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# Violence: René Girard and the Recovery of Early Christian Perspectives

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*As a converted persecutor, Paul is the archetypal Christian.*<sup>1</sup>

*René Girard*

I VO LESBAUPIN in his recent *Blessed Are the Persecuted* observes that “persecution forms the backdrop of all Christian reflection. To speak of the Christian life without referring to persecution is impossible.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, a cursory glance at major evangelical systematic theologies published in the last hundred years reveals quite the opposite. We found no evangelical systematic theology which took account of the perspective of persecution in the Christian life. The irony is that every single New Testament document appears to have been produced in a climate of persecution.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the missionary zeal of the early Christians produced such a climate of persecution. It would appear that mission and persecution go hand in hand.<sup>4</sup>

René Girard has observed that “Beginning with Constantine, Christianity triumphed at the level of the state and soon began to cloak with its authority persecutions similar to those in which the early Christians were victims.”<sup>5</sup>

These observations of contemporary dissonance and historical process suggest three significant and somewhat ominous conclusions providing a relevant foil for this essay. First, evangelical theologies are at grave risk of being removed in perspective from their documentary base and its perspectives. Second, evangelical theologies will have difficulty appreciating those reforming theologies which find such vitality and power in the liberating hope and promise of the biblical perspective of the persecuted. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that the reforming force of these theologies from the persecuted is at times attributed by Americans to the Satan of the Evil Empire rather than to the Kingdom of the Crucified. Third, evangelical theologies are at grave risk of giving theological support—as indeed we are charged with doing—to policies and practices which are exploitive and oppressive; doing a theology of the persecutor for the comfort of the persecutor rather than the persecuted. Saul the persecutor became, as a result of his conversion, Paul the persecuted. Somehow the American perspective, like the church after Constantine, seems to have reversed that sequence.

When the third world accuses North American theologies of indulging in forms of persecution, both overt and covert, how are we to respond? Can a theology which takes no account of the perspective from which persecution is

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experienced adequately respond to critics who accuse it? By what criteria are we to recognize a theology which lends itself to persecution? If it is our theology, what are its roots and the dynamics of its development? This essay will endeavor to answer these questions with the help of René Girard, Professor of French Language, Literature, and Civilization at Stanford University.

## THE SACRIFICIAL HERMENEUTIC

### Girard's Hypothesis

The hypothesis of Girard is disarmingly simple in its structure, yet complex and subtle in its comprehension. It is a phenomenological hypothesis which gains from the amount and range of evidence surveyed. His 1972 *Violence and the Sacred* includes references from subjects as diverse as ethnology and linguistics, from the deconstruction of Derrida to the psychoanalytic method of Freud, from the Greek tragedians to Nietzsche.

Girard contends that human culture is founded on violence done to an innocent victim. His work is the extension and critique of the early pioneers of theories of the origins of hominization. Somewhere in the dim mists of prehistory an innocent human being was slaughtered to protect the community from a more complete self-annihilation. In the earliest beginnings of human culture, humanity is separated from all other living creatures by an act of violence, an act of irrational life taking. As Andrew McKenna wryly puts it, "In the beginning was the victim."<sup>6</sup> Girard contends that it is mimetic desire which led to this violence, to the expulsion of the victim, and finally the ritual process. Mimetic desire or mimesis refers to desire directed and energized by the covetous dynamics of imitation.<sup>7</sup>

Picture two children in a room full of toys. As soon as one of them reaches out for a toy, and not before that, that one toy becomes the object of desire. The first child becomes a model. The second child imitates the first. As the two children focus their attention on the toy, a rivalry ensues. The model issues a double-bind in his act of reaching. On the one hand, he makes the toy an object of desire by reaching for it, occasioning mimesis. On the other hand, as soon as he reaches for the toy an implied prohibition is expressed; the toy belongs to him since he reached for it first. The rivalry, as most parents can attest, inevitably turns to violence. This violence ends with the expulsion or victimizing of one of the two rivals vying for the toy.

In the same way, Girard argues that similar mimesis can be found in the origins of the hominization process. Girard uses as an example the myth found in Livy of the founding of Rome by the two brothers, Romulus and Remus. Romulus had just finished tracing the boundaries of the city when Remus jumps those boundaries. This act of mimesis in a display of authority turns into a rivalry in which Remus ends up being murdered by the angry crowd.<sup>8</sup> One can also point to the suggestive founding murder in Genesis 4 where two brothers seek the attention of God and one brother kills the other to end the rivalry.<sup>9</sup>

Girard points out that Freud correctly identified the significance of the founding murder but failed to explore its meaning.<sup>10</sup> Freud originally explored

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mimesis as the mechanism underlying the Oedipus Complex, but failed to carry through his insights.<sup>11</sup> The founding murder in Freud is misunderstood, according to Girard, who contends that the notion of the collective murder originates with Freud. However, as Girard observes with respect to the murder:

Freud astutely surmised the necessity for this act, but because the mechanism of the surrogate victim eluded him, he failed to grasp its *modus operandi*. This mechanism provides the only feasible explanation of how a sacrificial murder, originally regarded as a crime, can literally be transformed into an act of piety.<sup>12</sup>

By locating mimetic desire at the heart of the phenomenon of violence (the victimage mechanism), Girard is able to suggest a paradigm which explains the function of both myth and ritual in the hominization process. As an explanation for myth, the victimage mechanism could also participate in the development of the symbolic process in general and the formation of linguistic symbols and ultimately texts.<sup>13</sup>

According to Girard, this founding murder is, until the Gospel texts, shrouded in a mythological deception. Texts written from the perspective of the persecutor are mythic and false, preserved by the community to rationalize and sacralize persecution. In myths and persecution texts,<sup>14</sup> the victim is always judged as guilty; blamed for the woes that have befallen the community.<sup>15</sup> As victim, the persecuted becomes the focus of the hostility generated in the mimetic process.

However, once expelled or murdered, the victim becomes transformed in the perception of the community when, as a result of the transference of communal hostility to the innocent scapegoat, cohesion is restored. The transformation of the persecuted victim into the Bringer of Peace, the One who restores cohesion and blessing to the community, is the process of sacralizing. This sudden change is usually attributed to the appeasement of the transcendent as the most viable source for the remarkable cessation of hostility and onset of cohesive tranquility. It is this process of sacralizing, operational as a principle of interpretation of both texts and situations, which we shall often refer to as the *sacrificial hermeneutic*.<sup>16</sup>

It is ironic but true that violence can effect reconciliation. The beneficial effects of the scapegoat are the grounds of ritual in which the community from that point on will engage. Ritual reenactment of the sacrificial victimage mechanism now safeguards the community from further spontaneous outbursts of violence. Ritual channels mimesis so that the community's violence does not get out of hand but instead is displaced onto a single victim. Ritual reenactment of the victimage mechanism is a feigned disintegration of the community to ward off the threat of a real mimetic crisis. The sacrificial hermeneutic is thus justified in the community's myths and ritually reenacted in the community's life.

The Gospel texts, according to Girard, reveal the innocence of the victim and the guilt of the persecutors. As texts, they challenge the mythological hermeneutic found in any other text which attributes guilt to the victim. The Gospel texts demystify all other texts which conceal the victimage mechanism under the sacralizing impact of the sacrificial hermeneutic.

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The sacrificial hermeneutic places a deceptive cover over the victim, making the victim appear guilty of all the crimes of which he or she is accused, protecting and justifying the victimizing person or community. The death of the victim is seen as necessary or divinely sanctioned to relieve the perceived crisis of the community.

### **The Prophetic Hermeneutic of Jesus**

The Gospels, suggests Girard, offer an alternative hermeneutic by which to understand all texts, and as the church has correctly argued, they offer a paradigm of a life lived by which to interpret all human action. The Gospels offer an antisacrificial hermeneutic.

Girard contends that:

the gospels only speak of sacrifices in order to reject them and deny them any validity. Jesus counters the ritualism of the Pharisees with an anti-sacrificial quotation from Hosea: Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'"<sup>17</sup>

Recent studies on Jesus lend credence to Girard's interpretation. Marcus Borg's *Jesus: A New Vision* concludes that Jesus, following the prophetic tradition and its "mercy code," set aside the "Holiness Code" and, as we will note, its corollary, the sacrificial system (Luke 6).<sup>18</sup> The mercy code is seen in Jesus' demand to refrain from any form of violence and to love one's neighbor as completely as oneself, even to the point of giving up one's life. As Girard puts it:

The gospels tell us that to escape violence it is necessary to love one's brother completely—to abandon the violent mimesis involved in the relationship of doubles. There is no trace of it in the Father, and all the Father asks is that we refrain from it likewise.<sup>19</sup>

In his renunciation of the sacrificial hermeneutic, Jesus follows prophetic tradition in interpreting the Law. This prophetic reading of the Law is opposed to the sacrificial reading found in other Jewish circles.<sup>20</sup> For example, one could point to Jeremiah's rejection of sacrificial directives given to Moses at Sinai (Jer. 7); or to Hosea's denunciation of Jehu's violence which in the Books of the Kings is "commanded by God" (Hosea 1:4, 2 Kings 9–10); or to the nonsacrificial hermeneutic enjoined by a number of psalms composed in the postexilic era of Israel's history (e.g., Psalms 40, 51).

As Raymond Schwager has pointed out, God disassociates himself from violence more and more as Israel's history progresses. Violence is more and more consistently shown to be a human phenomenon condemned by God who progressively reveals himself as nonviolent.<sup>21</sup>

If we follow this reading, we can argue that the Father did not require the sacrifice of the Son, only the obedience of love. Violence, like love, can effect reconciliation. Unlike love, which is self-giving, violence is life-taking. Violence

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sacrifices the life of an “innocent other” to prolong the life of the community. Love gives its life for the sake of the other.<sup>22</sup>

The god who requires sacrifice is not the God of Jesus, who rejects the sacrificial system and its corollary, the sacrificial hermeneutic. In obedience to his God, Jesus rejected the sacrificial hermeneutic in his teaching and his acts.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, Joachim Jeremias has argued for what Girard contends is an antisacrificial reading of Old Testament texts. In his *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, Jeremias suggested that Jesus avoided any nationalistic sentiment of hatred toward the Gentiles, thus refusing to scapegoat the Gentiles.<sup>24</sup> Jewish culture could not, according to Jesus and the Old Testament prophets, be founded on the Gentiles as victims of the divine wrath.

Further support can be found in the work of Bruce Chilton who suggests that Jesus' use of the Old Testament, in particular the Isaiah Targum, was not to negate the Old Testament, but rather to encourage a prophetic reading of the Old Testament traditions.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, two recent studies on the Bible from a Girardian perspective continue this nonsacrificial reading. Robert Hamerton-Kelly's *Sacred Violence* argues that Paul has demystified the issue of violence from a theology of the cross, thereby shaping a hermeneutic which exposes the myth of sacred violence.<sup>26</sup> Jim Williams is his lucid work *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* offers a reading of mimesis and violence, similar to Schwager, which functions for him as the hermeneutic key to interpreting the Bible.<sup>27</sup>

Evidence is available and growing to suggest that Girard's hypothesis has significant backing in New Testament studies. An antisacrificial hermeneutic negates any sacrificial interpretation of Christian texts. Girard himself once felt that the Epistle to the Hebrews presented such a sacrificial position, and he rejected it on those grounds, but has since changed his mind.

In the light of this, it is important for evangelicals, who claim to follow the authority of Scripture, to also allow Scripture to shape their hermeneutic. Every major North American systematic theology consulted accepted the premises of the sacrificial hermeneutic laid down by Augustine and sealed in Anselm.<sup>28</sup> The failure to discern the nonsacrificial reading of the Gospels occurs in

the habit of tracing structural analogies between the Passion and the sacrifices instituted by all other religions. The sacrificial reading is capable only of seeing such analogies of this kind, and as we have shown, all anti-Christian arguments remain committed to this superficially structural reading.<sup>29</sup>

In short, the life of Jesus Christ is the life of a nonviolent human being whose “project” was to rid humanity of violence by bringing violence out in the open and exposing its lies.<sup>30</sup> The ministry and teaching of Jesus are the concrete manifestations of the love of the God of nonviolence and the repudiation of all sacrificial hermeneutics.

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## Hermeneutics in the Early Church

From the earliest times of the postpentecost church the prophetic hermeneutic of Jesus contended with the sacrificial hermeneutic of the mimetic process for the minds of both leaders and laity. Neither was clearly dominant through all the early centuries so punctuated with persecution for the church.

It is our contention, however, that the hermeneutic given in the Gospel texts was officially subverted and disguised in the period beginning with Constantine and continuing through Augustine and Anselm. In what follows we shall show that a “Christian culture” founded under Constantine and given theological justification in Augustine is primarily responsible for the enduring authority of a sacrificial hermeneutic in the West. Our arguments are not intended to substitute Constantine and Augustine as scapegoats for others. Rather, it is only by rethinking our theological roots, and indeed repenting of them where appropriate, that we shall be able once again to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is well known among students of church history that dramatic and often sweeping changes took place in the life and theology of the early church during the first four hundred years. One thinks of Nicea and Chalcedon or of leaders like Ambrose, Cyprian, Origen, and Tertullian. The most dramatic change, however, took place when Christianity, under the Emperor Constantine, was declared a legal religion. The early church had endured 300 years of persecution, some local, some universal, some formal, some informal, but persecution of the ugliest kind nevertheless.

The dawn of Constantine brought outward peace and security for the first time in the history of the Christian church.<sup>31</sup> The interpretation of Hosius of Cordoba that it was Jesus Christ whose sign Constantine had seen in his vision before his victory at the Milvian Bridge was the final straw that encouraged Constantine to “become” a Christian and for all the empire to follow suit.<sup>32</sup>

One clear sign of the early church’s acceptance of a nonsacrificial hermeneutic can be seen, among other places, in the attitudes of the church fathers toward military service and military involvement in violence. It is at this point among others that the shift in the framing of persecution and violence becomes clear. Hans von Campenhausen summarizes the position of the early church when he points out that:

not a single one of the Fathers doubted that, in the world as it is, war is inevitable, and consequently, they saw no reason to condemn the military profession in particular. It is of the very essence of the world to be obliged to shed blood, whether in war or in legal process. . . . They themselves, however, would have nothing to do with war service.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, the church fathers recognized that human culture was founded upon the violence of mimesis. Following the example of Jesus and the apostles they refused to participate in the military or in violence.

Adolf von Harnack in his *Militia Christi* suggested that prior to 170 C.E., there was no discussion about military service simply because it was not yet a live issue.

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But does this mean that had it erupted prior to 170 that it would not have been answered in the negative? The “pacifism” expressed in the Gospel accounts, particularly the mercy code, as well as the pacifism found, for example, in Clement of Rome, would seem to indicate that a definite Christian attitude prohibiting violent retaliation was established.<sup>34</sup>

At any rate, from 170 C.E., the majority opinion of the church fathers is that military service is a banned profession simply because it could demand bloodshed, and Jesus’ teachings prohibit bloodshed and violence. To be sure, as Harnack points out, there is some evidence to the contrary, but it seems that the majority opinion is that military service and war are prohibited to the Christian. As Lisa Cahill has submitted in summing up the early fathers, “violence is not part of the new dispensation.”<sup>35</sup>

Tertullian, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Lactantius, major figures all, have the common opinion that violent retaliation was foreign to the spirit of the gospel. As the Apostle Peter had suggested in his first epistle:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth” (Isaiah 53:9). When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly (1 Peter 2:21–23).

What must be remembered is that many of these same fathers, like the Apostle Peter, paid for their Christian views with their very blood. In other words, they did their theology in a climate of persecution. But early Christian martyrdom was not unique to the leaders of the early church. As Ivo Lesbaupin has observed, “the same radicality of life was demanded of the catechumen as of the bishop, and no difference of age, sex, or community function was deemed important.”<sup>36</sup>

One could suggest that persecution in the early church was the major pastoral care issue. Care for those persecuted, care for those in prison, those who were afraid, those who had lapsed: these are only a fraction of the pastoral care issues that would have arisen as the church attempted to do theology from the perspective of the persecuted, from the perspective of below. Nowhere do we find any bishop or Christian calling for retaliation in times of persecution. Rather we find the opposite, bishops and laity alike encouraging one another to persevere in their love of the persecutor.

### **The Subversion of the Biblical Hermeneutic**

With the advent of Constantine and the shift in the legal position of Christianity in relation to the state, a new era dawns for the church. Not without some measure of justification has this time been called the “Fall of the Church.”<sup>37</sup> With the church as an accepted cultural institution, even the spirituality of martyrdom undergoes the subtle transformation from the bloody “red” martyrdom to the ascetic ideal expressed in the “white” martyrdom. The “white martyrdom” transfers the outer hostility of persecution inwardly, thus providing a

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foundation for the hatred of “bodily passions,” passions which if excited would lead to mimetic conflict.<sup>38</sup> The age of martyrs gave way to the rise of ascetic monasticism.

Constantine’s ecclesial chronicler, Eusebius of Caesarea, is primarily responsible for our interpretation of Constantine. Eusebius is the first figure in the early church to seek to discern the patterns of ecclesial history and the divine involvement in that history. What is striking is that in the earliest editions of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Eusebius was a pacifist!<sup>39</sup> It is not until after the Constantinian peace that Eusebius appears to sanction violence as a Christian possibility. He even leaves out of his church history Constantine’s murder of Crispus, his own son. Apparently Eusebius, the primary model of church historians in the early church, came to accept the violence of the state as the price paid for peace from persecution.

The shift from a theology of the persecuted to a theology of the persecutor has become evident at this point. As Robert Grant has observed, it is also the fate of the Jews which played a prominent *raison d’être* for Eusebius’ chronicles.<sup>40</sup> Judaism and Christianity now became the two dominant religious traditions caught in a mimetic conflict. The Cain and Abel character of the relation of Judaism and Christianity ends with Jews becoming official scapegoats and Christian anti-Semitism becoming an institutional reality.<sup>41</sup> The church which began as a persecuted community now becomes the persecutor, thus sealing its fate with those who had in times past killed the prophets.

Approximately 100 years after Constantine, violence and persecution sanctioned by the church came to the fore in the life and thought of Augustine. It was the Donatist problem that was the occasion for Augustine to set forth his views on violence. In the words of Peter Brown, “Augustine, in replying to his critics, wrote the only full justification in the history of the early church, of the right of the state to suppress non-Catholics.”<sup>42</sup>

The Donatist problem began as a result of persecution. At stake was whether or not priests who had lapsed, i.e., those who had become *traditores* by sacrificing or handing over Scriptures to the local magistrates, could remain priests within the church. Donatus argued that anyone who denied the faith was out. It was as simple as that.<sup>43</sup> This attitude of extrusion toward the lapsed betrays Donatus’ involvement in a mimetic rivalry with the lapsed, understandable enough in view of the pain which persecution had brought to the martyrs.

Augustine demonstrates that he was “hooked” into this mimetic rivalry from the other side, the side of the lapsed. His response to the crisis was to turn the Donatist Christians into victims, scapegoats, to resolve the conflict and bring peace to North Africa. The alternative available to Augustine and to Donatus alike is illustrated in the writings of Cyprian<sup>44</sup> who stood with Augustine against Donatus and his harshness, calling for forgiveness and reconciliation on the grounds that all are sinners in need of grace. It would have been prophetic thus to instruct the Donatists, but unfortunately mimetic and violent to victimize them.

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In his profound and often moving biography of Augustine, Peter Brown has analyzed this painfully difficult period of the life of the Bishop of Hippo. Brown notes several crucial aspects of Augustine's thought that bear upon the sacrificial reading he will give the Christian tradition.

First, the doctrine of double predestination had grown more deeply rooted in Augustine. There can be little doubt that Augustine is the first major systematic writer on the subject. While it is clear that Augustine did not have in mind the dual predestination that many of his medieval followers would have; nevertheless, Augustine suggests that prior to creation God had determined to damn most of humanity, and to admit only a few to heaven. While it is true that in Augustine, election is *ad gratiam, ad vitam*, it is also true that he refuses to delve into why God does not choose all. We would contend that, for Augustine, the doctrine of predestination provided a theological justification for victimizing, since God himself arbitrarily chose victims in eternity past. That is, since all would be foreseen as sinners, all were justly damned and punished. Any gracious election of a few only underscores the depths of God's mercy.

Second, Augustine's attitude, according to Brown, can be summarized in the word *disciplina*. Augustine argues that in the Old Testament, disasters were divine punishments. This corresponds to Girard's suggestion that a cause was sought for such disasters in one who had violated the divine prohibitions. Augustine seems to work the victimage mechanism clearly in his notion of *disciplina*, because he sees the punishment of the Donatists as "another controlled catastrophe imposed by God, mediated, on this occasion, by the laws of the Christian Emperors."<sup>45</sup> Brown also points out that Augustine had accepted the "severities and violent deeds" of God in the Old Testament and that they no longer shocked him.

Why did Augustine so easily engage the sacrificial interpretation and the victimage mechanism? We noted earlier that Girard contends victims are necessary when mimetic conflict reaches a dangerous level. It would appear that Augustine and the church as he saw it were caught in such a mimetic crisis. The downfall of Rome, the collapse of Roman culture, the invasion of the barbarians, as well as the license and promiscuity so prevalent for Augustine, all probably contributed to such a mimetic crisis in Augustine's mind. As a bishop, Augustine could have sought to encourage his followers by the example of Christ, as the early fathers had done. However, Augustine had long since accepted the Constantinian synthesis and would admit that humanity required more than spiritual pressure to keep from violating cultural and Christian prohibitions.

We may with Peter Brown call Augustine the "first theorist of the Inquisition." We are suggesting that Augustine baptized the victimage mechanism with Christian theology. Little wonder that Augustine himself felt a *tremendum*, a sense of awe and foreboding. Augustine sacralized the martyrs who had been persecuted in the early church as well as others who had been victimized, thus continuing to pave the way for "the cult of the saints."<sup>46</sup> Augustine merged all holy dead, since

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all had been scapegoated, and from the perspective of sacred violence, all scapegoats share in the sacralization process.

It is ironic and significant that when Augustine engages in a defense of persecution, the awe he feels in the face of the persecuted is the same as that which Girard contends is felt in the face of the scapegoat who ends the misfortune of the community and brings a saving cohesion. Augustine had set in motion a mechanism cycling both forward and backward in time, a sacral screen for violence, plundering both the persecuted and the persecutor in the church of the treasure of the Gospel of peace. Unknowingly he merges the Donatists he persecutes with the holy martyrs and with Jesus himself in the indiscriminate blur of sacralized violence. *Tremendum* indeed!

The persecuted Donatists became the first official victims of Augustinian "Christian" culture, a culture reflected in his influential *City of God*. It is in truth an anti-Christian culture, east of Eden in violence. It is a culture for which Augustine justified the victimage mechanism from biblical texts using the sacrificial hermeneutic exposed and opposed by the prophets and by Jesus in the Gospels.

It is striking, as Girard has observed, how

historical Christianity covers the text with a veil of sacrifice. Or to change the metaphor, it immolates them in the (albeit splendid) tomb of Western culture. By this reading, the Christian text is able to found something that in principle it ought never to have founded: a culture.<sup>47</sup>

The Gospels can serve as a foundation for a new culture, similar to all the previous cultures only as a result of a certain distortion of the original message.<sup>48</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS

There are profound consequences to utilizing such a hermeneutic which Girard has proposed.

First, in parish work it is crucial to discern the roles played in family systems, especially the role of scapegoat often taken by one family member. If scapegoats are endemic to our world, then it stands to reason that we will find them in the smallest community, the family. By exposing scapegoating (among other dysfunctional elements), we will go a long way to helping families face their collective crises. In so doing, we shall begin to halt the escalation of abuse and domestic violence by modeling nonmimetic behaviors with our congregations and our families.

Second, as Edwin H. Freedman has observed, this scapegoating dynamic works itself out in congregational life where it is all too easy to focus blame on a member or a group of members when things go wrong. Power politics in the church are little more than mimetic conflict in ecclesial dress.<sup>49</sup> Churches are sadly replete with mimetic conflict between members and pastors, or between committees. We can no longer afford to live out dysfunctional patterns of behavior in our

church families especially when we engage in mimesis and ultimately some sort of violence.

Third, it forces us as interpreters of Scripture to rethink our commitments to social justice and active nonresistance. Our ethics, if grounded in sacred violence, will only end up justifying violence and participating in the mimetic conflict. We can and ought to affirm those aspects of Christian theology in which violence is exposed as evil, and nonviolent affirmation is seen as the cost of discipleship.<sup>50</sup>

Fourth, it challenges us to reconsider issues relating to capital punishment, war, the Christian as police officer, and indeed, as practicing politician. Christians who participate in social roles which demand some form of retaliation or punishment might need to be challenged to ask whether they have bought into the mechanism of sacred violence.

Finally, it exposes the nature of mimetic conflict in all of us. On the level of our spirituality, we are challenged to renounce all forms of greed, self-aggrandizement, fame, and glory. It demands humility. Here, I think of the seductive power of the church growth movement where “bigger is better.” Denominational pension plans commensurate with larger churches and salaries provide ample opportunity for upward mobility, but little by way of humble acceptance of small parish life. Ministerial gatherings which emphasize “growing churches” only exacerbate mimetic conflict. Acceptance of a humble and simple lifestyle where upward mobility in all its “Adamic” forms is renounced, and where “letting go and letting God” is fostered, places us into a spirituality of modeling Jesus (Phil 2:5–11).

The relation of culture to Christianity is a significant issue that many figures of church history explore. Theologians like Martin Luther, Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, and Jacques Ellul all spent a good deal of their lives and ministries reckoning with the cultural Christianity of their times. We can add to their ranks the work of René Girard. Attempts made by the religious right to found a Christian culture must come to terms with the nonviolent, nonsacrificial hermeneutic proposed by Girard. In a world broken by war, violence, and abuse, any theological alternative which proposes healing, love, and peace should be pursued.<sup>51</sup>

#### NOTES

1. René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1986), 211.
2. Ivo Lesbaupin, *Blessed Are the Persecuted* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), 48; see also W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).
3. See, e.g., Leonard Goepfert, *Apostolic and Post Apostolic Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 108ff.
4. Herbert Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church* (London: Oxford, 1980), 20. Michael Green posits persecution as an indirect outcome of early Christian evangelism, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 264; W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 89f.
5. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 204.
6. Andrew McKenna, “Introduction” to *Semeia* 33 (1985): 5.

7. The heart of Girard's hypothesis lies in his understanding of mimesis. In *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1972), 146ff., Girard suggests the need to reframe current definitions of human behavior in the light of the mimetic phenomenon.
8. *The Scapegoat*, 88–94.
9. René Girard, *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 144–49.
10. On Freud, see “Freud and the Oedipus Complex” in *Violence and the Sacred*. Girard points out that Freud correctly saw the importance of mimesis in parent-child relations but then proceeded to sublimate mimesis to a “philosophy of consciousness” which Girard contends cannot be clinically demonstrated in the child-parent relationship. For the child to experience the hostility to the father in his desire for the mother, the child must at some point be conscious of the rivalry which then becomes repressed and unconscious. This consciousness is, according to Girard, the lynchpin of Freud's Oedipus complex, and the Achilles' heel as well. Girard contends that Freud abandoned the insights of mimesis expressed in the 1921 *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* in his 1923 *The Ego and the Id*. Cf. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 173.  
Girard's deconstruction of the Oedipus story as a phenomenon of the victimage mechanism is not an isolated reading. A similar reading of other Hellenist myths by Margaret Visser, “Worship Your Enemies: Cult Worship in Ancient Greece,” in *Harvard Theological Review* 75, #4 (October 1982), suggests that Girard is on a better hermeneutical track than Freud.
11. *Violence and the Sacred*, 169–92.
12. *Ibid.*, 197.
13. Girard suggests that “the victim must be the first object of non-instinctual attention, and he or she provides a good starting point for the creation of the sign systems because the ritual imperative consists in a demand for substitute victims, thus introducing the practice of substitution which is the basis of all symbolization,” in Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 129.
14. Girard makes the telling connection between myths, whose “historical” connections are tenuous, and persecution texts, whose historical connections are taken for granted, in *The Scapegoat*, 24–44; *Violent Origins*, 112ff.
15. René Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985)
16. *Violent Origins*, 91ff.; *The Scapegoat*, 44.
17. *Things Hidden*, 180.
18. Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).
19. *Things Hidden*, 215.
20. Klyne Snodgrass, “Matthew and the Law,” *SBL Seminar Papers* (Chico: Scholars, 1988).
21. See Raymond Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 43–126; *Jesus Im Heilsdrama* (Tyrolia: Innsbruck, 1990). Robert Daly contends for a “incarnational spiritualization of sacrifice” in the New Testament in his *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).
22. Eberhard Jungel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 314–15, 334–43.
23. E.P. Sanders in his book *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 89ff., writes that reference to the event as a “cleansing of the Temple” falsifies the narrative since no prophet was expected to engage in such an activity, nor does Jesus appear to have done so. Sanders, however, in accepting the sacrificial hermeneutic does not go further, as does Girard who suggests that Jesus rejected the sacrificial cultus following the prophetic tradition, an action which could be expected of a prophet!
24. Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 42; *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1971), 203ff.
25. Bruce Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984), 166ff.
26. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992).

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27. James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* (New York: Harper, 1992).
  28. Representative is Donald Bloesch's *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (New York: Harper, 1978).
  29. *Things Hidden*, 233.
  30. *Things Hidden*, 197. On Jesus' nonviolence, among others see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); George R. Edwards, *Jesus and the Politics of Violence* (New York: Harper, 1972); Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).
  31. See W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom*, 542; also his *Rise of Christianity*, 482. Note that the crucial question for Constantine concerned finding out which God it was that conquered, i.e., had the most violent power.
  32. A.H.M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (Toronto: Toronto, 1978). W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom*, 542, queries whether it was the expediency of politics or true conversion, as does Jones, but comes to the conclusion that Constantine felt a debt to the "god" who had given him the victory over Maxentius.
  33. Hans von Campenhausen, "Christians and Military Service in the Early Church," in *Tradition and Life in the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 161.
  34. Adolf von Harnack, *Militia Christi* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981). Documentation for the early church has been collected and commented upon by Louis Swift, *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983).
  35. Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Nonresistance, Defense, Violence, and the Kingdom in Christian Tradition," *Interpretation* (October 1984): 382.
  36. Lesbaupin, *Blessed Are the Persecuted*, 48.
  37. Most notably by Anabaptist church historians. See, e.g., Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 214ff.  
 Massey Shepherd, "Before and after Constantine," in Jerald Brauer, ed., *The Impact of the Church upon its Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968), 21, argues that "it would be far more accurate, from a historical point of view, to describe the contemporary crisis of Christianity as the emergence of the 'Post-Constantinian' age." If he is correct, it is critical to discern the Constantinian influence in the current crisis of Western Christianity.
  38. The deprecation of bodily and sensual reality found expression above all in the church's attitude toward women. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition Vol I* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971), 288ff.; Robin Lane Fox, *Christians and Pagans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 370ff.
  39. Glenn F. Chestnut, *The First Christian Histories* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 131. Chestnut dates the first edition of the *H.E.* before 303. Robert Grant also dates the first edition prior to 303, *Eusebius as Church Historian* (London: Oxford, 1980). Chestnut, 129, also points out that "in the first edition of his *Church History*, Eusebius nowhere sanctioned physical violence or persecution against those regarded as heretics."
  40. Grant, *Eusebius*, 97ff.
  41. Compare the observation of Robert Wilken, "*Insignissima Religio, Certe Licita?*" in *The Impact of the Church on Its Culture*, 44, "Now we are dealing, as it were, with an internecine feud, a conflict devoid of reason and logic, a bitter war, the spoils to be nothing less than life itself. Both Jew and Christian claim to bear an ultimate truth, each supports this claim by an appeal to the same book, and each realizing that the fate of the one is somehow dependent upon the other. Either Christianity or Judaism!"
  42. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 235.
  43. On Donatus see the complete work by W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (London: Oxford, 1971); also his summary of Donatus found in *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1985).
  44. S.L. Greenslade, ed., *Early Latin Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 140, 143-47. See also Jean Danielou, *The Origins of Latin Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977), 426.
  45. Brown, *Augustine*, 237.

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46. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 71–73. Girard treats the function of the dead in *Violence and the Sacred*, 250ff.
  47. *Things Hidden*, 249.
  48. *Ibid.*, 253.
  49. Edwin H. Freedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: Guilford, 1985).
  50. Joseph T Culliton, *Non-Violence: Central to Christian Spirituality* (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1982).
  51. This paper was originally presented to the International Congress on Christian Counseling, Atlanta, GA, November 1988.