by their very prominence. Typically, they will be charged with violating the community's most extreme taboos. The process does not just accept innocent victims, it prefers them: outsiders with no friends or defenders. This, in a nutshell, is Girard's account of the origin of religion. It is identical with the beginning of culture itself, for without some such mechanism to head off "tit for tat" conflict, human society could not get off the ground. This is the genetic flaw in our normal approaches to peacemaking, the "good" violence against them that drives out bad violence among us.

No one thought out this process, and its effectiveness depends on a certain blindness to its workings. Myths are stories that reflect the scapegoat event, but do not describe it. They are the legacy of a collective killing that all the perpetrators found completely justified, entirely necessary, and powerfully beneficent. Myth is the memory of a clean conscience that never registered the presence of a victim at all. It can take the form of a creation myth of the world being created out of the body parts of a deity, a traditional story of old women casting spells with an "evil eye," or the wildfire contagion of rumors that Jews caused the plague by poisoning wells. The continuity of consciousness between producers and consumers of a myth, from mouth to mouth or from generation to generation, is precisely the invisibility of the victim as a victim.

### **HOW CHRIST'S DEATH UNDERMINES THE PATTERN**

Scapegoating is one of the deepest structures of human sin, built into our religion and our politics. It is demonic because it is endlessly flexible in its choice of victims and because it can truly deliver the good that it advertises. It is most virulent where it is most invisible. So long as we are in the grip of the process, we do not see our victims as scapegoats. Texts that hide scapegoating foster it. Texts that show it for what it is undermine it.

Jesus' willingness to face death, specifically death on a cross, suddenly looks anything but arbitrary, and much more like the "wisdom of God" that the New Testament so surprisingly discovers there. God breaks the grip of scapegoating by stepping into the place of a victim who cannot be hidden or mythologized. God is willing to die for us, to bear our sin in this particular way because we desperately need deliverance from this particular sin.

Jesus does not volunteer to get into God's justice machine. God volunteers to get into ours. Jesus' persecutors intend his death to bring peace, to avoid an outbreak of violence between Romans and Israelites, between Jews and other Jews. Jesus' accusers intend his death to be sacrificial business as usual. But God means it to be the opposite.

The Bible is frequently criticized for exhibiting so much violence in its narratives. To Girard, this is extremely ironic. Truly mythical texts are rooted in sacrificial violence, prescribe it, and shield us from awareness of our complicity in it. That is why they do not show it directly. The Bible makes violence visible, and therefore makes its victims uncomfortably visible too. The language of sacrifice and blood (with all its dangers) is there to tell the truth. To wish to avert our eyes reflects a naïve confidence that we are in greater danger of being corrupted by the language than of falling prey to the sin it describes. The sensitivity to victims so often now turned against the Bible is itself rooted there. We would not accuse the Gospels of victimization if we had not already been converted by them.

To Girard, this theme is a continuous thread in the Bible. An awareness and rejection of the sacrificial mechanism is already set forth in Hebrew scripture. The averted sacrifice of Isaac; the Joseph story; the prophets' condemnation of scapegoating the widow, the weak, or the foreigner; the complaints of Job against false accusations; and the Psalms' obsession with the innocent victim of collective violence—like the passion narratives' transparent account of Jesus' death, all these point in the same direction. They reveal the "victimage" mechanisms at the joint root of religion and society, and reject them.

The workings of mythical sacrifice require that in human society generally "they know not what they do." But in the Gospels the process is laid out in stark clarity. Jesus says these very words from the cross. The scapegoat is revealed as a scapegoat (Luke's centurion

confesses at the moment of Jesus' death, "Surely this man was innocent"). When Girard came to the Gospels after his work on violence and the sacred in anthropology, he found there all the classic elements his sacrificial theory had come to expect in myths: the crowd coalescing against an individual, antagonists like Herod and Pilate making common cause, accusations of the greatest crimes and impurities. But he was startled to recognize that

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the reality of what was happening was explicit, not hidden. This time the story was not told in the terms of the mob but from the point of view of the victim, who is unmistakably visible as unjustly accused and wrongly killed. The scapegoating process is stripped of its sacred mystery. And the collective persecution and abandonment are painfully illustrated, so that no one, including the disciples, the proto-Christians, can honestly say afterwards that they resisted the sacrificial tide.

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**The Church, as a new community formed through identification with the crucified one, is dedicated both to the innocent victim whom God has vindicated by resurrection and to a new life through him that requires no further such sacrifice.**

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Seen from this perspective, Christ's somewhat enigmatic actions make complete sense. To resist victimization by means of counter-violence would simply stoke the proliferation of violence sacrifice seeks to contain, and intensify the search for more and better victims. On the other hand, to submit passively to the sacrificial mechanism would do nothing to change it; rather, that would only

smooth the way for future victims and condemn them to invisibility. Such is the dilemma posed by this malignant wisdom we seem doomed to serve whichever way we turn. Humanity is caught in this bondage, caught without even being able to name it directly.

God steps into this double bind and overcomes it. No ordinary victim can change this process, can uncover what is obscured in the constant practice of scapegoating. Redemptive violence—the sort of violence that claims to be for the good of many, to be sacred, to be the mysterious ground of human life itself—always purports to be the means of overcoming sin (removing pollution, punishing the transgressor who has brought disaster on the community). The sin it characteristically claims to overcome is the offense of the scapegoat, the crime the victim has committed. But in the passion accounts the sin in view is that of the persecutors. It is not the sin of the one which jeopardizes the many, but the sin of the many against the one. In the passion narratives, redemptive violence stands forth plainly and unequivocally as itself the sin that needs to be overcome.

Any human being can be plausibly scapegoated and no human can prevail when the collective community turns against her. Nor is it sufficient to simply instruct us about our situation, for we are all too fully enclosed in the scapegoating process to be able to break the spell. It is virtually miraculous to become aware of our own actions as scapegoating. It is an extraordinary step even to arrive at the awareness of our susceptibility to that dynamic

that is expressed by the disciples at the Last Supper. When Jesus predicts his own betrayal, they piteously ask him, "Is it I, Lord?" A hard-headed reader would object that at this late date they ought to know if they are going to do it or not. But they have understood enough to know that they cannot be sure. They are not exempt. When the cock crows the third time for Peter, it crows for us, to state the truth that when we become part of a mob, we too will likely be the last to know.

Christ died for us. He did so first in the mythic, sacrificial sense that all scapegoated victims do. That we know this is already a sign that he died for us in a second sense, to save us from that very sin. Jesus dies in our place, because it is literally true that any one of us, in the right circumstances, can be the scapegoat. As the letter to the Hebrews says, Christ is a sacrifice to end sacrifice, who has died once for all. Christ's purpose was not

to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

*Hebrews 9:25-26*

The work of the cross is the work of a transcendent God, breaking into a cycle we could not change alone. If we limit Jesus' work to that of a human exemplar—a task to be repeated, then the crucifixion becomes more of a prescription for suffering than if we grasp it as the work of the incarnate one, once for all.

Is Christ's death unique? It is not unique at all in that scapegoating deaths like his happen constantly. That very identification is crucial to understand what is unique about it, the distinctive way in which it makes *them* visible and opposes their repetition. It is the one of these deaths that have been happening since the foundation of the world that most irreversibly cracks that foundation. Christian "exclusivism" about Jesus' death is of this sort. To believe in the crucified one is to want no other victims. To depend on the blood of Jesus is to refuse to depend on the sacrificial blood of anyone else. It is to swear off scapegoats.

### **HOW THE REDEEMED COMMUNITY BEHAVES**

When mythical sacrifice succeeds, peace temporarily descends, true memory is erased and the way is smoothed for the next scapegoat. But in the case of Jesus' death, neither does everyone unanimously close ranks over Jesus' grave (as his executioners hope) nor is there a spree of violent revenge on behalf of the crucified leader. Instead, an odd new counter-community arises, dedicated both to the innocent victim whom God has vindicated by resurrection and to a new life through him that requires no further such sacrifice. One of the crucial things that makes the Church a new

community is its constitution in solidarity not *against* some sacrificial victim, but by identification with the crucified one. The moment we point a finger at some “they” as Jesus’ killers, we have enacted the sin that the very particularity of the cross meant to overcome.<sup>6</sup>

The pattern of the cross has a great native power to interrupt our patterns of violence. When we locate ourselves by reference to Jesus, it is hard not to see our location to our victims. Sister Helen Prejean started her ministry with death row inmates and what became a national campaign around a simple identification. Jesus was a death row inmate, a condemned one of his society, and so were these people. Harriet Beecher Stowe turned abolitionism from a fringe political passion to a flood tide by writing a book, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. That book made one relentless juxtaposition, between the plight of a slave being beaten to death and the plight of the scourged Jesus. A U.S. military guard at Abu Ghraib prison was moved to rise in opposition to the abuse there by one image she could not erase from her mind: a prisoner shackled in the likeness of a body on a cross. Marc Chagall’s famous painting, *White Crucifixion*, addressed the holocaust with an unforgettable image of a prayer shawl-clad Jesus on a cross, floating over scenes of pogroms and burning synagogues. To identify those in the place of Jesus is to know that we ought not to be in the mob against them.

It is not enough to simply recognize the existence of the sacrificial dynamic. We need to see its application in our own situation. We need a substitute, a way to overcome conflict in our communities without resort to sacrifice. This is actually the great venture the Church is engaged in every time it gathers at the communion table. When Christians come there, they meet the unequivocal reminder of Christ’s bloody death, of the blindness and abandonment of the disciples. And when we hear “Do *this* in remembrance of me,” we hear the implied contrast. Do this *instead* of offering new victims. Unlike the mythic figures who hid past actual bodies and modeled future sacrifices, Christ is not to be remembered with scapegoating, with taking or being new victims. “This” is a humble meal and prayer, not a new cross. Following that example, Christians undertake the hope that this meal of the new community may accomplish the peace that sacrificial violence could, and more. In it, we recall a real sacrifice and practice a substitutionary atonement. On that table, bread and wine are to be continually substituted for victims, substituted for any, and all, of us.

## NOTES

1 On such criticisms see Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001).

2 For an overview of Girard’s work, see René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, edited by James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

3 See S. Mark Heim, “In What Way Is Christ’s Death a Sacrifice? Theories of Sacrifice

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and Theologies of the Cross," in Carrie Ann Murray, ed., *Diversity of Sacrifice: Form and Function of Sacrificial Practices in the Ancient World and Beyond*, The Institute for European and Mediterranean Archeology Distinguished Monograph Series (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016).

4 In this vein it is striking that liberation theologians have taken particular interest in Girard's work, seeing in it a new type of social analysis relevant to their concerns, one drawn from the heart of Scripture. See the materials from a consultation of Latin American liberation theologians with Girard in Hugo Assmann, ed., *Götzenbilder und Opfer: René Girard im Gespräch mit der Befreiungstheologie* (Münster, DEU: LIT Verlag, 1996).

5 See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

6 This is why the rejection of anti-Semitism is the infallible test for a healthy atonement theory. See S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 209-212.

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