

The Root of Violence: Imitative Desire, Death Anxiety, and the Gospel's Solution to Both

Humanity is enveloped in violence. Since the dawn of civilization, violence has been front and center. In fact, as the late French anthropologist René Girard noticed, human culture and religion are in fact *founded* on violence. Various cultures tell their founding murder myths differently, but similar mythologies are present nonetheless. For instance, according to legend, the city of Rome was established after the blood of Remus was spilled by his brother, Romulus. The Greek city of Thebes was founded after a race of “fierce armed men” fell upon one another until only five remained. The very first city, according to the Hebrew Scriptures, was that of Enoch, and was inaugurated immediately after the slaying of Abel at the hands of Cain.¹ So, while humanity recognizes that our civilizations were founded on blood, we have no doubt, given the current violence pervading much of the world, failed to familiarize ourselves on a broad scale as to why this is. But that does not mean there lacks a solution, regardless of how dire the situation seems much of the time.

Two Primary Causes

Two anthropologists have discovered different, yet complementary theories as to what the root causes of violence are. First, René Girard posits that mimetic desire is at the origin of the problem. He argues that because our own desires are based on the desires of each other, we will inevitably become rivals for our shared *finite* objects of desire. *There are two of us and only one of it.* And so, our model becomes an obstacle in obtaining our shared desires. While this process is what allows human beings to possess freedom (or our desires would be fixed and thus a form of instinct)², it is also what leads to mimetic rivalry, jealousy, and envy, and ultimately, the seemingly perpetual state of violence humanity is engaged in. Thus, it is not our differences that lead to conflict, but rather, our similarities.

To quell this violence, Girard noticed, communities then turn to a third party to blame for all of the societal problems. This phenomenon is called the scapegoating mechanism. Instead of communal violence that is all against all, which has the potential to spiral out of control and destroy the entire community, the people displace their violence onto one member or subgroup. This unifies the community and in turn leads to peace, albeit temporarily so, as the process

¹ Although not the specific intention of this piece, I will not fail to mention the uniqueness of the Cain and Abel story. What is strikingly dissimilar to the other founding murder myths is that the Bible does not justify the slaying, but rather, deems the victimizer *guilty* and the victim *innocent* (See Genesis 4:8–16). This theme then pervades the Scriptures and will be paramount in the Passion narratives as testified to in the Gospels.

² Girard, René. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. New York: Orbis, 2001, pg. 15.

inevitably repeats itself as the community progresses through history. Paradoxically, in the eyes of the community, the scapegoat is then viewed as the source of the conflict but then as the bringer of peace. The transformation from violence that threatens the survival of the community to peace that envelops it is the reason why this sort of mediated violence against the one is often seen as sacred.

Jewish-American cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker takes a different approach to that of Girard and argues that it is humanity's awareness of our own *mortality* that is the primary cause of conflict. This acknowledgement of our own future demise, which, second by second, draws increasingly closer in proximity, creates a death anxiety that has the potential to drive us mad. Human beings then create religions and cultures to counter this impending doom, Becker argues. In other words, "Immortality systems" (Becker's term), with doctrines that often include a blissful afterlife, or "heaven," so to speak, are created and then in order to protect these systems, each "truth" becomes absolute in the minds of the adherents of the faith. The battle for "truth" soon escalates in mimetic rivalry (Girard's term), the consequences of which are, in a word, catastrophic. Philosopher Glenn Hughes explains:

We have to protect ourselves against the exposure of our absolute truth being just one more mortality-denying system among others, which we can only do by insisting that all other absolute truths are false. So we attack and degrade—preferably kill—the adherents of different mortality-denying-absolute-truth systems. So the Protestants kill the Catholics; the Muslims vilify the Christians and vice versa; upholders of the American way of life denounce Communists; the Communist Khmer Rouge slaughters all the intellectuals in Cambodia; the Spanish Inquisition tortures heretics; and all good students of the Enlightenment demonize religion as the source of all evil. The list could go on and on.³

Now, what becomes even more problematic is this death anxiety that we possess then increases exponentially when the eschatologies we develop are dualistic. That is to say, when our "immortality systems" include a place or state of not only objective bliss, but also that of objective horror, violently defending one's system of "truth" nearly becomes paramount.

The stakes are that high . . .

Should "their" truth be in fact true and "our" truth untrue, we would find ourselves on the wrong side of salvation, to be damned to hell for all eternity.

A Look at the Gospel

³ Hughes, Glenn. "The Denial of Death and the Practice of Dying," *Ernest Becker Foundation*, 2015. http://ernestbecker.org/?page_id=989

If the core problem humanity is faced with is that of violence, and I believe it is, and if we accept both Girard's and Becker's theses as to the reasons why, then where do we look for an answer? Where do we go to find a solution to such a profound problem? Like Girard, I believe that answer is found throughout the Gospels—most specifically in the Passion narrative and consequent resurrection—and also in humanity's call to become “followers of Christ.”

So, how do we answer this call and how can it possibly lead to peace among humanity?

Follow me . . .

On numerous occasions, Jesus makes a simple two-word command: “follow me.”⁴ What Christ is doing here is making the invitation to *trust him* enough to join him in doing the will of the Father, as Jesus himself has no model other than the Father.⁵ This is a Father who is said to be *love* and *light*, having in him no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5, 4:8) And because Jesus has no model but the Father, he is able to resist the temptation to enter into rivalry with others, thus becoming *our model* for how we too become free from escalating mimetic contagion.

This is witnessed quite clearly in how Jesus deals with Peter in Matthew 16:21–23. Notice how, after Jesus foretells of his own death, Peter attempts to persuade Jesus to do contrary to what the Father was having him do. It is as if Peter is saying “no” to following Jesus but instead, desires *Jesus* to follow him. In the following quote, Girard offers great insight into how a rivalry could have been born during this event:

Instead of imitating Jesus, Peter wants Jesus to imitate him. If two friends imitate each other's desires, they both desire the same object. And if they cannot share this object, they will compete for it, each becoming simultaneously a model and an obstacle to each other. The competing desires intensify as model and obstacle reinforce each other, and an escalation of mimetic rivalry follows; admiration gives way to indignation, jealousy, envy, hatred, and, at last, violence and vengeance. Had Jesus imitated Peter's ambition, the two thereby would have begun competing for the leadership of some politicized “Jesus movement.” Sensing the danger, Jesus vehemently interrupts Peter: “Get behind me, Satan, you are a skandalon to me.”⁶

⁴ See Matthew 4:19, 9:9, 16:24; Mark 1:17, 10:21; Luke 5:27, 18:22; John 1:43, 21:19.

⁵ We find strong scriptural evidence for this primarily in John's Gospel. Jesus not only speaks what the Father speaks (John 12:49), but his very actions are the actions of the Father (5:19). In fact, Jesus claims to do nothing on his own (John 8:28).

⁶ Girard, René. “Are the Gospels Mythical?” *First Things*, April 1996. Para. 10.
<http://www.firstthings.com/article/1996/04/002-are-the-gospels-mythical>

Jesus understands the temptation of taking on a model other than the Father.⁷ He understands how enticing the satan can be and recognizes it as *skandalon*, or a stumbling block. In *this* case, it is Peter's desire to have Jesus follow *him* that is the *skandalon* personified—Satan!⁸ If Jesus would have followed Peter, the non-violent mission Christ was on would have failed and they would have entered into a rivalrous situation, one that would have potentially escalated toward overt violence, either among Jesus and Peter and the disciples, or with those in Jerusalem where Jesus would soon be going, or both.

Keep following . . .

On Palm Sunday, Jesus followed through on what he prophesied in Matthew 16:21, when he entered occupied Jerusalem mounted on a donkey.⁹ In doing this, he placed himself directly in the crosshairs of the Roman Empire. Some were already referring to Jesus as “messiah,” which had violent underpinnings due to some of those within the Jewish messianic movement who came before Jesus. Moreover, because of some of Jesus' more radical teachings, he was not always very popular among his Jewish interlocutors.¹⁰ He was a prime candidate to play the role of the *scapegoat*. Evidence of this is most notable when the high priest, Caiaphas, earlier stated: “You do not understand that it is better for you to have *one man* die for the people than to have the *whole nation* destroyed.” (John 11:50—my emphasis) As I mentioned earlier, this is precisely the way in which violence becomes transferred onto the scapegoat—from communal violence that threatens the entire community to sacred violence that (temporarily) spares the community.¹¹

So there he is, the son of God, completely innocent, yet offering himself to the violent systems that structure our world.¹² And he knew he would nearly go it alone.¹³ Jesus even predicts Peter's denial in Matthew 26:31–35. Notice, in Matthew's Gospel in particular, Peter's third and final denial is said to be in front of a group of “bystanders.” (Matthew 26:73) This shows how the power of the mob, with its collective anger directed toward Jesus and anyone associated with the Lord, overwhelms Peter. This is a mob who, at the peak of the mimetic contagion in Luke 23:21, will collectively yell, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” When we face a mob like that, as Peter is evidence of, we either join in or concede and cower.

Jesus, our model, however, goes on. He peacefully continues in spite of the torment, never once resisting his persecutors. In fact, in speaking only what the Father tells him to (John 12:49), Jesus forgives (Luke 23:34). He is flogged, whipped, beaten, and bruised; in short, painfully and

⁷ See the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness by Satan in Matthew 4:1–11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 12.

⁹ See John 12:14. This act fulfills the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9–10.

¹⁰ See Luke 20:20 and John 10:30–39.

¹¹ I say temporarily because as we witness in 70 CE, Rome levels Jerusalem entirely, slaying countless numbers of those who remained in Jerusalem as well as the Temple, the center of religious life.

¹² In Ephesians 6:12, Paul refers to them as “powers and principalities.”

¹³ I will note that, depending on which Gospel you turn to, multiple women *are* said to follow Jesus to Calvary.

publically humiliated. Naked, broken, and bloody, he is then nailed to a Roman cross. And it is there where Jesus utters the phrase, “It is finished,” meaning the True Human, or the last Adam, to put it in Pauline language, is created when Jesus breathes his final breath, when he bows his head and gives up his spirit (John 19:30). Now, for the first time, humanity had a model that trusted the Father so much so that he did his will to the point of the most brutal of deaths.

Jesus asks us to *follow*.

Why?

In short, we follow Christ because we are enslaved to our own systems and Jesus knew that following the path of non-violence and non-retribution was the only way humanity could break free from these world structuring systems. Jesus recognizes this, when, in Luke 11:51, he ties his sacrificial death to those of Abel and Zechariah, giving evidence to how violence, as 6th century BC Greek philosopher Heraclitus argued, is indeed humanity’s structuring principle of reality.¹⁴ To expose this mechanism, Jesus confronts the “perfect storm”—that of zealous religious nationalism and political empiricism—head on, in the most profane of spaces, as opposed to the sacred space, where sacrifices were generally performed. He does this so that humanity can see this structuring sin for what it is and what it is capable of doing—killing the innocent son of God. And as such, we can then address the problem.

Now, what I am not saying is that imitation of Christ *needs* to mean that one *must* stand alone against modern systems of power. It may mean that but since Jesus already went through it essentially alone, we should have learned something and should not have to continue repeating the same corporate mistakes. What I am saying is that we can imitate Christ by refusing to scapegoat others and by refusing to take on each other as models. If as a species, we can apply this understanding of the mimetic roots of violence and the Gospel’s answer to it, then, collectively, we can stand more in unity with one another so we don’t have to continue sending scapegoats to the proverbial cross. I believe this is a part of what Jesus meant when, in John 14:12, he said, “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.” Together, as a “body of Christ,” so to speak, the strong argument could be made that there is *potential* to do greater than one man, even if that man is Jesus of Nazareth. For instance, if all 2.2 billion Christians began following Jesus in social ethics, mimetic theory states that others will follow this positive mimesis. A peace movement started by billions of Jesus followers, which is what Christians claim to be, could sprout the seeds of peace, which in turn could overwhelm the powers that structure our modern world. Of course, the *key word being* “*could*.”

¹⁴ Heraclitus, Fragments DK22B80 & DK22B53.

The Resurrection

There is one more key ingredient to solving the problem of violence, that of Becker's "death anxiety." To quickly recap, Becker posits that violence, broadly speaking, results from humanity's response to the anxiety caused by the knowledge of our impending death. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ, when understood in light of this, appears to be God's response to death and the fear and subsequent violence that result from it. As James Alison notices, it shows that God has nothing to do with death but rather, that he is the bringer of life.¹⁵ Scriptural evidence of this is found in the book of Acts, namely in Acts 2:24, 3:15, and 4:10, when God is said to bring Jesus to life in spite of his death at the hands of "godless men." (Acts 2:23) And if Christ conquered sin and death (Revelation 1:18) for all whom he meant to, which, according to how I understand Paul, includes everyone, then God will bring everyone to life, so there need not be fear in death.¹⁶ I would argue that if God only resurrects and gives life to *some*, as many Christians believe, the anxiety over death would not be conquered. For example, should I believe that my own death would cause eternal separation from my daughter—should I be "saved" and she not be—my own death would cause great anxiety and unceasing grief. Paul makes precisely this point in his letter to the Romans when he writes: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh." (Romans 9:2–3) This interconnectedness with each other was termed by Girard as "interdividualism" and is further witnessed when Jesus refers to his very self as part of the "least of these." (Matthew 25:40) So, for Paul then, in his letter to the Corinthians, to mockingly ask: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" I believe it can only be because he took comfort in the fact that God would "be merciful to all," as he explicitly states in Romans 11:32. Short of that, I don't see how a man like St. Paul could both experience unceasing grief over the loss of his brethren and then turn around and mock death itself.

Furthermore, and only strengthening this view, the Resurrection then, is the unveiling of the forgiving victim. This is to say, the divine answer to "not only *our* sins but also for the sins of the *whole world*"¹⁷ is mercy, not retribution and yet more violence. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, Jesus—which, might I reiterate, only speaks what the Father tells him to— "speaks a better word than the blood of Abel,"¹⁸ which Genesis 4:10 implies is a word of *vengeance*. But, Christ's self-emptying; self-giving, truly *unconditional* love for humanity leads to an understanding of the divine where there is only forgiveness in the end. As I noted earlier, not only did Jesus forgive

¹⁵ Johnston, Britton. "Resurrection as Atonement: Rediscovering the Non-Violence of Christian Orthodoxy Using Girard's Principle of Metaphysical Desire as a Heuristic Key." *Colloquium on Violence & Religion*, 2008. Pg. 3.

¹⁶ This claim will no doubt be disputed by many. For my justification in making such a claim, please see my essay entitled "Paul's Inclusive Theology: a Consistent View Throughout the Pauline Corpus," found at <http://www.preachingpeace.org/teaching-resources/articles/25-articles-ebooks/articles-by-friends-of-preaching-peace/335-paul%E2%80%99s-inclusive-theology-a-consistent-view-throughout-the-pauline-corporus.html>.

¹⁷ 1 John 2:2.

¹⁸ Hebrews 12:24.

during his own murder, but he also brings peace as the Risen Christ (John 20:19–23). This is what Alison calls “the intelligence of the victim.” He writes:

It is in the light of the intelligence of the victim that we can begin to understand the relationship between the two—the love for us that involved sending Jesus, the love for Jesus that involved sending, and raising him up, the love which Jesus had for his Father which involved giving himself for us knowingly to victimization. It is this knowledge of the intelligence of the victim which sets us free: the truth which sets us free is the truth of the victim. The Counselor (Paraclete), the Spirit of truth, who is the advocate for the defense against the lynching of the world, this is the intelligence of the victim, bearing witness to the truth which flows from the victim (. . .) the Holy Spirit is the intelligence of the victim.¹⁹

The Way of peace was forged by Jesus but it was also given to us by him in the same way the Father gave it to Jesus (John 20:21). This model of forgiveness becomes our new reality, our new “structuring principle of reality,” a reality where we have *faith* that no matter what suffering befalls us, no matter what manners of evil we face, the death we face is inconsequential²⁰ as we will once again be made alive. In fact, so too will everyone (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Concluding Thoughts

Although suggesting that the Bible addresses “scientific truths” sounds absurd on the surface, I believe I have shown that, if we focus on the human sciences and more narrowly on humanity’s propensity to engage in violence, it does just that. If our cultures and religions are founded on sacred violence and the scapegoating mechanism, then the Passion narrative exposes this for what it is and profoundly models the way out of such an enslaving system. If death anxiety causes humanity to build “immortality systems” that pit us against the other, where we defend our absolute truths at all costs, then the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and thus a future resurrection for all of humanity is the Father’s merciful and wholly gracious answer for how we tear down such violent and destructive systems. It is our rivalry over our immortality systems that kill each other, including the very son of God, but it is the son of God who reveals God’s immortality system, rooted in eschatological *shalom* for all of humanity. The model has been set but the question remains: will humanity heed the call? Will she become imitators of the way out of the cycle of retributive violence before it is too late? Time will tell . . .

Peace. Shalom. Salaam.

¹⁹ Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, Springfield: Templegate, 1994. Pg. 112–13.

²⁰ In fact, Paul talks about dying/being crucified with Christ in Romans 6:28 and Galatians 2:20.