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Religious Sacrifice, Social Scapegoating, and Self-Justification

Ted Peters

When the term *sacrifice* is used to designate practices common to various world religions and used to designate a historical scapegoat at the founding of a social order, are we referring to the same thing? Perhaps not. The sacrifice of which the Girard school speaks applies to any social order—whether a political order, an ideological organization, a social movement, or such—not merely to an established religious tradition.¹ So, let us pose the question: What is the value of Girardian theory? Is it to illuminate the religious concept of sacrifice or to illuminate human nature in general? I believe it is the latter.

I think Girard offers us an interpretation of human nature broadly speaking, not merely describing sacrifice as it appears in religious rituals. Even in a secular or avowedly nonreligious society, the mechanism of scapegoating still obtains, even if less recognizable than ritual sacrifice. I would not expect the Girardian account of scapegoating to fit like a glove over the hand of religious sacrifice.

Religion replete with ritual and even ritual sacrifice is one human institution among many, at least in our modern pluralistic global community. For most of us, religions and their rituals do not provide a single sealed world-view or horizon of self-understanding, at least not in the comprehensive

manner they might have in isolated archaic societies. Yet, I plan to argue, René Girard's theory of the scapegoat remains as an illuminating description of human being-in-the-world regardless of which social order or even multiple orders we live in.

According to Girard's insightful theory, human violence is ubiquitous and it is ubiquitously feared. The first stage of violence is precipitated by mimetic desire, where each desires what the other desires. A competition ensues and violence gets out of control. Fearing the loss of control, the contenders unite all against one, against the scapegoat. Once the scapegoat is lynched or crucified or destroyed, the previous enemies find themselves united in peace and community.² A social order is established around the once hated scapegoat who is now becoming a god. The social order then tries to perpetuate the peace-bringing effect of this original scapegoating by commemorating it ritually and sacrificially. This ritualized violence becomes the basis for mythology, religion, kingship, and traditional social orders.

"The community unites against a victim in an act of spontaneous killing," Girard summarizes. "This act unites rivals and restores peace and leaves a powerful impression that results in the establishment of sacrificial religion."³ It appears that what we have here is an explanation for the founding of sacrificial religious practices.

Girard presses forward. He advances the view that the scapegoating mechanism has shackled the human race in a prison of its own making, a prison that requires sacred violence combined with lying about this violence in order to maintain an uneasy communal peace. The shackles begin to fall, adds Girard, when we view the death of Jesus Christ. Why? Because the classical scapegoat myth is broken. By remembering the victim rather than the victor, we realize that our community is founded on a gratuitous murder. Our social order is founded on untruth. The cross stands in judgment over the human condition. "But Christ, the son of God, is the ultimate scapegoat—precisely because he is the son of God, and since he is innocent, he exposes all the myths of scapegoating and shows that the victims were innocent and the communities guilty."⁴

In what follows I plan to fabricate a four-step argument for the unique insight into human nature that can be gained through the revelation in Jesus Christ, an insight routinely missed in the ritual sacrifices of the world's religious traditions. I will then press the matter of what is common and

what is distinctive about the Christian insight when compared to scholarly interpretations of religious practice. The greatest value of Girardian theory for Christian theology, I will then argue, is not found in its ability to analyze religious ritual but rather in its illuminative power for understanding the human condition overall. My recommendation will be that theological anthropology would do well to incorporate Girard's insights into its explication of sin.

Despite the overlap between religious sacrifice and social scapegoating, I will distinguish them. Girard's theory shines light on the latter more than the former. Still, what Girard reveals regarding scapegoating indirectly applies to ritual sacrifice too, namely, the structure of self-justification works in both. Characteristic of the human condition is our inclination to draw the line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side of the line. Religious sacrifice is erroneously assumed to provide a mechanism whereby we are cleansed or somehow made good in the eyes of the deity. Social scapegoating similarly declares that we the scapegoaters are good; but the price we pay for this goodness is self-deceit. If the gospel of Jesus Christ reveals that God accepts no sacrifices and judges scapegoating from the side of the victim, then the mechanism of self-justification is broken. It will no longer work. Once our trust in the mechanism of self-justification through either sacrifice or scapegoating is broken, then we are ready to drop the lie and accept the truth: our justification comes from God, not from ourselves.

A Girardian Argument for the Uniqueness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

As a test hypothesis, let us assume that Girard's scapegoat theory summarizes and represents the Christian understanding of sacrifice. What would this look like? What might be its theological implications? Follow me as we take four steps.

Step 1: Acknowledge the place of Christianity among the plurality of world religions. Founding myths and sacrificial practices characterize religion in general, and some ancient religious myths look like the Christian founding story. Girardian interpreter S. Mark Heim of Andover Newton acknowledges this. "An awareness of world religions and mythology has put

Jesus' death in an unavoidably comparative context. . . . Tales of dying and rising gods are commonplace. . . . We are told that these dying and rising gods express symbolic truths about the cycles of nature, the quest for psychic wholeness, the healing of inner wounds. . . . In sum the Christian story of the cross is exactly like all the others and perversely, uniquely worse than all of them."⁵ On the surface, it appears that the Jesus story is just one among others. What might a closer look uncover?

Step 2: A closer look uncovers that myths are disguised accounts of a founding violence, remembered by the perpetrators of the violence, in order to establish and preserve the social order. Myths are not what they appear to be. More than merely personifying forces of nature, myths are told to justify a hidden history that includes the scapegoating of a victim by the prevailing power structure. "Girard maintains that central human myths are in fact transcriptions of a consistent kind of violence that he calls the 'founding murder.' . . . It makes human community possible."⁶

Step 3: Distinguish the history of Jesus from founding myths in other religious communities. The Gospels of the New Testament, "appear to be myth because the death of Christ is presented as a sacrifice, and sacrifice of the scapegoat is the origin and theme of all mythology. The Gospels may *appear* to be myth, but they actually deconstruct other myths. The death of Jesus is a sacrifice that refutes the whole principle of violence and sacrifice. God is revealed as the 'arch-scapegoat,' the completely innocent one who dies in order to give life. And his way of giving life is to overthrow the religion of scapegoating and sacrifice—which is the essence of myth."⁷ Heim adds, "When mythical sacrifice succeeds, peace descends, true memory is erased, and the way is smoothed for the next scapegoat. . . . But in the case of Jesus' death, something else happens. . . . Instead, an odd new counter-community arises, dedicated both to the innocent victim whom God has vindicated by resurrection and to a new life through him that requires no further such sacrifice. As Girard sees it, this is the good news, the inexplicable revelation, that is found in the Bible."⁸

Yet, one might object, the Christian religion distorts this originating insight by becoming itself a religion of ritual sacrifice, the religion of the Eucharist. Is the Eucharist not ritual sacrifice for the Christian Church? No, not necessarily. If the Christian Church properly interprets the Sacrament of the Altar, human sacrifice can be avoided. What is the proper interpretation?⁹

To see the Eucharist as God's sacrifice on our behalf, not a sacrifice we offer to God.¹⁰ In the original cross event remembered and made present in the sacrament, the mechanism of sacrifice, as well as the mechanism of the scapegoat, is broken by God's gift to us.

Step 4: Apply the scapegoat mechanism to human nature universally, including judgment against the Christian Church. Does the remembrance of the revelatory history of Jesus accrue to the affirmation that Christianity is the best religion? No. The tendency to scapegoat and to cover communal violence with justifying myths can be found wherever there is human community, even Christian community. Followers of Jesus have been known to remythologize and to twist the otherwise revelatory history of Jesus into a justification for scapegoating. Christian anti-Semitism provides perhaps the most dreadful example. "Christians are as susceptible as others to scapegoating, and have often turned their tradition to sacrificial ends," writes Heim. "Christian history is a struggle between a redemptive resistance to sacrifice and a remythologizing of the gospel."¹¹

Feminist theologian Rita Nakashima Brock is condemnatory. "Killing in the name of Christ became a holy act, preached by bishops, supported by taxes, celebrated by poets and artists, institutionalized as penance enacted by ritual, legalized by canon law, and legitimated by theologians."¹² The practice of redemptive violence became for the Christian pious a substitute for internal regeneration. "Committing violence substitutes for spiritual rebirth as the route to paradise."¹³

Ritual sacrifice within a specific religious tradition or the redemptive sacrifice of a scapegoat establish the delusion that our particular religion or our particular social order is justified. Appeal to what is revealed in the death of Jesus, however, shatters this delusion. Unless, of course, we insist on living in the delusion despite the criticism of revelation.

Factors in Connecting or Disconnecting the Scapegoat with Religious Sacrifice

In this chapter we are posing this question: When the term *sacrifice* is used to designate practices common to various world religions and used to designate a historical scapegoat at the founding of a social order, are we referring to the

same thing? Perhaps the scapegoat mechanism and traditional ritual sacrifice overlap, but I do not believe they are identical. The sacrifice of which the Girard school speaks applies to any social order, not merely to an established religious tradition. What, then, is the value of Girardian theory: is it to illuminate the religious concept of sacrifice or to illuminate human nature in general? As I have said, I believe it is the latter. Common to both religious sacrifice and scapegoating in the social order—even in a secular social order—is the human propensity to declare itself good, to justify itself. Ritual cleansing or blaming the scapegoat declare that we are good, clean, right, or powerful.

We have just taken four steps to make the argument that Girard's theory applies to human nature universally. Now, let us turn to four factors or components in contemporary scholarly discussion that provide additional support to this observation: (1) the nature of sacrifice in religious tradition; (2) the distinction between sacrifice and scapegoat; (3) the internalization or spiritualization of sacrifice; and (4) the elimination of the practice of sacrifice in religious and secular communities.

What is the nature of ritual sacrifice as practiced in religious traditions? Does sacrifice contribute to the social order? Yes, indeed. Still, the presumptions at work in the practice of sacrifice suggest belief in a mechanism for harnessing suprahuman power. Commenting on the ancient Vedic practice of sacrifice, A. L. Basham writes, "The chief purpose of the sacrifice was the gratification of the gods in order to obtain boons from them . . . success in war, progeny, increase of cattle, and long life, on a *quid pro quo* basis."¹⁴ Human sacrifice to the deities is a mechanism for obtaining the goods of prosperity.

"Sacrifice is found in most of the religions known to us," contends Joseph Henninger.¹⁵ Sacrificial rites include an offering. Bloodless offerings, especially among food-gatherers, will include vegetative foodstuffs they have collected. The offerings may also include inanimate objects such as clothing, jewelry, weapons, precious stones, and such. Motives for sacrificial offerings include homage and thanksgiving to the divine source of life, performed in such a way as to participate in the power of life that transcends us.

Sharing in the transcendent power of life becomes even more intense with blood offerings. Blood offerings are usually identified with food cultivators. One might think that blood offerings belong to hunter cultures, but curiously, this does not seem to be the case. Hunters tend to offer a small but

symbolically important part of the animal slain; so the slaying itself is not part of the sacrificial action but precedes it. Among the cultivators, on the other hand, blood seems to have fertility power. By sprinkling the blood of a sacrificed animal or human person in the fields, cultivators believe that they can promote fertile crop yields.

Fertility and femininity come together. Feminist interpretations of religious structures focus on power relations in the social order. Sacrifices give to males the mysterious powers that are akin to those that women have in childbirth. Patrilineal descent through males is not naturally given but socially achieved through ritual violence.¹⁶ One might argue that a patrilineal hierarchy scapegoats women, and one might look for signs of this scapegoating in a given religion's myths. Yet feminist scholars focus on the power transaction, not on scapegoating.

Is there an *esse* or heart or center to the practice of sacrifice? The essence of sacrifice, argues one pioneer in the field of the history of religions, Joachim Wach, is the gift. We human beings give to the gods, and the gods give to us. "There are three major reasons for making gifts to God: propitiation, expiation, and gratitude."¹⁷ Each of these results in a cleansing, in an identification of the sacrificer with what is sacred or good. When the sacrifice becomes internalized, what we give are intangibles; we give ourselves. "The sacrifice of intangibles is symbolic in a double sense, representing in the offered 'heart' the person of the giver and symbolizing as well this person's total surrender to God."¹⁸ To offer such a gift-sacrifice testifies that we have a clean heart, or at least our heart will be cleansed once the sacrifice is accepted.

Another pioneer in the study of archaic religious sensibilities is Adolf Jensen, who would not place the gift at the center of sacrificial practice, especially blood sacrifice. Jensen like others believes that the earliest human communities—the hunter-gatherers that gave way to the development of agriculture—did not sacrifice animals. Blood sacrifice came later. What accounts for this cultural change? "The act of killing was not a gift to the deity. [Rather, sacrifice] is a religiously founded ethical action."¹⁹ The function of sacrificial ritual is to provide the paradigm and sustain communal taboos and customs. Sacrifice accompanied by myth and ritual portray and support communal practices. "*To act 'ethically' means to live by the universal order.* Not to subordinate the self to the divine code or to act counter to it would be sacrilege and therefore unethical."²⁰ Jensen's view that the function

of ritual sacrifice is to maintain the community's customs through ethics might be a place of overlap with Girard's view that the scapegoat creates and maintains the social order. Yet we may ask whether ritual sacrifice is in all cases structured according to the scapegoat mechanism. This does not seem to be the case for the interpreters of sacrifice I've noted above.²¹

Is Jesus a sacrifice or a scapegoat? Scholarly readers of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures technically distinguish between a ritual sacrifice and a scapegoat, at least within the context of the Pentateuch. In Leviticus 16 the scapegoat is driven out into the wilderness, into *Azazel*. Another goat is sacrificed for Yahweh, while the scapegoat bears the sins of the people to *Azazel*. Fordham University biblical studies professor Stephen Finlan contends that the "scapegoat ritual is to be distinguished from sacrifice . . . the scapegoat ritual is surrounded by the regime of sacrificial cleansings (Lev. 16), yet retains its distinctive character: an expulsion ritual, not a sacrifice."²² Whereas ritual sacrifice includes worshipful facts such as holiness, pollution, cleansing, and obeisance, the "scapegoat ritual is not an act of worship but a violent act of self-defense based on the most primitive metaphysics."²³

Now, which applies to Jesus: the sacrifice or the scapegoat? The Leviticus 16 template does not exactly fit Jesus, argues one scholar. The scapegoat's blood is not shed, nor is it sacrificed. "Unlike the scapegoat, he [Jesus] does suffer a sacrificial death. . . . But as the scapegoat was never regarded as an offering to anyone, least of all to God, the notion of the scapegoat was not developed in the New Testament and later Christian doctrines of atonement and salvation through Christ."²⁴

The early Girard did not like applying the term "sacrifice" to the death of Jesus, even though Jesus's destiny certainly fits the model of the scapegoat. "There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that the death of Jesus is a sacrifice."²⁵ Yet, a critic might ask, how then will Girard deal with Hebrews 9:26: "He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself." On Girard's behalf, it seems to me that the theological meaning of this passage is clear: Jesus's sacrifice is the sacrifice to put an end to all sacrifices. It could even mean that the mechanism of sacrifice had never been embraced by God.

Girard certainly affirms this interpretation. So, in the later Girard, we find a reluctant willingness to apply the word "sacrifice" to the cross with the caveat that in this case we receive God's gift to us and not the reverse. Girard

uses the term "bad sacrifice" for traditional religious ritual.²⁶ Our point here is that Girard recognizes the difference between ritual sacrifice in religion and the deconstruction of the scapegoat mechanism in the revelation of the cross.

Heim summarizes Girard. "Christ has ended sacrifice. The one approach emphasizes that the cross has revealed what was always wrong with sacred violence. The other emphasizes that Christ's sacrifice is better than all the others. It is the one truly effective offering and accomplishes what all the others never could. But these are not really opposed to each other. They are more like two sides of the same thing."²⁷ Or, more succinctly: "a koan-like conclusion. If you believe in sacrifice, then you can't practice it anymore, because it has been done completely, perfectly, once for all. This was the sacrifice to end sacrifice."²⁸

The conflation of sacrifice with scapegoat has led to a widely shared criticism of Girard, namely, his scapegoat theory falls short of universal application. "Girard's concept of sacrifice is too narrow," complains Joseph Henninger, "for he supports it by reference solely to stratified societies and high cultures. It could at most explain blood sacrifices involving killing, but not sacrifice as such and certainly not the sacred as such, since the idea of the sacred exists even among peoples . . . who do not practice sacrifice. . . . Firstlings sacrifices (of which Girard does not speak) have intellectual and emotional presuppositions far removed from Girard's key concepts of primal murder and scapegoat mechanism."²⁹

I do not take this to be a critique of Girard's theory of sacred violence. Rather, it suggests that the Girardian paradigm does not apply to the full range of religious sacrificial practices. Rituals associated with the annual agricultural cycle, for example, may rely upon a metaphysical mechanism whereby human offerings help to insure fair weather and a bountiful harvest.

Similarly, Finlan criticizes Girardian theory on the grounds that it is not universally applicable to either religious communities or other communities. "The fatal flaw in Girard's proposal is the reductionist insistence that all culture and religion are founded on one thing, the scapegoating mechanism. . . . In fact, there are numerous (but less thrilling) reasons for the formation of human societies: the advantages of coordinating efforts at securing food, shelter, and defense."³⁰ Even though Girard's theory falls short of explaining every phenomenon including ritual sacrifice, Finlan grants how it illuminates

the blame game in political rhetoric. "There is an ugly human inclination to focus blame and to take revenge. There is no difference in method, only in details, between Hutu leaders vilifying the Tutsi, Hitler's systematic blaming of the Jews for Germany's defeat in World War I, and Russian Socialists' discussion of which groups were to be blamed and punished . . . [or] radical Islam's blaming of Zionism for every problem."³¹ We blame others—we blame those who are evil—so that we can ascribe contrasting goodness to ourselves. To my mind, this application to large political movements in the twentieth century reveals its illuminative value when asking about human nature in the broad sense.

What happens when sacrifice becomes meditation or prayer through internalization? The third factor is the phenomenon of internalization or spiritualization of the sacrifice. In the Vedic period of ancient India, for example, the fire sacrifice ritual was a communal event. In this case, the Vedic deity Agni, the god of fire, would consume the plant sacrifice, and its smoke would wend its way aloft until it reached heaven. Agni united earth with heaven. The priests of Agni facilitated this marriage of earth with heaven through the fire sacrifice over which they presided with their sacred utterance, the mantra.³²

As we move into the period of the Brāhmanas and Aranyakas (forest books), we find commentaries on the fire sacrifice and its meaning. The commentators begin to internalize the ritual so that it becomes an inaudible meditative practice, a silent mantra. It becomes individualized. The repetition of the once communal ritual within the individual mind gives rise to a complex inner consciousness and the yogic pursuit of saving knowledge or saving awareness. By the time we arrive at the end of the Vedic period with the Upanishads, the pantheistic and monistic metaphysics that will characterize later Hinduism have been established.³³ What has gradually replaced the mechanistic assumptions of ritual sacrifice is a new vision of the transcendent, of Brahman. If the divine Brahman is pure Being, then the divine cannot be conceived in the form of an image before which sacrifices might be efficacious. The value of sacrifice, then, becomes an internal one—that is, sacrifice takes place within one's meditative psyche as a means for cultivating spiritual devotion. "This can be called 'interiorized' or 'internal' sacrifice," writes Finlan. "In this kind of spiritualization motive is everything: the *true* sacrifice is not the ritual act but the inward disposition."³⁴

Internalization of sacrifice was anticipated in ancient Israel with the great prophets who distinguished between a righteous heart committed to social justice and merely external communal rituals. Hosea 6:6: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Or Psalm 51:16-17: "For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Whether this spiritualization implied the elimination of cultic sacrifice entirely or merely a nonhypocritical approach is less than fully clear. Henninger makes the ambiguous point: "prophetic criticism of sacrifice was directed at an outward cult unaccompanied by interior dispositions and ethical behavior."³⁵

This ethical internalization manifests itself even in Islam, at points where Islamic theology opposes ritual sacrifice. "It is not their flesh and blood [i.e., that of sacrificial animals] that reaches God but the piety of your heart" (Qur'an, sura 22:38). This sura suggests that Islam reveres the internalization; the pure heart of the devotee is more important than the public or communal ritual.

Might we think of contemporary Christian practices such as petitionary prayer and especially confession as internalizations of ritual sacrifice? It looked this way to William James. "Not nearly as widespread as sacrifice, it corresponds to a more inward and moral stage of sentiment. It is part of the general system of purgation and cleansing which one feels one's self in need of, in order to be in right relations to one's deity."³⁶

In sum, the internalization or spiritualization of sacrifice turns religious ritual toward human subjectivity, the subjectivity of the individual. The external ritual no longer provides the means for establishing or preserving the social order. Enlisting the heartfelt commitment of devotees or citizens so that they live ethically might be required for communal maintenance, to be sure; but the sacrificial ritual itself no longer plays the interindividual or communal role. In short, to postulate that the scapegoat mechanism allegedly at work in ritual sacrifice is what establishes and maintains the social order does not seem to fit the phenomenon of internalized spiritualization.

With internalization or spiritualization and the rise of private meditation and private prayer, we turn away from communal or interindividual practice toward individual subjectivity. Is the social order still at stake?

What happens when ritual sacrifice is eliminated in a religious or secular community? The fourth factor is that nonreligious persons and some religious practitioners find they can get along quite well without ritual sacrifice at all. This seems to be the case in modern secular society, especially modern pluralistic society. Modern consciousness no longer relies upon sacrifice. "The symbolical links with the spirit world, which sacrifice regulated and normalized, have been broken."³⁷ Yet, one might argue, mimetic rivalry and scapegoating still abound. If we look solely in the direction of ritual sacrifice, we may not see the presence of scapegoating or its influence.

Adam, Eve, and Jesus

Let us turn to theological anthropology. Karl Rahner reminds us that a distinctively theological anthropology attempts to get at an understanding of human nature beneath or more broadly than scientific or other forms of anthropology. "Theology is a science which is concerned with the interpretation of human existence, a field which is existentially and ontologically prior to man's interpretation of himself at the level of the natural sciences."³⁸ Theological anthropology will require, among other things, an appeal to distinctively Christian resources carefully interpreted. This is where Girard's value to theology can be best demonstrated.

The universal value of Girardian theory, I contend, is that it illuminates the human condition. By this I mean Girard's description of the scapegoat mechanism replete with its lie shines light into a dark human secret, namely, we human beings justify ourselves while scapegoating others. This is the human psyche at work.

Let us return for a moment to the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2-3, to the conversation between God and his newly minted human creatures. Once the sin of eating the forbidden fruit was discovered, a chain of self-justification ensued. Adam blamed Eve, thereby implying that he was innocent. Eve blamed the serpent, thereby implying that she was innocent. So, the reader asks: who made the serpent? God did, of course. This means that God indirectly becomes the author of sin for creating the serpent and putting the temptation into the garden in the first place. Adam and Eve have learned to draw the line between good and evil. With this knowledge they draw a line

between good and evil and place themselves on the good side of the line. We are so intent on placing ourselves on the good side of the line that we will do so even if it means placing God on the evil side. In his exegesis of this story, Martin Luther concludes, "This is the last step of sin, to insult God and charge Him with being the originator of sin."³⁹

We lie. We lie individually and intervidually. We draw the line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side of the line, an act that itself is evil because it justifies violence against the scapegoat. Girardian James Alison sees this in ritual sacrifice. "All these forms of sacrifice, from big bullocks all the way down to grains of incense, are part of a pattern of desire by which people form themselves in their own image, lock themselves into projections of themselves, and then proceed to call good, to delight in, things which are not good at all."⁴⁰ The key insight here is drawn not from the mechanism of sacrifice but rather the apparent human desire to self-justify, to perform a ritual that declares: we are good.

This compulsion to self-justify suggests bondage. Perhaps it is a symptom of original sin. Systematic theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg sees this in human nature in general. "Only the power of the lie that says that good is evil and evil good and deceptively offers us life as the reward for sin [explains how] human beings can nonetheless choose what is objectively evil, and choose it not through negligence but by compulsion. This is the bondage of the will."⁴¹ In order to declare ourselves as good, we are driven toward self-deception.

We get so wrapped up in our distortions that we can "no longer see the lies," writes Raymund Schwager.⁴² Gregory Love holds that "the problem is not merely that we do not see the truth, *but that we also do not want to see the truth*."⁴³ The chief lie is that God is to blame. God becomes our scapegoat. This is the human condition in general, perhaps even universally according to the Christian perspective on human nature. Girard helps us to see through the lie with his exegesis of Jesus as the final scapegoat.

One of Girard's chief theological concerns is that we avoid scapegoating God. Even if Adam and Eve scapegoated God, we can avoid it because of what we have learned from the cross. God does not demand sacrifice, even if we do. The sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross does not turn God's wrath into love, because God's love is prior and is the motive for the divine action of atonement. John Calvin reminds us this way: "The fact that we

were reconciled through Christ's death must not be understood as if his Son reconciled us to him that he might now begin to love those whom he had hated. Rather, we have already been reconciled to him who loves us. . . . 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' [Romans 5:8]."⁴⁴ For those within the Christian tradition who insist that atonement consists of appeasing a wrathful God with a human sacrifice, a great reversal is in store. "We have a complete reversal—God does not receive a sacrifice, but becomes it. Instead of us reaching up to God, God reached down to us. The reversal of the sacrifice from man-to-God to God-to-man is extremely significant."⁴⁵ It is God who is good, not us. And divine goodness comes to us as a gift, not through acts of self-justification such as ritual sacrifice let alone scapegoating.

At least two theological implications come to mind. The first is for those of us who scapegoat. If the cross of Christ is indeed a revelation from God, then it means that our justification comes from God and not from our scapegoating. Whatever need we might have previously felt—a need to draw a line between good and evil with ourselves on the good side—has been mitigated. God has placed the divine self on the evil side of the line. To be godly means to accept ourselves as scapegoaters justified by God rather than by ourselves. We do not need to continue the practice of either ritual sacrifice or scapegoating.

Nor do we who are victims need to internalize the evil heaped upon us by our scapegoaters. This leads to the second implication. The revelation in Jesus Christ regarding human nature should result in liberation from false consciousness, from a loss of dignity. The gospel can elicit a sense of self-love and self-worth for those previously victimized by scapegoating. African American Womanist theologian JoAnne Marie Terrell celebrates this insight for those in her social location. "Because God desires mercy and not sacrifice, there should never really be any reason for the act of sacrifice. . . . Contrary to the church's historical attempts to impose the hermeneutics of sacrifice on any people whom it or the state would subjugate, this is not sanction for anyone's or any group's victimization. . . . When black women can see the truth of this revelation, self-love becomes imminently possible."⁴⁶

Conclusion

From the point of view of the Christian systematic theologian, we are dealing here with the concept of sin within anthropology. "Scapegoating is one of the deepest structures of human sin, built into our religion and our politics. It is demonic because it is endlessly flexible in its choice of victims and because it can truly deliver the good that it advertises. Satan can cast out Satan, and is the more powerful for it. Its hold is stronger where it is most invisible. Victims are called criminals, gods, or both. So long as we are in the grip of sin, we do not see our victims as scapegoats. Texts that hide scapegoating foster it. Texts that show it for what it is undermine it."⁴⁷

What we have done here is distinguish between the ritual of sacrifice within religious traditions, on the one hand, and scapegoating for the purpose of establishing and maintaining the social order, on the other. Girard's theory illuminates the latter more than the former. Nevertheless, what Girard uncovers regarding scapegoating indirectly applies to ritual sacrifice, namely, the structure of self-justification works in both. It is common to us in the human condition to draw the line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side of the line. Religious sacrifice is erroneously assumed to provide a mechanism whereby we are cleansed or somehow made good. Social scapegoating similarly declares that we the scapegoaters are good, but the price we pay for this goodness is self-deceit. If the gospel of Jesus Christ reveals that God accepts no sacrifices and judges scapegoating from the side of the victim, then the mechanism of self-justification is broken. It will no longer work. This realization may lead to a further awareness that it is the goodness of God's gift that provides us with our justification.

NOTES

"René Girard and World Religions." GTU Symposium, Graduate Theological Union, Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, April 14–16, 2011.

1. When I initiated an attempt to appropriate the scapegoat theory of René Girard for theology, I was attracted to his partial model for atonement, one that revealed to humanity our sinful state. Ted Peters, "Atonement and the Final Scapegoat," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 151–81; and Peters, *God—The World's Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 162–63. More astutely than others, Girard helps us to unmask the lie we tell ourselves when engaging in self-justification. Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), chap. 6.

2. "The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into proper channels." René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 10.
3. Brian McDonald, "Violence & the Lamb Slain: An Interview with René Girard," *Touchstone*, December 2003, <http://www.touchstonemag.com>.
4. Ibid.
5. S. Mark Heim, "Saved by What Shouldn't Happen: The Anti-Sacrificial Meaning of the Cross," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 212.
6. Ibid., 215.
7. McDonald, "Violence & the Lamb Slain."
8. Heim, "Saved by What Shouldn't Happen," 220.
9. "Die Eucharistiefeier bildet immer aufs Neue den heilbringenden Opfertod Christi ab, sie repräsentiert (vergegenwärtigt) ihn realistisch. In diesem Sinn ist das Opfer der Kirche nach Augustin similitudo des Opfers Christi." Christof Gestrich, "Opfer," in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th ed., ed. Hans Dieter Betz et al., 8 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998–2005), 6:587.
10. The post-Tridentine assumption that a sacrifice takes place on the Eucharistic altar could be misleading. Richard Schenk uncovers a pre-Tridentine ambivalence toward the concept of sacrifice. Contemporary ambivalence toward sacrificial imagery and the critique of such imagery has a systematic foundation. "Opfer und Opferkritik aus der Sicht römisch-katholischer Theologie," in *Zur Theorie des Opfers: ein interdisziplinäres Gespräch*, ed. Richard Schenk (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1995), 193–250.
11. Heim, "Saved by What Shouldn't Happen," 221.
12. Rita Nakashima Brock, "The Cross of Resurrection and Communal Redemption," in Trelstad, *Cross Examinations*, 246.
13. Ibid., 247.
14. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 239.
15. Joseph Henninger, "Sacrifice," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones, 15 vols. (New York: MacMillan, 2005), 12:8005.
16. See Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
17. Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 108.
18. Ibid., 109.
19. Adolf E. Jensen, *Myth and Cult Among Primitive Peoples*, trans. Marianna Tax Choldin and Wolfgang Weissleder (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 165.
20. Ibid., 198.
21. Girard might object to my somewhat bland conclusion here on the grounds that a closer look would reveal what history of religions scholars and ethnologists cannot see, namely, that

- persecution of victims is universal in the world's societies and religious traditions. Scholars miss this point "because we do not know how to decipher the documents we do possess." René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 25. Be that as it may, what such scholars report they see is relevant to this argument.
22. Stephen Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 13.
 23. Ibid., 14.
 24. David Phillips, "Scapegoat," in *Man, Myth, and Magic: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural*, ed. Richard Cavendish, 24 vols. (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1970), 18:2488.
 25. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, research undertaken in collaboration with J.-M. Oughourlian and G. Lefort, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 180.
 26. McDonald, "Violence & the Lamb Slain."
 27. S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 157.
 28. Ibid., 180.
 29. Henninger, "Sacrifice," 8005.
 30. Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 106.
 31. Ibid., 107–8.
 32. See R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 19–20.
 33. Ibid., 38. The move from external sacrifice to internal meditation can be recapitulated today by the individual Hindu. "Sacrifice in the temple, a self-offering which is still external, is later internalized step-by-step in meditation." Michael von Brück, *The Unity of Reality: God, God-Experience, and Meditation in the Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, trans. James Zeitz (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 65.
 34. Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 38.
 35. Henninger, "Sacrifice," 8007.
 36. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Gifford Lectures, 1901–1902 (New York: Fontana, 1960), 443.
 37. Eric J. Sharpe, "Sacrifice," in Cavendish, *Man, Myth, and Magic*, 18:2458.
 38. Karl Rahner, "Theological Observations on the Concept of Time," in *Theological Investigations*, 22 vols. (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1961–76; New York: Seabury, 1974–76; New York: Crossroad, 1976–88), 11:289.
 39. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vols. 1–30 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–67); ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vols. 31–55 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1955–86), 1:179.
 40. James Alison, *Broken Hearts and New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (New York: Continuum, 2010), xv.
 41. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), 118.

42. Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption*, trans. James G. Williams and Paul Haddon (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 91.
43. Gregory Anderson Love, *Love, Violence, and the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 214.
44. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.xvi.4 (1559), ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1:506–7.
45. Derck Flood, "The Rebel God: Understanding the Cross and the Radical Love of God" (master's thesis, Graduate Theological Union, 2011), 59–60.
46. JoAnne Marie Terrell, "Our Mother's Gardens: Rethinking Sacrifice," in Trelstad, *Cross Examinations*, 45–46.
47. Heim, "Saved by What Shouldn't Happen," 217.