

Shearing God of Violence

I offered Shearing God of Violence to my own Eighth Day Faith Community on July 4, 2006. It tackles the complex Christian doctrine of atonement and suggests that we need to take a look at that concept in such a way that we are consistent with the actively non-violent God of the Gospels. (This is, in part, a look at one of René Girard's conceptualizations of the nonviolent God.)

At Dayspring several weeks ago, Gordon Cosby startled some of us by declaring in no uncertain terms that the usual understanding of the doctrine of atonement—that Jesus had to die in order to appease God for the sins of humanity—is incompatible with God's unconditional love for human kind. Jesus, I understood Gordon to say, was crucified by an occupying power for his resistance to Empire, not by God to make amends for the sins of humanity. Gordon's brief comments have evoked some discussion, so it seems reasonable to explore them a bit more deeply this morning.

Atonement is a complex doctrine and, to be honest, it's never made much sense to me. In fact, as I read various definitions of atonement in preparation for this teaching, it occurred to me that the convoluted definitions were necessary to obscure what is, in fact, a barbaric belief: that God demands an innocent Jesus' death to forgive us our otherwise unpardonable sins. "God's justice" requires a sacrifice to pay for our sins, and Jesus is that "perfect sacrifice," a ransom paid. While the doctrine is undoubtedly more complex than this, certainly its popular understanding is that God requires the death of an innocent Jesus in order to avenge the affront to God of our sinfulness and to placate God's wrath.

Perhaps the first question is: Why should we care about some weird doctrine? There are at least two important reasons. First, the traditional conception of the doctrine of the atonement seriously distorts our understanding of the nature of God. Second, it obscures the historical conditions of Jesus' death and their relevance for our resistance to our Empire.

I don't know if Gordon was responding directly to René Girard, but Girard's work can certainly give us a vantage point for understanding the problem, so let me briefly summarize Girard's thinking in this area—which many of you are familiar with—then come back and see what we can learn from it.

For Girard, the essential historical question is how cultures overcome the violence that arises within them and among them. Remember that for Girard, we are “mimetic” or imitative creatures. Human *desire* is not so much about wanting the desired object (whatever it is) but about wanting-what-the-other-wants ... regardless of what it is. Of course ... if I want what you want and you want what I want, then we’ve got problems. In the absence of cultural safeguards, our mutual and tangled desire will too often lead to violence. Worse, because of our mimetic nature, that violence leads to more violence, and soon the whole community is involved. Girard believes that this was the fundamental problem plaguing the social organization of early human communities.

The solution spontaneously discovered by primitive communities, according to Girard, was scapegoating violence: placing all the blame for the problems of the entire community on one individual and getting rid of him (or her). By its nature, it’s an unconscious process. As the level of violence rises within a community, people begin blaming each other for it. Because of our mimetic nature, however, soon one of those accusations sticks, others begin repeating it, and everyone in the community quickly piles on the one who has been indicted, who’s now become the scapegoat.

Notice, however, that there’s an important misperception here. While the accused victim may be responsible for *some* of the violence in the community, the community accuses him or her of being *the cause of it all*.

But—from the point of view of the community—something mysterious has also just happened. Just a short while before, everyone in the community had been at each other’s throats in a maelstrom of violence; suddenly they’re united ... against the accused scapegoat. Violence of all-against-all has almost magically transmuted into unity: unanimous violence against the one. At this point, the scapegoat is driven out of the community or killed, bearing, as it were, the violence of the community, and the community is miraculously reconciled.

What then happens, says Girard, is that the community experiences a moment of awe, what he calls the “hush,” a sacred moment. Around the corpse of the victim, the primitive community suddenly recognizes the peace that’s settled on it, and it’s awestruck by the transformation. At this point, a second misperception occurs: the community believes that the peace just bestowed was given directly by the victim. So the scapegoat—originally misunderstood as the cause of all the violence—is now misunderstood as the cause of the peace that unites the community. This power over violence and peace, of course, is a god-like quality, it becomes the origin of the

sacred, of primitive religion. Because of the obvious powers of the victim, he or she becomes a god, capable of bringing both discord and peace.

Notice, however, that this process depends upon the double misunderstanding of the genesis of both the violence and the peace

Out of this event, the community builds its religious experience, in the process creating myth, taboo, and ritual, and to sustain it. Myth was the creation of a story or legend that hides the real nature of the original mob's violence. If the community were to understand the truth—namely that the original sacred experience was simply the murder of a relatively innocent person selected almost at random—it could not maintain the same awe-inspiring, sacred, solidarity-generating effect. Taboo is the set of rules to keep people from doing whatever precipitated the violence in the first place. Ritual is the attempt to repeat the sacred event in a controlled way, getting the benefit of the awe and peace without having to go through the chaos of the community violence. Most frequently, this ritual was the killing of a substitute, which was understood traditionally as a sacrifice to the god or (gods).

While this bare bones outline may be difficult to swallow immediately if you're not familiar with it, Girard's theory suggests that up through the time of Jesus, the human community handled its violence through this scapegoating method. Indeed, civilization was (and remains) dependent upon violence for the degree of peace it enjoys. [\[1\]](#) The more interesting application of Girard's theory is looking at most other forms of violence—from our day-to-day interpersonal interactions to wars between states—and noticing their scapegoating or sacrificial nature.

While scapegoating is a very effective way of dealing with the violence, it's nevertheless founded on those two basic misperceptions about the relationship of the scapegoat to the violence and subsequent peace. It also invests God with violence, hence the almost universal ritual of sacrifice, originally human sacrifice.

On the face of it, the story of Jesus' crucifixion is just another similar story, which is how the originally agnostic Girard first came to it: Amid all the violence of the time, one victim is chosen as the cause of the trouble, crucified, and then becomes, in the eyes of his community, a god, the conveyor of peace. As Girard examined the story more closely, however, he found a revolutionary difference between this story and the others: There is no myth obscuring the horror of the violence. Even in the Gospel story, Jesus is the absolutely innocent victim killed by a fearful state and a mob screaming for vengeance. The mechanism of the scapegoating, in

other words, is revealed, not hidden. Girard suggests that Jesus' unveiling the violence of the scapegoating mechanism has been decisive in human history, throwing a monkey wrench into the gears of the process, making it ever less effective. The scapegoating mechanism works less and less well; it's not that we don't still scapegoat (because we do); it's that the scapegoating brings less and less peace for a shorter and shorter time after which even more scapegoating violence is demanded. For Girard, this is society's current dilemma. The one mechanism that society has used to control violence no longer works.

One major effect of Jesus' life and death, therefore, is to demythologize the scapegoating myth. It's the revelation that it's not God who calls for the sacrifice of the innocent man but rather the mob or the state or other powers that demand the sacrifice and then *attributes* the demand to God. In going to the Crucifixion as the utterly innocent victim, Jesus shears God of violence. The violence that the Old Testament attributes to God is a misconception of God's character. Jesus' nonviolent understanding that God is the source of unconditional love and absolute forgiveness rules out the possibility that God might be demanding the sacrifice of an innocent. Because it reveals the scapegoating mechanism for what it is, in that sense, Jesus' death is the ultimate sacrifice, indeed, the
end
of sacrifice.

Since the Crucifixion will ultimately undermine the only way of controlling violence that cultures have discovered, it's no coincidence that Jesus' life and teaching offer a second way of overcoming humanity's violence: namely, the utterly nonviolent love and forgiveness of the Gospel. Jesus is suggesting that our mimetic desire (wanting what others want) be turned back to its intended purpose: wanting to be like God. At the very same time that Jesus begins the dismantling of the scapegoating mechanism, in other words, he's offering the Kingdom of God in its place. The Kingdom of God means the complete and definitive elimination of every form of vengeance and every form of reprisal in relationship between human beings. [\[2\]](#) And Jesus' active nonviolence in going to his death becomes the pattern for our faithful behavior.

In an important sense, Jesus' death was not "*necessary*." If Jesus' audience had accepted unreservedly the invitation to the Kingdom of God, there would have been no crucifixion. [\[3\]](#)

So far, so good. But how do we explain the passages throughout the New Testament, especially in the book of *Hebrews*, that spell out much of the atonement theory? If Jesus' death was murder by an occupying force, why did the early church see in his death the need to placate a wrathful God, to ransom humanity from sin?

There are, I think, several reasons. First, the disciples never did really comprehend Jesus' radical understanding of a completely loving, completely forgiving God. Jesus tried to shear God of violence, but it was simply too much for his followers. Belief in a wrathful God lingered.

Second, Jesus' followers misunderstood what it meant for Jesus to be messiah. They were delighted with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But like Peter they simply could not understand the nonviolent victory of Jesus on the cross. Throughout Jesus' ministry, the disciples over and over again misunderstood and refused to acknowledge Jesus' predictions of his coming death. For the disciples, Jesus execution at the hands of the Roman authorities was initially the ultimate failure of the Jesus movement and inconsistent with the Resurrection. So, after the event, the Jesus movement went back to the Old Testament to make sense of it. And what they found was the Suffering Servant. Think of Isaiah:

He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;

The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed. ...

And the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. ...

it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. Is 53:5-7, 10a

So the early Jesus movement took these images of a violent, wrathful God in order to make sense of what had just happened and developed the sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death: that Jesus' sacrifice was demanded by God in order to bring peace to the world.

But there are devastating side effects to this understanding of the Crucifixion. First, and most importantly, God is reinvested with violence. The desire for vengeance becomes a holy

attribute. The loving, forgiving God of Jesus requires gruesomely violent revenge before taking back the prodigal son. Further, the way religion ordinarily works in a society, of course, is that to one degree or another God's power is invested in the King: If God can justify violent vengeance, the King's violence will also become justified. We're off and running to the 20th century's slaughter of the innocents.

The doctrine of the atonement utterly undercuts the nonviolence of Jesus. How could the Christian church's bloody history, especially its persecution of the Jews, have taken place if God had remained Jesus' God of nonviolence?

A similar thing happens when we interpret Jesus' apocalyptic sayings as intending God's revenge upon the unfaithful. These sayings are better understood as a description of what will happen if humanity doesn't come to a nonviolent understanding of the deity. The usual interpretations miss the point entirely and reinvest God with violence.

Second, because it's precisely the horror of the sacrificial mechanism that the Crucifixion reveals, the theory of the atonement essentially nullifies a most important meaning of the Crucifixion. The death of the scapegoat is a sacrificial event. This is what the high priest Caiaphas means when he says: "It is better ... that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." (Jn 11:50) But both theologically and historically, the death of Jesus reveals and ultimately destroys this sacrificial mechanism. Jesus reiterates the Old Testament promise that God does not desire sacrifice but rebirth. The atonement doctrine, on the other hand, re-anoints sacrifice with holy status.

Third, within the usual doctrine of atonement, Jesus' death becomes a mysterious transaction within the Godhead rather than the murder of an innocent man by the social, political, economic, and religious forces of his day. From what modern scholarship tells us, Jesus was executed as a political act within a violently occupied country. That fact should have great significance for *us* as we contemplate our own response to the violence of the current empire. But the mysterious doctrine in which Jesus' death was really just the will of his Father—or, more mysterious, the sacrifice of God to Himself—obscures this

practical

relevance of Jesus' death to people within their own historical context.

Finally, atonement doctrine mutes the extraordinary nature of Jesus' active nonviolence in the face of death. Jesus models a response to the murderous forces in our own lives: *active* and *n*

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resistance ... which has power beyond our knowing. Remember, at the time, from a practical, historical viewpoint, Jesus faced an utterly meaningless death: the Roman Empire hardly hiccuped. Yet at the deepest level of the spirit, the world was no longer the same. When we

are confronted with similar choices—say resistance to the occupation of Iraq—all we see is the minimal chance that our active nonviolence will do any good. If we accept the doctrine that it was God who demanded Jesus' death, there's no relationship between our apparently futile act and Jesus'

expiating the sins of humankind

. If we understand what really happened, though, then Jesus becomes our guide. We, too, can resist the Empire even when the practical effect of our resistance seems minuscule.

None of this is in any way to minimize the sacrifice and death of Jesus. Ultimately, his obedience to God (to engage in active nonviolent resistance rather than engage in violence or to flee) changed the world forever and will ultimately overcome society's need for revenge.

Perhaps the most important question facing American Christians today is our response to the political forces gathering under the dark clouds of violence. We exist as a small remnant battling overwhelming powers entrenched in political offices, media control rooms, corporate boardrooms, and, indeed, in many American pulpits. Will we resist? Will we employ the full power of Jesus' nonviolent revelation in our resistance? Will we understand the utter necessity of an active but loving nonviolence in our resistance? To do so, we must see our God more clearly, shorn of violence.

[1] Girard, René, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, p 211

[2] Girard, René, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, p 197

[3] Girard, René, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, p 202