

This morning I'm continuing the Lenten series on the meaning of the cross and of atonement. Today I'm going to focus on the work of Rene Girard.

Much of Girard's early work was in literary criticism, and he became a Christian through studying the work of Dostoyevsky. Later he formulated a specific theory which he and others have applied to theology. It is known as the "mimetic" theory. Girard says that we all imitate one another. In fact, we want to be like each other and when we especially want to be like someone else, we imitate them and want to have what they have. So "mimesis" means imitating someone to the extent of coveting their lifestyle.

That can quickly lead to violence, and Girard postulates that human society is based on violence and the need to control and avoid it. He's talking here about the underlying structures of human society not necessarily how we live our conscious lives. Girard points to the myth of Romulus and Remus who fought each other over the founding of Rome and also the Biblical story of Adam and Eve's son Cain who killed his brother Abel, as evidence for the deep knowledge that society is founded on violence. Most civilizations and cultures have founding myths that revolve in some sense around the death of an outsider at the hands of the community.

So in order to avoid killing one another we create laws and social structures, but even more importantly, we gang up on other people, or another person. Again, Girard comes to this idea through literature and medieval history. For example, during the mid-14th century, when the plague was sweeping across Europe, Jews were blamed and it was believed that they were poisoning the water. Horrible massacres and persecution followed. Of course we know now how the plague spread so

we can see clearly that the Jews didn't poison the water – they were scapegoated.

This for Girard is at the very core of human behavior. In order to avoid killing one another we gang up against people who we think are different and we blame them for our ills. A community will go for a time peacefully but then the mimetic desire starts causing problems and soon they are ganging up against someone – usually someone who's a bit different – blaming them for their problems. And then there's a shunning, a lynching, a sacrifice, and everything is peaceful again because the scapegoat has taken the blame and the angst away. The violence is cathartic and its effect reinforces the idea that the scapegoat really was to blame.

This idea is manipulated by politicians all the time. “Vote for me and I will rid you of those who are to blame for your discontent.” Hitler, for example, was a shrewd manipulator of the scapegoating mechanism. He brought the deeply divided German nation of the 1930's together precisely by declaring the Jews as a scapegoat for the country's economic, political, and cultural woes.

Often it is believed that the gods or God ordained the violence which brings such peace so the violence is in a way made sacred.

When Girard turned his literary attention to the Bible he was surprised to find quite a different story. For example in the story of Joseph, Joseph is falsely accused of trying to rape his Egyptian master's wife and put in prison. This looks like the beginning of a typical scapegoating. But Egypt only avoids famine when Joseph is vindicated: the Biblical narrative insists on Joseph's innocence and the land can only prosper once the truth is accepted.

He saw that the Bible often deconstructs and denounces scapegoating, a theme which finds its culmination in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the ultimate scapegoat. The crucifixion of Jesus is a classic instance of the old pattern. It is utterly consistent with mimetic theory that Caiaphas, the leading religious figure of the time, could say to his colleagues, “You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” (John 11:50) Jesus was sacrificed to maintain the boundary-preserving false sacred of the powers that be – the false sacred of temple and empire.

But the resurrection changes everything. It shows that God is not on the side of the persecutors but of the victim. Jesus was a totally innocent victim. His death and resurrection brings the scapegoating mechanism into the light of day. The light shines in the darkness and it shows us that human society is violent and continues to scapegoat the innocent.

But God does not sanction this. The true God does not take sides against other people. The reign of God is not founded on violence but on peace. The Kin-dom of God is a society grounded in forgiveness, love, and identification with the victim. So Jesus's death is not in order to appease an offended heavenly Father but, rather, a loving God beginning to liberate our world. The resurrection of the forgiving victim begins a new creation beyond the violent sacred, offering human life new foundations.

If we look at the New Testament reading this morning, we have an astonishingly clear statement: “All of us once lived among them [that is, among trespasses and sins] in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.” (Eph. 2:11) All of us once lived caught in mimetic desire and we were by nature violent, like everyone else. BUT God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us... made us alive

together with Christ” We no longer need to be caught up in the endless cycle of desire and violence.

Just a few verses after the end of our reading, the writer to the Ephesians goes onto say, “For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace....” (Ephesians 2:14-15) The two groups are of course Jews and Gentiles but it could be any two groups. Christ comes to break down the divisions and do away with the scapegoating so that we may become peacemakers, the children of God and be part of the new creation.

In the old story, humans thought they had to offer a sacrifice to an angry God when in fact it was their own mimetic desire that was making them think God was angry, an idea that was reinforced when peace returned after the scapegoat had been sacrificed. What we see now, is that it is not humans who offer a sacrifice to God (by, for instance, killing a blasphemous transgressor), but *God who offers a sacrifice to humans*. The whole self-giving of Jesus becomes possible because Jesus is obedient to God, giving himself in the midst of violent humans who demand blood. And in so doing, unmasking the whole system of violence.

The light shines in the darkness. And we are set free. Free to bring in the new creation, the kin-dom of God based not on attacking one another, not on violence or scapegoating but upon love. For we are called to be imitators of God, the one who so loved the cosmos that he sent his only Son that we might no longer be caught up in the cycle of violence but have amazing life.