

Scapegoating and the Cross

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The Scapegoat Mechanism

Human nature, when it is seeking power, wants either to play the victim or to create victims of others. In fact, the second follows from the first. Once we start feeling sorry for ourselves, we will soon find someone else to blame, accuse or attack—and with impunity! It settles the dust quickly, and it takes away any immediate shame, guilt, or anxiety. In other words, it works—at least for a while.

When we read today's news, we realize the pattern has not changed much in all of history. Hating, fearing, or diminishing someone else holds us together for some reason. Scapegoating, or the creating of necessary victims, is in our hard wiring. Philosopher René Girard (1923–2015) calls “the scapegoat mechanism” the central pattern for the creation and maintenance of cultures worldwide since the beginning. [1]

The sequence, without being too clever, goes something like this: we compare, we copy, we compete, we conflict, we conspire, we condemn, and we crucify. If we do not recognize some variation of this pattern within ourselves and put an end to it in the early stages, it is almost inevitable. That is why spiritual teachers of any depth will always teach simplicity of lifestyle and freedom from the competitive power game, which is where it all begins. It is probably the only way out of the cycle of violence.

It's hard for us religious people to hear, but the most persistent violence in human history has been “sacralized violence”—violence that we treated as sacred, but which was, in fact, not. Human beings have found a most effective way to legitimate their instinct toward fear and hatred. They imagine that they are fearing and hating on behalf of something holy and noble: God, religion, truth, morality, their children, or love of country. It takes away all guilt, and one can even think of oneself as representing the moral high ground or being responsible and prudent as a result. It never occurs to most people that they are becoming what they fear and hate.

This week we enter Holy Week, the days leading up to Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. As long as we deal with the real meaning of evil and sin by some means other than forgiveness and healing, we will keep projecting, fearing, and attacking it over there (“scapegoating”), instead of “gazing” on it within ourselves and “weeping” over it. The longer we contemplate the cross, the more we recognize our own complicity *in* and profits made *from* the sin of others. Forgiveness demands three new simultaneous “seeings”: I must see God in the other; I must access God in myself; and I must experience God in a new way that is larger than an “enforcer.” That is a whole new world seen in three dimensions. The real “3-D”!

References:

[1] The scapegoat concept is a key feature of Girard's thought, especially in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), chapter 4; and *The Scapegoat* (1982), chapter 3.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (Franciscan Media: 2008), 134–135, 194.

A Temporary Solution

The word “scapegoating” originated from an ingenious ritual described in Leviticus 16. According to Jewish law, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest laid hands on an “escaping” goat, placing all the sins of the Jewish people from the previous year onto the animal. Then the goat was beaten with reeds and thorns, driven out into the desert, and the people went home rejoicing. Violence towards the innocent victim was apparently quite effective at temporarily relieving the group’s guilt and shame. The same scapegoating dynamic was at play when European Christians burned supposed heretics at the stake, and when white Americans lynched Black Americans. In fact, the pattern is identical and totally non-rational.

Whenever the “sinner” is excluded, our collective ego is delighted and feels relieved and safe. It works, but only for a while, because it is merely an illusion. Repeatedly believing the lie, that *this time we have the true culprit*, we become more catatonic, habitually ignorant, and culpable—because, of course, scapegoating never really eliminates evil in the first place. As Russian philosopher Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” [1] As long as the evil is “over there,” we can change or expel someone else as the contaminating element. We then feel purified and at peace. But it is not the peace of Christ, which “the world cannot give” (see John 14:27).

Jesus became the scapegoat to reveal the universal lie of scapegoating. He became the sinned-against one to reveal the hidden nature of scapegoating, so that we would see how wrong even educated and well-meaning people can be. This is perfectly represented by Pilate and Caiaphas (state and religion), who both find their artificial reasons to condemn him (see John 16:8–11 and Romans 8:3).

In worshiping Jesus as the scapegoat, Christians should have learned to stop scapegoating, but we didn’t. We are still utterly wrong whenever we create arbitrary victims to avoid our own complicity in evil. It seems it is the most effective diversionary tactic possible. History has shown us that authority itself is not a good guide. Yet for many people, authority soothes their anxiety and relieves their own responsibility to form a mature conscience. We love to follow someone else and let them take the responsibility. It is a universal story line in history and all cultures.

With the mistaken view of God as a Punisher-in-Chief that most Christians seem to hold, we think our own violence is necessary and even good. But there is no such thing as *redemptive* violence. Violence doesn’t *save*; it only destroys all parties in both the short and long term. Jesus replaced the myth of redemptive violence with the truth of *redemptive suffering*. He showed us on the cross how to hold the pain and let it transform us.

References:

[1] Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, I–II, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (Harper & Row: 1974), 168.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *CONSPIRE 2016: Everything Belongs*, sessions 2 and 3 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2016).

Opposing Evil without Becoming It

The mystery of the cross teaches us how to stand against hate without becoming hate, how to oppose evil without becoming evil ourselves. We find ourselves stretching in both directions—toward God’s goodness and also toward recognition of our own complicity in evil. In that moment, we will feel crucified. We hang in between, without resolution, our very life a paradox held in hope by God (see Romans 8:23–25).

Over the next three days, I share a few examples of women who have understood the mystery of the cross in a personal and embodied way. They have known great suffering; they have been victims of oppression and cruelty and yet they sought to respond consciously, not reactively. Today, I offer a journal entry from ETTY HILLESUM (1914–1943), a young Jewish woman who was killed at Auschwitz. In her diary, she recreates a conversation with her friend, writer KLAAS SMELIK, about the hatred and bullying she saw within her own community:

Klaas, all I really wanted to say is this: we have so much work to do on ourselves that we shouldn’t even be thinking of hating our so-called enemies. We are hurtful enough to one another as it is. And I don’t really know what I mean when I say that there are bullies and bad characters among our own people, for no one is really “bad” deep down. I should have liked to reach out to that [bully] with all his fears, I should have liked to trace the source of his panic, to drive him ever deeper into himself, that is the only thing we can do, Klaas, in times like these.

And you, Klaas, give a tired and despondent wave and say, “But what you propose to do takes such a long time, and we don’t really have all that much time, do we?” And I reply, “What you want is something people have been trying to get for the last two thousand years, and for many more thousand years before that, in fact, ever since [humankind] has existed on earth.” “And what do you think the result has been, if I may ask?” you say.

And I repeat with the same old passion, although I am gradually beginning to think that I am being tiresome, “It is the only thing we can do, Klaas, I see no alternative, each of us must turn inward and destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others. And remember that every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable.”

And you, Klaas, dogged old class fighter that you have always been, dismayed and astonished at the same time, say, “But that—that is nothing but Christianity!”

And I, amused by your confusion, retort quite coolly, “Yes, Christianity, and why ever not?” [1]

Richard again: It is a truth of the world's major religions that the goal of God's work—God by any name, I might add—is always healing reconciliation and not retributive justice, resurrection and not death.

References:

[1] Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941–1943; and, Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (Henry Holt and Company: 1996), 211–212.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (Franciscan Media: 2008), 203–204.