



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The End of Scapegoating
(*Patterns of Violence*,
pp. 20-27)

Suggested Article:

📖 Meditating on Christ's
Suffering
(*Patterns of Violence*,
pp. 60-62)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The End of Scapegoating

The cross can only be understood in light of a prototypical pattern of violence in human culture: scapegoating sacrifice. The biblical tradition and the passion accounts are themselves momentous steps in bringing that pattern to light, and rejecting it.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 53:7-10

Reflection

"Violence is lodged at the center of the Christian gospel, in the crucifixion of Jesus," Mark Heim admits. But rather than condoning or inciting further violence, Jesus' crucifixion plays a key role in exposing one of the most violent ways humans deal with communal problems—the murder of a scapegoat—and rejects it.

We're familiar with scapegoating. René Girard believes it underlies much of human culture. As rivalries and tensions escalate among people we care about or must live with, it's easy to blame our intra-group problems on some innocent person or minority or foreign group. Oddly this works—at least for a while! By uniting together to 'punish' or even destroy the scapegoat, we build community of purpose and 'clear the air' among us. This newfound unity seems to confirm our collective judgment against the scapegoat—that person or group must have been the source of our problems! Thus, we continue on our way, failing to address our rivalries and setting the stage for the next scapegoat.

"Scapegoating...is demonic because it is endlessly flexible in its choice of victims and because it can truly deliver the good that it advertises," Heim writes. "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." Many myths, ancient or modern—for example, "of the world being created out of the body parts of a deity,... of old women casting spells with an 'evil eye,' [or]...that Jews caused the plague by poisoning wells"—grow out of, disguise, and thus encourage scapegoating.

To Girard, the biblical narrative is unique in being so forthright about the violence of scapegoating sacrifice, and showing how God sides with its innocent victims. "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; 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," Heim notes. "They reveal the 'victimage' mechanisms at the joint root of religion and society, and reject them."

"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," Heim explains. "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



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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 next chapter in the story is crucial too. After the crucifixion, not everyone comes together and embraces Jesus' death, nor do his disciples respond with retaliatory violence. Rather, "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." The Church is equipped with more than new insight into the evils of scapegoating; it receives a substitute "way to overcome conflict in our communities without resort to sacrifice" – the Communion Table. There forgiven sinners gather to remember Christ's sacrifice "once for all," and to seek no more victims.

Study Questions

1. On René Girard's theory, how is scapegoating central to the formation of human society and creation of guiding myths? Why does scapegoating remain "hidden" from view? How is the biblical witness radically different from mythology?
2. How, according to Mark Heim, is the creation of the Church a part of God's unmasking and rejection of scapegoating?
3. For Heim, what light does René Girard's theory shed on Jesus' words of institution for the Lord's Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19 / 1 Corinthians 11:24-25)?
4. Some have used the passion story to fuel anti-Semitism. Discuss Heim's critique of this misuse: "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."
5. According to Heidi Hornik, how does both the composition of Fra Angelico's fresco *The Mocking and Flagellation of Christ* and its physical location encourage the viewer to identify with the suffering of Christ as an innocent victim?

Departing Hymn: "Sing of the Lamb, Whose Love and Power" (vv. 1, 2, and 5)

Sing of the Lamb, whose love and pow'r
rescued the world in its darkest hour,
while angel hosts intently gaze,
and heaven is filled with holy praise.

Sing of the Lamb, whose blood was shed,
who lay among, yet left the dead;
to save from sin, and death's dread pow'r,
he triumphed in the darkest hour.

Sing to the Lamb, all kindred here,
who in his glorious triumphs share;
sing to the Lamb, with all above,
who taste the fullness of his love.

C. H. Whitecar (d. 1892), alt.

Suggested Tune: DUKE STREET

The End of Scapegoating

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To outline René Girard's theory of scapegoating sacrifice.
2. To discuss the light Girard's theory sheds on Christ's passion, death, and resurrection.
3. To consider how the Church is a continuing part of God's exposing and rejecting the violence of scapegoating.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Patterns of Violence (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Sing of the Lamb, Whose Love and Power" locate the familiar tune DUKE STREET in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymn-time.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with an Introduction

Meet René Noël Théophile Girard (1923-2015), the eminent thinker who is behind Mark Heim's reflection on violence and Christianity in *The End of Scapegoating*. Girard was born in France and studied to be an archivist and librarian like his father. But in 1947 he entered the University of Indiana to study history, and the rest of his academic career would be in America.

Girard proposed a novel interpretation of what it means to be human. His view is hard to characterize, because it crosses boundaries of literary criticism, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, theology, and philosophy. Here's the basic idea: we gravitate toward wanting what other people want (that is, our desires are mimetic), which brings us into conflict with others, but we manage to coexist with them by redirecting our frustration against an outsider, a scapegoat. In other words, humans are not essentially violent, but we often turn to scapegoating in order to preserve the peace we deeply desire. And now for Girard's most interesting idea: our scapegoating violence works so well that we would never know this dark truth about ourselves, except for one scapegoat who reveals it to us and thereby undermines the pattern: Jesus Christ.

How should we take Girard? Some think he has explained everything—the origin of human community, our religious impulse, mythology, violence, and so on. Theologian Mark Heim presents a more modest reading: that Girard helps us understand why Christ's death was so violent, and why the Church is called to be a radically different form of human community.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to make members more aware of their scapegoating tendencies and thanking God for drawing us to himself in love and repentance.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 53:7-10 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study we explore the pattern of scapegoating violence and the Church's response to it. In his seminal work on scapegoating, René Girard expressed ambitious goals to explain the origins of human community,

our religious impulse, mythology, and violence generally. Here we put those claims to one side and focus only on the light that Girard's theory can shed on the role of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection in God's fundamental rejection of scapegoating. To read more about René Girard's interpretation of Scripture (and especially its differences from ancient myths), see his *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Orbis Books, 2001).

Study Questions

1. René Girard notes that our desires are mimetic – that is, we learn to value and want what other people around us value. This drives us to compete with one another for things, recognition, and power, which leads to frustration and conflict. When we cooperate with others to vent anger against a scapegoat – that is, an “outside” person or group whom we blame for our troubles – we restore some community feeling. Girard says this is how communities form and preserve themselves – by uniting to fight a common enemy in the scapegoat.
“Myths are stories that reflect the scapegoat event, but do not describe it,” Heim writes. They retell the story of community-formation in a way that occludes the underlying problem, the scapegoat's innocence, the community's mistake, and so on. Ironically, because scapegoating brings temporary peace, some myths may lionize the scapegoat as having special powers or being a god. The Bible, on the other hand, is brutally honest about human sin, communal violence, and the victims' innocence. Heim continues, “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.”
2. Here's the usual pattern after a successful scapegoat sacrifice: “peace temporarily descends, true memory is erased, and the way is smoothed for the next scapegoat.” Heim says the formation of the Church after Jesus' death disrupted each element of that pattern. First, its members did not “close ranks” with Jesus' executioners and agree that he had been the problem. Second, they did not forget Jesus' death or their sinful complicity in it, but made the cross an emblem for remembering his love and forgiveness. Finally, in the practice of the Lord's Supper, they found a substitute way of bringing peace without any further scapegoating sacrifice. Heim explains, “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.” Consider how your congregation actively stands in solidarity with innocent victims today.
3. “This” refers to “a humble meal and prayer.” We are to gather together, seek God's and one another's forgiveness, and then eat and pray. Heim explains that after we realize the pervasiveness of scapegoating, “we need a substitute, a way to overcome conflict in our communities without resort to sacrifice.... 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.”
4. Since the Jewish religious leaders and crowd participated (with political rulers and soldiers) in scapegoating Jesus, some Christians and others through the centuries have blamed Jews for killing Jesus. But to do this is to participate in the very sort of scapegoating that Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection exposes and rejects, Heim notes. To identify with Jesus' suffering requires that we see the victims of human violence as together with Jesus on the cross. He describes how Helen Prejean, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the whistle-blowing U.S. military guard at Abu Ghraib prison, and Marc Chagall have done this.
5. Hornik notes that Fra Angelico does not identify the figures who mock and reject Jesus, but shows only their body parts that do him violence. The focus is on Jesus' suffering as an innocent victim. The other figures – Mary and Dominic – model identification with and quiet meditation on Jesus' suffering. The fresco is painted on the wall of a senior cleric's room to guide him in “habits of prayer, liturgical customs, and practices of reading and studying.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.