

November Reflections article

Violence is woven into the fabric of human relationships. The history of the human family has included progress toward more civilized behavior, but it has always been shadowed by violent behavior: domestic strife, sexual abuse, tribal conflicts, criminal activity, civil wars and international conflicts. Scholars try to determine the causes of this recurrent brutality. Sociobiologists claim that our ancestors, who fought outsiders to preserve their clans, have passed their aggressive impulses on to our genetic code. Freudians point out that modern civilization, which places greater restraints on violent behavior, leaves humans with a boiling cauldron of aggressive energy that periodically explodes. Sociologists call attention to economic factors that offer people, especially young men, little hope of a better life and thus heighten the likelihood of violent responses. Some cultural anthropologists think that urbanization, which puts more human beings in close physical proximity, increases opportunities of aggressive behavior. Focusing on the United States, they blame the increased violence on the easy access to guns and on the drug culture that spawns so much criminal activity, including street crime and clashes between governments and powerful drug cartels.

Ever since the 18th century Enlightenment in Europe, secular scholars have blamed religion for much of the violence in the world, citing Crusades, the Inquisition, and religious wars as examples. The Enlightenment project was to replace religion with reason and science, thus freeing the human family from superstition and violence. The great Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) argued that reliance on human reason would gradually reduce violence so that in civil society there would be “more charity and less strife,” eventually extending “to nations in their external relations toward one

another up to the realization of the cosmopolitan society.” In other words, when reason replaces religion, we will arrive at world peace. Some scholars today still contend that secularism, freed from religious superstition, is our best chance to reduce violence and that we are actually making progress toward a more civilized non-violent world. In response, we might call to mind some familiar symbols of violence in the contemporary world: the holocaust, gulag and killing fields representing monstrous evil; Hiroshima and Nagasaki calling attention to the intensified destruction of modern war; My Lai and Abu Ghraib instructing us in the effect war has on moral sensibilities; 9/11 and Oklahoma City symbolizing for Americans all manner of terrorist attacks; Columbine and West Virginia haunting students and their parents; Rodney King highlighting the problem of police brutality; Rwanda and Bosnia that call attention to ethnic cleansing; Roe v. Wade legalizing over a million abortions in the U.S. each year; and Jerry Sandusky reminding of the sexual abuse of minors by priests, scout leaders and others dealing with youth.

These familiar symbols that carry such dark imagery call for reflective thought. Enlightenment reason has obviously not eliminated violence. Quite the contrary, technological advances have equipped violent intent with greater destructive power. To counter the cycle of violence that now threatens the very existence of the human family, we need a larger vision and deeper motivation than provided by instrumental reason and scientific technology, the kind of worldview associated with religion.

Religion has always been a powerful force in human affairs both for good and for evil, because it deals with the depth dimension of human existence and matters of ultimate concern such as identity, meaning, purpose, and commitment.

In trying to deepen our understanding of the relationship between religion and violence, we can find guidance in the work of the French anthropologist Rene Girard, who

published his ground breaking book *Violence and the Sacred* in 1972. In the broadest terms, Girard contends that violence originates in the human desire to have what others have. The energy of “mimetic desire,” which gathers people around similar desires, creates contention and rivalry within the group. To dissolve the tension created by this “mimetic rivalry,” the group settles on a common victim, a scapegoat, that they kill, thus relieving the stress within the group and restoring some measure of harmony and peace. Religious traditions develop to remember, justify, and ritualize this murder of the scapegoat. This, in turn, provides a divine sanction of the murder, while covering up the real dynamics that led to it. Later, Girard came to see that the Gospel story of the death and resurrection of Jesus un.masks the hidden causes of violence rooted in mimetic desire and rivalry. Without needing to accept Girard’s grand theory, we can use his analysis of the scapegoating dynamic as a way of unlocking the positive potential of Christianity as a force for reconciliation and peace. Drawing on Girard’s work, Miroslav Volf points out in his insightful book *Exclusion and Embrace*, that violence is in the background of the whole New Testament narrative. The story begins with King Herod killing innocent children to eliminate a potential rival to his throne (Matt 2) and ends with Christ casting the beast and the false prophet into the fiery lake and killing their followers with the sword of his mouth (Rev 19). In John’s Gospel the high priest Caiaphas sets the stage for the act of violence at the core of the narration with the scapegoating comment: “Can you not see that it is better for you to have one man die than to have the whole nation destroyed” (11:50). The whole New Testament views Jesus as an innocent victim. In his public ministry, he goes about doing good: exorcising demons, curing the sick, forming an inclusive community, and raising the dead – all for establishing the kingdom of God in the world. He preached and practiced non-violence. He insisted on the essential unity between love of God and love of neighbor and promised his disciples a richer, more abundant life. His total dedication to

God's cause necessarily involved challenging the oppression and violence prevalent in his occupied country. Jesus didn't seek the role of innocent victim, but concentrated on doing the will of God which threatened the religious and political establishment. The violent death of Jesus is the predictable outcome of a life dedicated to human liberation and flourishing.

Volf suggests some ways that the crucified Jesus challenges the tyranny of violence. First of all, he broke the usual cycle of violence by forgoing revenge and forgiving his executioners. He absorbed the aggression of his persecutors without being sucked into the vortex of vengeance. By word and example, Jesus teaches us the power of non-violent responses to oppression. In our own time, we have come to a greater appreciation of the practical power of non-violence through Mahatma Gandhi's successful campaign for self-rule in India and through Martin Luther King's use of non-violent tactics in the civil rights struggle against institutionalized racism. Even more important for Girardians, the passion account exposes the dynamics of scapegoating that legitimizes violence in society. The Gospels, written from the perspective of the scapegoat, reveal what standard histories always conceal; the victim was innocent. The religious and political authorities used Jesus as a scapegoat to preserve their own positions of power. The lynching was unjust. They murdered an innocent man. The Gospels subvert the standard justification for violence -- the scapegoat deserved death. This insight invites reflection on our own tendencies to use scapegoats to mask our deficiencies and to deal with societal conflicts. An honest examination of conscience can discern the object of our vengeful thoughts and can recognize our need to blame other persons or groups for what is wrong in our world. Furthermore, the Gospels have created a new awareness that not all victims are guilty and deserving of punishment. Some scapegoats are innocent of the charges against them. This

realization has created among Christians, and others influenced by the Gospel, a certain “compassion for the victim” that manifests itself in various ways: the preferential option for the poor in Catholic social teaching; widespread involvement in Christian service programs; the effort to abolish the death penalty so that innocent individuals will not be executed; the extension of full human rights to unborn humans and to persons with a same sex orientation. Genuine Christian compassion extends to all members of the human family, including those who are banished to the margins and know the cruel fate of oppression and injustice.

The story of Jesus as scapegoat is completed only in the resurrection. The innocent victim is raised to a glorious new life. His non-violent teaching and example are vindicated. His wisdom relativizes all attempts to condone violence whether in the Bible, the church or the secular world. The risen Christ empowers his disciples to practice non-violent love and to exercise special care for the victims and scapegoats in this world.