

I live, work, move and breath in a world of practical theology. This is the world where the church works to put its beliefs into practice. And it is also a world of balance – a world in which the question of being prophetic vs. realistic must be constantly confronted. As Assistant Director of the Eco-Justice Programs and Coordinator of the Poverty Initiative of the National Council of Churches, the issue of putting faith into practice is tantamount. How do we translate our belief in care for Creation into practice in terms of national policy dealing with climate change? How do we take our belief in the humanity of all people, and translate that into effective policy that makes sure everyone has an equal shot at life? Included in, and extending beyond, these questions looms the question of war and peace, of violence and nonviolence. How do we take a Jesus who calls us to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, and love our enemies and translate that into national defense policy? The church needs to speak in these very situations – to call the world to the prophetic word and witness of our faith. However, we have to get what we believe in line first. That is what is so exciting about this conference, and this opportunity. How we act, what we do, how we live is a direct reflection of the God in whom we believe. Sallie McFague, writing about the environmental crisis, describes this reality:

Deep down, beneath all of our concepts and ideas about ourselves, is a sense, a feeling, an assumption about who we are. This is not a question people commonly ask of each other – or of themselves – any more than they ask one another, “Who is God?” These questions are seen as too personal or too abstract or too intimidating for civil conversations.; nonetheless, they are the deepest questions of human existence and lie uneasily beneath any glib answers we might give, were we to be asked. However we act all the time on the basis of these deep assumptions of who we are and who God is, even while not acknowledging we have such assumptions [...] So we are suggesting that *who* God is and *who* we are must be central questions if we hope to change our actions in the direction of just, sustainable planetary living. It is useless to censure people for their actions when the roots of those actions lie in deep, unexamined assumptions. The

problem lies in our theologies and our anthropologies. The problem, as many have pointed out, is a “spiritual” one, having to do with our *will* to change¹.

And for too long we have professed belief in a violent God. A God who sent Jesus Christ to a violent death on a cross, as a sacrifice demanded for our sin. Is it any surprise that the world, then, is embroiled in the violence in which we find it? If God responds to our sin by demanding the violent sacrifice of Jesus, why would we expect ourselves to respond any differently? As J. Denny Weaver writes, “Atonement theology starts with violence, namely the killing of Jesus. The commonplace assumption is that something good happened, namely the salvation of sinners, when or because Jesus was killed. It follows that the doctrine of atonement then explains how and why Christians believe that the death of Jesus – the killing of Jesus – resulted in the salvation of sinful humankind”². There is a presumption here that sin, or sinfulness, deserves violent retribution. That Jesus’ death paid the price for the sin of humankind. We continue this cycle as we respond to violence, sin, and evil in this world with retributive violence.

And we certainly live in a violent world. A glance around the globe reveals no sector not affected by either direct violent activity or the specter of violence. Furthermore, as previously noted, the Bible and theology are often used to justify this violence. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer writes:

The menace posed by legalistic Christians stretches to the whole world, but they don’t have to *imagine* a manifestly evil God to justify their views and actions [...] they paint the world as a politically and spiritually dangerous place in which enemies, or even people with whom they differ, are to be feared and defeated. Regrettably, their views on God’s wrath and the scarcity of divine blessing rest on *solid theological ground*³.

¹ McFague, Sallie. *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota: 2008. Pg. 30-31.

² Weaver, J. Denny. *The Nonviolent Atonement*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Grand Rapids, Michigan: 2001. Pg. 2.

³ Nelson-Pallmeyer, Jack. *Saving Christianity From Empire*. Continuum International Publishing Group, New York: 2005. pg.121.

This need not be so, however. What stands at the center of this cycle of violence, and its being justified through the church and theology, is a misunderstanding of the atonement – a misreading of the passion narrative. Jesus did not die due to the demands of a God as wages for sin, but rather as a result of our sin. Jesus died because of our violent reality – not at the behest or requirement of God, but of us. Furthermore, Christ’s death at the hand of our violence calls us to a different response to this violent world – to a breaking of the cycle. Rene Girard’s theory of mimetic desire explores our violent world, and displays how our religious myths and rituals – including our biblical narrative - have been used to reinforce this reality. Girard also, however, shows why this need not be. Girard’s interpretation of the biblical texts, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, call us to a different reality. It is a reality of not only a nonviolent Christ to follow, but one of divine relationality. Only when viewed through the lens of Trinitarian relationship can Girard’s Jesus, and the overturning of the scapegoating mechanism, truly provide us with another way of living in this world.

Mimesis describes a way of living in which we are in constant competition for resources until violence results. Girard writes, “If the appropriative gesture of an individual named A is rooted in the imitation of an individual named B, it means that A and B must reach together for one and the same object. They become rivals for that object”⁴. The idea here is that we form our desires, our wants, based on what other people have. And, realistically, two people can never possess the same thing at the same time. S. Mark Heim writes, “We are genetically programmed to be programmable through interaction with our environment, and above all through interaction with our human environment. We are face-readers, emotion-detectors, who from the beginning of our dependent infancies grow our own desires and patterns of behavior on the basis of models

⁴ Girard, Rene. *The Girard Reader*. James Williams, ed. Crossroad Publishing Company, New York. 1996. Pg. 9.

take from others”⁵. This is how we learn what we want, what we need, and how to act. We learn by watching others. We necessarily want or desire what they have. Weaver writes, “Human beings develop by imitating each other, and in that imitation they end up as rivals who desire the same things”⁶. Girard describes it this way, in reference to the tenth commandment:

We assume that desire is objective or subjective, but in reality it rests on a third party who gives value to the objects. This third party is usually the one who is closest, the neighbor. To maintain peace between human beings, it is essential to define prohibitions in light of this extremely significant fact: our neighbor is the model for our desires. This is what I call mimetic desire. Mimetic desire does not always result in conflict, but it frequently does so for reasons that the tenth commandment makes evident. The object I desire in envious imitation of my neighbor is one he intends to keep for himself, to reserve for her own use; she will not let someone snatch it away without combat.⁷

We see this early on in our lives as children. The toys we desire, and want, are based on the toys other people have. It is why our parents and teachers constantly reminded us to learn how to share. Indeed, at a glance the commandments reveal a way of ordering this very desire. Girard states, “In the Bible, and especially in the Gospels, there is an original conception of desire and its conflicts that has gone largely unrecognized. In order to grasp how old it is, we must go back to the Fall in Genesis or to the second half of the Ten Commandments, which is entirely devoted to prohibiting violence against one’s neighbor”⁸. Without this kind of ordering, whether learning to share or being instructed not to commit violence to get what we want, constant conflict would result from us wanting what the others had. This is not something that just goes away as we get older.

Indeed, contemporary culture illustrates this as the way our world operates. Current economic conversations explore how we, as citizens of the United States, can best protect what is

⁵ Heim, S. Mark. *Saved From Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing. Grand Rapids, Michigan: 2006. Pg. 41.

⁶ Weaver, 46.

⁷ Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, New York: 2001. Pg. 9-10.

⁸ Ibid, 7.

ours. Sallie McFague writes of this economic model, describing one which allocates its resources based not on need, but competition. “The key feature of market capitalism is the allocation of scarce resources by means of decentralized markets: the allocation occurs as the result of individual market transactions, each of which is guided by self interest [...] The value by which scarce resources are allocated, then, is the fulfillment of the self-interest of human beings”⁹. We live in a world not based upon the biblical call to care for our neighbor, but instead to accumulate as much as we can for ourselves. In a world of finite resources, this constant search for self fulfillment necessarily will lead to competition, resulting in violence. “Violence is generated by this process; or rather violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means.”¹⁰ We can see this throughout the world around us – war and violence throughout the continent of Africa over scarce resources and in the violence in the inner cities of the United States as people battle for survival, for example. In a world of finite resources, a competitive model of living will necessarily result in violence as the resources increase in scarcity. In fact, many have argued the United States has set up its system of being in the world in just this fashion. “The ideology of empire is fairly simple. It expresses the desires to add to one’s wealth and to dominate over others, desires that seem to be found among at least some segments of all ‘civilized’ societies. The ideology assumes that if one group is able to assert its will over others, then it is superior to them and has the right to exploit them”¹¹. Or, in order to make sure all our desires are fulfilled, we set up systems to dominate and exploit others. We have seen that the best way to keep and get what we want is to keep others from it – at any cost.

⁹ McFague, 87.

¹⁰ Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 9.

¹¹ Cobb, John B. “Commonwealth and Empire”. *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God: A Political, Religious, and Economic Statement*. Griffen, et al. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky: 2006. Pg. 137.

Mimetic desire would result in constant violence among neighbors if societies did not determine a method to order it. Girard describes this as the scapegoat mechanism – society’s way of creating order around this kind of competitive violence. Girard writes, “By a scapegoat effect I mean the strange process by which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters.”¹² The scapegoat effect is the culmination of the mimetic process. It is what keeps the mimetic process in order. Weaver writes, “At the beginning of human civilization, unchecked mimesis produced chaos, which Girard describes as the violence of all against all. At some point, this violence became focused on a single individual, marked by a distinguishing weakness or characteristic. The chaos of all against all could be transformed into peace and order, it was learned, when all antagonists come to focus on a single individual as the cause of all the violence”¹³. It allows a community to come together and rid itself of that which is denying it access, or creating the problems of the community. While it begins as the coalescing of a community against one, in our world of societies and nation-states, entire other nations or cultures become our scapegoat. Samuel Huntington explains this modern day scapegoating:

The West is and will remain for years to come the most powerful civilization. Yet its power relative to that of other civilizations is declining. As the West attempts to assert its values and to protect its interests, non-Western societies confront a choice. Some attempt to emulate the West and to join or to “bandwagon” with the West. Other Confucian and Islamic societies attempt to expand their own economic and military power to resist and to “balance” against the West. A central axis of post-Cold War world politics is thus the interaction of Western power and culture with the power and culture of non-Western civilizations¹⁴.

In other words, our interests have been set against the interests of other societies. In this world, cultures reach against one another for the same finite resources – leading to violence against

¹² Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 12.

¹³ Weaver, 46.

¹⁴Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon and Shuster Publishing. New York: 1996. Pg. 29.

those others. This is successful because this violence is seen as justified. S. Mark Heim writes, “Sacrifice is successful when no one takes the side of the suffering one, no one thinks that person is innocent, no one withholds participation in the collective violence against the person, no one considers his or her death a murder, no one remembers the victim as such after the victim is gone”¹⁵. The “other” in this sense is seen as a threat to our reality, our way of living. The death of the “other” is necessary and justified.

This is again descriptive and reflective of the world we see around us. For instance, in the build up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, our response to the violence dealt to this nation was to seek out those responsible, and coalesce behind a kind of collective vengeance and justice for the actions. David Ray Griffin writes, “the evil of the attacks [9/11] becomes even worse insofar as they were orchestrated to pave the way for launching unprovoked wars on two countries that posed no threat, whether imminent or long-term, to the people of the United States”¹⁶. They were, however, deemed responsible, and scapegoated, for the attacks against our way of life. Every society has the mimetic desire to feel safe, and we scapegoated those whom we could blame for threatening our safety. In fact, every society begins with this kind of scapegoating, in the nature of its founding murder. This is a murder around which society becomes ordered – the mimetic cycle has finally broken out into violence, and at this point structures, rituals, and scapegoating come into effect to bring order to that violence. Furthermore, in our discussion of our actions in these wars, particularly in our treatment of prisoners of war, we see this distinction between the terrorists and victims laid out. The people who are against us, who threaten us, are not accorded the same rights as others – their deaths are deemed right, and necessary. This kind of scapegoating is considered necessary to keep the peace of a society – indeed, this is the

¹⁵ Heim, 65.

¹⁶ Griffin, David Ray. *Christian Faith and the Truth Behind 9/11*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky: 2006. Pg. 181.

argument for keeping Guantanamo Bay open, continued “enhanced interrogation” of prisoners of war, and the reasoning behind the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They are acts of violence needed to bring peace and order to our world. Weaver continues, “When this individual, on whom was loaded all the blame for chaos, was removed – murdered – peace and order reined where previously there was chaos. This first murder became the foundation of human society”¹⁷. In this case, it is not an individual, per say, but the group of people who would strive to do us harm, who must be removed, or defeated, in order to bring peace and order.

This is not something just reflected in our current reality or in the modern history of civilization – where our safety and security seemingly depend on the continuation of the scapegoating mechanism. No, this is also reflected in our biblical story. Girard writes, “The theme of the founding murder is not only mythical but also biblical. We find it in the book of Genesis, in Cain’s murder of his brother Abel. The account of this murder is not a founding myth, it is rather the biblical interpretation of all founding myths. It recounts the bloody foundation of the beginnings of culture and the consequences of this foundation, which form the first mimetic cycle narrated in the Bible”¹⁸. From the beginning of humanities story outside the Garden, of living in community, mimetic desire and scapegoating resulting in our violence is present. This is reflected in stories throughout the Hebrew Bible, Genesis in particular, and specifically in the link from Cain to Noah. Heim writes,

But the biblical God is quickly implicated in killing. In fact, the story of Cain and Abel begins a short, vivid portion of scripture in which God is caught up in the intensive spiral of violence at the end of which God destroys the entire world [...] Just as Cain’s descendants escalate their levels of retribution, God is recruited into this dynamic. God breaks out in violence...against violence. From Cain and Abel, the world has spiraled

¹⁷ Weaver, 46.

¹⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 83.

into a relentless reciprocal destruction. The response is a massive attempt to drive out violence by violence¹⁹.

Girard shows that the entirety of the biblical narrative can be read as reflective of this very kind of scapegoating violence, from the Flood story to traditional atonement theory. He notes that a culture born out of violence remains in that cycle.

If we examine the story with care, we come to see that the lesson of the Bible is precisely that the culture born of violence must return to violence. In the initial stages, we observe a brilliant flowering of culture: techniques are invented; towns spring from the desert. But very soon, the violence that has been inadequately contained by the founding murder and the legal barriers deriving from it starts to escape and propagate²⁰.

Read in this manor – from the stories of the Hebrew Bible through the Passion narrative of Jesus, can certainly give us a picture of a God and a society modeled around the scapegoat mechanism. Indeed, the biblical narrative is often thus interpreted – and used to justify the violence in the world around us.

However, as Girard himself points out a reading of the Bible oriented around the Gospel narrative reveals a God not of mimetic desire and redemptive violence, but one who is instead calling us into relationship – both with Godself and the world around us. The biblical narrative is, instead of emblematic of scapegoating, a thorough rejection of it, and an invitation to respond in another way. The Passion reveals what has remained hidden in so much of the biblical story – the focus of God on the innocence of the victims of our violence. Girard writes,

The victory of Christ has nothing to do with the military triumph of a victorious general: rather than inflicting violence on others, Christ submits to it. What we should retain in the image of triumph is not the military aspect but the idea of an extraordinary event offered to the view of all humankind, a public exhibition of what the enemy had to conceal in order to defend himself [...] Christ does not achieve this victory through violence. He obtains it through a renunciation of violence so complete that violence can rage to its hearts content without realizing that by so doing, it reveals what it must conceal, without

¹⁹ Heim, 73.

²⁰ Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 150.

suspecting that its fury will turn back against it this time because it will be recorded and represented with exactness in the Passion narratives²¹.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, in fact, turns the cycle of mimetic desire, and its resulting scapegoat mechanism, upside down. Jesus' life, committed to the values of nonviolence and the revealing of the Kingdom of God – leading ultimately to his death - shows that the violence of this world is not of God. Girard writes, “In effect, mankind is responsible for all of this. Men killed Jesus because they were not capable of becoming reconciled without killing [...] Hence they are exposed to a limitless violence that they themselves brought about and that has nothing to do with the anger or vengeance of God.”²² Jesus death, then, is not reflective of a violent God, but rather of a violent humanity that has shown itself unable to learn another way.

The final revelation of human violence and the nonviolence of Yahweh and the reign of God occurs with the crucifixion of Jesus. As the representation of the reign of God, Jesus is absolutely committed to nonviolence. As the innocent victim, he exposes the violence of those who oppose the reign of God. His death unmasks the powers of evil, and renders empty their claim that peace and order are founded on violence²³.

The suffering and death of Jesus is not redemptive violence, then; or just a continuation of the cycle. Instead, it is showing a God refusing to give into the mimetic cycle, refusing to justify the violence of scapegoating, instead showing another way through loving relationship with Creation. The ultimate suffering and death of the innocent Jesus is the complete rejection of this ordering of mimetic desire. Jurgen Moltmann writes that the suffering is contingent on the very nature of God and the way God relates to the world. The suffering is not a necessity God must go through, but is a necessity based on who God is.

If God were incapable of suffering in every respect, then he would also be incapable of love. He would at most be capable of loving himself, but not of loving another as himself, as Aristotle puts it. But if he is capable of loving

²¹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, pg. 140.

²² Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 186-87.

²³ Weaver, 48.

something else, then he lays himself open to the suffering which love for another brings him; and yet, by virtue of his love, he remains master of the pain that love causes him to suffer. God does not suffer out of deficiency of being, like created beings [...] But he suffers from the love which is the superabundance and overflowing of his being.²⁴

The suffering of God comes from the desire to be in relationship, and to call the world into that relationship. To no longer relate to one another and God through violent scapegoating, but instead through giving love and relationship. When read through this lens, the stories of the Hebrew Bible put this nature of God on clear display. The biblical story consistently refers to the innocent nature of the victim. This begins with the founding murder of Abel. Weaver writes, “Beginning with the story of Cain and his founding of a city, the accounts in the early chapters of Genesis reflect the development of culture and religion on the basis of a founding murder. But the uniqueness of the Bible’s stories, according to Girard, is that they consistently tell the story from the standpoint of the innocent victim²⁵. This is also seen in the story of the Flood, where God, after flooding the Earth, promises to never again respond to humanity with violence. Heim continues his reflection on this story by writing, “The response is a massive attempt to drive out violence by violence, an attempt God then declares will never be repeated. A rainbow marks this unilateral covenant promise. To put it badly, God too because subject to this disease, or was forced to violent judgment by it²⁶. Or, what this story highlights is the ineffectiveness of responding with violence, and instead a call to relationship. Girard also calls our attention to the story of Joseph, and his twelve brothers who ran him out of town, only to have to turn to him for help. Genesis 37: 2-11 reads,

This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah,

²⁴ Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Trinity and the Kingdom*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN: 1993. Pg. 23.

²⁵ Weaver, 48.

²⁶ Heim, 73.

his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, 'Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.' His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?' So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, 'Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, 'What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?' So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind²⁷.

Joseph is then sold into slavery by his brothers. When given an opportunity for retribution, the Bible records Joseph responding in this way, chapter 45: 4-8:

Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.'

On this, Girard writes,

This final episode is a meditation on the kind of collective violence with which the biblical story is obsessed just as much as the myths, but the results are just the reverse. The final triumph of Joseph is, not an insignificant "happy ending", but a means of making explicit the problem of violent expulsions. Without ever leaving its narrative framework the biblical account pursues a reflection on violence whose radicalism is revealed at the point where pardon replaces the obligatory vengeance. It is only this pardon, this forgiveness, that is capable of stopping once and for all the spiral of reprisals²⁸.

²⁷ All Biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

²⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, pg. 111.

The story of Joseph continues to show that this cycle can only be broken through the power of continued relationships, not the vengeful cycle of scapegoating violence.

The biblical story, culminating in the Passion narrative, exposes the insufficiency of the scapegoat mechanism for dealing with the world around us. However, what is not immediately granted is the reasoning for why this empowers us to another way of living. William Placher, in an article in *The Christian Century*, writes, “Helping me to realize my faults is therefore in itself no cure. I understand that when despised outsiders are over *there*, and people over *here* are speaking of them hurtfully and with contempt, then I ought to move from here to there. But it is much more comfortable over here, and the people here are often better looking and rather consistently more successful. Many days, I would rather stay put”²⁹. In other words, simply saying we are to live in relationship, as God does, clearly isn’t enough to get us there. What, then, calls us to another way of living? Jesus’ resurrection is what calls us to a different reality – one of relationship with God and the world around us. Placher begins to suggest this, when he writes, “The physical, or mystical, account of the atonement can indeed make room for elements of other pictures. The Christ who becomes what we are so that we might become what he is can also teach us about God, manifest self-sacrificial love, defeat on our behalf forces of evil and show us the innocence of many whom society condemns. But the process begins when he conjoins our sinful humanity with divinity”³⁰. No longer is it a world of scapegoating violence, but instead one of co-dependent relationship. God entered our suffering – Jesus Christ’s saving power lies in the combination of humanity and divinity, through bringing us into the Trinitarian, relational reality of God. Not only did God suffer out of love, but God then overcame this suffering, and through doing invites us into another way of living – outside the cycle of mimetic

²⁹ Placher, William. “How Does Jesus Save?”. *The Christian Century*. 2 June 2009. Pg. 26.

³⁰ Placher, 27.

desire and scapegoating. Girard begins to suggest this, when he writes, “First of all, it is important to insist that Christ’s death was not a sacrificial one. To say that Jesus dies, not as a sacrifice, but in order that there may be no more sacrifices, is to recognize in him the Word of God”³¹. Jesus death was not a sacrifice for what we had done, but a death that frees us to respond to the mimetic cycle in another way. That enters that scapegoating mechanism and reveals it as a never ending cycle of unjustified violence. And then invites us into the relationships of God with the world.

This continues our reinterpretation of the biblical texts – revealing a God who calls us to this relationship from the very beginning. Girard notes this, writing,

Instead of reading myths in light of Gospels, people always read the Gospels in light of myths. In comparison with the astonishing work of demystification effected by the Gospels, our own exercises in demystification are only slight sketches, though they may also be cunning obstacles that our minds erect against the Gospel revelation. But from now on the obstacles themselves must contribute to the invisible by ineluctable advance of revelation³².

Joseph had been thrown out of his family as a result of, as the biblical account states, his brothers desire for what he had – his fathers affection. But instead of responding with vengeance, he instead responds with forgiveness – breaking the cycle of violence. “What stands against any world of contagion and violence is the Bible itself, the biblical interpretation of these phenomena [...] the reversal of the relation of innocence and guilt between victims and executioners is the keystone of biblical inspiration”³³ McFague continues this theme, writing, “Jesus Christ is the lens, the model, through whom Christians interpret God, the world, and themselves.”³⁴ When viewed through this lens, the stories cited earlier show a constant call to relationship, and show that violence necessarily begets more violence in a mimetic cycle ordered through scapegoating.

³¹ Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 184.

³² *Ibid*, 176.

³³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 115-118.

³⁴ McFague, 73.

“That is the reason why killing and dying are simply one and the same thing. To kill is to die, to die is to kill – for both stay within the circle of evil reciprocity, in which reprisals inevitably take place [...] Cain [...] said, ‘Now that I have killed my brother, everyone can kill me’. Everything that could be taken for a rupture in the text that we are following is in reality part and parcel of all the rest within the terms of the Gospel logic.”³⁵ These stories no longer put on display for us a God of vengeance, of retribution, who is as much a part of the scapegoating cycle as the rest of us. Instead, they are lessons, stories that tell of the problems associated with such a system. They are stories that show a way of living, a reality, that living into God’s relational kingdom tosses aside.

We are invited, through Jesus uniting of humanity and divinity, into this relational reality that is God, and is God’s vision for the world. This fundamentally alters the way we are called to live – when the biblical texts reveal the relational God of nonviolence, we cannot continue to use that God to justify mimesis and violence. Instead, we are called and empowered to live differently – in a profound relationship of co-dependence with the world around us. God exists as the primary example of relationships that are based in self giving love. “The Christian God is the eternal communion of the divine Three – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are eternally pouring forth, one toward the other, so much so that they build a single movement of love, communication, and encounter.”³⁶ It is into and out of this loving community that we are called to live. This is to be the basis for all human communities. God is laying forth an example in how we can all come together to work for oneness. Coming together out of our love, through the power we have been granted in the power of the resurrection. Moltmann writes,

³⁵ Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 187.

³⁶ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 47.

God loves the world with the very same love which he himself is in eternity. God affirms the world with the energy of his self-affirmation. Because he not only loves but is himself love, he has to be understood as the triune God. Love cannot be consummated by solitary subject. Individuality cannot communicate itself: individuality is ineffable, unutterable. If God is love he is at once the lover, the beloved and the love itself. Love is the goodness that communicates itself from all eternity.³⁷

This loving relationship is who God is, and by becoming human, flesh, is the loving relationship we are called to. Girard writes of this, “The Gospel revelation is the definitive formulation of a truth already partially disclosed in the Old Testament. But in order to come to completion, it requires the good news that God himself accepts the role of the victim of the crowd so that he can save all. The God who becomes a victim is not another mythic god but the one God, infinitely good, of the Old Testament”³⁸. It is this relationality that we are called to enter into. That the God seen in Jesus is the one and same God of the Hebrew Bible. It is the love of God that makes God three at the same time as one. It is the mystery we are trying to discover laid out plain for the eyes to see. God has modeled what the loving community looks like, and extended it through God’s interaction with and union with the world as an example to follow. Boff writes, “Thus there is wealth in unity and not mere uniformity. The Trinity is the model for each and every community: while individuality is respected, the community emerges through communion and mutual self-surrender. Grassroots Christians understand this well, better than any theology, and they know how to give it very accurate expression: ‘The Blessed Trinity is the perfect community.’”³⁹

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Passion narrative, invites us into the relationships of the triune God, calling us to another way of living, to a relationship God has been calling us to since the very beginning. The stories of Noah, of Cain, of Moses, and of

³⁷ Ibid, 57.

³⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, pg. 130.

³⁹ Boff, *Leonardo. Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, NY: 2000. Pg. 54.

Joseph are not stories of a vengeful God, but rather examples of the cyclical nature of mimesis, ordered through scapegoating violence, and calls to the possibility of another way. They are emblematic of the breaking of the very cycle which Jesus Christ breaks through his life, death, and resurrection. The biblical texts empower us to live a way of peace in this world, declaring God's reign with each step we take. We are to be on the side of those being scapegoated for the sake of the mimetic cycle. To be on the side of those whom are suffering at the hands of the violence perpetuated in this world. Moltmann writes,

So the question is: *Who really is Christ for us today* (Bonhoeffer's formulation)? And who really are we today [...] For every civilization has its reverse side, which is a barbarism [...] This other side is generally neither seen nor heard. Who bothers about the victims at whose expense he is living? But Christian theology would not be *Christian* and would not be *ecumenical* (in the proper sense of the word) if, in the civilization in which it has something publicly to say, it did not become the advocate of the people who are living 'on the other side'.⁴⁰

This relationship we are invited into challenges us – to live in a way reflective of this it. We are now living in a world that relates to a God that is relational in nature – more even than that we live in a world that is a reflection of those relationships. Boff writes eloquently of why this should change the way we think of relating to each other and to God.

Creation is not necessary in the sense of being imposed on God. It derives from the freedom and love of the three divine Persons in wanting an expansion of their communion on another level, different from the internal level on which they live together infinitely, the temporal and finite level [...] That is why creation is so rich, because behind it and within it is hidden the wealth of each divine Person, as that Person is, ever distinct and ever in communion. That is also why creation is pervaded, within the most variegated differences, by a drive toward union, convergence, and communion that mirrors the internal reality of the Trinity.⁴¹

When God is considered in a triune community of love, creation can then be viewed as an extension of that loving relationship. We live in a world so often defined by violence around us, and violence often justified by a theology centered on a God who sacrificed Jesus to this cycle. A

⁴⁰ Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Way of Jesus Christ*. Fortress Press. Minneapolis, MN: 1993. pg. 64.

⁴¹ Boff, 104.

closer reading of the Bible, and of the Passion narrative, however, reveals a very different tale. It tells the death of Jesus as a breaking of that cycle – as the death of someone who could not be scapegoated. Who transforms the world around him so that in him we can transform the world around us. Boff continues, “There is a fundamental human yearning for sharing, equality, respect for differences, and communion of all and with God. The communion of the divine Three offers a source of inspiration for achieving these age-old yearnings [...] The Blessed Trinity is the most wonderful community.”⁴² Or, we have always had this yearning to address the mimetic desires of our hearts – to seek ways to order society and relate to one another. The power of the triune, relational God, made flesh by Jesus Christ, is that we are brought another way to do this than through scapegoating violence. Catherine LaCunga writes of the kind of impact this understanding should have, stating,

God moves toward us so that we may move toward each other and thereby toward God. The way God comes to us is also our way to God and to each other: through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is our faith, confessed in creed and celebrated in sacraments. Confessing faith is incomplete unless it becomes a form of life. Living faith in the God of Jesus Christ means being formed and transformed by the life of grace of God’s economy: becoming persons fully in communion with all; becoming Christ to one another; becoming by the power of the Holy Spirit what God is: love unbounded, glory uncontained.⁴³

This is the power of the Bible read as a book of peace – as a book that speaks to the problems of the mimetic cycle of violence, and shows the path through which it can be overcome. It is a message for all time – and it is certainly a message for our time.

Our response to the problems of this world necessarily changes when how we conceive of God changes. When God is no longer one who submitted Jesus to torture and death as a result of violence, but instead is a God who suffered and died innocently because of our own violence. It

⁴² Boff, 64.

⁴³ LaCunga, Catherine. *God For Us: The Trinity and Christiana Life*. Harper Collins. New York: 1991. pg. 377.

is a fine, but important distinction. And in overcoming that violence, then invites us into a different response. Stanley Hauerwas writes,

We are called to be like God: perfect as God is perfect. It is a perfection that comes by learning to follow and be like this man whom God has sent to be our forerunner in the kingdom. That is why Christian ethics is not first of all an ethics of principles, laws, or values, but an ethic that demands we attend to the life of a particular individual: Jesus of Nazareth. It is only from him that we can learn perfection – which is at the very least forgiving our enemies.⁴⁴

The inward being of God invites us into relationship, and Christ lives out an example of that relationship in action. Dietrich Bonhoeffer also had a conception of the impact that understanding the kingdom of God to be reflected in us would mean if this creation were the setting for the kingdom of God to break in. He wrote, “The kingdom of God is not to be found in some other world beyond, but in the midst of this world. Our obedience is demanded in terms of its contradictory appearance, and then, through our obedience, the miracle, like lightening, is allowed to flash up again and again from the perfect, blessed new world of the final promise.”⁴⁵

The work of God is a verb for us to act on now. We are not called to wait for perfection to come to us, but to work toward it. This is what God suffered for. To enable us to overcome our shortcomings and realize our potential as the reflection of the divine Triune Community. Jurgen Moltmann writes of the Trinitarian nature of this kingdom:

We said that the kingdom of the Father is determined by the creation of the world and its preservation through God’s patience. This constitutes the freedom of created things and preserves for them the necessary space in which to live. The kingdom of the Son is determined by the liberation of men and women, through suffering love, from their deadly withdrawal into themselves, their closed-in-ness. This restores the freedom of created beings and redeems them from self-destruction. The kingdom of the Spirit, finally, is determined by the powers and

⁴⁴ Hauerwas, Stanley. “The Peaceable Kingdom”. *The Hauerwas Reader*. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, eds. Duke University Press. Durham, NC: 2001. pp. 121.

⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. “The Kingdom Come”. *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of the German Pastor and Theologian Who Joined the Resistance Against Hitler and Was Executed in 1945*. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, eds. HarperCollins. New York: 1995. pp. 92.

energies of the new creation. Through these powers and energies people become God's dwelling and his home. They participate in the new creation.⁴⁶

In God's trinity are three different ways this kind of a community effects our lives. It gives us the freedom to live, the freedom to get over ourselves, and finally the freedom to enter into and live out of the divine community.

The power of this relationality, revealed and explored in the Passion narrative as the way of the triune God, is in its practical application as another way to order our mimetic desires, and as a response to the problems with which we are currently confronted. I named at the outset that I live in a world of balance between prophetic witness and practical application. With this kind of biblical reading, that balance shifts. If people are living out a relational reality as they are called to by the biblical narrative, then they are calling on Congress to change the way the world in which they live operate. They are no longer functioning out of the self motivated, make sure I have mine, competitive model that the scapegoat mechanism has put into place. When responding to climate change, the question shifts from one of making sure our standard of living is preserved, that American jobs are protected, and of the accumulation of resources to how can we best live in relationship with the rest of Creation? Sallie McFague writes,

In closing, let us note that the two pictures of God and the world suggest two different answers to the question we have been pursuing in this book: Who we are, and what should we do? In the first view, we are individuals responsible to a transcendent God who rewards and punishes us according to our merits and God's mercy. In the second view, we are beings-in-community living in the presence of God, who is the power and love in everything that exists. In the first, we should do what is fair to other individuals while taking care of our own well-being; in the second, we should do what is necessary to work with God to create a just and sustainable planet, for only in this way will all flourish⁴⁷.

. A similar question is asked when we confront the problem of global poverty and hunger.

Donald Messer writes, "We excuse ourselves by praying for the hungry, even as we eat

⁴⁶Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 212-13.

⁴⁷McFague, 96.

excessively and consume far more than any of us really need. We seem totally ensnared by our chosen cultural standards of living and cannot escape the handcuffs of self-indulgence”⁴⁸. It is a matter of changing our priorities. A shift that is possible when the God in which we believe shifts from a God who participated in the violent, scapegoating response to mimetic desire to a God who instead overcame it, and invites us to participate instead in a relational response.

Even beyond the questions of Creation Care, and hunger and poverty, lie the questions of war and peace, and how we respond to violence dealt against us. Creation Care and hunger and poverty are certainly part of that – included in how we respond to different types of violence being committed. But broader questions remain – how we deal with issues of terrorism, our own nation conducting wars, and torture. This relationality includes the rejection of violence. It is shown by Jesus Christ to be the way of God, and thus the way we are called to reflect and act in this world. Gregory Boyd spells out part of what kind of implication this theology would have. “Rather, [God]’s about gathering together a group of people who embody the kingdom – who visually and corporately manifest the reality of the reign of God on the earth. And he’s about growing this new kingdom through his body to take over the world.”⁴⁹ The church is now the vehicle of the relationality of God. The church is called to offer another alternative in our response to mimesis. To call out that instead of responding with violence and scapegoating, we can, should, and must respond with the relational power of God. It is the divine reality, and a divine reality that Jesus Christ made human. Weaver writes of this as Christ’s response to the evil of his time – the rejection of violence.

When Jesus confronts the rule of evil, as he does in narrative *Christus Victor*, there is no longer the difficulty of a problematic image for victims of abuse. Jesus depicted in narrative *Christus Victor* is no passive victim. He is an active

⁴⁸ Messer, Donald, et al. *Ending Hunger Now: A Challenge to Persons of Faith*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota: 2005. Pg. 16.

⁴⁹ Boyd, Gregory J. *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church*. Zondervan Publishing. Grand Rapids, MI: 2005. Pg. 30.

participant in confronting evil. Salvation happens when or because Jesus carried out his mission to make the reign of God visible. His saving life shows how the reign of God confronts evil, and is thus our model for confronting injustice [...] Above all, in the narrative Christus Victor salvation and justice are no longer based on the violence of justice equated with punishment [...] Making right no longer means the violence of punishment.⁵⁰

Jesus death puts on display that in the community of God violence is no longer an acceptable response to evil. We are called to another way. Dr. Martin Luther King realized that a Christian must respond to the problems of the world, and must do it in a Christian fashion. He also wrote, “Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. [...] As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity, discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence.”⁵¹ The Church of the Brethren’s statement titled “Nonviolence and Humanitarian Intervention” lays out explicitly this call, and how Jesus lived it out.

Jesus cast his lot with the poor and oppressed. He moved among the masses. He stood with those who were suffering and reached out to them. His approach was not that of seizing political power by violence in order to set things straight. Rather, he drew together a community of disciples committed to living out God’s intentions for humanity [...] He taught them to love enemies, to meet cursing with blessing and evil with good.⁵²

This is the way we are called to respond to the violence of this world. By entering into it in loving relationship, by calling our government to do the same, and by living out the relationality of the triune God. It is the way to transform the world around us, it is the call of the Bible when read as a book of peace, and it epitomizes the words of Cornell West, who wrote, “To be a Christian is to live dangerously, honestly, freely – to step in the name of love as if you may land on nothing, yet to keep on stepping because the something that sustains you no empire can give

⁵⁰ Weaver, 211-12.

⁵¹ King, Jr., Martin Luther. “The Most Durable Power”. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* James M. Washington, ed. HarperCollins. New York: 1986. Pg. 10.

⁵² The Church of the Brethren. “Nonviolence and Humanitarian Intervention: Statement of the Church of the Brethren 1996 Annual Conference”. Brethren Press. Elgin, IL: 1996. Pg. 5

you and no empire can take away.”⁵³ It is time to wake up and begin answering our call as Christians. Living into this relational reality grants us the power to begin changing the world around us – to the world imagined by God and called into being through the biblical narrative. It is a story of the power of peace, non-violence, and relationship over and through scapegoating and violence. It is a story of new life – and a story our world needs to hear. It is the kind of relational reality that invites us to this prayer written by the Rev. Chris Glaser:

O holy One, too often we resist your rule, we pass by your glory, we mistrust your grace. We divide ourselves between the privileged and underprivileged, the acceptable and unacceptable, us and them. Too often: Our religion, intended to bond us to one another as well as to you, becomes another source of division. Our diversity, reflecting your many faces, becomes a cause for concern rather than gratitude. Your creation, revealing your grandeur, we spoil and devour rather than respect. Free us from our closets! Free us from our tombs! Free us even from a heaven that does not also embrace earth. Give us, please, the ecstasy you enjoy by bringing us together in friendship, in community, in prayer, on earth as in eternity. Give us, please, the intimacy you inspire through mutuality and consensus, in relationships political, sexual, spiritual. Give us, please, the compassion you manifest in your exorbitant love for creation and all creatures, great and small. Thank you for our opportunities to make things right, to make life good, to be your presence in the world. We pray this in your many names: may it be so!⁵⁴

AMEN.

⁵³ West, Cornell. *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. Penguin Books. New York: 2004.. 172.

⁵⁴ Glaser, Chris. “That We May Know God’s Grandeur”. *Prayers for The New Social Awakening: Inspired by the New Social Creed*. Tosso, Christopher and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, eds. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky: 2008. Pg.21-22.