WALTER
WINK

ENGAGING THE POWERS

Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination

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Above the shouts and the shots,
The roaring flames and the siren's blare,
Listen for the stilled voice of the man
Who is no longer there.

Above the tramping of the endless line
Of marchers along the street,
Listen for the silent step
Of the dead man's invisible feet.

Lock doors, put troops at the gate,
Guard the legislative halls,
But tremble when the dead man comes,
Whose spirit walks through walls.

Edith Lovejoy Pierce,
"Drum Major for a Dream"[1]

7. Breaking the Spiral of Violence: The Power of the Cross

The Victory of the Cross

When the Domination System catches the merest whiff of God's new order, by an automatic reflex it mobilizes all its might to suppress that order. Even before Jesus experienced its full fury against himself, he apparently predicted the outcome.[2] The Powers are so immense, the opposition so weak, that every attempt at fundamental change seems doomed to failure. The Powers are seldom content merely to win; they must win overwhelmingly, in order to demoralize opposition before it can gain momentum. Always there is the gratuitous violence, the mocking derision, the intimidating brutality of the means of execution.[3] All of this is standard, unexceptional. Jesus died just like all the others who challenged the Powers that dominate the world.

Something went awry with Jesus, however. They scourged him with whips, but with each stroke of the lash their own illegitimacy was laid open. They mocked him with a robe and a crown of thorns, spit on him, struck him on the head with a reed, and ridiculed him with the ironic ovation, "Hail, King of the Jews!"—not knowing that their acclamation would echo down the centuries. They stripped him naked and crucified him in humiliation, all unaware that this very act had stripped them of the last covering that disguised the towering wrongness of the whole way of living that their violence defended. They nailed him to the cross, not realizing that with each hammer's blow they were nailing up, for the whole world to see, the MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN by which the Domination System would be numbered, weighed in the balances, found wanting, and finally terminated (Dan. 5:25-28).

What killed Jesus was not irreligion, but religion itself; not lawlessness, but precisely the law; not anarchy, but the upholders of order. It was not the bestial but those considered best who crucified the one in whom the divine Wisdom

was visibly incarnate. And because he was not only innocent, but the very embodiment of true religion, true law, and true order, this victim exposed their violence for what it was: not the defense of society, but an attack against God.[4]

Paul asserts that it was not through the resurrection that the Powers were unmasked, but precisely through the cross:

> And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the charge that stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. Unmasking the Principalities and Powers, God publicly shamed them, exposing them in Christ's triumphal procession by means of the cross.
> (Col. 2:13-15*)[5]

The Law by which he was judged is itself judged, set aside, and nailed to the cross. The authorities that publicly shamed him, stripping him naked, have been stripped of their protective covering and exposed as agents of death. The very Powers that led him out to Golgotha are now led in God's triumphal procession, vanquished by the cross. When they tried to destroy him they in fact stepped into a divinely set trap. "The devil saw Jesus as his prize, snapped at the bait, and was pulled out of the water for all to see" (Luther). As a result, it is the Powers themselves who are now paraded, captive, in God's victory celebration. The cross marks the failure, not of God, but of violence.

How could this defeat issue in such a victory? The Powers were as powerful the day after the crucifixion as the day before. Nothing had visibly changed. And yet everything had changed. For now the Powers were forced to "listen for the silent step of the dead man's invisible feet," and to contend with a spirit that "walks through walls."

Let me illustrate. After Benigno Aquino had decided to renounce violence and commit himself to a nonviolent struggle against the Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, he deliberately chose to return from exile to almost certain death. He was shot by the military before he had even descended from the plane. His death changed nothing. Marcos was more powerful than ever, having disposed of his only viable rival. Yet his death changed everything. Two and a half years later, Marcos was nonviolently removed from power. But for those with eyes to see, Marcos fell when Aquino toppled to the tarmac.

Jesus' death was like that, only he took on more than a single ruler. In his death he challenged the entire System of Domination.

For millennia the delusional system had taught that domination was given in the nature of things. Now the cross revealed evil where one had always looked for good: in the guardians of the faith of the people. The religious elites rejected him and delivered him to the Romans for execution, observes Herman Waetjen, precisely because the rule of God that he was establishing would eventually abolish the moral order that they attributed to divine origin and that they safeguarded through Roman violence.[6]

The cross exposed as well humanity's complicity with the Powers, our willingness to trade away increments of freedom for installments of advantage. It shows us that we are now free to resist the claim of any finite thing as absolute, or of any subsystem to be the whole.

The cross also exposes the Powers as unable to make Jesus become what they wanted him to be, or to stop being who he was. Here was a person able to live out to the fullest what he felt was God's will. He chose to die rather than compromise with violence. The Powers threw at him every weapon in their arsenal. But they could not deflect him from the trail that he and God were blazing. Because he lived thus, we too can find our own path.

Because they could not kill what was alive in him, the cross also revealed the impotence of death. Death is the Powers' final sanction. Jesus at his crucifixion neither fights the darkness nor flees under cover of it, but goes with it, goes into it. He enters the darkness, freely, voluntarily. The darkness is not dispelled or illuminated. It remains vast, untamed, void. But he somehow encompasses it. It becomes the darkness of God. It is now possible to enter any darkness and trust God to wrest from it meaning, coherence, resurrection.

Jesus' truth could not be killed. The massive forces arrayed in opposition to the truth are revealed to be puny over against the force of a free human being. The Chinese student who stood alone before a column of tanks for an eternity of minutes in Tiananmen Square graphically displayed this power. The collapse of Soviet and Eastern-bloc communism is a breathtaking reminder that no evil can hold dominion indefinitely. As Martin Luther King, Jr. could see with a prophet's eyes, the universe bends toward justice.

Those who are freed from the fear of death are, as a consequence, able to break the spiral of violence. On the cross, Jesus voluntarily took upon himself the violence of the entire system. "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted himself to the one who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23). The cross is the ultimate paradigm of nonviolence. Through the cross, God is revealing a new way, tried many times before, but now shown to be capable of consistent, programmatic embodiment.

Chai Ling was the Chinese student leader in Tiananmen Square when only five to ten thousand demonstrators were left, surrounded by the Red Army. She discovered that some students had machine guns. Calling them together, she told this story: a billion ants lived on a high mountain. A fire began at the base. It appeared that all billion of them would die. They made a ball, and rolled down the mountain and through the fire to safety. But those on the surface died.

We are the ones on the surface, she said; we must die for the people. So the students destroyed their weapons and sat down peacefully to wait for what seemed certain death. Perhaps as many as three thousand of them were killed.[7] By refusing to use violence, they robbed the communist regime of its "mandate from heaven," guaranteeing its eventual collapse—or transformation. "The June 4 [1989] massacre was no more the end of democracy in China than was the Amritsar massacre by Britain the end of India's freedom struggle," predicts Richard Deats. "Rather than the end, it may some day be remembered as the beginning."[8]

Jesus' nonviolent response mirrored the very nature of God, who reaches out to a rebellious humanity through the cross in the only way that would not abridge our freedom. Had God not manifested divine love toward us in an act of abject weakness, one which we experience as totally noncoercive and nonmanipulative, the truth of our own being would have been forced on us rather than being something we freely choose. By this act of self-emptying, Jesus meets us, not at the apex of the pyramid of power, but at its base: "despised and rejected by others," a common criminal, the offscouring of all things.

As the Crucified, Jesus thus identifies with every victim of torture, incest, or rape; with every peasant caught in the cross fire of enemy patrols; with every single one of the forty thousand children who die each day of starvation. In his cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", he is one with all doubters whose sense of justice overwhelms their capacity to believe in God; with every mother or father who cradles the lifeless body of a courageous son or daughter; with every Alzheimer's patient slowly losing the capacity of recognition. In Jesus we see the suffering of God with and in suffering people.

The cross is God's victory in another, unexpected way: in the act of exposing the Powers for what they are, Jesus nevertheless submitted to their authority as instituted by God. Jesus' way of nonviolence preserves respect for the rule of law even in the act of resisting oppressive laws. By submitting to the authority of the Powers, Jesus acknowledged their necessity but rejected the legitimacy of their pretentious claims. He submitted to their power to execute him, but in so doing relativized, de-absolutized, de-idolized them, showing them to be themselves subordinate to the one who subordinated himself to them.

Therefore, according to the Epistle to the Ephesians, God has enthroned Jesus at God's right hand in the heavenly realms, "far above all government and authority, all power and dominion, and any title of sovereignty that commands allegiance, not only in this age but also in the age to come. God has put everything in subjection beneath his feet."[9] In our struggles with the Powers, consequently, we do not have to make the cosmic Christ their Lord; that is what the cosmic Christ already *is*. We do not have to install Christ as the principle of systemicity

(Col. 1:17—*synestēken*). We simply have the privilege of calling attention to the fact that the world already possesses coherence through him. The Powers, despite their constant effort to deny it, are indissolubly linked to the whole and cannot exist for a single moment, even in their idolatry, apart from the whole. And it was in the event of the cross that this truth became manifest.

In the effort to recall the Powers to their divine vocation, the good usually seems to lose. "Take up your cross and follow" means expecting the wrath of the Powers to break over our bodies. We take up the cross of our tragic impotence and offer it to God, praying for light on the other side of the grave of hope. That is all that black slaves could do for more than a hundred years, and somehow lifting it all up to God was an act of transcendence even in the midst of suffering.[10] We want desperately for the world to have meaning, for things to work, for problems to have solutions. And if not? The cross also encompasses the meaninglessness, the sheer God-forsakenness we experience when we are crushed by the Powers.

Further, the cross is God's victory over the Powers because, in this event, the Christ-principle, which was incarnated and humanized in Jesus, was made universal, liberated to become the archetype of humanness for all who are drawn to him. Jesus not only fulfilled the Law and the Prophets of the Jews; he also fulfilled the myths of the pagans. He not only lived out the inner meaning of the old covenant, lifting it to a new plane; he also lived out, in the daily pattern of his life and teaching, and in an exemplary way, in his death and resurrection, the pattern of dying and rising known to myths around the globe. What these myths depicted as the necessary course of personal and social development, Jesus demonstrated as an actual human possibility. In so doing, his own history became mythic, universal. By historicizing these myths he mythicized his history. At the same time, he demystified these myths by exposing the actual sociopolitical agents of this dying. The timeless pattern of dying and rising is thus historicized as the struggle to humanize existence in the face of Powers that will kill to silence opposition.

Jesus' death on the cross was like a black hole in space that sucked into its collapsing vortex the very meaning of the universe, until in the intensity of its compaction there was an explosive reversal, and the stuff of which galaxies are made was blown out into the universe. So Jesus as the cosmic Christ became universal, the truly Human One, and as such, the bearer of our own utmost possibilities for living.

Killing Jesus was like trying to destroy a dandelion seed-head by blowing on it. It was like shattering a sun into a million fragments of light.

Breaking the Spiral of Violence: Girard's Hypothesis

But why must there be crosses? Why is the human race so violent? It is clear *that* the Domination System is founded on violence, but not *why*. The cross displays violence directed at the very heart of God, but it does not explain its source. There is, however, a hypothesis, still being tested, but possessed of such remarkable heuristic power that it deserves serious consideration. It is René Girard's theory of the scapegoat.

In a series of brilliant studies, Girard proposes that the roots of violence can be traced back to the mechanism of mimetic conflict.[11] I will present his theory in this section, and offer a few criticisms (though I largely agree with him) in the next.

The problem of violence does not first appear with the rise of agricultural civilization, according to Girard, but is endemic to human society from its earliest beginnings. Human beings, lacking the instinctual braking mechanisms that cause a wolf to spare its defeated rival, fell headlong into endless spirals of ever-escalating retaliation.

Those societies that survived did so, he believes, because they discovered a mechanism by which all parties could perform a "final" killing of a surrogate victim. This "scapegoat," usually randomly chosen, disabled, odd, or marginal, has to be someone whose death or expulsion no one will seek to avenge, and who everyone can agree is to blame for the conflict. The scapegoat is regarded as odious, monstrous, an object of hatred and contempt. Yet, because his or her death brings reconciliation to the quarreling parties, he or she is often regarded as a savior, a god, a cult figure. Herein lies the origin, Girard argues, of the gods, of religion, of sacrifice, of ritual, of myth.

Traditionally, the victim was taken to the edge of a cliff. The entire community formed a half-circle and began to hurl stones. Thus everyone—and no one—was guilty of the victim's death. Having removed this threat, and having celebrated the reconciliation that the scapegoat made possible, the community was restored to peace.

Myth arises to obscure the murderous nature of scapegoating by providing a fictional account of the event, says Girard. The arbitrariness of the victim's murder is covered by declaring it a divine necessity. The gods thus created by humanity demand the death of victims. But the hunger for blood projected onto the gods is in fact a metaphysical howling instituted by the murderers to drown out the cry rising from innocent blood spilled upon the ground.

So powerful is the collective trance, so mesmerizing the dancing, costuming, pageantry, and drumbeats of the ritual, that the victims may even offer themselves

to immolation willingly, like the Aztec maidens, or the victims of Stalin's purges. The group thus splits off its violence from consciousness and transfers it not to the unconscious, but to religious or quasi-religious political institutions.[12]

The scapegoat mechanism is characterized by the following elements:

1. *Mimetic Desire*. We become human, in large part, by learning from others what to desire and then copying them. We imitate them (mimesis) by desiring what they desire. Such desire is in itself good. We learn by mimicry what is a good worth striving for. Value is defined for us as that which someone we admire wants.

2. *Mimetic Rivalry*. But in a world of scarcity, mimetic desire issues in a double bind: the one imitated says, "Be like me: value this object." But when the imitator reaches out to take it, rivalry occurs, and the one imitated says, "Do *not* be like me. It's mine."[13] Conflict inevitably ensues from mimetic desire, because both parties now competitively desire the same thing. Oedipal conflict is more simply explained on this model than on Freud's, Girard believes, and all other rivalries can be explained on this theory as well. The rival, who once modeled behavior, becomes the object of hostility and possibly violence.

3. *The Crisis of Distinctions*. When the differences that formerly separated potential rivals are dissolved as a result of their both desiring the same thing, the social distinctions by which order was preserved collapse. Girard calls this a "crisis of distinctions." Students seize the administration building, demanding a share in decision-making power that has previously been the sole prerogative of the administrators. Mill workers shut down the plant, insisting on a voice in shaping their new contract. The hierarchical barriers that society has so carefully erected, unjust as they may be, dike society against the flood of anarchy. When these distinctions collapse (as when soldiers in Vietnam refused to obey orders from their officers), that social system faces the possibility of collapse. Collapse can be averted, however, if society can find a scapegoat.

4. *The Necessary Victim*. The scapegoat can be a foreigner, an eccentric, a communist (or someone labeled "communist"), a witch, a carrier of the plague, a homosexual, a purveyor of new ideas, a prophet—in any case, his or her murder resolves the crisis. The fiction of the scapegoat's guilt must be maintained regardless of the real truth of the matter. The fact that hostilities cease following the scapegoat's death seems to confirm that he or she indeed was their cause and that therefore the execution was justified.[14] The key is the doctrine of Caiaphas: it is expedient that one person die and that the whole nation not perish (John 11:50). The group discharges its violence on the scapegoat and can now redirect its energies into mutual cooperation, even reconciliation.

5. *Sacralizing the Victim.* The necessary victim is rendered sacred by being regarded simultaneously as accursed and life bringing. As compensation for his or her sacrificial death, the victim is endowed with special honors and sometimes even elevated to divinity. Not only can violence now be survived, but it has also provided the impetus for the development of religious ritual and myth, and, through their generative influence, legislation and human culture.

6. *Sacrificial Repetition.* Subsequent sacrifices repeat in strictly controlled ritual the primordial structure of the scapegoat mechanism. Internal aggressions are thus diverted and expended ritually, and the social fabric is preserved.[15]

Religion is therefore, according to Girard, organized violence in the service of social tranquility. Religion covers up the sacrificial mechanism by means of myth, ritual, and prohibition. It institutionalizes amnesia regarding the origins of violence, and endows violence with an aura of necessity and divine ordination that disguises its cost to the victims. Religious systems cannot permit their violence to be known, even to themselves. Søren Kierkegaard identified this obfuscation with characteristic clarity: "The ethical expression for what Abraham did is, that he would murder Isaac; the religious expression is, that he would sacrifice Isaac."[16] By means of ritual, religion substitutes an animal for the original victim. By means of myth, it conceals the original violent murder while still maintaining an invisible connection to its life-giving power. And by elevating the victim to the status of a god, it erases remorse for his or her slaughter.

There is in the universe, however, a counterforce to the power of myth, ritual, and religion, says Girard, one "that tends toward the revelation of the immortal lie," and that is the Christian gospel.[17] Girard understands the Hebrew Bible as a long and laborious exodus out of the world of violence and sacred projections, an exodus plagued by many reversals and falling short of its goal. The mechanics of violence and projection remain partly hidden. The old sacred notions are never quite exposed in their true meaning, despite the process of revelation.[18] Nevertheless, here, and only here, is that process begun.

The violence of the Old Testament has always been a scandal to Christianity. The church has usually ducked the issue, by avoidance, allegorizing, Marcionism, or special pleading.[19] Raymund Schwager points out that there are six hundred passages of explicit violence in the Hebrew Bible, one thousand verses where God's own violent actions of punishment are described, a hundred passages where Yahweh expressly commands others to kill people, and several stories where God kills or tries to kill for no apparent reason (e.g., Exod. 4:24-26). Violence, Schwager concludes, is easily the most often mentioned activity and central theme of the Hebrew Bible.[20]

This violence is in part the residue of false ideas about God carried over from the general human past. It is also, however, the beginning of a process of raising the scapegoating mechanism to consciousness, so that these projections on God can be withdrawn. Now, for the first time in all of human history, God begins to be seen as identified with the *victims* of violence (the Exodus tradition; Isaiah 53; Mic. 4:2-4; Isa. 19:19-25; and Psalm 51, among others). All other myths, Girard says, have been written from the point of view of the victimizers. But these occasional critiques of domination in the Hebrew Bible continue to coexist with texts that call on Israel to exterminate its enemies now or in the last days (Mic. 4:13; Joel 3:1-21).[21]

In the Hebrew Bible, with only a few exceptions that are all legendary, whenever God acts to punish, God does so through human beings attacking each other. This indicates, says Schwager, that the actual initiative for killing does not originate in God, but is projected onto God by those who desire revenge. Yahweh's followers projected their own jealousy on God, and made God as jealous as they were. But something new emerges nonetheless: Yahweh openly insists on this jealousy, which begins to reveal Yahweh's singular relationship to Israel as one of love.[22]

The violence of the Bible is the necessary precondition for the gradual perception of its meaning. The scapegoat mechanism could have come to consciousness only in a violent society. The problem of violence could only emerge at the very heart of violence, in the most war-ravaged corridor on the globe, by a repeatedly subjugated people unable to seize and wield power for any length of time. The violence of Scripture, so embarrassing to us today, became the means by which sacred violence was revealed for what it is: a lie perpetrated against victims in the name of a God who, through violence, was working to expose violence for what it is and to reveal the divine nature as nonviolent.

It is not until the New Testament that the scapegoat mechanism is fully exposed and revoked. Here at last, Girard asserts, is an entire collection of books written from the point of view of the victims. Scripture rehabilitates persecuted sufferers. God is revealed, not as demanding sacrifice, but as taking the part of the sacrificed. From Genesis to Revelation, the victims cry for justice and deliverance from the world of myth where they are made scapegoats. In the cross these cries find vindication.

There is nothing unique about the death of Jesus—his sufferings, his persecution, his being scapegoated. Nor is there anything unique about the coalition of all the worldly powers, intent that one man should die for the people so that the nation should not be destroyed (John 11:50). What is astonishing, says Girard, is that, contrary to other mythological, political, and philosophical texts, the gospel denounces the verdict passed by these Powers as a total miscarriage

of justice, a perfect example of untruth, a crime against God. The Gospels are at great pains to show that the charges against Jesus do not hold water, not in order to avoid suspicion of subversion, but precisely to reveal the scapegoating mechanism. The enemy of the state and of religion is, in fact, an innocent victim.

In John's Gospel, Satan is called the "father of lies." "He [Satan] was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth" (8:44). That lie, says Dominique Barbé, consists precisely in dissembling the violence at the base of society. Murder calls forth murder, and the whole chain of slaughter is the consequence of a lie. Redemptive violence, so celebrated and haloed by memorials, rhetoric, and parades, is the lie spawned by Satan that keeps the world bound by this concatenation of murder and lie.[23] And, painfully, the Johannine church's hatred and rejection of Jews who had rejected it was the poisonous deposit that would later lead—when the church had become powerful—to the slaughter of Jews by Christians.

Jesus never succumbed to the perspective of the persecutors—neither in a positive way, by openly agreeing with his executioners, nor in a negative way, by yielding to vengeance in mimetic repetition of the executioners' crime. In Jesus there is a total absence of positive or negative complicity in violence. In his arraignment, trial, crucifixion, and death, the scapegoating mechanism is at last, categorically, revealed for all the world to see. Insofar as other deaths reflect the truth revealed in his dying, they share its integrity and continue its revelation.[24]

The earliest Christians were not able to sustain the intensity of this revelation, and dimmed it by confusing God's intention to reveal the scapegoating mechanism for what it was with the notion that God intended Jesus to die. This in turn led to their reinserting the new revelation into the scapegoat theology: Jesus was sent by God to be the *last* scapegoat and to reconcile us, once and for all, to God (the Epistle to the Hebrews).

This took the Powers off the hook, however. The earliest Epistles and all the Gospels had attested that Jesus was executed by the Powers.[25] Jesus' own view of his inevitable death at the hands of the Powers seems to have been that God's nonviolent reign could only come in the teeth of desperate opposition and the violent recoil of the Domination System: "from the days of John the Baptist until now, the reign of God has suffered violence."*[26] Now, however, Christian theology argued that *God* is the one who provides Jesus as a Lamb sacrificed in our stead; that God is the angry and aggrieved party who must be placated by blood sacrifice; that God is, finally, both sacrificer and sacrificed. Jesus must therefore cease to be a man executed for his integrity, and becomes a "Godman who can offer to God adequate expiation for us all" (Basil).[27] Rather than God

triumphing over the Powers through Jesus' nonviolent self-sacrifice on the cross, the Powers disappear from discussion, and God is involved in a transaction wholly within God's own self. But what is wrong with this God, that the legal ledgers can be balanced only by means of the death of an innocent victim? Jesus simply declared people forgiven, confident that he spoke the mind of God. Why then is a sacrificial victim necessary to make forgiveness possible? Does not the death of Jesus reveal that all such sacrifices are unnecessary?

The God whom Jesus revealed as no longer our rival, no longer threatening and vengeful, but unconditionally loving and forgiving, who needed no satisfaction by blood—this God of infinite mercy was metamorphosed by the church into the image of a wrathful God whose demand for blood atonement leads to God's requiring of his own Son a death on behalf of us all. The nonviolent God of Jesus comes to be depicted as a God of unequaled violence, since God not only allegedly demands the blood of the victim who is closest and most precious to him, but also holds the whole of humanity accountable for a death that God both anticipated and required.[28] Against such an image of God the revolt of atheism is an act of pure religion.

By contrast, the God whom Jesus reveals refrains from all forms of reprisal and demands no victims. God does not endorse holy wars or just wars or religions of violence. Only by being driven out by violence could God signal to humanity that the divine is nonviolent and is antithetical to the Kingdom of Violence.[29] As Simone Weil put it, the false God changes suffering into violence; the true God changes violence into suffering.[30] Jesus' message reveals that those who believe in divine violence are still mired in Satan's universe.[31] To be this God's offspring requires the unconditional and unilateral renunciation of violence. The reign of God means the complete and definitive elimination of every form of violence between individuals and nations. This is a realm and a possibility of which those imprisoned by their own espousal of violence cannot even conceive.[32] "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be seized by violence, but emptied himself of the mimetic spirit" (Phil. 2:5-6*).

In its early centuries, the church lived in conflict with the Roman Empire, and used the imagery of conflict to explain the efficacy of the cross. God and Satan were engaged in cosmic struggle. The Son of God became man, wrote Justin Martyr, "for the destruction of the demons."[33] Two irreconcilable systems strove for the allegiance of humanity. The Christus Victor or social theory of the atonement (more a set of images than a systematic doctrine) proclaimed release of the captives to those who had formerly been deluded and enslaved by the Domination System, and it set itself against that system with all its might.

With the conversion of Constantine, however, the empire assumed from the church the role of God's providential agent in history. Once Christianity became the religion of the empire, notes J. Denny Weaver, its success was linked to the success of the empire, and *preservation of the empire became the decisive criterion for ethical behavior*. The Christus Victor theology fell out of favor, not because of intrinsic inadequacies, but because it was subversive to the church's role as state religion. The church no longer saw the demonic as lodged in the empire, but in the empire's enemies. Atonement became a highly individual transaction between the believer and God; society was assumed to be Christian, so the idea that the work of Christ entails the radical critique of society was largely abandoned.[34]

The theory of atonement by blood has usually correlated throughout Christian history with support for a reactionary status quo.[35] It stresses the idea that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins, without acknowledging the degree to which the laws that we have broken (human and allegedly "divine") are often themselves sinful, oppressive, and evil (the Southern "Jim Crow" laws, for example, or Islamic rules regarding women). Laws, too, are Powers, are relative, and change from culture to culture and age to age. Like all Powers, they are necessary for human life; they are good, fallen, and need continual correction. Genuine immorality is a symptom that one is in bondage to Powers greater than oneself, or that one is in rebellion against the fundamental requirements of authentic existence in the world. But when God is modeled as an authoritarian lawgiver, then the highest virtue becomes obedience, an obedience required *even when the laws that we obey deprive us of our essential being*.

The Christus Victor or social theory of the atonement, by contrast, states that what Christ has overcome is precisely the Powers themselves. The forgiveness of which Col. 2:13-14 speaks is forgiveness for complicity in our own oppression and in that of others. Our alienation is not solely the result of our rebellion against God. It is also the result of our being socialized by alienating rules and requirements. We do not freely surrender our authenticity; it is stolen from us by the Powers. Before we reach the age of choice, our choices have already been to a high degree chosen for us by a system indifferent to our uniqueness. The Law itself is one of the Powers that separates us from the love of God; it is the "letter" that "kills" (2 Cor. 3:6).[36] Therefore, Jesus "gave himself for our sins to set us free from this Domination Epoch" (*aiōn*—Gal. 1:4*).

Christianity has, on the whole, succeeded no more than Judaism in unmasking the violence at the core of humanity's religions. Its accommodation to power politics through the infinitely malleable ideology of the just war, its abandonment of the Christus Victor or social theory of the atonement for the blood theory, its projection of the reign of God into an afterlife or the remote future—all this

gutted the church's message of its most radical elements. Jesus was divinized, as are many surrogate victims; the Mass (in the theology of the Council of Trent) became a perpetual sacrifice, rather than the end of all need for sacrifice; and Jews were scapegoated for the death of Jesus, so that the cycle of mimesis was set loose to run its violent course all over again.[37]

Nevertheless, the story was there for all to read in the Gospels, and it continues to work, like a time-release capsule, as an antidote to the scapegoating that still finds official sanction but diminished credibility in the world. The present cultural order cannot survive the revelation of the scapegoating mechanism, says Girard. The Domination System is premised on the belief that violence must be used to overcome violence. Wherever the gospel is truly heard, the scapegoat mechanism is rendered impotent, the persecutors' reports of their authorized actions are no longer believed, and the complicity of the Powers in officially endorsed executions of innocent victims is exposed as judicial murder. (Herein lies the world-historic significance of the exposure, by groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, of official torture and disappearances.)

Paul writes, "We speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the Powers (*archontōn*) of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:7-8*). This secret hidden since the foundation of the world is the scapegoat mechanism, and the rulers would never have crucified Jesus if they had realized that doing so would blow their cover.

Raymund Schwager presses Girard's theory one step further. Jesus "himself bore our sins in his body on the cross" (1 Pet. 2:24), not to reconcile God to us, as the blood-atonement theory has it, but to reconcile us to God (2 Cor. 5:18). God has renounced any accounting of sins; no repayment is required or even possible. God is not a stern and inflexible magistrate but a loving Abba. Why then was a redemptive act necessary? Because our resentment toward God and our will to kill leave us unable to turn to God. "God needs no reparation, but human beings must be extracted from their own prison if they are to be capable of accepting the pure gift of freely offered love. . . . It is not God who must be appeased, but humans who must be delivered from their hatred" of God.[38]

For Paul especially, the essence of sin is the desire to be God, which is in effect to enter into mimetic rivalry with God. Desire, seeing that God had forbidden it the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, corrupted itself to envy by persuading itself that God was envious first. We are meant to imitate God, says Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, but sin enters when imitation turns to envy and God becomes the ultimate rival. Desire thus transforms God into an idol on whom human beings not only project their own violence and

hatred, but whom they also depict to themselves as the sanctifier of the violence at the heart of all religious systems.[39] To desire to usurp the place of God inevitably leads a person to create God after the image of a jealous rival, and fosters an unconscious death wish against God.[40]

The human desire to be God is countered by the divine desire to become human. God reveals the divine weakness on the cross, leaving the soul no omnipotent rival to envy, and thus cutting the nerve of mimetic desire. "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa. 53:2). Jesus absorbed all the violence directed at him by people and by the Powers and still loved them. But if humanity killed the one who fully embodied God's intention for our lives, and God still loves us, then there is no need to try to earn God's love. And if God loves us unconditionally, there is no need to seek conditional love from the various Powers who promise us rewards in return for devotion.

When the early Christians proclaimed that "there is salvation in no one else" (Acts 4:12), this should be taken as literally true: only through Jesus is the scapegoat mechanism exposed and the spiral of violence broken. "Salvation" here is an anthropological, not a theological, term. It simply states a fact about human survival in the face of human violence. Nothing is hidden except to be revealed (Mark 4:22): even "disappeared" and tortured people serve to reveal the violence of the Domination System, and the ideological justifications that the Powers advance (anticommunism, anticapitalism, national security) become less and less convincing. The problem is that, once the gospel has deprived a society of the scapegoating mechanism, that society is defenseless against the very violence in which it trusts. For us today, the only alternative to love and nonviolence is apocalypse. And it is not a vengeful God who ushers in apocalypse, but ourselves. The "wrath" or judgment of God is precisely God's "giving us up" to the consequences of our own violence (Rom. 1:18-32; Acts 7:42). It is now, in Gil Bailie's words, a race between the gospel and the effects of the gospel: either we learn to stop mimetic violence and scapegoating, or, having been stripped of the scapegoating mechanism as an outlet for our violence, we will consume ourselves in an apocalypse of fire.[41] In a world of nuclear weapons, even more urgently than in that of the Roman Empire, scapegoating must be exposed and eradicated, or we will destroy ourselves.

Evaluating Girard's Hypothesis

A theory of such global perspectives as Girard's cannot be casually assessed. It will require the work of a generation of scholars from a variety of fields to take the measure of his mind. I regard his treatment of violence as fundamentally correct. At the same time there are some matters of dispute.

1. I do not agree with Girard that all myths are lies masking events of generative violence. I believe that they often tell the truth, and that they are, like the Babylonian myth of redemptive violence, rather straightforward depictions of the actual power relations in a given society.

2. I regard the scapegoat motif as merely a subset or variation on the theme of violence (one that does involve attempts to disguise the real injustice of victimage), and see the combat myth of redemptive violence as more generic and common. Squaring off and slugging it out is the norm, and no third-party scapegoat is usually involved (see, e.g., the standard cartoon-show format). Scapegoating occurs more often in intragroup rivalry rather than among nations. In wars, by contrast, the more powerful combatant simply wins, and makes the loser subordinate.

Explicit scapegoating behavior has been documented among long-tailed macaques. What Girard leaves out of his theory, however, is *reconciliatory* behavior, already present among primates perhaps some thirty million years ago. Conflicts are averted or resolved by grooming, submitting, third-party mediation, embracing, and kissing, according to Frans de Waal. Among Homo sapiens children this list extends to include apologizing, gift-giving, pledges to cooperate, and sharing of food or toys.[42] It is not scapegoating alone, but an entire repertoire of behaviors and cultural institutions (law, police, courts, public opinion, mores, etc.) that helps to prevent bloody conflict. Scapegoating is an extreme and violent solution, marking the failure of the more normal means for preventing violence.

3. The idea of the sacrificial, expiatory death of Jesus is far more pervasive in the New Testament than Girard acknowledges (Mark 14:24 par.//1 Cor. 11:24-25; John 1:29, 36; Rom. 3:25; 4:25; 5:6-9; 8:3; 14:15; 1 Cor. 5:7; 10:16-21; 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:14; Gal. 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; Eph. 5:2; Col. 1:20; 1 Thess. 5:10; Hebrews; 1 Pet. 1:2, 19; 3:18; 1 John 1:7; 2:2; Rev. 1:5; 5:9, among others).[43] And it is not Hebrews and the later writings that proved most influential in the reassertion of the sacrificial hermeneutic, but Paul himself.

Paul betrays a certain ambivalence toward the sacrifice of Christ. Girard has stressed one side of that ambivalence, his critics the other. For Paul, Christ is the *end* of sacrificing and the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism, as Girard correctly perceives. But by depicting him as sacrifice, Paul also gives credence to the notion that God caused Jesus to be a *final* "sacrifice of atonement by his blood" (Rom. 3:25). If Christ's death saves us from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9); if Jesus was sent by God as a sin offering (1 Cor. 15:3; Rom. 8:3, NRSV margin); if Christ is a paschal lamb sacrificed on our behalf (1 Cor. 5:7), it would appear that God's wrath must indeed be appeased. Paul has apparently been unable fully to distinguish the insight that Christ is the *end* of sacrificing

from the idea that Christ is the *final* sacrifice whose death is an atonement to God. And Christianity has suffered from this confusion ever since.

4. I doubt that the scapegoat motif is foundational for all the world's myths, or that the Judeo-Christian Scriptures have a monopoly on the criticism of violence. There are myths that are nonviolent (the Hopi emergence myth, to name only one)[44] and as true as anything ever articulated by Christianity, and Girard's Christian triumphalism does them grave injustice. There are branches of major world religions that are nonviolent in many respects (Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism), and numerous surviving "primitive" societies that are remarkably nonviolent in their actual practice.[45] But (in fairness to Girard) while these traditions do reduce violence by ritual, asceticism, injunction, and example, they do not raise the scapegoating mechanism to consciousness. They do not reveal the secret hidden from the foundation of the world—or whenever scapegoating got started.

5. How early was human sacrifice? There is a smattering of evidence for animal or human sacrifices performed by hunter-gatherers. Gimbutas cites a find of forty-five deer carcasses at Stellmoor near Hamburg, apparently sacrificed by weighting them with stones and throwing them into water (ca. 20,000–12,000 B.C.E.). Bear sacrifice apparently goes back to the Upper Paleolithic, and rams and bulls were sacrificed to the Bird and Snake Goddess in the East Balkan and Vinca civilizations from early times.[46] But animal sacrifice appears on a large scale only after animal domestication by agrarian or pastoral societies.

There seems to be little evidence of human sacrifice prior to the beginning of the androcratic period, however (around 3000 B.C.E.).[47] So whether the scapegoat goes back to the origins of humanity is far from certain. Here again, as with Marx and Freud and Eisler, there is an impulse to ground a mythic motif in historical fact. In Girard's case this is especially ironic, since he regards all myth as untrue.

Both Girard and Eisler may be correct. The scapegoat mechanism may have been precisely the means by which greater violence was averted; hence the relatively pacific societies that antedated the rise of the great civilizations. One could, in fact, modify Eisler's somewhat idyllic picture of early societies by arguing that they were as pacific as they were precisely because they had discovered the scapegoat mechanism. Unfortunately, scapegoating is not likely to have left much archaeological evidence, since it required no altar, but merely stoning;[48] and primitive societies today show no sign of scapegoating rituals.

6. It is risky to build an analytical theory on speculations about prehistorical culture when the evidence is so thin. Universal claims for a single-cause solution to the problem of violence have always proved inflated in the past, and there is no reason to expect anything different here. But the real value of Girard's

hypothesis lies not in its theory of origins, but in its analytical power to unmask the nature of human violence today. Even if aspects of Girard's overall thesis fail to convince, his understanding of mimetic rivalry and conflict and of the scapegoat are among the most profound intellectual discoveries of our time, and will remain permanent contributions to our understanding of the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion.