

THE BIBLICAL TESTAMENTS AS A MARRIAGE OF CONVIENCE:  
RENE GIRARD AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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It is not politic these days to bear witness to peace. To seek peace is equated with 'liberalism' or is construed as a form of treason. Peace is perceived as unpatriotic. Furthermore, the Bush administration's haste to war has justified a lot of similar talk of war around the world and virtually the entire planet is held hostage to the specter of violence. The Church contributes to the rhetoric of war as its theology capitulates more and more to what Girard has called the scapegoat mechanism. The Christian church can no longer afford to flirt with this whirlpool. It is a maelstrom that will destroy.

This essay will show that there is an alternative hermeneutic to be found in the gospel tradition, particularly in the appropriation of the Hebrew Scriptures. This hermeneutic is completely at odds with much of contemporary American Christianity. The rise and influence of Evangelicalism and its concomitant vision of a Christian culture founded in violence creates the occasion for us to ask whether Evangelicalism is 'orthodox.' Or whether, in fact, there is now anthropological justification, for Protestants at least, to consider the minority hermeneutical opinion of the Anabaptist or peace church tradition.

One aspect of the work that Rene Girard will bequeath to the twenty first century is the reopening of the question, "What do the two Biblical Testaments have to do with one another?" We have grown accustomed to referring to these as the Old and New Testaments. In point of fact, the very designation 'old' and 'new' implies a relationship already. But what kind of relationship?

John Rogerson points out that "an examination of the New Testament indicates that there are few examples where specific Old Testament laws or pieces of teaching are detailed for observance by Christians."<sup>1</sup> James Kugel and Rowan Greer contend that while the early church authors did not question the authority of the Old Testament, "there remains, however, the issue of how that authority was understood."<sup>2</sup> Our proposition in this essay is that, unlike its peers from Justin Martyr to contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> John Rogerson, et. al., The Study and Use of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 9.

<sup>2</sup> James Kugel and Rowan Greer, Early Biblical Interpretation (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 113-14.

theology, the hermeneutic approach of Rene Girard has more to commend it as a model faithful to the Bible than the great majority of previous approaches.

Girard's most discerning comments on Holy Scripture come from Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World.<sup>3</sup> In this volume, Girard most clearly spells out his understanding of the relation of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. He says,

“I think it is possible to show that only the texts of the gospels manage to achieve what the Old Testament leaves incomplete. These texts, therefore, serve as an extension of the Judaic Bible, bringing to completion an enterprise that the Judaic Bible did not take far enough, as Christian tradition has always maintained.”<sup>4</sup>

In essence Girard takes us back to reformulate what the early Church fathers had formulated, the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Our understanding of the relation of these two parts of Holy Scripture has tremendous implications for our hermeneutics. As we hope to demonstrate, the post apostolic (125+ C.E.) use of the Hebrew Bible is fundamentally different than is found in the New Testament. The consequences of a reexamination of this hermeneutic relationship from a Girardian perspective are so far reaching they will either alter the Church's preaching as we know it or the theory will eventually be 'mythologized' (lied about) and deemed heresy.

We believe there is a unity to the Testaments. This unity is not a theological unity but an anthropological one.<sup>5</sup> First, Girard's hermeneutic proposals will be summarized. His criticism of a Platonic component in exegesis is used to focus the discussion. Second, the differences and similarities between Marcion and Justin Martyr on the relationship of the Testaments will allow us to see where the early church made a fundamental miscalculation. Finally, we will briefly examine the influence of this sacrificial hermeneutic in the theology of John Calvin and his heirs. This in turn will help us designate American Protestant Christianity as little more than '*Cultural Protestantism*.' A brief concluding comparison with Anabaptist hermeneutics opens the door to discuss a non-sacrificial hermeneutic and its appropriation.

### Girard's Hermeneutic Observations

Girard says that the Hebrew Scriptures have begun a hermeneutic enterprise that is only clearly brought to light in the gospel texts. This enterprise is the demystification of the mechanism from which religion and culture stem: the unanimous violence against the scapegoat.<sup>6</sup> This unanimous victimage occurs when a mimetic crisis reaches

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<sup>3</sup> Originally published in 1978 and translated in 1987 by Stanford University Press. (Abbreviated as TH.)

<sup>4</sup> TH: 158.

<sup>5</sup> It begins where the New Testament preaching begins, with a theology of the cross. Both Luther and Kierkegaard who begin and end with a 'theology of the cross' can also be brought in as examples of thinkers moving toward an anthropological rendering of the Bible.

<sup>6</sup> TH: 155.

feverish proportions and demands an outlet so that internal mimetic aggression will not lead to an all-encompassing destruction. One crucial element in mimetic theory is Girard's description of mimesis (s.v.). An illustration that hits home more than we would like to admit will suffice.

“Two children [are] in a room full of toys. As soon as one of them reaches out for a toy, as soon as one toy becomes the object of desire, the second child imitates the first child. The first child is a model. As both children now focus their attention on that one toy, a rivalry ensues. The model has ‘issued’ a double bind in his act of reaching; at one and the same time he makes the toy an object of desire by reaching for it and as soon as he reaches for the toy an implied prohibition is sent, the toy belongs to him because he had it first. The rivalry, as most parents can attest, usually turns violent.”<sup>7</sup>

The acquisitive character of mimesis is the component that was missed by Plato and underlies the Western inability to see the connection between violence and religion.<sup>8</sup> Mimesis is basically harmless imitation in Plato. As Girard observes, there is no innocent harmless mimesis and one “cannot ritually imitate the crisis of doubles without running the risk of inciting real violence.”<sup>9</sup>

Religion feigns or simulates a mimetic disintegration and ‘religious sacrifice.’ The final act of violence culminates a succession of socially aggressive acts.<sup>10</sup> Religion is ‘feigned’ mimetic crisis and resolution because it shares in the lie that the victim deserved what he or she got.

The demystification process, i.e., the process of exposing the true character of violence, begins by pointing out the origin of myth, ritual and prohibition (see the Introductory Articles) in the false attribution of guilt to the scapegoat. The failure to discern the mimetic process eventuates in the expulsion of the victim, as can be seen in non-biblical mythology. This expulsion or sacrifice in turn generates the rituals and prohibitions of both religion and culture while the justification for this generation is enshrined in its mythology.

The Judeo-Christian tradition exposes the victimage mechanism offering a distinctive treatment of myth.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely the intervention of God in the ‘founding murder’ of Abel that differentiates the Jewish myth from other ancient myths. The innocent Abel may indeed be the ground of Cain's city, but it is a city doomed to disintegrate because it is grounded in a mechanism that will ultimately fail. This is clearly seen in the lament of Lamech on the escalation of human violence and vengeance.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Hardin “Violence: Escaping the Paradigm of Constantine and Augustine” Brethren Life and Thought

<sup>8</sup> TH: 8, 15.

<sup>9</sup> TH: 21.

<sup>10</sup> TH: 22, 24.

<sup>11</sup> TH: 144.

The earliest stories of the Jewish people are stories that share violence, death, and victimization of the poor, the needy and the outcast. They differ from mythology in that God does not take the side of the aggressor but the victim. David Tracy who speaks of the Bible as the 'church's classic' has pointed out that any true hermeneutic that would call itself 'critical' must come to terms with the voices of the outcast.<sup>12</sup> He suggests that "like all strictly metaphysical questions, the fundamental questions of religion must be logically odd questions, since they are questions about the most fundamental presuppositions, the most beliefs, of all knowing, willing and acting."<sup>13</sup>

To listen to the Bible from the perspective of the scapegoat is the internal biblical logic, the internal biblical hermeneutic. This perception of what Bonhoeffer would call 'the view from below' is the signal merit of the biblical text and is what grounds its authority. Girard concludes,

"The Judeo-Christian scriptures should be regarded as the first complete revelation of the structuring power of victimage in pagan religions, and the question of their anthropological value can and should be examined as a purely scientific question, in the light of whether or not myths become intelligible when interpreted as more or less distant traces of misunderstood episodes of victimage. I believe that they do."<sup>14</sup>

For Girard, the unity of the two Testaments stems not from a theological datum such as God or covenant, but from an anthropological datum, unanimous victimage. The propensity of humanity to turn to violence presents a theory of humanity. As Andrew McKenna wryly put it, "In the beginning was the weapon."<sup>15</sup> Girard has been influenced in this regard by the anthropological thinking of Simone Weil. In a personal conversation Girard affirmatively quoted her saying that "in the gospel there is a theory of humanity."<sup>16</sup>

It might appear that Western Christian theology is anthropologically centered. After all, isn't this what Barth seemed to lament? But it is a false center largely due to the influence of Augustine. The neo-Platonist Augustine, deeply influenced by Platonism, betrays a dualism when discussing the human condition. Augustine's dualistic thinking could not accommodate a world without a primordial act of divine violence or expulsion.<sup>17</sup> Violence and the sacred had become merged in Augustine. Unfortunately, for western Christian theology, Augustine's gloomy anthropology was brought to the fore again at the time of the Reformation but neither Calvin nor Luther was entirely able

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<sup>12</sup> Plurality and Ambiguity (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 68ff.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 87

<sup>14</sup> In Robert Hamerton-Kelly ed., Violent Origins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 117.

<sup>15</sup> Semeia, Vol. 33, 185, page 5. Girard is not contending for a historical reconstruction but a generative principle for reading texts and rituals. See Violent Origins, 91.

<sup>16</sup> March 1988; see "Simone Weil vue par Rene Girard" in Cahiers Tome 9, No 3, 201-213.

<sup>17</sup> A Hilary Armstrong, St. Augustine and Christian Platonism (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1967); R.J. O'Connell, "The Platonian Fall of the Soul in St Augustine" Traditio Vol 19 (1963), 1-35.

to break free from the dualistic presuppositions of their heritage.<sup>18</sup> The Reformers in turn read Paul through this Augustinian lens and the consequences of this anthropological reading have been seen worldwide ever since.<sup>19</sup>

The Christian anthropological quest has not always followed Augustinian ways. Certain philosophical and theological traditions sought to articulate an anthropology that was Christologically centered. For the most part, however, Western Christianity has opted to remain within its Augustinian bondage. John Kent has chronicled the failed search for anthropological rootedness and concluded that Western Christian theology is “at the end of the line.”<sup>20</sup> The First World War evoked Karl Barth’s judgement on theology. The utopian dream of the Enlightenment had crashed on the rocks of humanity’s violence. And for the next 100 years, the world would be engaged in war. The twentieth century is the century of war; it is the century of the violent logos.

To break free from the Platonic circle in biblical interpretation it is necessary to reexamine the matrix within which Christian theology developed, particularly looking at the underlying presuppositions concerning the relationship of the Testaments.<sup>21</sup> A more holistic and consistent approach is needed in our investigations if we are to find the distinctive element of the anthropology of the Bible.<sup>22</sup> The Bible, according to Girard, is in the process of showing that violence is a human characteristic not a divine one. In the words of the second century Epistle to Diognetus, “violence is not an attribute of God.”<sup>23</sup> And this is really the same problem that faced Marcion, what do the violent God of the Hebrew Bible and the loving ‘abba’ of Jesus have in common?

### Marcion, Justin Martyr and Early Christian Hermeneutics

An explicit dualism remained in Marcion’s thought. The rigorist response of Judaism following the collapse of the Temple, an anti-Hellenistic literal rendering of Torah and anti-Jewish sentiment all contributed to Marcion’s rejection of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>24</sup> The mimetic conflict between Synagogue and Church in Pontus only reinforced Marcion’s dualism and his rejection of the Creator God and thus the covenant God of Judaism. When the early church leaders went to relate the Testaments I think they were on the right track but they got on the wrong train.

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<sup>18</sup> Both Calvin and Luther quote Augustine more than any other church figure. This is because Augustine was the authoritative figure behind Roman Catholicism. Neither Luther nor Calvin wanted their work to appear as anything other than a re-formation of the true church. For both Luther and Calvin, going back to the early church meant going as far as Augustine, but really, no further.

<sup>19</sup> Krister Stendahl, Paul Among Jews and Gentiles (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> John H.S. Kent, The End of the Line? (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982). If this was true twenty years ago, September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 has shown it is perhaps even truer today.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Torrance has called for just such an approach in Theological Science (London: Oxford, 1969); Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); see also Dietrich Ritschl The Logic of Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> TH: 358, 443.

<sup>23</sup> Kirsopp Lake, ed., The Apostolic Fathers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 365.

<sup>24</sup> The most recent thorough examination is R. Joseph Hoffman, Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), 8, 27.

We can compare Justin Martyr's theory of the relationship of the Testaments with that of Marcion. Several reasons propose themselves. First, Justin's influence on early Christian theology, particularly on Irenaeus, is well known. Second, it is with Justin that the church achieves the first working hypothesis of the relationship between the Testaments.<sup>25</sup> Third, Justin claims to have written a treatise that responds to Marcion.

Justin's appropriation of the Hebrew Scriptures would set the tone for the next 1900 years. It is therefore all the more important to note Justin's Platonic background.<sup>26</sup> Both the heretic Justin is fighting and Justin himself are seeking to work out their interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in the context of Platonic dualism. Now Justin does this when he engages prophecy-fulfillment and allegory, both rabbinic models of exegesis as William Shotwell has demonstrated.<sup>27</sup> This is the apparent consonance with New Testament exegetical traditions. But the appropriation of rabbinic hermeneutics mingled with Platonic presuppositions is something else. The methods of rabbinic exegesis are congruent with those of the New Testament authors, but those of Platonic origin are not.<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Woolcombe contends that "in the sub-apostolic age the historical typology of the Bible was at once obscured and overlaid by the symbolic typology of Hellenistic Platonism."<sup>29</sup>

Justin's use of Platonic ideology in exegesis can be seen in the number of times he uses the word 'symbolon' to refer to a peshet type reading where biblical prophecy is equivalent to current history. Only, in this case, Justin's appropriation of the Hebrew bible is still sufficiently christologically centered so that if it said in the Hebrew Bible it can be fitted to the history of Jesus. This method is taken to extremes in the Epistle to Barnabas, reminiscent of Philo and foreshadowing Origen.

Justin missed significant distinctions between the Hebrew prophecies and the history of Jesus. This occurs in "the habit of tracing structural analogies between the Passion and the sacrifices instituted by other religions. The sacrificial reading is capable only of seeing such analogies of this kind."<sup>30</sup> Justin missed the strategic difference between the gospels and mythology claiming that while both had the same symbolic structure, only the gospel was historical.<sup>31</sup> To be sure Justin does not have as developed a sacrificial understanding of the death of Christ as does say, Melito of Sardis. Nevertheless, his habit 'of tracing structural analogies' laid the groundwork for a sacrificial theology to take hold.

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<sup>25</sup> Kugel and Rowan, *op. Cit.*, 14ff.

<sup>26</sup> Johannes Quasten, Patrology I, (Westminster: Newman, 1951), 207 says, "it is not surprising that Justin's theology reveals the influence of Plato; it was his, among all of the pagan systems, that Justin valued most highly."

<sup>27</sup> The Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr (London: SPCK, 1965).

<sup>28</sup> Richard Longenecker, Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); Leonard Goepfelt, Typos (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> "The Biblical Origins and Patristic Development of Typology" in Essays on Typology (London: SCM, 1957) ed., by G.W.H. Lampe and K.J. Woolcombe, 69.

<sup>30</sup> TH: 233.

<sup>31</sup> Apology, 54; Dialogue 9, 59. Girard might say that if we recognize the same structure between myth and gospel then since we accept the historicity of the Passion, we might ask where the 'historical' victim is in the myth and for that we would seek traces of 'the lie.'

Justin found a theological connection between the Testaments in the typology of the scapegoat Jesus but the fusion of type and prototype obscured any significant differences between them. Thus begins the “Christian” myth. Justin’s Platonic typological exegesis opened the door to read the Gospels through a sacrificial lens, the very hermeneutic they demystify. While Justin fought to keep out Marcionite dualism from coming in the front door, Plato slipped in the back.

As a primary example we can cite Justin’s use of Psalm 110.<sup>32</sup> In early Christianity it is the most frequently quoted text from the Hebrew Bible, particularly verses 1 and 4.

The Lord said to my Lord:  
“Sit at my right hand  
Until I make your enemies  
A footstool for your feet.”

The Lord has sworn  
And will not change His mind:  
“You are a priest forever,  
In the order of Melchizedeck.”

In the New Testament there are over twenty-five citations of these verses. Psalm 110 probably originated prior to the exile, but was used by the Hasmoneans to justify their royal and priestly prerogatives.<sup>33</sup> In addition to the priestly Melchizedeck, they also claimed the violent Phineas as a model (see Num 25, I Macc 2:26ff). The violence of Psalm 110, verses 2-3 and 5-6, admirably suited a militant interpretation of the Psalm. However, in the New Testament, only verses 1 and 4 are quoted. David Hay suggests that this can be traced back to Jesus himself offering an anti-Hasmonean interpretation of the text.<sup>34</sup> For Jesus, a violent interpretation of the Psalm would be a misinterpretation of his mission. There is a specific hermeneutic occurring here.

I would say that verses 2-3 and 5-6 are omitted in the New Testament discussion of Jesus’ messiahship because they participate in the sacrificial hermeneutic, a way of thinking we believe Jesus intentionally sought to expose. The first Christian to quote Psalm 110 in its entirety is Justin Martyr who incorporates both sacrificial and non-sacrificial elements in his exegesis.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Manilo Simonetti has carefully demonstrated that heretics and orthodox did not use different texts to support their positions but exegeted the same texts, Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994). We have no exegesis of Marcion on Psalm 110 but it is possible that Justin was aware of the ‘Hasmonean’ interpretation within Judaism and this serves as the foil for his use of Psalm 110.

<sup>33</sup> David M. May, Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26. William Lane, Commentary on the Gospel of Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) misses this point in his desire to affirm some sort of divine authority for the entire Psalm. Ragnar Leivestad, Jesus in His Own Perspective (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) prefers to admit that it is a puzzle, an interpretive enigma. This at least is more honest.

<sup>35</sup> Dialogue 32

Justin's influence on Irenaeus whose theory of the canon was to have a profound effect cannot be underestimated.<sup>36</sup> Augustine's dictum that 'the old in the new is revealed and the new in the old is concealed' is little more than a paraphrase of Justin. Such a position continues to be propagated to the present.<sup>37</sup>

This does not mean that Justin Martyr has a full blown sacrificial theology; that cannot be demonstrated. But it can be shown that Justin's exegetical presuppositions allowed sacrificial thinking to begin to penetrate the developing early Christian theological tradition. To be fair, there are elements of a non-sacrificial reading in Justin's Dialogue with Trypho. Justin says, following the Hebrew prophets, that the rituals and prohibitions of the Torah were given because of the tendency of the people to sin. Justin also quotes extensively several anti-sacrificial texts from the prophets, including Amos 5-6 and Jeremiah 7:22ff. Even the Temple is not "commanded by God but used by concession that you [Jews] in giving yourself to him might not worship idols."<sup>38</sup> Irenaeus, apparently taking up a common tradition will pick up this same anti-sacrificial motif.<sup>39</sup> Sacrifice in the early church would become rapidly spiritualized in a positive direction where the appropriate sacrifices were those of praise and thanksgiving.<sup>40</sup> But the damage had been done.

Some circles were apparently more aware of their non-sacrificial hermeneutic. Epiphanius records that Matthew 5.17 in the Ebionite tradition read "I came to abolish sacrifices and if you do not cease from sacrificing, the wrath of God will come upon you." In an early Christian document titled 'Timothy and Aquila', Deuteronomy is rejected as non-inspired because it was "not dictated by God, but 'deuteronomized' by Moses; this is the reason why he did not put it in the *aron*, that is, in the ark of the covenant."<sup>41</sup>

We also see this in the Pseudo Clementine Recognitions. There is a preview of Girard's scriptural principle: God was in the process of weaning the Jewish people from sacrifice. Sacrifice was allowed for a season until the prophet like Moses should come to take away all sacrifice.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the Pseudo Clementine Homilies assert that the Hebrew Scriptures say both true and false things about God!<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, The Formation of the Christian Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

<sup>37</sup> As in 'The Constitution of Divine Revelation' in Documents of Vatican II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 758-760. Protestants can refer to A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield, Inspiration (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

<sup>38</sup> Dialogue 20, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Against Heresies 4.17-18.

<sup>40</sup> Frances Young, Sacrifice and the Death of Christ (London: SCM, 1975); Robert Daly, The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

<sup>41</sup> Cited in R.P.C. Hanson, Allegory and Event (Richmond: John Knox, 1959), 289-290.

<sup>42</sup> Recognitions I.36-38. Raymund Schwager also uses this pedagogical analogy in his 'theodrama' for which he finds support in both Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus, Jesus in the Drama of Salvation.

<sup>43</sup> Homilies 2.38-46.

Finally we must mention once again the Epistle to Diognetus. Of all early Christian literature outside the New Testament it is the most consistently non-sacrificial. We saw earlier the observation that 'violence is not an attribute of God.' In this little essay, the Jews are reproved for thinking God needs sacrifice (3.3-4); God has called Christians to the post/role of scapegoat (6.9-10); the proof of the Christian message is found in the Christian ability to endure being scapegoated (7.7-9); God is, was, and always will be long suffering and free from wrath (8.7-8); there is an awareness of desire (epithumia, 9.11); Christ in becoming the scapegoat par excellence restores humanity to God becoming a ransom on our behalf (lutron hyper humon, 9:2-6). Finally, imitation of God is possible (10.4) by which a human may become like God. This imitation consists in caring for those weaker than oneself (10.6-7) and rejecting mimetic desire (10.5).

As interesting as these few cases may be, an anti-sacrificial hermeneutic really had no chance to take hold in the early church as soon as Plato was introduced into the discussion. Western civilization missed the acquisitive character of mimesis, following Plato. And so it is easy to see how so much of early Christian theology developed a sacrificial hermeneutic and practiced that hermeneutic! Take, e.g., the church's feud with Judaism. Christianity and Judaism were in a mimetic crisis as to who constituted the true people of God. Christian anti-Semitism and Jewish anti-Christian attitudes arose as both were rival claimants to the same throne, both seeking to justify their legal right to exist in the Roman Empire. Inter-Christian conflicts and the eventual 'conversion by coercion' of the post-Constantinian church only exacerbated the painful reality of Christian anti-Semitism.<sup>44</sup> Finally the church and the synagogue were battling over the authentic transmission of the Hebrew scriptures, both Hebrew and Greek. The Jewish people would be morphed into 'Christ killers' and bringers of plagues. Christian justification of victimage is the classic expression of a mimetic hermeneutic.

I would like to observe three critical areas where the early fathers missed important aspects of the non-sacrificial hermeneutic witnessed to in the Hebrew Bible and exploited in the New Testament. First, most of the early Christian leadership failed to understand the critique of propitiatory sacrifices in the Hebrew prophets. That is, they missed the insight that there was a development away from all sacrifice, and that God neither wanted nor desired sacrifices (Psalm 40; Jer. 7; Amos 5; Psalm 51, etc). Had they perceived this they would not have had to lay the framework for the later church to speak of God in almost schizophrenic terms.<sup>45</sup> In what appears to become a tortured discussion in later Christian theology, the work of the Son somehow appeases the wrath and hatred of the father who loves (sic) humanity. God's anger and mercy battle like mythological Titans. And this battle is still reflected in contemporary doctrines of the atonement.

Second, many early Christian interpreters missed the significance of the founding murder in Genesis 4. Only in I Clement and a century later in Irenaeus are Cain and Abel even mentioned. The crucial role of mimesis in Genesis which issues in violence and sacrifice and the unmasking of the victim in Genesis 4 is muted when Augustine

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<sup>44</sup> Ramsey MacMullen, Christianizing the Roman Empire (New Haven: Yale, 1984), 86-101.

<sup>45</sup> Frances Young, *op cit.*, 42-44, 64-82.

interprets Genesis 3 through his neo-Platonist glasses and blames humanity's fall on sexual desire. The other significant person to pick up on this some 1500 years later also, like Augustine, missed the founding murder and sexual desire like before became the culprit.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, I would contend that early Christian thinkers tended to miss the selective use of the Hebrew Scriptures in the New Testament, a hermeneutic approach we believe can be traced back to Jesus' exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. There is no wholesale takeover of the Hebrew Scriptures in the New Testament. In short, the church's indulgence in dualistic categories set up mimetic conflicts in all of its subsequent theological discussion. The disastrous results of dualism that plagued early Christian controversies continue to do so to the present day. Colin Gunton claims that what the doctrine of impassability was to the church fathers, post-Kantian dualism is to modern theology.<sup>47</sup>

The reference to patripassionism is of no little consequence. The prolonged debate on patripassionism so adamantly rejected by the church fathers is grounded in the Platonic understanding that ultimate reality is not able to undergo change. But if God cannot suffer, neither can God be acquainted with those who suffer. Little wonder that Plato, and following him Christian Platonists, both ancient and modern, were unable to acknowledge the role of acquisitive mimesis, the mimesis that originates the mechanism that begins the cycle of human suffering. To acknowledge the acquisitive character of mimesis, as Girard has done, is to begin to understand that Christology is not about God's being unable to suffer and sending a son to suffer in his place. To acknowledge acquisitive mimesis as an anthropological datum allows one to see the progression from mimesis to scapegoating, and thus the scapegoating or suffering of God in Christ.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed the patripassionist debate of the second and third centuries is, according to Jaroslav Pelikan, the same issue that faced Marcion and the Gnostics, viz., "the crucifixion and death of the one who was called God."<sup>49</sup> What then, is Girard's contribution to this discussion? Quite simply, Girard makes an anthropological case in the same sphere that Christian theology makes a theological case, at the cross.<sup>50</sup> As a consequence, Girard reads the Hebrew Bible through the lens of the founding murder of Jesus. Jesus' death is the anthropological fulfillment of the revelation begun in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>51</sup> There are stages within the Hebrew Scriptures deconstruction of the victimage mechanism:

"The first stage is the transition from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice in the so-called patriarchal period; the second, in Exodus, is in the institution of the

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<sup>46</sup> See Girard's critique of Freud in Violence and the Sacred, 169-192, esp 176; TH: 357 where Girard contends that Freud's Platonism blinded him to the acquisitive character of mimesis. On the 'fall' (misperceived) as sexual expression see Peter Brown, The Body and Society (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Elaine Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent (New York: Vintage, 1988).

<sup>47</sup> Yesterday and Today (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1983), 97.

<sup>48</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, The Crucified God (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), esp. 200-290.

<sup>49</sup> The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971), 176-180.

<sup>50</sup> Girard has summarized his work in the volume I See Satan Fall Like Lightning.

<sup>51</sup> TH: 233.

Passover, which accentuates the common meal rather than the burnt sacrifice and can hardly be a sacrifice at all in the proper sense of the term. The third stage is represented by the prophets wish to renounce all forms of sacrifice, and this is carried out in the gospels.<sup>52</sup>

The Hebrew Bible did not completely destructure the victimage mechanism; it awaited the full revelation of the founding murder.<sup>53</sup> The full revelation of the founding murder in the death of Jesus is a fulfillment of the Hebrew Bible because there is a complete renunciation of violence. It is this renunciation of violence by 'God' which forms the connection between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, according to Girard.<sup>54</sup>

The process of the revelation of victimage in the Hebrew Scriptures is not one that is cut and dried. Rather it is "a process under way, a text in travail; it is not a chronologically progressive process, but a struggle that advances and retreats."<sup>55</sup> This struggle is reflected in Robert Jewett's observation that the Hebrew Scriptures participate in both paradigms of zealous nationalism and the renunciation of violence and sacrifice.<sup>56</sup> These two paradigms are hermeneutic options. Some recent research on the 'historical Jesus' lends credence to this. For example, Marcus Borg argues that of the hermeneutic options available to him, Jesus explicitly chose the 'mercy code' over against the militant 'holiness code' of many of his contemporaries.<sup>57</sup>

Girard demonstrates that Hebrew biblical imagery is used in the New Testament to describe mimetic crisis. The desacralization process begun in the Hebrew Bible is fulfilled in the telling of the story of Jesus. Some have argued that God is apparently 'violent' in the New Testament, citing for example, YHWH's destructive violence in the parable of the tenants.<sup>58</sup> However, as Girard points out, the simplified editing of the text by Mark and Luke has dropped the original question/answer format that turns out to be crucial.<sup>59</sup> Jesus rejects any notion that the Father is violent or coercive.

Unlike Platonic Christianity, especially that which has been influenced by Augustine, the gospels do not project onto God the demand for mimetic doubles.<sup>60</sup> There is no division between the Father and the Son in the gospels. This is especially seen in the positive dynamic of imitation found in the Fourth Gospel. The full expose of the victimage

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<sup>52</sup> TH: 240.

<sup>53</sup> TH: 200.

<sup>54</sup> TH: 182.

<sup>55</sup> Girard in *Violent Origins*, 141.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>57</sup> *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (Toronto: Edwin Mellen); *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

<sup>58</sup> TH: 187-88.

<sup>59</sup> The Matthean priority of the parable has been shown by Klyne Snodgrass, *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1983).

<sup>60</sup> TH: 183. This has always been a problem in Christian trinitarian discussion. Little wonder that Jews or Muslims do not perceive us as monotheists.

mechanism in the gospels functions for the world in the same way that the Hebrew Scriptures functioned for Judaism, as a tutor.<sup>61</sup> Christianity, far from contributing another mythology or religion to the world scene, is to announce the destructuring effects of the gospel upon the world. Jesus, the crucified and vindicated victim, does not found cultures. But what happens when Christian theologians create 'Christian culture?'

### John Calvin and the Peace Tradition

The Reformation heritage has left its mark on Christianity in a number of significant ways but probably none greater than in the engagement of a sacrificial hermeneutic. American Christianity, greatly influenced by Calvinism and our Reformed forebears, the Puritans, continues to promulgate the sacrificial hermeneutic.

Unlike Luther who distinguished the Old and New Testaments with his law/gospel dichotomy (which has its own problems), Calvin argued forcefully for their unity. In the second edition of his Institutes (1539), Calvin inserted a section on the unity of the Testaments arguing against the Anabaptists. The unity of the Testaments was grounded in the unity of the covenant made with Israel. But notice where Calvin focuses; the unity of the covenant is the unity of prohibition and ritual. When Calvin speaks of the necessity of prohibition it is to quell the mimetic tendency toward violence in the unregenerate<sup>62</sup> and when he speaks of ritual it is but a type that points to Christ, the ultimate propitiatory sacrifice.<sup>63</sup> Calvin's understanding of the covenant, and the relation between the Testaments has its origins in two of the three pillars of mimetic culture. The third would be myth, the establishment of the guilt of the victim.

Like Justin so long before him, Calvin does not see the hermeneutic significance of the prophetic critique of sacrifice. Instead both sacrifice and violence are attributed to the deity as an almighty prerogative.<sup>64</sup> Robert Paul has pointed out that Calvin repeats the penal satisfaction theory of the atonement in which Christ on the cross is the victim upon whom God pours his wrath in order to satisfy a claim to justice. For Calvin, the cross as the place of victimage is accursed "not only in human opinion, but by decree of God's law." He further asserts that "the Father destroyed the force of sin when the curse was transferred to Christ's flesh." This is because "we could not believe with assurance that Christ is our redemption, ransom and propitiation unless he had been a sacrificial victim."<sup>65</sup> So close, but yet so far.

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<sup>61</sup> To use the language of Paul. See TH: 253.

<sup>62</sup> Institutes 2.7.11-12

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 2.7.16

<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, we believe that we can demonstrate the growing development of the theme of the grace of God in the successive editions of the Institutes. This is important because it shows for all of Calvin's flaws, he was moving from vengeance toward grace in a manner of speaking.

<sup>65</sup> Institutes 2.16.6.

Calvin will use the argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews to substantiate his contention that Christ is the true and perfect sacrifice.<sup>66</sup> In his commentary on Hebrews Calvin ignores 10:8 and the hermeneutic significance of Psalm 40 which expressly rejects sacrifice as desired by God. Calvin thus locked Reformed theology into the straitjacket of the sacrificial hermeneutic.

This sacrificial way of thinking was deeply challenged in the Anabaptist rendering of the Bible. Their commitment to a peace tradition in the 1527 *Schleitheim Confession* and their refusal to carry arms was a hearkening back to the 'mercy code' ethic found in the Jesus tradition. Some Anabaptist clergy wrestled with the problems created by Luther and Calvin in relating law (the Hebrew Bible) and gospel (the New Testament). Pilgrim Marpeck argued for fundamental differences between the two Testaments.<sup>67</sup> But Bucer in Strasbourg, Calvin in Geneva, and Bullinger in Zurich would contend for an essential unity to the Bible in contrast to Marpeck. It is the hermeneutical relation between the Testaments that frames the most significant issues of the Reformation.

More study is needed in Anabaptist hermeneutics, particularly in the coherence of the hermeneutics of the peace church with mimetic theory. Few Anabaptist theologians of the sixteenth century actually wrote on the hermeneutical issue.<sup>68</sup> The congruence of the mercy code of Jesus, a peace church appropriation of Scripture and mimetic theory brings the problem of violence in theology to the foreground. But the Anabaptists would not be the majority voice of the sixteenth century. Anabaptists were hunted down by Protestant and Catholic alike, persecuted by the followers of Luther and Calvin in the name of the One who called them to love one another. They were the scapegoats on which Protestantism would be erected.

Calvin's influence on the Western world has been well documented.<sup>69</sup> It is Calvin's doctrine of the covenant that is the lynch pin his successors would use, a covenant which we have seen is structured just like Girard said a myth would be. With Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669), the covenant is identified with the written biblical text and the Bible, as a whole becomes complete justification, a witness without error to sacrificial theology.<sup>70</sup> The Pilgrims brought this view of the Bible to America and it has been a divisive and contentious issue for conservatives and fundamentalists ever since. Sadly, the popular expression of American Christianity, or Evangelicalism, holds to this 'lie' of the sacrificial hermeneutic. Clark Pinnock in an address given to the Evangelical Section of the American Academy of Religion has also observed that the penal

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<sup>66</sup> Institutes 2.7.14; cf also his comments on Hebrews 9-10 in Calvin's Commentaries. See my essay, "Sacrificial Language in Hebrews" in Willard Swartley, ed., Violence Renounced (Pandora Press, 2000).

<sup>67</sup> David Steinmetz, Reformers in the Wings (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 219-230.

<sup>68</sup> John Howard Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists" Mennonite Quarterly Review XLI (1967), 291-308. See also Essays on Biblical Interpretation (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984) edited by Willard Swartley.

<sup>69</sup> W. Stanford Reid, ed., John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1982); Brian Gerrish, Tradition and the Modern World (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978).

<sup>70</sup> Heinrich Heppel Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950).

substitutionary atonement is at the heart of Evangelical Christianity.<sup>71</sup> Inerrancy and the penal atonement theory are more than shibboleth to Evangelicals, they are perceived as bedrock.

Girard's challenge to Christians is to reconsider some nineteen hundred years of sacrificial thinking. "The sacrificial reading is a protective envelope; beneath this envelope, which is finally crumbling to dust in our time, is a living principle which has so far been concealed."<sup>72</sup> This living principle is the love of the Creator expressed in the person of Jesus.

The sacrificial hermeneutic is creating a myth today, the myth that America is a Judeo-Christian country, founded on Judeo-Christian principles. American Protestant viewpoints have become part and parcel of public life and public policy, functioning as the mythology to cover the innocence of those victims slaughtered on the way to world dominance.<sup>73</sup> Little wonder as Robert Jewett has pointed out, "in our [American] tradition, that holy war ideology, which has been secularized in the popular media...carries out exactly the same Manichean policies that we can trace right back to biblical paradigms."<sup>74</sup> The debates about these paradigms, these 'texts in travail' that the early church wrestled with is no longer to be considered a closed book. We can ill afford to agree with the dictum of Vincent of Lerins that "one should always believe what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all." In fact, if we have learned anything it is that majority opinion is often enshrined in the mythology of the victimage mechanism. Like Jesus of Nazareth and the Hebrew prophets before him, we are called to bear witness to the truth about humanity, and then perhaps with courage, to the truth about God.

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<sup>71</sup> "Response: Alternative Evangelical Models of the Atonement", given at the AAR/SBL meeting November 1988.

<sup>72</sup> TH: 254.

<sup>73</sup> As an example, see Robert Nisbet *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) for a discussion of Woodrow Wilson's Calvinism and the way it shaped his policy of American interventionism. This is not to say anything about the influence of Evangelicalism on every American President since Carter.

<sup>74</sup> In *Violent Origins*, 139.