

The Epistemological Upheaval of the Cross:

The Revelation of Human
Violence, Scapegoating,
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The thesis of this paper is that the salvific work of Jesus reveals human violence as rooted in sacrifice, reverses the sacrificial logic of scapegoating, and substitutes a new basis for reconciliation between humanity and God. The paper begins with a short primer on René Girard's theory of religion and violence, elaborates on how the cross and resurrection subverts the typical logic of sacrifice, and how humanity is reconciled to God. Proceeding, Reformer John Calvin's Penal Substitutionary Atonement (P.S.A) theory provides an interlocutor to the proposed anti-sacrificial understanding of atonement. A subsequent rebuttal to the P.S.A. theory follows and demonstrates that the cross should not be understood within a sacrificial framework whereby Jesus is sacrificed to appease God's wrath; rather, the cross is God's self-giving of the Son into the hands of violent humanity in order to unmask humanity's violence by forgiving humanity's sin outside the logic of *do ut des* ("I give so that you will give").

René Girard's mimetic theory of religion and violence contends that the practice of sacrificial scapegoating is the cornerstone of human society and religion.¹ According to Girard, the escalating cycle of mimetic rivalry is the original social contagion that threatens communal life in a war of all-against-all. To break the violent cycle, Girard argues that the spontaneous, irrational, and violent mob lashes out against a particular victim or minority in the group. The chosen victim, blamed for the community's conflict, is sacrificed and the victim's death acts as a catharsis for the community. As a result of the victim's death and the resulting peace that follows, the community divinizes the victim as a god. Thus, the victim's sacrifice becomes the locus of reconciliation.

¹ Girard's theory of the universal phenomenon of scapegoating is presented in: René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1977). For an overview of Girard's mimetic realism see: René Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (New York, NY: Orbis, 2001); Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2011); René Girard and James G. Williams, *The Girard Reader* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

Girard calls this process “the scapegoat mechanism.” While the scapegoat mechanism stops mimetic crises; the effects are only momentary and not telic. Eventually, another mimetic crisis will arise, at which point, the community will repeat the sacrificial process in a ritual manner to quell future generalized violence and retributive violence from reaching a catastrophic and self-destructive stage. Girard further argues that out of the scapegoat mechanism religion, culture, and civilization arise.

In humanity’s sacrificial drama, there are two roles that a person can play: the persecutor/persecuting community or the persecuted/persecuted minority. Myths are the byproduct of the sacrificial drama through which the actors (persecutors) justify their sacred violence by hiding and divinizing the victim. In myth, the victim is always hidden, silenced or made to agree with the guilt attributed to them, and buried under the mythic prose of the persecutors caught in the inescapable cycle of sacred violence. The entire edifice of human religion, culture, and civilization is built upon the mythic stories of origin which ultimately are built upon the bodies of silenced and hidden victims of sacred violence.

Jesus’ death, rather than being understood in the sacrificial logic of *do ut des* as a sacrifice to God, is understood as the subversion and substitution of the logic of sacrificial reconciliation. The Gospel stories, structured in the same manner as myths, witness to the subversive and revelatory innocence of Jesus as a failed scapegoat who was vindicated by God.² The cross, as the focal point, is the epistemological grounding for the subversion of humanity’s epistemology grounded on the lie of the victim’s guilt, the community’s innocence, and the justification of sacred violence through myths. In order for humanity, trapped in the sacrificial

² 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, MN: Augsburg Press, 2006), 219-220.

logic of scapegoating, to be reconciled to God, Jesus offered himself to humanity, entered into humanity's sacrificial drama in the role of the victim, subverted the sacrificial scapegoating logic from within, and substituted his own life as a new basis for reconciliation.³ The cross reverses all brokenness through reconciliation: "between God and humanity (*theologically*); within ourselves (*psychologically*); amongst ourselves (*sociologically*); and within all creation (*ecologically, cosmologically*)."⁴

In the resurrection, God vindicates Jesus, the failed innocent scapegoat, and acquits all the hidden victims of myth. The persecutors likewise are acquitted in the resurrection by God giving back to them the one they are charged with killing, fully alive. By the fact that Jesus is not dead, the persecutors can be declared "not guilty" of Jesus' death.⁵ The cross and resurrection of Jesus is the foundational scene of origin played out in reverse, in which, the victim is given back in order to permit a new basis for reconciliation not established on the mythic cover-up of victims but on the revelation of the innocent and forgiving victim who reveals God as being entirely without violence.

The following two foundational shifts in perspective are permitted as a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus: 1) Humanity is permitted to perceive (*pneumatology*) that humans are formed in violence, with victimization as the foundation of human awareness (*anthropology*); and 2) Coinciding with the anthropological shift, humanity comes to perceive God as entirely without violence (*theological*) willing to undergo human violence to set humanity free from their

³ Heim, "Saved", 223; and see Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 143.

⁴ Wayne Northey "The Cross: God's Peace Work Towards a Restorative Peacemaking Understanding of the Atonement" in *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 376.

⁵ On resurrection and acquittal see S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 145-147.

bondage to victimization (*soteriological*) to a way of being outside the tit-for-tat logic of sacrificial scapegoating, namely the logic of forgiveness and grace (*ethics* and *spirituality*).⁶

In this model of atonement, revelation occurs at the same place as where myth originates, namely the epistemological foundation of human awareness that arises out of sacrificial victimization.⁷ Here, Jesus' death reveals that God does not retaliate, require retribution, or use the sacrificial logic of human scapegoating in order to reconcile humanity; rather, God's forgiveness is the disrupting force that enters into humanity's economy of exchange built upon the sacrificial logic of retributive violence and subverts it from within by means of utter graciousness not bound by *do ut des*.⁸ The God that the cross and resurrection permits humanity to perceive is revealed, by the Spirit, as being anti-violent, fore-giving, and of one '*homoousias*' with the Son.⁹ The cross unmasks the violent gods of sacrificial religion in humanity's *face-to-face* encounter with the anti-violent God revealed in Jesus.¹⁰

⁶ The soteriological model argued in this paper coincides in part with the historical atonement theories set forth by Peter Abelard (moral influence theory) and the patristic fathers (recapitulation; ransom or conquest theories). Abelard's theory stresses the ethical dimension of the theory with regards to Christ as the model-of-imitation and the graciousness of God in Christ as the means through which humans in a process become more and more like Christ. The patristic understanding set forth by the likes of Irenaeus, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa whom stress salvation as deliverance from death, sin, and the powers and the subsequent re-creation of humanity in the likeness of Christ. Stephen Finlan, "Jesus in Atonement Theories." *The Blackwell Companion to Jesus*. ed. Delbert Burkett (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 203-205.

⁷ The foundation upon which human knowledge is based is the innocent victim of sacrificial violence. Borrowing the term from Michael Polanyi, Hardin writes, "The victim is the 'tacit dimension' of all knowledge." Michael Hardin, *Mimetic Theory and Biblical Interpretation: Reclaiming the Good News of the Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books), 62.

⁸ See Hardin, *Mimetic Theory*, 61 where revelation is described as having a "relational reconciliatory ground with epistemic, ethical, and soteriological implications." Hardin also notes two important realities in which revelation is grounded: 1) "revelation is cruciform in character"; and 2) "revelation is of the character of God as forgiving, thus establishing an alternative shape community formation and identity."

⁹ The designation of "fore-giving" is explained by Sharon Baker when she writes, "Fore-giving expresses the notion of 'giving *beforehand*' or giving something *before* a person repents or pays back a debt." Sharon Baker. "The Repetition of Reconciliation: Satisfying Justice, Mercy, and Forgiveness" in *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 233.

¹⁰ Baker, "The Repetition", 227.

Jesus' death, understood from this perspective, is necessitated by humanity and does not stem from God. God did not need to be reconciled to humanity. Rather, the cross is God's offering of Jesus into the hands of violent humanity in order to reveal the lie of scapegoating and to substitute a new basis for reconciliation.¹¹ Humanity, caught up in rivalry and sacrifice and in need of reconciliation, is enabled, by the Spirit's witness to Christ, to perceive God's disposition toward humanity as forgiving and not contrived in an economy of exchange, *do ut des*, or *quid pro quo* (something given or received for something else); rather, an entirely free notion of graciousness.¹²

Reformer John Calvin slightly modified Anselm's Satisfaction theory of atonement by adding a more legal (or forensic) framework into the notion of the cross as satisfaction.¹³ In Penal Substitutionary Atonement (P.S.A.), Christ dies to appease God's wrath against human sin. Jesus is punished (penal) in the place of guilty sinners because Jesus is innocent (substitution). In light of Jesus' death, God can forgive sinners because Jesus has taken the punishment on their behalf meeting the retributive requirements of God's justice and the legal demand of God to punish sin. The result of Christ's Penal Substitution is forgiveness and reconciliation between humanity and God (atonement).

¹¹ S. Mark Heim illuminates this point in the following ways, "Blood is not acceptable to God as a means of uniting human community or reconciling with God. Christ sheds his own blood to *end* that way of trying to mend our divisions. Jesus' death isn't necessary because God has to have innocent blood to solve the guilt equation... Jesus didn't volunteer to get into God's justice machine. God volunteered to get into ours. God used our own sin to save us." Heim, "Saved", 218.

¹² *Ibid.*, 218; Mark Heim notes that, "Redemptive violence is our equation."

¹³ Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, concerning Jesus' death understood as a satisfaction, states, "The idea of Christ's death as making satisfaction is not found in the Greek fathers nor I think in the early Latin Fathers. It is a medieval addition, and it separates Christ from the father so that can't be right." See: Kallistos Ware. *Salvation in Christ: The Orthodox Approach*. (The Alfred S. Palmer Lecture. Seattle Pacific University, March 3, 2008), 6.

Calvin makes it explicit that Jesus' death is a sacrifice to appease the wrath of God.¹⁴ He states in his *Institutes*, "In short, the only reason given in Scripture that the Son of God willed to take our flesh, and accepted this commandment from the Father, is that he would be a sacrifice to appease the Father on our behalf."¹⁵ Calvin's understanding of the cross is construed within a sacrificial framework whereby one (Jesus) stands in for the many (sinners), takes the deserved punishment (God's wrath and death) on their behalf in order to appease God (Divine Justice), and thus enable reconciliation to happen between sinners and God. The challenge set forth by P.S.A to the atonement model set forth above is the problem of divine justice, construed in a forensic frame, whereby the disposition of God toward humanity, as wrath and hostility, must "seek ways and means to appease God—and this demands a satisfaction."¹⁶ God as a righteous judge, for Calvin, "does not allow his law to be broken without punishment, but is equipped to avenge it."¹⁷

While the P.S.A theory requires the wrath of God to be appeased and the offended justice of God to be paid in order for humanity to be reconciled to God, I propose the P.S.A. theory takes on the narrative shape of the myth-making mob in contrast to the narrative as told by the innocent victim. Adherents to P.S.A. theory have a sacrificial interpretation of Jesus'

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. from the 1559 Latin ed. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., in *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2XVI.2. "Christ interceded as his advocate, took upon himself and suffered the punishment that, from God's righteous judgment, threatened all sinners; that he purged with his blood those evils which had rendered sinners hateful to God; that by this expiation he made satisfaction and sacrifice duly to God the Father; that as an intercessor he has appeased God's wrath.

¹⁵ *Institutes* 2XII.4.

¹⁶ *Institutes* 2XVI.1.

¹⁷ *Institutes* 2XVI.1.

death, like Jesus' accusers¹⁸ in the Gospel narratives, which unfolds in the following two ways: 1) God's reconciliatory act is construed in an economy of exchange whereby the substitution of the innocent victim for the group is better than the group's perishing. 2) God in the P.S.A. theory is confined to humanity's creation of economies of exchange and is no longer the active subject of salvation; rather, God is humanity's rival. The P.S.A. theory puts God and Jesus in a sacrificial relationship in which the Trinity is conceived within a pagan framework of sacrifice and an economy of exchange. Within P.S.A. theory, the Trinitarian, self-giving, and other-oriented relationality of God as revealed in Jesus is truncated by a human notion of reciprocity conceived in sacrificial terms and legal metaphors outside the Nicene formulation of '*homoousias*'.

Calvin's imported prior forensic assumptions further limit God's actions such that God would not or could not freely pass over the offended honor or debt owed in order to forgive sin.¹⁹ Forgiveness, then, is only received in this model through some sort of an economy, of *quid pro quo*, of a balancing of the divine account books. The P.S.A. theory functions as a mythic narrative that keeps victims hidden behind a God(sic) that justifies redemptive violence by siding with the persecuting community in requiring satisfaction and construes forgiveness within an economy of exchange whereby God is the object rather than the free initiating agent of salvation and reconciliation. The salvific work of Jesus understood as the subversion of the sacrificial logic of scapegoating and the revelation of human violence provides an account of the cross whereby the Trinity is not separated into opposing roles, the human problem of violence is dealt

¹⁸ Mark Heim notes "that in the Gospels it is Jesus' accusers who affirm the reconciling value of his death." Heim, "Saved", 217.

¹⁹ The forensic assumptions are as follows: "1) Payment is required; 2) Jesus has to pay or we do; 3) Someone has to be paid; 4) The implicit assumption that someone is owed; and 5) Jesus can substitute to pay on behalf of humanity." Michael Hardin, *The Jesus Driven Life: Reconnecting Humanity with Jesus* (Lancaster, PA; JDL Press, 2013), 107; Wayne Northey also provides some exegetical problems found in the satisfaction/penal view of atonement. Wayne Northey "The Cross", 253; also see Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 25.

with by Jesus' going through death and being given back as pacific and non-retributive, and sacrificial reconciliation is exposed as a lie and substituted by Jesus' forgiving presence as the new basis for reconciliation. Further questions to explore in light of the atonement model proposed, herein, are as follows: How can human communities exist without the crutch of the scapegoat mechanism? How does the anti-violent characteristic of God revealed in Christ challenge our own notions of justice? How will Christians live in response to the self-giving example of Jesus that disrupts our notions of security, safety, and self-preservation?

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