

Against Scapegoating: Revisiting Rene Girard and Walter Wink's Understanding
of Christianity and Scapegoating

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In an article titled “Time to Decide,” the social psychologist Dan Bar-On writes:

The Jewish Israeli society has to decide now what are her goals as a society. A decision not to decide will actually be a bad decision. A lack of decision will lead, sooner or later, to political, economic, and social disintegration, even if we are able to survive, militarily, for quite a while. Today we are using our violent struggle with the Palestinians (and theirs with us) in order to avoid the decisions. It is my estimate that the main threat to Israeli society does not come from the outside: Even a hundred explosions planted by Hamas suicide fanatics will not destroy Israel. The threat comes from within and it has to do with its indecisiveness as a society. (Bar-On)

Israel and the United States face the same issue; both are using violence with enemies from the outside to evade critical decisions regarding what their goals are as a society.

Bar-on says that a hundred explosions planted by Hamas suicide bombers will not destroy Israel. In the same vein, terrorist actions, even theorist attacks as horrific as September 11th, will not destroy the United States. The real threat to the United States comes from within her society.

Bar-On notes that a decision not to decide is itself a bad decision. What decision imperils the United States? What decision risks the United States as a viable, integrated, and healthy society? I characterize this decision in a specific way: The decision is whether to accept or reject the practice of scapegoating. Will the United States use the scapegoating ritual at a collective level to establish social order, create harmony, and institutionalize tranquility?

The literary theorizing of Rene Girard and the Christian theology of Walter Wink answer the question this way: society has no choice on the matter. Scapegoating, they say, is not only inevitable in the history of a community but also necessary.

Scapegoating, they argue, is necessary for maintaining social order and meeting the functional needs of society. Violence, they say, is inevitable. For Girard and Wink,

scapegoating is ritualized violence that, when done unanimously, stops violence.

Scapegoating is done out of deep fear and social angst; it attempts to stop a spiral of violence whose dynamics mime the state of nature called the Hobbesian jungle.

According to Girard and Wink, if scapegoating is done unanimously, it suppresses the possibility of reciprocity. Retribution becomes impossible. In Engaging the Power, Wink writes, “Religion is therefore, according to Girard, organized violence in the service of social tranquility” (146).

In contrast to Girard and Wink, I argue that, whenever scapegoating occurs within a community, categorical imperatives become opaque, moral actions are paralyzed, Christian theology is perverted, and human rights become invisible. It is important to analyze the politics of scapegoating, both its theory and its practice, and to critique a community’s propensity to scapegoat from the perspective of Christianity and human rights. When societies use the scapegoating ritual to sustain order, human rights become non-existent.

What is the scapegoat? Concretely, there is not a difference between being a victim of violence and being a scapegoat. The victim and the scapegoat suffer. Analytically, there is a difference. Unlike a victim, whose suffering may be accidental or intentional, the scapegoat takes on symbolic significance. There is a symbolic ritual that constructs a collective understanding of the scapegoat. The result is prejudice and then violence under the cloak of blind righteousness. The person who is scapegoated loses his or her voice and comes to represent something arbitrarily connected to his or her self. The person is trapped in a ritual that has Biblical nuances but inhuman consequences.

It is helpful to consider the recent history of former Yugoslavia, in which nationalist groups ruthlessly employed the scapegoat paradigm to alienate neighbors and abuse citizens. The advantage of looking at the former Yugoslavia is not that scapegoating is absent elsewhere in the world but that scapegoating occurs in a clear and sophisticated manner in the Balkans. Scapegoating occurs not only in the Balkans but throughout the world where there are harsh, intractable social conflicts.

In former Yugoslavia, nationalists forced “others” into a scapegoat role as a prelude to violence that involved genocide. Nationalists forced “others” into a scapegoat role as a prelude to violence that is best characterized as sociocide, the murdering of society. After this murdering of society through the ruthless and sadistic destruction of villages, towns, cities, schools, zoos, libraries, postoffices, families, churches, mosques, trust and confidence became next to impossible. Relations between person were reduced to an individual’s need to survive.

Before the start of what is euphemistically and erroneously called “ethnic cleansing,” people were characterized and then entrapped in a scapegoat paradigm. Intellectuals, whose theorizing is not so different from Girard or Wink, employed the scapegoat paradigm to turn neighbors murderously against each other and justify their political ambitions. Politicians then just followed the script provided.

In Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation, Laura Silber and Allan Little give this example of political scapegoating: “Belgrade Television was firmly in Milosevic’s grip. It was the ideal tool for stirring up hatred against ‘the enemies of the Serbian people’ —first Kosovo’s Albanians, then the Slovenes, the Croats, and finally, the opposition in Serbia itself” (120). How then did Slobodan Milosevic come to power? Silber and Little note

this incident at the beginning of his ascendancy: “The crowd roared, screaming for the arrest of the Albanian Party leader [Azem Vllasi]. Milosevic answered: ‘I can’t hear you, but we will arrest those responsible including those who have used the workers. In the name of the socialist people of Serbia I promise this’” (68). Silber and Little then note that Dusan Mitevic, chief of Belgrade TV and confidant of Milosevic, said that this was Milosevic at his best (68).

What is it about Milosevic’s utterance that is so admirable for Mitevic? Milosevic says he will arrest those who deceive the people, who are plotting against Yugoslavia, and who have used the workers. It is Milosevic, however, who, at this moment, is deceiving the people, plotting against Yugoslavia, and using the workers. The way in which Milosevic describes Vllasi is less a description of Vllasi and more a description of Milosevic. Milosevic makes Vllasi his scapegoat. By transferring to Vllasi the crimes against the state of which he himself is guilty, Milosevic becomes something other than himself. Milosevic co-opts Vllasi’s innocence; he assumes Vllasi’s integrity. At the same time, Milosevic’s guilt in undermining the state of Yugoslavia is passed over to Vllasi, who was subsequently put on a show trial and imprisoned.

During such events, the Serbian people identified with Milosevic; that is, they identified with what Milosevic was doing, namely, scapegoating. The Serbian people were susceptible to this type of propaganda. Milosevic’s unchecked use of the scapegoating ritual made his power unassailable, not only to people inside Serbia but also to people outside Serbia, including international politicians. While the subjects of the ritual changed and others also learned to master the technique, the ritual remained the same. First, Kosovar Albanians, then Croats, then Bosniaks, then Roma, and then the

political opposition in Serbia were cast in the same light. Then, nationalist leaders in other communities copied these dynamics. Communities who were scapegoated retaliated by scapegoating those who had been scapegoating them.

To this day Milosevic employs the technique standing trial for genocide at the War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague. Milosevic's line of defense is that he is simply a scapegoat for the Western powers. Milosevic claims to be the sacrificial goat for when NATO bombed Serbia and Kosovo. This line of defense is even promoted by leftists such as Michael Parenti and Harold Pinter, who actively support Milosevic, charged for war crimes and crimes against humanity with overwhelming evidence. During the war in Bosnia that started in 1992, a quarter of a million people were killed, a quarter of a million were maimed or injured, a quarter of a million were held in concentration camps, and two and half million were violently driven from their homes. Milosevic was directly responsible for this tragedy. Scapegoating blinds people morally, including intellectuals. Parenti and Pinter are a case in point; they, too, think in Manichaeian terms. The weapon that Milosevic used to destroy communities in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, he uses now in a perverse way to defend himself.

Consider the following conversation on Milosevic between Aleksa Djilas and Thomas Butler.

When our conversation turned to Milosevic, Aleksa Djilas declaimed: 'My position is unique in Belgrade: he's guilty, but don't extradite him!' He chuckled as he told me that Latinka Perovic was "mad" at him for his stand. I asked what was wrong with handing such djabre ("trash") as Milosevic over to the Hague. Here, the British educated Djilas shed his urbanity, spitting out his words in a manner that reminded me of his late father: "But that would make him into a scapegoat!" (Butler)

If Milosevic is guilty of genocide, why oppose the need to arrest him? On what basis does one resist this moral imperative? Djilas indicates that Western leaders underestimate the power of scapegoating. Djilas dreads the consequences of scapegoating because he witnessed how it was used in Serbia so effectively.

Djilas could say that recent events at the Hague have proved him right. Allowing Milosevic to defend himself before the Tribunal without the appropriate and required legal representation (Milosevic is himself a lawyer) creates a kind of simulated example of support for Milosevic's argument. It allows Milosevic to construct his case on the spot. Before the Tribunal's judges and prosecutors, Milosevic acts out his scapegoat role. Before the Serbian people, Milosevic becomes not only a scapegoat, but also a martyr, and the judicial process backfires. Milosevic's individual responsibility for the injustices that he inflicted on so many people remains concealed.

What is scapegoating as a symbolic ritual? To answer this question, Kenneth Burke introduces the notion of vicarious atonement.

As such, [the scapegoat] is profoundly consubstantial with those who, looking upon it as a chosen vessel, would ritualistically cleanse themselves by loading the burden of their own iniquities upon it. Thus the scapegoat represents the principle of division in that its persecutors would alienate from themselves to it their own uncleannesses. For one must remember that a scapegoat cannot be "curative" except insofar as it represents the iniquities of those who would be cured by attacking it. In representing *their* iniquities, it performs the role of vicarious atonement (that is, unification, or merger, granted to those who have alienated their iniquities upon it, and so may be purified through its suffering). (406)

What sort of vicarious atonement does Milosevic seek for himself at the Hague? What sort of vicarious atonement does the Serbian nation seek through Milosevic's trial?

Arresting Milosevic in Belgrade and transferring him to the Hague divides Milosevic from the Serbian people. Milosevic represents the guilt of the Serbian people; in the name

of a Greater Serbia he initiated, planned, incited, and carried out genocide. The division that the arrest creates seems to initiate a curative process. In offering up Milosevic as a scapegoat, the Serbian nation seem to be giving some sort of reparation. The Serbian people seem to be cleansing themselves of their iniquities against their neighbors. The reparation, however, is unreal; it is vicarious, and this is Djilas' point. All atonement that is done through the scapegoat ritual is vicarious. And we need to understand why.

In the social sciences scapegoating is a mechanism for expressing prejudice; in literary criticism it is, more deeply, a symbolic mechanism for purging a community of its guilt. For the purging to be successful there must be identification as well as dis-identification. The scapegoat is not a stranger. The scapegoat comes from within the community. The scapegoat is a member of the community upon whom the sins of the community are projected. Ideally, the identification results in transference.

The scapegoat's relation to the sins of the community, however, is tangential. Vllasi has nothing to do with the crimes of which he was accused. Milosevic is a metonym for the complicity of the Serbian people in genocide. After identification has been made with the scapegoat, the scapegoat is reified. The community then must expel its fetish. Scapegoating is iconoclastic. If the scapegoat has not been successfully identified with the transgressions of the community, there is no reason to cast out the scapegoat. If the scapegoat has been successfully identified with the transgressions of the community, there is every reason to cast out the scapegoat. The scapegoat has become a mirror in which the community sees itself. The mirror reflects the community's guilt. The community cannot tolerate the scapegoat in its midst; the identification that the community constructed itself is too painful because the identification is innate.

The argument is hardly esoteric. Contemporary cinema commonly dramatizes the dynamic. For example, in the film, *Radio*, a small town overcomes its temptation to scapegoat an older African-American man. Through the actions of a schoolteacher and football coach, the community develops sympathy and love for the individual. Sometimes contemporary cinema sometimes sensationalizes a community's compulsion to scapegoat. One such movie is *Dogville* with Nicole Kidman. The film depicts the progressive manner in which a community scapegoats a stranger who sought refuge. In the end, the person who is scapegoated turns the table and has everyone in the town killed. The scapegoat scapegoats the community. *Dogville* is a nihilistic movie in part because of its uncritical attitude toward the scapegoat ritual that structures the film's narrative. Mel Gibson's *Passion* perverts Christian theology because it inflates to an extreme the scapegoat paradigm as the structure of the crucifixion story and thus undermines Christian theology. The actual significance of Christ's crucifixion is lost because the form of a scapegoat ritual is exaggerated to such a degree. The problem is also a feature of the political conduct of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

With the concept of vicarious atonement, Burke suggests a critical understanding of scapegoating that is missing in Girard and Wink's theorizing. For Girard and Wink the atonement that results from scapegoating is not only real, but also necessary. The atonement is necessary to establish peaceful co-existence. Wink writes, "having celebrated the reconciliation that the scapegoat has made possible, the community was restored to peace" (144). The positive result justifies the negative means; Girard and Wink rationalize that only the negative means could have achieved this positive result.

Girard understands well the problem of social order that centers modern sociological thought. In Violence and the Sacred he articulates the state of nature that Thomas Hobbes calls the Hobbessian jungle vividly.

The fear generated by the kill-or-be-killed syndrome, the tendency to “anticipate” violence by lashing out first (akin to our contemporary concept of “preventive war”) cannot be explained in purely psychological terms. . . . In a universe both deprived of any transcendental code of justice and exposed to violence, everyone has reason to fear the worst. The difference between a projection of one’s own paranoia and an objective evaluation of circumstances has been worn away. (54)

Girard engages in sociological theorizing as much as he does literary theorizing. He then proceeds to offer a solution to the problem of social order, one that contrasts sharply with Hobbes. To critique Girard’s solution, it is necessary first to review Hobbes’.

What is the social contract? For Hobbes the social contract represents the birth of society. Society is created when a collection of people recognizes that life becomes more peaceful when they agree to suspend their use of force and fraud against each other and when this agreement is viewed as binding. Without a social contract, life is short, nasty, and brutish. Violence dominates. With a social contract, violence is collectively viewed as unnecessary--necessarily unnecessary. This recognition lifts people out of the Hobbessian jungle, where interactions remain a matter of every man and woman for himself or herself and where every man and woman engages in limitless albeit self-destructive use of force and fraud. For Hobbes society is simply a cognitive construction. Society is born when people collectively recognize the rationality of the social contract. As rational beings, people recognize that the social contract is more efficient than individuals’ unchecked use of force and fraud for attaining a satisfactory life.

What convinces people to accept the social contract? The hellish experience of a war of all against all and our primal memory of this experience compel us to accept the

rationality of the social contract. Social history there is a record of forgetting and remembering this lesson, the ebb and flow of irrational and rational conduct. Society is the birth of the distinction between being obliged, for example, obeying in deference to of another's use of force and fraud, and being obligated, for example, obeying out of respect for authority. Authority here is based on the notion that a group of people (a society) accepts a rule as binding.

For Hobbes, the explanation for the origins of society is strictly empirical. The foundations of society are based on human experience, human experience that leads to knowledge. The explanation is not metaphysical, not moral, and not religious. Society is an a posteriori construction. This empirical cosmology is something that Girard, in fact, shares with Hobbes. It indicates why Hobbes is the philosophical precursor to modern sociology. The foundation of authority is empirical, not metaphysical. It is neither religious nor transcendent.

Let us now consider Girard's solution to the problem of social order and how it undermines Hobbes' solution. Girard draws heavily upon the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, especially in On the Genealogy of Morals.

How does it happen that the community's sense of unity, destroyed by the sacrificial crisis, is suddenly, almost miraculously, restored? Here we are in the very midst of the crisis, when all the circumstances seem to militate against any unified course of action. It is impossible to find two men who agree on anything, and each member of the community seems intent on transferring the collective burden of responsibility to the shoulders of his enemy brother. Chaos reigns. No connecting thread, however tenuous, links the conflicts, antagonisms, and obsessions that beset each individual. (78)

Here again Girard articulates the problem of social order vividly. The situation is every man and every woman for himself or herself. Only force and fraud rule. There are no virtues. Life is short, nasty, and brutish. Girard then writes the following.

Yet at this very moment, when all seems lost, when the irrational runs amok amid an infinite diversity of opinions, the resolution of the dilemma is at hand. The whole community now hurls itself into the violence unanimity that is destined to liberate it. (78)

Notice that, in place of the Hobbesian contract Girard inserts the idea of unanimity, violence unanimity, the guiding principle of the scapegoating and its legitimacy. This idea is central to Girard's theorizing and needs to be addressed carefully. Girard next writes.

What is the source of this mysterious unanimity? The antagonists caught up in the sacrificial crisis invariably believe themselves separated by insurmountable differences. In reality, however, these differences gradually wear away. Everywhere we now encounter the same desire, the same antagonism, the same strategy—the same illusion of rigid differentiation within a pattern of ever-expanding uniformity. As the crisis grows more acute, the community members are transformed into “twins,” matching images of violence. I would be tempted to say that they are each doubles of the other. (78-79)

In the state of nature there is equality. The equality is based on natural right. We are perfectly equal in our capacity to survive or to fail to survive in relation to another. We are alike. We are each other's double. What then is the resolution to this state of affairs? Girard answers this way.

If violence is the great leveler of men and everybody becomes the double, or “twin” of his antagonist, it seems to follow that all the doubles are identical and that any one can at any given moment become the double of all the others; that is, the sole object of universal obsession and hatred. A single victim can be substituted for all the potential victims, for all the enemy brothers that each member is striving to banish from the community; he can be substituted, in fact, for each and every member of the community. Each member's hostility, caused by clashing against others, becomes converted from an individual feeling to a communal force unanimously directed against a single individual. The slightest hit, the most groundless accusation, can circulate with vertiginous speed and is transformed into irrefutable proof. The corporate sense of conviction snowballs, each member taking confidence from his neighbor by a rapid process of mimesis. The firm conviction of the group is based on no other evidence than the unshakable unanimity of its own illogic. (79)

The illogical carries the day because the illogical is unanimous. Unanimity trumps the rational. For Girard, rationality has nothing to do with the birth of society. The origins of society are inherently fascist.

Girard then critiques the tradition of modern sociological thought for not understanding what he, in fact, understands.

Because human thought has never succeeded in grasping the mechanism of violent unanimity, it naturally turns toward the victim and seeks to determine whether he is not somewhat responsible for the miraculous consequences of his own death or exile. ... Because the violence directed against the victim was intended to restore order and tranquility, it seems only logical to attribute the happy result to the victim himself. (85)

The scapegoat is selected by chance. In reality, it could be any individual in the community. All are alike. Everyone is a candidate. In the state of nature, chance rules: no other logic guides conduct. The scapegoat's positivity is based on the pure negativity of the scapegoat's selection, that is, the sheer randomness of the selection. Girard then writes.

At present we have good reason to believe that the violence directed against the surrogate victim might well be radically generative in that, by putting an end to the vicious and destructive cycle of violence, it simultaneously initiates another and constructive cycle, that of the sacrificial rite—which protects the community from that same violence and allows culture to flourish. (93)

Girard consummates the argument this way.

Unanimity is a formal requirement; the abstention of a single participant renders the sacrifice even worse than useless—it makes it dangerous. (100)

Girard has strikingly anti-Hobbesian understanding of social order. While Girard's theorizing appears wise in terms of understanding human nature, it shuns foundational principles of social thought. Natural right is not suspended. Nor is it

critiqued. Natural right is sustained and masked with a vulgar notion of social right. The notion that might is right is preserved through the notion of society's evolution. When unanimous, society becomes mightful and therefore rightful. The point is crude, as is often exposed in the Platonic dialogues. Social right becomes social right because it is the most forceful expression of natural right; social right is unanimous. For Girard the moral foundation of society is its lawlessness.

Girard repeatedly says that violence is inevitable. Hobbes says clearly that, thanks to the social contract, it is not. It is true that in the state of nature violence is inevitable. It is important, however, to understand why it is not inevitable in society. Girard and Hobbes both address the role of envy in recounting the origins of society. Envy, they say, is a natural feature of humanity. Human beings are naturally social; one way that sociability is expressed is through envy. For Girard, envy is superior to rationality. For Hobbes, rationality is superior. For Hobbes rationality and envy, in fact, come together to establish the social contract. The social contract is created not simply because of our rationality (the utilitarian understanding) but also because of our capacity to put ourselves in the place of another. We reason that, if we can use violence against another, another can use violence against us. Envy, which puts oneself in the place of another, is turned into a positive force. Since we do not want violence to be brought to bear against ourselves, we do bring violence to be brought to bear against others. Envy is transformed into empathy.

Girard also argues that violence is imitable. Violence, though, cannot be imitated. To imitate, we put ourselves in the place of another. Our conscience links us to another. We imagine and anticipate what another thinks and feels. We are related to another

socially. When there is identification with another, violence cannot occur. We cannot put ourselves in the place of another and inflict violence.

Violence, of course, can be copied and in the state of nature violence is copied. Copying occurs without conscience or identification with another. Copying violence is what psychologists call aggression. Copying is a natural behavior, not a social one. To say that violence can be imitated is perverse and illogical; it places natural right, whether the natural right of a collective or the natural right of an individual, over social right. Social right is grounded in the trust that people imitate, that is, identify with, the rationality of the social contract. The logic informs, for example, the commitment of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others to nonviolence as the only love force that bring about positive social change. The Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” for example, is a normative principle that makes violence inimitable. Likewise, the Great Commandant, “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” makes violence inimitable.

The writing of Emile Durkheim suggests that the notion of social right is grounded in something more than empirical experience. Durkheim surpasses Hobbes. Durkheim demonstrates how the problem of social order cannot be resolved without reference to human rights. While sociologists borrow from the transcendental language of human rights, they do so without acknowledging their indebtedness to the significance of this language. According to Durkheim, the social contract serves the interests of the individual and society equally: “Not only is individualism distinct from anarchy; but is henceforth the only system of beliefs which can ensure the moral unity of the country” (50). How is it that individualism and the moral unity of the country are affirmed

simultaneously? Is this a paradoxical situation or a dialectical one? Durkheim says that it is a dialectical one.

In “Individualism and the Intellectuals,” Durkheim writes, “And since each of us incarnates something of humanity, each individual consciousness contains something divine and thus finds itself marked with a character which renders it sacred and inviolable to others” (52). Since each individual is sacred and thus inviolable, scapegoating is taboo. Since each individual is inviolable, no individual and no community can accept the scapegoating of any individual. When one accepts this non-empirical principle, one recognizes that there is moral unity only when the state itself defends this conviction. Scapegoating can never become unanimous because no individual would consent to it. Girard’s theorizing is based on a fiction. What is unanimous in reality is the taboo against scapegoating. Durkheim argues that a state may never accept scapegoating as a way to establish order; “There is no reason of State,” he argues, “which can excuse an outrage against the person when the rights of the person are placed above the State” (46). When society “tolerates acts of sacrilege it abdicates any sway over men’s minds” (53).

For this reason, when scapegoating occurs within a community, categorical imperatives become opaque, moral action are paralyzed, Christian theology is perverted, and human rights become invisible. Any atonement that is done through a scapegoat ritual is vicarious. Here is the message of the Christ’s crucifixion. Christ’s crucifixion occurs in the form of a scapegoat ritual, “Oh, Lamb of God,” but its content destroys for all time the viability of the scapegoat ritual. With Christ’s crucifixion, there is to be no more scapegoating. There is the message of the Cross.

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