

THE SCAPEGOAT: CHRISTOLOGIES IN CONFLICT A STUDY IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

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“Christ on the cross, the murdered Son of God, is the end of the story of Cain, and thus the actual end of the story.”¹ With this illuminating quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested the crucial relation of the murder of Abel with that of Jesus Christ. It is our contention that this insight was never fully elaborated by Bonhoeffer in his theology as he struggled in his later years with issues related to violence. With the help of Rene Girard’s theory of religion, it will be seen that a number of apparent inconsistencies, not to say downright incongruities in Bonhoeffer’s theology will be made clear. It is no surprise that Bonhoeffer’s theology has no found no clear exposition in matters relating to his theory of non-religious interpretation. David Hopper’s dissent points out that Bonhoeffer really lived ‘between the times’ of the two great world wars and the fragmentary nature of his theological thought never really developed to a satisfying conclusion.²

Recent development of Rene Girard’s hermeneutic of religion can function as a heuristic tool which allows us to penetrate Bonhoeffer’s enigmatic utterances on religion to show that he finally falls into the justification of religion, never really achieving his life’s goal. This is not to deny the continuing validity and power of Bonhoeffer’s theology. Rather it is to move beyond his rather instructive insights to a deeper and finally more satisfying understanding of what actually constitutes ‘non-religious interpretation.’

Bonhoeffer’s Theory of Religion

The Letters and Papers from Prison have been given a thorough investigation. It is through these windows from Tegel that we can see Bonhoeffer struggling to make sense of his theological direction as well as his personal choices. It is in his famous April 30, 1944 letter to Eberhard Bethge that Bonhoeffer speaks of the world moving to a religionless time. He argues there that, “our whole nineteen hundred year old Christian preaching and theology rests on the religious *a priori* of mankind. Christianity has always been a form – perhaps the true form – of ‘religion. But if one day it becomes clear that this *a priori* does not exist at all...what does this mean for Christianity?”³

¹ Creation and Fall (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 93. N.B. This essay was written in 1993 prior to the publication of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer works. Because of the unevenness of many of the translations of Bonhoeffer’s writings, the DBW is a major improvement on many of the older translations. Readers are therefore asked to consult this edition as well as those translations found in the footnotes.

² David Hopper, A Dissent on Bonhoeffer (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975).

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 280.

Bonhoeffer rightly reacts to the problem of the religious *a priori* which he later defines under the rubrics of 'inwardness and metaphysics'.⁴ The 'god of the gaps' is the god of metaphysics whose role in the world increasingly diminishes as humans come to understand their reality without God as a working hypothesis. The realm of religion is the place, which the church has inhabited in that it pries upon the guilt and shame of humanity to secure a place for its God of grace. Both conceptions of God come under heavy fire from Bonhoeffer.⁵

Bonhoeffer's interest in the role and structure of religion can be seen in his earliest published writing Sanctorum Communio (1927).⁶ In the last chapter, Bonhoeffer analyzes the relation of religion to community and concludes, "in the general concept of religion social community is not given community."⁷ Bonhoeffer is critiquing the theory of religion exemplified by Rudolf Otto's philosophy of the sacred. Otto's work is merely the culmination of a tradition of religion that extends back through Schleiermacher and is individualist in character. Religion in this vein, according to Bonhoeffer "must be defined here as the touching of the human will by the divine will, and the overpowering of the former by the latter with resultant free action."⁸ Even if there are communal aspects to primitive religions, nevertheless, "the general concept of religion knows nothing of specific social intentions."⁹

In this regard, Bonhoeffer's criticism of those who misunderstand religion can be seen in the two ways errors are committed: when the church is historicized and becomes religious community or when it is confused with the kingdom of God. These two criticisms will be picked up later in the Letters and Papers from Prison and translated into the problematics of 'inwardness and metaphysics.'

Ernst Feil is surely correct when he notes that Bonhoeffer's understanding of religion rests upon that of his mentor Seeberg.¹⁰ Feil observes that Bonhoeffer does not appear to question Seeberg's definition at this point and it would appear that Seeberg's definition of religion continued to be used by Bonhoeffer.¹¹ However, it should be noted that Bonhoeffer was moving in a positive direction in his understanding of the relation between religion, revelation and sociality. Clifford Green has demonstrated that sociality as a theological category dominates Bonhoeffer's theology.¹²

⁴ Ibid., 285-86 (letter of May 5, 1944)

⁵ Cf. Andre Dumas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 163ff; James W. Woeffel, Bonhoeffer's Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 103ff; Eberhard Bethge in R Gregor Smith ed., World Come of Age (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 79ff; Geoffrey B Kelly Liberating Faith (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 138ff.

⁶ The Communion of Saints (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).

⁷ Ibid., 94.

⁸ Ibid., 92, 94.

⁹ Ibid., 96.

¹⁰ The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 168.

¹¹ So Feil, 171.

¹² Clifford J. Green, The Sociality of Christ and Humanity (Chico: Scholars Press, 1972), esp. 55ff.

Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer's struggle over the boundaries (*Grenzefall*) of human relationships caused him again and again to search for new parameters by which conduct this discussion. It is our contention that with the help of Rene Girard's theory of religion, Bonhoeffer's insights may be vindicated and further developed, as well as critiqued in a way that explains coherently the relation of religion and culture (community), as well as the role of Christian revelation. Before we turn to examine elements of Bonhoeffer's christology, it will be useful to explore Girard's theory of religion for there one finds the crucial connection that Bonhoeffer missed: that both religion and culture are founded in violence.

Rene Girard's Theory of Religion

Girard's 'non-sacrificial' theory of religion has increasingly come to the forefront of discussion in Europe, particularly France.¹³ We will examine Girard's major works in chronological order as he developed his thesis of generative scapegoating over a period of twenty years.¹⁴

Girard's early work as a literary critic inspired him "to test modern theories in the light of literature rather than literature in the light of modern theories."¹⁵ In the works of significant western writers Girard found what he believed accounted best for the structures of human relationships but had been ignored in western scientific anthropology: acquisitive mimesis. In Deceit, Desire and the Novel, Girard points out that envy, the imitation of another's desire over an object of desire produces the triangular structure of human relationships. Human relations are more than binary structures as some writers had suggested (e.g., Buber). These triangulated structures produce mimetic conflict when two enemy doubles rival over a third object. Girard demonstrates that Dostoevski, Proust and Stendhal all see clearly that triangulated desire produces rivalry which ends in violence. "Imitative desire is always a desire to be Another."¹⁶ This process of external mediation in which A imitates B's desire over C, in turn escalates as B imitates A and so on. "We all know that desire redoubles when it is seen to be shared."¹⁷ In this double mediation, "mastery is always the reward of the partner who has best concealed his desire."¹⁸ And this is the 'romantic lie' which begins the process of concealing the deadly nature of mimetic violence. Metaphysical desire thus "drags its victims toward the ambiguous point of fascination situated at exactly equal distances from true detachment and intimate contact with the desired object"¹⁹, and "the truth of metaphysical desire is death."²⁰

¹³ Paul Dumouchel, Violence and Truth (Stanford: Stanford Press, 1988); To Honor Rene Girard (Stanford: ANMA Libri, 1986); Robert Hamerton-Kelly, Violent Origins (Stanford: Stanford, 1987).

¹⁴ In the decade since this essay was originally written Girard has published Quand Ces Choses Commenceront (Arlea, 1994) and I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (New York: Orbis, 2001) as well as other shorter essays and notes.

¹⁵ Deceit, Desire and the Novel (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1965).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 282.

For Girard, romantic criticism rejects mimetic desire because it is unable to account for the hero in any other way. Rather “the title of hero...must be reserved for the character who triumphs over metaphysical desire in a tragic conclusion and thus becomes capable of writing the novel..the aesthetic triumph of the author is one with the joy of the hero who has renounced desire.”²¹ Girard’s beginning with desire has antecedents in both Hegel and Sartre. Yet Girard moves beyond Hegel (and Hegel’s imputed mentor, Plato) when he recognizes the acquisitive character of mimesis which leads to rivalry and violence.

In his 1972 Violence and the Sacred, Girard analyzed the phenomenon of acquisitive mimesis (metaphysical desire) in the light of comparative religions and psychoanalysis. In this programmatic essay Girard demonstrates how mimetic desire leads to sacrificial crises and the founding pillars of human culture, viz., prohibition, ritual and myth. In contrast to other philosophers of religion, Girard argues that the unmasking of violent mimesis shows the sacred to be a deception, that is, simply human projection. He does this by showing that communal mimesis out of control focuses on a random victim upon whom the collective hostility of the group is poured. The victim is judged guilty and the community is brought to a temporary peace. The role of the victim is the ground of symbolization since the victim is the first object to share in both malevolent and benevolent aspects. This is the process of sacralization whereby the victim is given divine status in the community. The communal myths then justify the act of victimage. This is the sacrificial or religious hermeneutic, a reading wherever victimage is not seen in or behind a text. As Masao Yamaguchi puts it, “at the hidden level, culture depends on what it excludes.”²²

The prohibitions generated by the victimage mechanism function to interdict mimetic processes. Prohibitions serve to prevent mimetic outbreaks in the community. Girard suggests that humans lack the instinctual braking mechanism of the animal kingdom (a theme taken up in his next work) and that humans “substitution of the biological mechanism is the collective cultural mechanism of the surrogate victim. There is no society without religion because society without religion cannot exist.”²³ Here the function of law (as prohibition) is related to religion and “neither customs nor law, as it develops, can be regarded as ‘not religious.’”²⁴

Konrad Thomas continues by saying that “religion should always be seen as linked to the foundation of society, foundation of order, given by a violent act regarded as sacrificial, whereas law, in combination with judicial institutions will never be able to give foundation to society; its power pertains to order and order only. This distinction makes clear that a society in crisis will look for peace by law (and order) in vain.”²⁵

²¹ Ibid., 296-97

²² “Towards a Poetics of the Scapegoat” in To Honor Rene Girard, 187.

²³ Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1972).

²⁴ Konrad Thomas, “On Law, Religion and Custom” in To Honor Rene Girard, 187.

²⁵ Ibid., 188.

Finally, rituals are a 'feigned disintegration' into a channeled mimetic activity whereby mimetic hostility can be poured into a substitutionary outlet, whether human or animal. Rituals thus ensure that should prohibitions fail, there remains a place (a sacred space) so that mimetic violence will not get beyond control.

Girard's thesis in Violence and the Sacred vindicates Freud's insight that the collective murder plays a strategic role in the hominization process. However, Girard takes Freud to task for not applying the mimetic triangle which Freud recognized in his 1921 Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego but abandoned a few years later in his 1923 The Ego and The Id. Since Freud did not recognize that substitute victims are necessary to the victimage process, he failed to grasp the mechanism itself.²⁶

A theory of generative violence can thus account for prohibition, ritual and myth. More so, it can account for the symbolization process and language, community and religion.²⁷ Girard's mechanism of generative scapegoating can account for order and disorder, differentiation and undifferentiation at the same time. To account for this juxtaposition of opposites is one of the key assets of Girard's theory. In Violence and the Sacred Girard has "tried to show that this lack of differentiation [between mimetic rivals] is no mere logical starting point, but reflects the vicious and undecidable nature of the revenge process; the world of reciprocal violence is one of the constant mirror effects in which the antagonists become each others doubles and lose their individual identities."²⁸

In his 1978 Des Choses cachees depuis la foundation du monde,²⁹ Girard took the step of modifying his theory in the light of further research into ethnology, ethology, linguistics, theology and psychology. In the first chapter he recapitulates the thesis of Violence and the Sacred as he explores the hominization process under the victimage mechanism. In the second chapter Girard says that the Biblical writings make clear what other literature and ancient mythology kept hidden, namely the role of violence in the founding process of human culture. Girard contends that beginning with Genesis, continuing through the Hebrew Prophets and culminating in the Gospels that violence is demystified of its role in founding human culture, thus human community. The voice of the victim is given utterance, particularly in the Psalms. Jesus' (or the gospel writers) use of the Psalter is intended to call attention to the sacrificial crisis of human culture come to a head. His death or murder at the hands of the mob is intended once again to re-ground civilization. Instead Jesus' resurrection demonstrates that his death accomplished nothing that his persecutors sought but instead became the basis for an entirely new community, a community which recognized their mimetic violence and renounced it as their master had done.

²⁶ Violence and the Sacred, 197.

²⁷ See the growing bibliography on the website of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion.

²⁸ Rene Girard, To Double Business Bound (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 186, parenthesis mine.

²⁹ Des choses cachees depuis la foundation du monde (Paris: Grasset, 1978) translated as Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

The justification of violence and sacrifice is termed a 'sacrificial reading' of texts and continues to ignore the 'non-sacrificial' reading which the Biblical texts employ as their strategic hermeneutic. Only a non-sacrificial reading of all texts allows one to encounter the Victim, who in the final analysis is God, the ultimate victim for whom all other victims are really substitutes.

Finally in the third chapter Girard returns to Freud and coins his only neologism: Interindividual psychology (*psychologie interindividuelle*). In this chapter "Girard calls for a radical deconstruction of metaphysics which he considers the mistaken concentration on objective representational mimesis...If one seeks above all else in the subject one imitates and the objects he desires is 'being', then the mimetic process by its very nature implies what might be called a metaphysical myth, a story of a quest for such 'being', and any insufficiently critical metaphysical system would be a translation of that myth into technical language."³⁰

In The Scapegoat Girard pointed out the connection between persecution texts, such as those used in the Middle Ages in which Jews were blamed for the plague, and ancient myths.³¹ The same method must be applied to all literature and the justification of victimage that is not accepted in persecution texts should neither be accepted in myths, the same hermeneutic must be applied equally across the board.

A Theory of the interpretation of myths as persecution texts is proffered in which two or more of the following criteria are present:³²

- 1) a generalized loss of difference
- 2) crimes that eliminate difference
- 3) the victim possesses marks of difference
- 4) violence itself.

After a thorough examination of several myths, Girard turns his attention to the one story that he alleges reveals mimetic violence in all of its fury: the crucifixion of Jesus. In the gospel story, all of the elements of Girard's theory of religion come to the fore. From the mimetic behavior of some of the Jewish leaders, Herod and Pilate to the role of the holiday crowds, Girard pushes his theory relentlessly ahead. It is the work of the gospels to deconstruct religion and culture. They do this by unmasking violence and its deceptions so that "in the future, all violence will reveal what Christ's passion revealed, the foolish genesis of bloodstained idols and the false gods of religion, politics and ideologies. The murderers remain convinced of the worthiness of their sacrifices. They too know not what they do and we must forgive them. The time has come for us to forgive one another. If we wait any longer there will not be enough time."³³

³⁰ Eugene Webb, Philosophers of Consciousness (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).

³¹ Le bouc emissaire (Paris: Grasset, 1982) translated as The Scapegoat (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986).

³² *Ibid.*, 24

³³ *Ibid.*, 212. Girard's Job: The Victim of His People (Stanford: Stanford, 1988) and The Theater of Envy (New York: Oxford, 1991) amplify and apply his theory to Job and Shakespeare respectively.

Girard and Bonhoeffer

Enough of Girard's understanding of the relationship between violence, religion and culture has been set forth so that we may proceed with the application of his study to Bonhoeffer. Points of similarity are easy enough to discern. Both writers were concerned with the relation of religion to society. Both critique the atomistic view of personhood and religious life. Both eschew any metaphysics. Both authors concede that christian revelation supplants religion. Both seek to bring the christian revelation to a 'non-religious' interpretation.

Where they differ is precisely in the problem of defining the root of religion and culture. For Girard, violence is the engendering mechanism. For Bonhoeffer, whose theology moved in the circle of the Lutheran orders of creation, even though he shifted their emphasis to become 'mandates of preservation', the engendering of culture and cult is the commandment of God. That is, while Bonhoeffer accepted that revelation abolished religion, he failed to see that both religion and culture are founded on the same mechanism, violence. Hence, community, qua 'fallen' or mimetically entangled human community, is not grounded in the commandment of God, as Bonhoeffer insisted, since mimesis and violence have restructured the world.

Bonhoeffer's struggle to relate culture and commandment can be seen in the way he relates church and state so that "the politics of the orders of preservation became the politics of the Confessing Church."³⁴ The attempt to separate 'mandate' from 'government' in Bonhoeffer's ethics suggests that a criticism of cultural institutions has clearly begun; what remained was to locate the beginnings of the mandates not in the creation but in the fall.

As noted, Bonhoeffer's concern to relate 'Christ to the world' involved the justification of the Lutheran mandates.³⁵ However, Bonhoeffer missed three salient points in the Genesis myth that Girard and his interpreters have exposed. First, is the fact that the texts reveal the non-violent character of God in creation. Compared with other ancient Near Eastern mythologies, God creates not through violence in the divine council but solely through the word.

Second, Bonhoeffer glosses over the fact that culture arises from the founding murder. He says, "man makes new things on the basis of the creation of God."³⁶ This is to miss the fact that culture is mimetically conceived over against God and Cain's city, which is founded on violence and escalates in just a few short chapters into a humanly initiated mutually assured destruction. The violence of Cain, upon which Cainite culture is founded, increases exponentially to Lamech and finally to Noah's generation when God grieves that humans 'were full of violence' (Genesis 6:5-10).

³⁴ Robin Lovin, "The Christian and the Authority of the State: Bonhoeffer's Reluctant Revisions" in John D. Godsey and Geoffrey Kelly, eds., Ethical Responsibility (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1981), 107.

³⁵ Ethics (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 207.

³⁶ Ibid., 209.

Third, the mandate of government is given “to preserve what has been created, maintaining it in the order which is assigned to it.”³⁷ The state utilizes two instruments to maintain social structure: prohibition (law) and the sword (sanctioned violence). As Heinz Eduard Todt has observed, *Gewalt* denotes both legal authority as well as unrestrained violence and that “Bonhoeffer had to consider the possibility of a justification for *Gewalt* as violence”³⁸ In his Ethics Bonhoeffer had grounded the will of God in a primordial justification of violence. Hence it is no surprise that at this time of his life (after 1937) as he wrestled with his involvement in the Abwehr resistance movement that he found it necessary to ask again about the relation of Christ to the world. Eberhard Bethge recalls that “for Bonhoeffer, as a German theologian and a Lutheran Christian, the step into political action, over which he still hesitated, meant going into a new and untravelled country. It was certainly a momentous step when one went over from silent opposition to open ideological protest...but it was a further and more critical step into that politically accountable revolutionary planning for the future.”³⁹ Further as Bethge observes, “to want to be only a Christian, a disciple who follows timelessly – that became a costly privilege. To become a contemporary standing in the right place...that alone was what it now meant to be a Christian.”⁴⁰

But it can be argued that the notion of mandates exacerbates the mimetic conflicts of human existence. Bonhoeffer has said that the mandates “are not the products of history; they are not earthly powers but divine commissions.” As such “there is established in the sphere of the mandate an unalterable relation of superiority and inferiority.”⁴¹ This can be seen in labor, marriage and the church but has its most profound consequences with reference to the state. In his exegesis of Romans 13 Bonhoeffer argues for an ontology of the state since the “state is an institution of God.”⁴² It is the function of the state to preserve order and to protect the righteous.

Here is the crux of the matter. Bonhoeffer moves in the sphere of dialogue between natural and divine law. He seeks to overcome the dichotomy between the two by arguing that Christ is Lord of both church and state, secular and sacred.⁴³ Bonhoeffer’s justification of law and culture misses the violent grounding of both. Law, as prohibition and ritual functions to maintain order and provide consequences for evil actions. However, as Girard has pointed out, “mimetic conflict is...the true denominator of prohibitions” and “the fundamental principle is the antimimetic character of all prohibition.”⁴⁴

There is another correlation Bonhoeffer made with law which fits in well with his later appreciation for the Hebrew Scriptures as well as his rescuing of the Jews from the

³⁷ Ibid., 210.

³⁸ “Conscientious Resistance” in Ethical Responsibility, 32.

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 526.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 582

⁴¹ Ethics, 288-289.

⁴² Ibid., 339.

⁴³ Ibid., 336-353.

⁴⁴ Things Hidden, 14, 19.

Nazi's. As Jim Burtress pointed out, Bonhoeffer intimately connected law with life.⁴⁵ But the goal of law, while it may temporarily preserve the life of the community from further mimetic conflict cannot be linked to the catchword *Lebensgesetz* inasmuch as it is grounded in the mimetic violence of the victimage mechanism. Law, in the hypothesis of generative scapegoating is fundamentally about death, an insight the apostle Paul perceived in his letter to the Romans (7:7-20).

What Bonhoeffer missed in his understanding of law, order, culture and religion is the key to Girard's thought viz., the mimetic character of human existence. Post-deconstructionist hermeneutics has grappled, as has anthropology and more recently quantum physics, with the relation of order to disorder. All structure, order, value and meaning are derived from the conflict that ends in the victimization of the innocent who begins the initial process of symbolization. Andrew McKenna posits that Girard's hermeneutic of the victim and Derrida's "search for structure, signification and relationship" both share a common element in the hidden victim of the text.⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer was in the process of seeing this but failed to carry through his insights.

Many Bonhoeffer interpreters have pointed out that Bonhoeffer's christology, from his earliest writings to his last, carried the notion of 'being there for others.'⁴⁷ This being there for others is given utterance in the Ethics as 'deputyship' (*Stellvertretung*)⁴⁸ In siding with the victims of Nazi culture, particularly the Jews upon whose victimage Nazi culture would be founded, Bonhoeffer saw that simply to remain quiet would be to incur a greater guilt than to act. Jesus Christ is the model of deputyship for the Christian in whom "all life is determined by him to be deputyship." This means that one must suffer with the suffering even as Christ had suffered on behalf of humanity. This act of "siding with" will inevitably bring one to the horns of ethical dilemmas. However, it is clear that not to side with the victim is not to side with Christ.

It is in the Letters and Papers from Prison that this comes to clearest expression in the poem 'Christians and Pagans.'⁴⁹ What makes Christian behavior different is that the 'Christian stands by God in God's hour of grieving.' However, the passion of God is the passion of the victim and not the uncontrolled mimetic frenzy of the persecutor. Bonhoeffer is correct that it is the suffering of God and identification with God's unjust suffering that is distinctly 'Christian.' To do otherwise would be to mythologize suffering and share in the role of the persecuting crowds. The Christian is the one who

⁴⁵ Shaping the Future (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 97.

⁴⁶ Violence and Difference (Baltimore: University of Illinois, 1992). See also Eric Gans The Origin of Language (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

⁴⁷ So e.g., Clifford Green Sociality of Christ and Humanity; Larry Rasmussen Reality and Resistance (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972)

⁴⁸ See also Letters and Papers, 348-349.

⁴⁹ It is such a wonderfully constructed poem in German that it is difficult to render into English. The rhymes, the rhythms and the word plays are beautiful, even to one who struggles with German! For example 'Christen stehen bei Gott in Seinen Leiden.' Is it to be translated as 'Christians stand by God in his suffering?' Or 'Christians stand by God in his pain?' Burton F. Nelson & Geoffrey B. Kelly A Testament of Freedom (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991), 541. There is a double nuance in *Leiden* as both passion (active) and suffering (passive).

recognizes that unjust suffering must be exposed, particularly since all unjust suffering is Christ's suffering. It is in this sense that Bonhoeffer could equate Abel and Christ in Creation and Fall, cited at the beginning of this essay.

In the Finkenwalde years (1935-37) when The Cost of Discipleship was written, this deputyship took the form of identification with Christ as Larry Rasmussen has shown.⁵⁰ It is later with the Ethics that a change would take place and Bonhoeffer began to wonder how the world could perform this deputyship apart from explicit knowledge of Christ; that is the problem of 'anonymous Christians.' Those in the resistance who ended up involving themselves in the violent overthrow of the Hitler regime found themselves, in Bonhoeffer's thought, taking the place of Christ, or perhaps of "having Christ formed in them" and like Christ assuming guilt for the greater good.⁵¹

But one must query has Bonhoeffer allowed his thought to be controlled by the Christ of the Gospels? Contemporary research on Jesus' relation to the state and violence suggests that the Jesus of the Gospels had no sympathy for the Zealots of his time, nor could he justify violence against the Roman State (or Jewish authorities in complicity). Rather as Girard has argued, Jesus exposed the victimage around him by not playing into the mimetic conflicts of his culture but rather by doing the only responsible act: he became a scapegoat.⁵² For Girard, as for Bonhoeffer, revelation is found in a *theologia crucis*, but the difference lies in the fact that Bonhoeffer portrays Christian deputyship as zealot-like in his Ethics, thereby justifying violence. On the contrary, in the Gospel traditions there is simply no way one can reasonably speak of formation to Christ and justify violence in the same breath.

One could argue that the other side of the coin to deputyship is acceptance of guilt.⁵³ However, the guilt which Jesus assumes in the Gospels is the imputed guilt of the victim not the guilt of the persecutor. For revelation of the violence of mimesis to occur, one cannot play into the hands of mimesis. One must rather allow oneself "to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross."⁵⁴ This is how one stands by God in God's hour of grief. It uncovers the fact that God alone is non-violent. As Girard has put it, "Let us come back to the attitude of Jesus himself. The decision to adopt non-violence is not a commitment that he could revoke...if so the commitment to the Kingdom of God would be another farcical procedure, comparable to institutionalized revenge or the United Nations. Despite the fact that all others fall away, Jesus sees himself as being bound by the promise of the kingdom. For him, the word which comes from God, the word which enjoins us to imitate no one but God, the God who refrains from all forms of reprisal and makes his sun shine on the 'just' and the 'unjust' without distinction – this

⁵⁰ Reality and Resistance, 39ff.

⁵¹ See the discussion of 'ethics as formation' by Larry Rasmussen, "A Question of Method" in William Peck ed., New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1987).

⁵² See my essay "Sacrificial Language in Hebrews" on the place of the category 'scapegoat' in New Testament Christology in Willard Swartley, ed., Violence Renounced (Pandora Press, 2000).

⁵³ Rasmussen, Reality and Resistance, 51ff.

⁵⁴ Letters and Papers, 360 (letter of 16 July, 1944).

word remains for him absolutely valid. It is valid even to death, and quite clearly that is what makes him the Incarnation of the Word.”⁵⁵

What Girard sees clearly that the later Bonhoeffer saw in shadow was that God could have nothing to do with violence and that formation to Christ or imitation of Christ must be non-violent and non-coercive. Certainly in The Cost of Discipleship Bonhoeffer saw this in his exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount. There he says “the church must patiently endure aggression” and “the only way to overcome evil is to let run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for.”⁵⁶ Evil drains itself on the victim and exposes its truly heinous character in persecution. “Violence stands condemned by its failure to evoke counter-violence.”

Bonhoeffer in 1937 was of kindred spirit to Girard in 1978. However, Bonhoeffer would later retract these comments during his time at Tegel prison where the day after the failure of the well known July 20th plot to assassinate Hitler, he wrote, “I can see the dangers of that book [The Cost of Discipleship], though I still stand by what I wrote.”⁵⁷ What seems evident is that Bonhoeffer’s time in the resistance and the rethinking of his ethics caused him to also reconsider his earlier pacifism. John Phillips’ study in the christology of Bonhoeffer was perhaps correct in this regard: there are two christologies in Bonhoeffer. Both are centered on Christ the victim. But the one, found in the earlier writings and later in the poem ‘Christians and Pagans’ was overshadowed by the Christ who is formed in the necessary encounter with evil in the world and who in reaction to evil assumes the collective guilt of violent humanity, a guilt only associated with complicity in violence.

This is why Bonhoeffer could not arrive at a satisfactory “non-religious interpretation of Christian concepts.” Until he could free christology from religion, and religion’s mechanism, violence, he was bound to end up with a religious interpretation no matter how hard he tried. One is either victim or persecutor. If the Nazi’s would found German culture on its victims, Jews, Gypsies and others, Bonhoeffer would have ended up founding post-Nazi German culture on Nazi ‘victims.’ By failing to see the role that violence played in religion and culture, in this sense, he ended up playing into the hands of his persecutors.

This is not to say that there is no responsible resistance. We are in hearty agreement with Larry Rasmussen who contrasts Bonhoeffer with the American priest Daniel Berrigan. He suggests that Berrigan’s non-violent activity “belongs to an ethic of parabolic action embodying the moral configurations of the ‘new man’ ahead of their times.”⁵⁸ That is, Berrigan is closer to Jesus and Jesus non-violent ethic than is Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer could not arrive at a satisfactory “non-religious interpretation of Christian concepts” even though aspects of his understanding of Christ were leading him in that direction. The *deus ex machina* which Bonhoeffer deplored came back to

⁵⁵ Things Hidden, 206.

⁵⁶ The Cost of Discipleship (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 127.

⁵⁷ Letters and Papers, 369.

⁵⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer: His Significance for North Americans (Philadelphia: Fortress, 55).

haunt him in his ethical activity when he and his fellow conspirators 'acted' in a violent manner, a manner worthy of the gods of pagan religions (and Nietzsche!) but not the God of Jesus Christ. In the end Bonhoeffer ends up with a new myth, or rather, a new version of the Christian myth since Constantine.⁵⁹ Had he not been bound his Lutheran heritage and the orders of creation as divine commands or mandates, he could have followed through his christological insight that only as victim can Christ reveal God. Instead, Bonhoeffer ends up participating in another of a long series of mimetic conflicts, this time with Hitler and his representatives. The model of imitation proposed in The Cost of Discipleship was really far more congruent with his desire to find a "non-religious interpretation of Christian concepts" than he realized.⁶⁰

One cannot thereby cast aspersions on Bonhoeffer as though he had turned against his earlier pacifism. Neither can one denigrate the extreme courage of those who passionately resisted under such extraordinary circumstances. Bonhoeffer did not have the answers when he joined the resistance nor did he arrive at a place where he himself was satisfied. Ethics and Letters and Papers From Prison still pose formidable questions and since they do, they invite us to think along with and ultimately through Bonhoeffer.⁶¹

This essay has suggested that Bonhoeffer's perception of religion can be reframed and that his central insights can be further developed. Far from being a failure, Bonhoeffer's final attempts to understand the Christian faith are far more probing than most theology. If I have found fault with Bonhoeffer, it is only because I have the advantage of hindsight. Therefore the last word belongs to him:

"The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age...which has done away with a false conception of God, opens a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by weakness. This will probably be the starting point for our 'secular interpretation.'"⁶²

⁵⁹ See my essay "Violence: Escaping the Paradigm of Constantine and Augustine" in Brethren Life and Thought, Volume 37, Number 2, Spring 1992.

⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer's pacifism is clearly what struck most of those who encountered him. See the examples in Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

⁶¹ Vernard Eller, Christian Anarchy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), senses the same struggle over christology in Bonhoeffer's thought and concludes that in certain writings Bonhoeffer could be considered anarchist. I would say that 'Christian' anarchy is a viable political alternative congruent with the ethical framework of Girard's theory. Jacques Ellul, Anarchy and Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) is a clear exposition of this position.

⁶² Letters and Papers, 361.