



Preaching the Word in a Culture of Violence

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After an errant missile landed in a crowded market in Baghdad, Iraqi citizens poured into the streets shouting: “We will sacrifice our blood and souls for you, Saddam.”¹ In the same issue of the local newspaper that described the reaction of the Iraqis to the destruction they had witnessed, another brief article noted that the Pentagon disliked the term *fedayeen*, which can be translated as “those who sacrifice themselves for a cause.” The idea that Iraqi irregulars could be seen as “freedom fighters” disturbed the military analysts. Army units were ordered to substitute the term PMF, meaning “paramilitary forces.”² Iraqis were not to be described as “sacrificing themselves.” What is the power of this word *sacrifice*? What is the source of its positive valence, so positive that we will not let opposing forces use this word? Apparently they do not use it correctly.

And what do we mean that is so different? Presumably we mean that we are dying for a good cause. Their cause—their culture, however problematic—is not good. We honor those who die for a good cause.

SACRIFICE AND VIOLENCE

Human sacrifice has been universal in human culture. It was seen as a way to

¹Anthony Shadid, “Baghdad civilians anguish over deaths,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 27 March 2003, A12.

²“No elevated title for Iraqi fighters,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 27 March 2003, A14.

As René Girard has shown, ritual sacrifice has been a part of every human culture—but one that finally produces violence rather than overcoming it. Christians must take great care in speaking of the “sacrifice” of Jesus.

placate the gods, to keep the gods at a distance, and thus to preserve the tribe. The cultural anthropology of René Girard theorizes that ritual sacrifice is actually the reenactment of a primordial murder, a murder that somehow channeled internal violence, directing it to a single victim, and thus siphoning off the intratribal violence that could potentially destroy the group. If a mob, instead of fighting one another—brother against brother, family against family, tribe against tribe—could direct their violence against a single victim, the group could be saved from self-destruction. Instead of destroying themselves, they could be transformed into a community of single-minded members—all looking in the same direction, all convinced that this particularly conspicuous, marginalized member of the group was the one responsible for their troubles. Destroying him (or her, in some cases) would be salvific. When murder brought peace—because internal violence had been channeled—the original suspicion was confirmed: the victim was the real origin of their problems.

But violence is never cured forever. When the cultural memory of that first moment of peace is preserved, the victim's tomb is honored. When violence reemerges, the mechanism for bringing about peace must be reinstated. The result is a ritual reenactment of the original murder and the retelling of the story so that subsequent generations will know how their culture was saved and how necessary it is to continue to venerate the victims who saved it. Tombs become shrines. Victims become gods.

Human sacrifice is the beginning of cultural institutions. Prohibitions are important to the preservation of culture and especially to the control of violence. Rivalries within the group must be suppressed (“Thou shalt not covet...”). Taboos must prohibit actions that generate murderous violence (e.g., wives must be secured from another tribe, not from within).

Later generations would channel the impulse to sacrifice, limiting it to animal sacrifice or, in subsequent cultures, to state-sanctioned sacrifice. The arbitrariness of the scapegoat mechanism would be deflected if the state determined who was really guilty, and sacrifice would be limited to juridically determined criminals executed in the relative privacy of state-controlled institutions. Laws would continue to prohibit theft, private vengeance, and other incitements to community violence. The cultural imperative to sacrifice is modified but not fundamentally altered.

The Vietnam Memorial in Washington and the tombs of unknown soldiers in Arlington, Paris, and other European capitals are memorials to those who “sacrificed” for their respective countries. Their deaths are referred to by Memorial Day speakers as “the price of freedom.” Sacrifice is seen as a “price” to be paid. What we get for that price is presumably a way of life that we treasure, in other words, a “culture.” The Iraqi fedayeen were willing to pay a price for a culture that they wanted to preserve. Americans are willing to pay a price for a culture that we think is better. In each case, what we are “paying the price for” is the culture we know. So the word “sacrifice” has meanings by extension that conceal the horror of violence and glorify the willingness to die.

The foundational stories of every culture include the account of a victim, someone who died, someone whose death led to the birth of a city, a culture, a nation. It should not surprise us that Cain is described in the biblical text as “the founder of cities.” The difference between the biblical story, however, and all other foundational myths (Romulus and Remus, for example), is that the victim—Abel—is innocent. In all other myths, the victim is guilty.³ The body of the victim, guilty or innocent, however, is always honored. “[I]n the end,” writes Girard, “the tomb is the first and only cultural symbol. The above-ground tomb does not have to be invented. It is the pile of stones in which the victim of unanimous stoning is buried.”⁴

Anyone who has visited the Vietnam Memorial will have experienced the genuine power of this monument to evoke grief, sometimes anger, but more often a kind of reconciliatory union with the dead. Veterans are seen to embrace one another, to lean their heads against the names of friends. Making a tracing of the names, in fact, has become a kind of ritual. Less spectacularly, perhaps, but still significant, is the power of war memorials to enkindle love for one’s country. We are told over and over again that others have died for us, that we must also be willing to “sacrifice” for our country. The word has such positive implications that we should not be surprised that Christian culture has taken up the word to describe what happened at Calvary. Over and over again in liturgy and prayer, we are reminded that Jesus was sacrificed for us, that Jesus paid the price of our redemption. We speak of the “sacrifice of the cross,” the “sacrifice of Calvary,” or sometimes, especially in Roman Catholic tradition, “the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass.” The question we must raise, in the light of our cultural understanding of violence, is whether this word continues to be useful. Or, if we must stay with it because of its use in foundational theology, can we reeducate Christians as to its real meaning?

SACRIFICE AND RELIGION

As Robert Daly has pointed out in his recent analysis of the word “sacrifice,” we have traditionally examined its meaning in the context of the history of religions. This way of understanding sacrifice is scarcely helpful. In this context, it always implies that sacrifice is something “done *to* somebody,” something that begins with human beings and then gets accepted or rejected by God.⁵

The meaning of this term, however, needs to be studied more carefully. Because of its cultural valence, the word “sacrifice” can transfer our reverence for soldiers who died to preserve our culture to the self-offering of Jesus at Calvary, even though these are very different realities. Not without good reason did Mark de-

³See the extended discussion of this in René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987) esp. 141–180.

⁴*Ibid.*, 83.

⁵Robert J. Daly, “Sacrifice Unveiled or Sacrifice Revisited: Trinitarian and Liturgical Perspectives,” *Theological Studies* 64/1 (2003) 24–42.

scribe the veil of the temple as “rent from top to bottom” at the death of Jesus. What was Mark’s intention if not to suggest that temple sacrifice had come to an end? Did he intend, however, to suggest that one sacrifice substituted for another? That the sacrifice of Jesus was simply an improvement over the sacrifice of goats and lambs? This interpretation conceals the theological significance of Jesus’ death on the cross which is properly interpreted as an end to all sacrifice—not because the best one of all has been accomplished, but that sacrifice was never an appropriate means to salvation. The prophetic texts always proclaimed the same point:

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.... (Hos 6:6)

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices...
I have had enough of burnt offerings.... (Isa 1:11)

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.... (Amos 5:22)

How then do we understand the death of Jesus?

“Jesus’ death on the cross is properly interpreted as an end to all sacrifice—not because the best one of all has been accomplished, but that sacrifice was never an appropriate means to salvation”

Often in catechetical programs I have asked the question: “Why did Jesus die on the cross?” In almost every case, the answer is the same: “He died for our sins.” When I ask, “What does that mean?” the answers are less confident. But inevitably, someone will suggest that Jesus died “in our place,” or that Jesus “paid the price” for our sins, or that Jesus “ransomed us.” Often I follow that response with: “Just exactly how did that work? To whom was the ‘price’ paid?” My point is that many Christians understand the death of Jesus in terms of something paid to God for us and something done to Jesus. Translation: God the Father wanted someone to suffer so that the rest of us wouldn’t have to be punished. However crudely expressed, this is precisely the understanding of Calvary shared by many if not most Christians, an understanding that supposes a punishing God and an understanding of “sacrifice” that includes its most violent aspect: killing is okay if it is for a good cause.

That Christians have interpreted their mission in terms that are suspiciously violent is evidenced by some of our most vigorous hymns. “Onward Christian Soldiers,” “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” and the militantly vigorous “Lift High the Cross”—all suggest that we are in some kind of struggle that is barely distinguishable from warfare. It could be argued that we are turning warfare “inside out,” but the distinction between ritual warfare and real warfare is not always clear. Life is a battle, and the Christian life is a battle against the powers of darkness. How does this kind of symbolism call us to the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the meek...”?

VIOLENCE AND DESIRE

To understand “sacrifice” in its Christian context, we need to begin not with the human effort to mitigate violence in the group by murder or by ritual sacrifice, nor to see what happened at Calvary as substitutionary atonement, but to see Jesus Christ as the self-offering of the Father and to see violence from the perspective of the victim, especially this victim, whose forgiveness transformed human violence into love. Unless we understand this moment and the vindication of the victim in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we cannot deal adequately with the violence in our own lives and in our culture. We will always attempt to justify it either by representing ourselves as the victim or by yielding to a spirit of accusation that unleashes public and private violence.

From the perspective of cultural anthropology, we can examine the stages of violence as they are manifested in group behavior, children’s quarrels, classic literature, and myth, insofar as myth can be probed for its underlying reality. Simply expressed, the dynamic begins with what René Girard describes as mimetic desire, that is, desire that imitates the desire of another. The entire advertising industry is based on this mechanism. Fads, fashions, testimonials, billboards, television celebrities—all tempt us to desire what others desire. Anyone who has been around children for even a short time notices how quickly they want what another child has. We learn to desire what is intrinsically useless: baseball cards, autographs, dysfunctional antiques, the detritus of celebrities, the current Christmas toy. The value of the object increases in proportion to the number of people who desire it, as every auction demonstrates.

Mimetic desire leads quickly to mimetic rivalry, as the quarrels on children’s playgrounds reveal and as looting, gang fights, and tribal warfare give evidence. Shakespeare knew enough of mimetic rivalry among those who love the same person and who imitate their rivals’ desires to make it a theme of some of his greatest plays: *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Twelfth Night*, especially.⁶

It is the contagion of desire that excites lynch mobs, street riots, and demonstrations of fanatic fidelity: “We will sacrifice our blood and souls for you Saddam.” When desire is frustrated, even the most temperate of religious believers will find him or herself dealing with that most poisonous of emotions, resentment. Many of us who consider ourselves “nonviolent” must deal frequently with the frustration of desire, especially when the desire of another has triumphed over our own. Resentment is sometimes called the revenge of the weak, that is, the revenge of those who—because of weakness or principle—would never physically attack another. But resentment unchecked is also contagious and can culminate in vandalism, terrorism, or malign accusation. It is a kind of psychological violence that is another form of self-destruction. Giving up resentment means giving up mimetic desire, giving up the rivalry that flows from mimetic desire.

⁶See René Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

The difficulty of checking violence, especially one's own, is the conviction that resentment is justified, or that the person or group I hold responsible for our problems is guilty, and that expulsion of the other is the only way to peace. "If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you," said the leaders of the Sanhedrin (John 18:30). This conviction is what Girard describes as *méconnaissance*, a "not-knowing," a blindness that can engulf whole groups of people or small parties to violence. John 9 describes that *méconnaissance* in a step-by-step revelation of the victim, who learns to see, and the persecutors, who are blind. And because they say they see, their blindness remains. Mohandas Gandhi once argued that if we want truth, if we search for truth, we must give up violence. It is violence that blinds, and consent to violence brings its own darkness.

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our own"*

"Not as the world gives [peace], do I give [peace] to you" (John 14:27). We need to reflect on how the world gives peace. Aware of the horrors of group violence and the chaos that follows uncontested liberty, we begin culturally by restricting the consequences of desire. We punish theft, murder, inciting to riot, slander, menacing, vandalism, and sexual imposition. When we consider others dangerous, we isolate them, confine them to jails and prisons. When people are not properly documented, we deport them. We restrict the movements of others, require compensation for damages, and survey streets and stores for possible violations of the law. We set up police departments, national guards, military establishments, and border controls—all to keep the peace. It should not surprise us that many Christians assume that God keeps peace in the same way: requiring compensation, arranging punishment, setting up an eschatological prison. We are so used to using a little violence to keep the larger violence at bay that we project our system into the reign of God, as if that world were just like our own.

PREACHING NONVIOLENCE

Preaching nonviolence means preaching an authentic, scripturally based understanding of God. That means dealing competently with biblical passages that seem to justify human violence and project violence onto divinity. This way of reading Scripture means reading it non-sacrificially. One of the most useful commentaries for this hermeneutic is Raymund Schwager's *Must There Be Scapegoats?* Alluding to the hundreds of scriptural passages that describe explicit violence—often attributed to God—Schwager writes: "The passages concerning God's direct or indirect avenging activity and the statements about the perpetrators' self-

punishment thus point to one and the same reality: violence is always committed by human beings.”⁷ He writes further:

As soon as the idea had spread among Christians that the kingdom of God was in certain circumstances to be defended with violence or even spread with the sword, the way was clear to project, even more openly and unnoticed, one’s own evil tendencies upon God....Under the idea of a God who demands bloody satisfaction, one’s own undetected projections could continue to grow uncontrollably.⁸

But God is innocent of desires for “bloody satisfaction.”

Both Hebrew and Christian Scripture are unique in the world for their attention to the innocence of the victim. This privileging of the victim grounds both Judaism and Christianity in an ethic of compassion that has had profound consequences in the history of culture and civilizations. In the Psalms, especially the psalms of lament, the book of Job, and Second Isaiah, we see the world through the eyes of the victim.

More in number than the hairs of my head
are those who hate me without cause;
many are those who would destroy me,
my enemies who accuse me falsely.
What I did not steal
must I now restore? (Ps 69:4)

[L]et me be weighed in a just balance,
and let God know my integrity! (Job 31:6)

Seeing the world through the eyes of the victim has been called the “epistemological privilege.” The victim, in other words, sees things as they really are. Persecutors are not so privileged—as John 9 reminds us. Studying that profound analysis in the Fourth Gospel of who sees and who does not, who becomes progressively blind and who experiences the revelation of the Son of God, discloses the meaning of spiritual darkness. Those who accuse and assume their own righteousness are the persecutors of history. Their blindness becomes so intense that they believe they see. As James Alison has observed in his brilliant analysis of this text: “Sin ceases to be a defect which excludes, and comes to be a participation in the mechanism of exclusion.”⁹ Preaching the reign of God means, therefore, preaching the politics of inclusion rather than the politics of identity, urging forgiveness rather than accusation, resisting envy, overcoming resentment, and identifying with the victims of contemporary culture.

Identifying with the victim has both social and sacramental implications. Identifying with the victim admits us to the vision, however indistinct, of the suffering and persecuted of our world. We are misled, however, if we believe that tele-

⁷Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. Maria L. Assad (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 66.

⁸*Ibid.*, 232.

⁹James Alison, *Faith beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: Crossroad, 2001) 16.

vision brings us the perspective of the world's suffering victims. Viewers cannot and will not submit to graphic portrayals of violence and will switch channels immediately if violence becomes too much to bear. Producers know this and will show only as much suffering as is compatible with the tastes of viewers and the politics of producers. Americans in general and middle-class viewers throughout the world are spared the sight of unbearable suffering, especially the suffering that may be the indirect consequence of their own country's foreign and economic policies. We confuse reality, moreover, with entertainment and watch the news more for its entertainment value than for insights into the suffering of others.

Unless Christians reach into the depths of the revelatory word, their awareness of who it is that suffers—and why—may never be aroused. In the Eucharist, especially, Christians are invited to identify with the divine victim of human persecution and with all victims. Christians gather around the body of this victim, not to rejoice that opposing armies have been defeated, but to give thanks that persecutors have been forgiven and the mechanisms of exclusion have been overcome. We can be frightened by the prospect of violence in this life and punishment in the life to come, but that terror is not from God.

What is from God is the promise: "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth..." (John 14:15–16). With that promise we can be peacemakers, struggling to reconcile enemies, working to heal the wounds of division in our families, in our local communities, and in the larger society. We can resist the impulse to sacralize violence, to see in it a terror that evokes an unhealthy and fundamentally pagan "awe." Only God should arouse awe. Only God can call us out of our darkness, like the rescuer in the Pentagon who cried out in the inky blackness of that destruction, "Is anybody in here? Anybody here?" In that terrible moment of violence and destruction, frantic voices called, "Help me, help me!" The rescuer, a man named Isaac Hoopii, called back, "Head toward my voice, head toward my voice! Come toward my voice!"¹⁰

The voice of the rescuer is the voice of Christ calling to us in our darkness. That voice comes to us from within and beyond our world. It is the only voice that can free us from the urge to sacrifice others for the sake of our own well-being and to identify with persecutors as a way to assure our own safety. It is the voice that reminds us, "In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world" (John 16:33). ⊕

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¹⁰Angie Cannon, "The 'Other' Tragedy," *U.S. News and World Report*, 10 December 2001, 24.