

Sacred Violence and Justification

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Both the formal and material principles of Luther's Reformation, Scripture alone and faith alone in the justifying effect of Christ's sacrifice, raise criticisms from modern people, as several articles in this issue of *Unio cum Christo* illustrate. Justification involves Christ dying for us in a substitutionary sacrifice in order to establish the justice of God on our behalf. The glorious transfer implies a certain violence, not one done to us, since by faith we willingly believe, but a violence done to God's own Son, who suffers for our transgressions in order that we go free—unjustly, according to the gainsayers.

One of the major objections to Christian faith on the part of humanists, apart from the claim that all religions are alike and ultimately cancel each other out, is that religions cause insoluble conflict between peoples, nations, confessions, and individuals. Religious violence is an exponential aspect of the problem of evil, the reef on which apologetics often comes to grief. The average punter in the street latches on to this like iron filings to a magnet: look at the religious conflicts in our world today, or look back at the wars of religion and the Inquisition in a hazy past.

Why do religions engender violence?¹ French anthropologist René Girard developed a much-discussed theory of sacred violence in several of his books and sought to address the fact that violence is deeply rooted in human social experience and particularly in religion.² Why *sacred*? Because, in the

¹ For more on atonement and violence, see Paul Wells, *Cross Words: The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2006), 81–92.

² René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); *Things Hidden from Before the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

Girardian perspective, human aggression has a religious character as a pathology in which the neighbor becomes an enemy. Conflict and aggressive rivalry ultimately express a rejection of transcendence. Sacred violence is a reversal of the primordial law to love God and the neighbor as oneself.

Even if the Genesis records represent more for Reformed theology than for Girard, for whom the narratives seem to symbolize the passage from a primitive state of existence to consciousness of evil, his perspectives are illuminating and can be stimulating in the context of covenantal theology. The problem with Girard's thought is that there is no historical passage from original righteousness to sin, and this has profound implications for the meaning of salvation. Genesis, on the other hand, reveals that it is not man who becomes conscious of violence; God himself uncovers the mystery of origins, original goodness and innocence, the first covenant, the appearance of sin and evil in transgression, and the first sacrifice.³

However, Girard does seem to think that the Genesis account of origins has universal significance. The primal prohibition of Genesis 2:17 is not restrictive in its intention, but indicates a positive destiny for man, who is neither a double nor an equal of the divinity. Because of this, mimetic rivalry is excluded. Man's life cycle is pointed in the direction of what is good, and the prohibition indicates, *a contrario*, the completeness of the image of God, male and female. The *harmonia mundi* includes balanced relationships with the Creator, the neighbor, and the ecosphere.⁴ In this protoeschatological situation, the first and great command, the original law, is to love the Lord, to love the neighbor as oneself, and to care for creation. Obedience in love excludes sacrifice, which is a postlapsarian adjunction resulting from sin. This may be why obedience and sacrifice are often contrasted in Scripture.

How is the primal transgression to be understood? In Genesis 3, "man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (v. 22) is the counterpart of Satan's promise "you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (v. 5). Man's fallen state corresponds to the divine warning "when you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you will surely die" (Gen 2:17). Prohibition, temptation, desire, transgression, acquisition, opposition, and curse constitute the ethos of human rebellion. Original sin, as transgression of divine law and righteousness, is an act of sacred violence *directed*

1987); *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). Girard was a member of the Académie française from 2005 until his death in 2015.

³ This is true even if the word *sacrifice* is not used in Genesis 3:21, as Geerhardus Vos points out. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (1948; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 156.

⁴ Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, The Didsbury Lectures, 1990 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 99–103.

against God. Presumption is the heart of sin and violence, as man aspires to pseudo-omnipotence.

But who is the victim of violence? God is not the subject or exemplar of violence even though the curse introduces death and sanctions into a good creation. Appearances are misleading because we naturally think that victims suffer because of weakness. However, in this case, God is the object of human violence in Eden, because in mimetic desire man transformed the Creator into a rival and an obstacle to self-promotion. Law breaking dispossesses God of his position and his rights, and as a result, man acts like a god with respect to his neighbor. This is a denial of God's property rights.

God is the primary victim of human violence and as rival and obstacle to human pretensions; God himself ironically becomes the scapegoat of history. Alienation from God is the motivational factor of human guilt transference. False imputation transfers responsibility onto God the enemy. When challenged, guilt is transferred from Adam to Eve to the serpent. By implication it is the Creator's fault. Man looks for scapegoats and is invariably someone else's scapegoat himself.

However, to guile corresponds double guile! God replies to man's guilt transfer with another, which illuminates the sense of the fault. God institutes sacrifice, a blood-victim from his own good creation, in order to signify that another sort of transfer (the blessed one) is necessary to cover man's nakedness (Gen 3:7, 21). The sacrifice instituted by God veils the identity of the true victim. God himself assumes the weight of human guilt and inaugurates the process of reconciliation by expiation.

Reformed theology has, with great clarity, described the nature of biblical reconciliation.⁵ It is not primarily man who is reconciled to God but God, the offended party, who reconciles himself to man. By an unexpected act of grace, God is not the avenger, but the Savior who makes peace. Sin is removed by sacrifice in an act which prefigures the one ultimate sacrifice of the cross. So the sacrificial system of the older testament, instituted by God, hides the identity of the real victim and reveals the divine reply to sin. The response to human violence is not more sacred violence but pardon and grace. The Mosaic covenantal code establishes law and sacrifice as a way of approach to God. Violence is contained and purification of sin through substitution restores right relations with God.

In the Girardian perspective, human aggressiveness has its origin in mimetic behavior, imitation, and rivalry with regard to the neighbor, who

⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 2:181–83.

becomes a threat and an object of envy. Elimination via violence and death is the *dénouement* of rivalry between opposing parties. The way of defusing antagonism is by focusing it on an excluded third party, or scapegoat, which is sacrificed in a triangular transfer of evil. Thus sacrifice serves to eliminate violent confrontations by crystallizing animosity in a victim; this victim assumes a mediatorial function between opposed parties and, in so doing, becomes a sacred symbol. Sacrifices, which can be repeated, are a way of removing violence and maintaining order. Laws indicate what is prohibited, and repeated sacrifices serve to maintain order and peace in human societies.

Sacred violence is original sin's act of rebellion against God. Violence has been typical of the human condition from that moment on. It implies a reversal of a divine command, which leads to death. So the multiplicity of human religions is not the *cause* of antagonism but the *result* of rebellious sacred violence. False sacrifices and victims express man's rejection of God's blessings of life and peace. Here lies the fount of every human aggression and vendetta. Religions are deadly, as Karl Barth claimed, because they are essentially idolatrous: "The human righteousness of religion, of *pious* man, of phariseism, the man-made righteousness ... is nothing other than 'irreverence and insubordination.'"⁶ By contrast, the original divine law of love and justice is summarized in the words of Jesus: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart. ... Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37–38). The Creator's intention for life and fellowship in paradise was nothing other than ordered love, according to the laws of divine nature, which was forfeited when man put his own pseudopower in the place of God's. As a creature in the image of a righteous God, what rebellious man requires is not love but justice and justification. God's cure for human violence is not *homeopathic*, treating violence by counterviolence in a self-perpetuating cycle, but *allopathic*, healing violence by an act of justice and love. This is why the doctrine of justification is not violence done by God against his beloved Son, but a means of the eradication and healing of violence in reconciliation. It includes propitiation, which is not God's anger against his Son, but against the sin assumed and borne in self-giving sacrifice by the Mediator. Human violence, on the contrary, is Stalinistic and intended primarily to liquidate rivals.

Jesus warned his followers that those who take the sword also perish by it (Matt 26:52). But that is what religions have invariably done—sadly, Christendom as well. Every form of idolatry promotes its sacrifices,

⁶ Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Harry R. Boer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 27.

worship, legislation, and traditions as being superior to and exclusive of others. Religions, like other expressions of sinful human power, engender rivalry, idolatry of ideology, and ultimately violence, war, and death. In Girard's theory, exclusion is a litmus test which reveals the presence of sacred violence.⁷ Judaism, like other religious faiths, is exclusive, even if in the Abrahamic perspective all the world will be blessed (Gen 12:3) and the Decalogue repeats the creational charge to love God and the neighbor. However, the history of Judaism, culminating in the rejection of the Messiah, is typical of a spirit of self-righteousness and division characteristic of all religions.

Saul of Tarsus, a ritualistic kosher and Sabbath observer, was a prime example of this ethos before Paul the apostle emerged as defender of the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ through the sacrifice of the cross. Paul had considered the cross a scandal in light of the law and its ordinances (1 Cor 1:22), but he came to interpret the law in light of the cross, which constituted a 180° conversion. Galatians 2:20 is capital: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me," which interprets the previous verse, "Through the law I died to the law that I might live for God." Christ died because of the law, and Saul with him. Justice comes not from conformity to rituals but through the sacrifice required by the law. Thus Christ is "the end [*telos*, fulfillment] of the law for righteousness" (Rom 10:4). Reconciliation is through expiatory sacrifice: "The Son of God loved me and *gave* himself for me." To die and live with Christ is to die to the law and to all laws as ritual systems of exclusion founded on sacrifices and violence, by identification with the one who was the ultimate victim of violence and exclusion.

The apostle proposes a new universal belief founded on reconciliation through the cross. This definitively deconstructs the patterns of mimetic violence, scapegoating, and exclusion found in Judaism and in all natural religion. Paul describes man-centered religion with metonymies such as law, flesh, circumcision, old man, old creation, world, body (of sin), Adam, and death. The sending of Christ in Galatians 4:4 is the opposite of the sending away of the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement. Christ is sent into the sphere of sacred violence and the flesh in order to make an end to man's religion of self-atonement. Henceforth no more sacrifices are required, nor laws to be obeyed, nor ostracisms to be maintained *for* salvation, as the

⁷ Exclusion is the opposite of hospitality. Cf. Paul Wells, "Hospitality and Ministry in Trinitarian Perspective," in *Triniteit en kerk*, Festschrift Arie Baars, ed. G. C. den Hertog, H. R. Keurhorst, H. G. L. Peels (Heerenveen: Groen, 2014), 174–84; Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

work of Christ has changed the way to God once and for all. Union with the victim in death and resurrection tolls the knell of human violence.

A commentator of Girard's thought has said that the first effect of the cross is to unveil sacred violence rather than being a transaction that appeases divine wrath.⁸ But this bipolarization is neither useful nor necessary nor biblical. The cross marks the end and the failure of the practices of self-atonement not only because of the result obtained, but also because it fulfills God's plan to justify sinners. Without the divine intention to accomplish reconciliation in this way, the cross is merely exemplary, which annuls the *hapax* of the New Testament. Even if the model of divine substitution and obedience has evocative power, its ultimate efficacy is in the removal of condemnation and in justification because "one died for all, and therefore all died" (Rom 8:1; 2 Cor 5:14). Sacred violence is finished in the objective sense because the ultimate sacrifice has been made and God is propitiated. David Chytraeus, a disciple of Luther and Melancthon, wrote,

*The efficient principal cause of Christ's sacrifice is the will of God's Son, who voluntarily turned upon Himself the wrath of God against sin and underwent abuse and dreadful torments of soul and body, so as to make satisfaction for the sins of the human race and, with the placation of God's wrath, restore righteousness and eternal life to men.*⁹

Sacred violence is objectively dealt with at Golgotha because human rivalry, guilt, sacrifices, and scapegoating have been exposed as false expressions of man's pseudoreligious attempts to deal with the problem of hatred and aggression. God breaks the *karma* of human violence, and those who, like Saul of Tarsus, had been caught in the spider's web of exclusion are liberated by union with the only victim required by God. As Rousas Rushdoony affirms, "Man cannot get rid of the burden of sin by himself. Man tries, *first*, either to pay for his sins himself by masochistic activity, a futile process, or *second*, to make others pay for them through sadistic activities. Both alternatives lead to sick lives and sick societies."¹⁰ In Christ, the destructive rivalries of domination give way to faith, hope, and love stimulated by positive mimesis. New life is liberation through dying and rising

⁸ Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 79. Girard's views on sacrifice and expiation seem to change at a later stage in his work: René Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), part III.

⁹ David Chytraeus, *On Sacrifice: A Reformation Treatise in Biblical Theology* (*De Sacrificiis*, 1569), trans. John W. Montgomery (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), 80–81.

¹⁰ Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The Politics of Guilt and Pity* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn, 1978), 17.

with Christ; all those who belong to the new humanity by identification with the one victim are brothers and fellow servants. The only “sacrifices” left to be made are free and living ones in the liberty of new obedience (Rom 12:1–2).

The power of the cross is not illustrative of a possibility open to man, but results from divine substitution. Romans 3:25 indicates that “God presented Christ as a propitiation (*hilasterion*) by his blood.” This refers not to the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement, but to the Passover sacrifices made for the expiation of sin. Biblical sacrifice does not primarily have a liturgical function or present an exhortatory symbol, but is an act of penal substitution. As “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, 36), Christ on the cross is judged before the divine tribunal. Assuming our sin in an act of divine imputation, Christ dies in the place of the unjust (1 Pet 3:18) and so undergoes punishment in our place in judgment, merited condemnation, death, hell, and separation from God. The blood of Christ saves us, and blood evokes violent death. The result is justification by faith for those for whom Christ died.

In some recent “evangelical” theology a tendency has arisen to accept the substitutionary character of the cross but to deny its penal and expiatory character. These reinterpretations fall short of the New Testament teaching that is based on the Levitical sacrifices, which symbolize the transfer of sin, and consequent death, as necessary for restoration of communion with God. The effect of the sacrifice of the cross is the removal of sin because divine wrath is propitiated. Leon Morris has indicated that propitiation is a fully personal act on God’s part.¹¹ Because sin is removed by expiation, the wrath of God no longer concerns those for whom Christ died, and a relationship of reconciliation is established with them.

Propitiation, the turning away of the anger of God against sin, is the summit of divine reconciliation and the presupposition of reconciliation and justification. Covenantal mediatorial sacrifice reveals the fullness of the divine plan of salvation which an exemplary abolition of sacred violence could never attain. Wolfhart Pannenberg sums it up by saying,

The vicarious penal suffering, which is rightly described as the vicarious suffering of the wrath of God at sin, rests on the fellowship that Jesus Christ accepted with us sinners and with our fate as such. This link is the basis on which the death of Jesus can count as expiation for us.¹²

¹¹ Leon Morris, *The Atonement* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 55.

¹² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 2:427.

Finally, a structural difference exists between human religions and biblical revelation. Biblical history is told from the side of the victim; mythology narrates it from the side of dominant power. Scripture demythologizes the structures of sacred violence, rebellion against God, and human self-salvation. God and Christ are victims because of human rebellion and destructive sin, and sacrifice is transformed into a manifestation of love, which reconciles to God. Positive imitation of Christ, based on divine forgiveness through blood atonement and the declaration of justification through faith, opens the way to liberation from violence and conflict of all kinds. The believer is freed definitively from the fear of guilt manipulation by others and also from the self-pity of a victim mentality. Conversely, freedom is also being freed from making others victims and being set at liberty to follow the perfect law of love, which casts out fear, as in the parable of the good Samaritan.