

Devotional: M2/W2 Staff-Board Retreat, June 12, 1999

I did numerous reflections on such themes in my career as Executive Director of M2/W2 (Man-To-Man/Woman-To-Woman: Restorative Christian Ministries).

Three events have been in my consciousness the last while:

- 1 Yugoslavia - Kosovars and NATO bombings;
- 2. Atlanta - Colloquium on Violence and Religion;
- 3. Victoria - Steve Reid and a bank hold-up and shoot-out

There is one common thread in them all: violence towards the other/neighbour/enemy.

We read:

James 4:1-12

What causes fights and quarrels among you [violence]? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you-- who are you to judge your neighbor?

1. Kosovars and NATO bombings

The history of conflict between Christians and Muslims in the region goes back centuries, ultimately, to the Crusades beginning in the 12th century. There were great moments of mutual slaughter and hatred throughout the whole history. Christians are just as guilty as Muslims – more so, for the Crusades were initiated in the name of Christ! Yugoslavia, since the 1980's, was the only region in Europe that had not bowed to Western economic interests, especially the "new world order" of globalization and free trade.

Further, Yugoslavia is key strategic location for NATO to have a military presence; there also are key economic resources available. See:

Chapter 4a, Article I of The [Rambouillet Agreement](#)

'The economy of Kosovo, shall function in accordance with free market principles.' Kosovo has vast mineral resources, including the richest mines for lead, molybdenum, mercury and other metals in all of Europe. The capital to exploit these resources, which are today mainly state-owned, would undoubtedly come from the U.S. and western European [businesses].

The Rambouillet Agreement was, in truth, a declaration of war disguised as a peace agreement! We all know the atrocities committed by Serbs, but we in the West are again implicated in the

economic violence that led to the bombing, and in the hundreds of billions of dollars of destruction we have caused, including hundreds of deaths of civilians, and the aftermath of cluster bombs and depleted uranium contamination which civilians will live with for generations.

1. Colloquium on Violence & Religion (COV&R)

Last weekend, in Atlanta, I was invited to co-present with CSC Chaplain Hugh Kirkegaard on “The Sex Offender as Scapegoat: Vigilante Violence and a Faith Community Response”.¹ We shared in that context about our “Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA)” program. The conference explores each year a basic understanding of human behaviour which includes the phenomenon of “mimetic” or “imitative desire”, whereby we are socialized, but also whereby we develop intense longings – “covetousness” – for what others have, and violence repeatedly erupts! As the text above says:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

According to anthropologist René Girard, tendency is within us all, and the danger lies in our *desiring the desires of others!* When it leads to violence. An example (paraphrased) is supplied by Girard:

When two toddlers are in the nursery surrounded by toys, one child is perfectly content to let a certain abandoned toy lie untouched beside him until the other child suddenly wants it. That demonstrated desire by one child suddenly awakens desire in the other, and literally, “all hell breaks loose”. Violence erupts, violence which is always the outcome of the contagion of a desire whose origins are “Satan” (in Girardian terms the accuser).

James puts the matter succinctly:

...each one is tempted when, *by his own evil desire*, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death (James 1:14-15).

This is mimetic desire gone amok, derivative from “Satan” who is the personification of the rivalrous mimesis [imitation], the mimesis engendering accusation and violence (Williams, 1996, p. 293).

As Jesus himself says:

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). (emphasis added). The same Greek work (*epithumia*) is used in both texts for “desire”. This is not an anti-Semitic passage, despite its long tragic history of such use.)

Note how *lies* and *violence* are linked together by Jesus. Our intense “desiring” leads to prevaricating violence ultimately towards the other. This in turn calls forth a societal response to contain the violence; which invariably has meant, in all cultures for all time, argues Girard, a “scapegoating violence” exercised towards a select group, in order to re-establish “peace” – or social cohesion.

The ultimate example this century is the scapegoating, preceded by monstrous lies about the Jews during the Holocaust. Such action unified the German people under Hitler; but the peace attained invariably was

¹ Please see the chapter in *Volume One* of this Series. A copy of the paper is also on the Emory University [website](#); and on [mine](#).

only the “peace” of the graveyard (at the expense of scapegoats). And such violence must be repeated again and again (like a drug fix) to keep on overcoming the violence. But since it is through violence that the peace is reached – scapegoating violence – the net gain is endlessly repeated violence. All violence in fact is retaliation for previous violence.

The entire conference I attended at Emory University in Atlanta was devoted to explore this phenomenon of “mimetic desire” and “scapegoating” violence, and how to overcome it.²

Steve Reid

Something went off inside when I heard of his “fall from grace” – and what a fall! It was a blatant act of violence arising no doubt from (probably addictive) “desires” deep within his being. Now Reid will be scapegoated like sex offenders and so many others. This is what our work with prisoners constantly faces.

So what is the antidote to this universal human dilemma of “mimetic or imitative desire” that leads to violence?:

Rom 7:24 - 25a

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord!

And exactly what shape does this antidote take? The writer of Ephesians tells us:

Eph 5:1-2

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Instead of participation in violent sacrifice of others (scapegoating) that is everywhere in our culture and in all cultures, we are called to *not conform any longer to the pattern of this world [culture], but be transformed by the renewing of [our] mind* (Rom 12:2).” – to imitate God in Christ who gave himself freely as a scapegoat for all to bring about our salvation.

We are called in fact to imitate the *Trinitarian* relationship Jesus has with the Father. One writer influenced by the kind of thinking at the conference I attended says:

So what difference does Jesus’ death make to human society? It is at once the deconstruction [undoing] of a society [culture] founded upon violence and the revelation of the God who, in his son, calls us to a new society founded upon the rejection of this violence (Taylor, 1998, p. 139).’

Orthodox scholar Father Thomas Hopko writes:

I recall a televised discussion program in which we were asked what was most important in Christianity. Part of what I said was that the only way we can find ourselves is to deny ourselves. That’s Christ’s teaching. If you cling to yourself, you lose yourself... There is a consistent line through the Gospel -- if you want to be the first you must will to be the last. The other fellow, who taught the psychology of religion at a Protestant seminary, said, “What you are saying is the source of the neuroses of Western society. What we need is healthy self-love and healthy self-esteem.” Then he quoted that line, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” I said ... that there is no self there to be defended except the one that comes into existence by the act of love and self-emptying. It’s only by loving the other that myself actually emerges. Forgiveness is at the heart of that.

As we were leaving a venerable old rabbi with a shining face called us over. “That line, you know, comes from the Torah, from Leviticus,” he said, “and it cannot possibly be translated love your

² René Girard’s work is explored worldwide. A vast body of research, papers, journal editions, books, etc. has been and continues to be generated. A great place to start is [The Colloquium on Violence and Religion \(COV&R\): International Association of Scholars of Mimetic Theory](#).

neighbor as you love yourself. It says, You shall love your neighbor as being your own self." Your neighbor is your true self. You have no self in yourself.

After this I started reading the [Scriptures] in this light, and that's what they all say -- "Your brother is your life." I have no self in myself except the one that is fulfilled by loving the other. The Trinitarian character of God is a metaphysical absolute here, so to speak. God's own self is another -- His Son. The same thing happens on the human level. So the minute I don't feel deeply that my real self is the other, then I'll have no reason to forgive anyone. But if that is my reality, and my only real self is the other, and my own identity and fulfillment emerge only in the act of loving the other, that gives substance to the idea that we are potentially God-like beings. Now, if you add to that that we are all to some degree faulty and weak and so on, that act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That's how I find and fulfill myself as a human being made in God's image. Otherwise, I cannot. So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It's a metaphysical suicide (Kisly, 1987).

Glen Tinder in "Can We Be Good Without God?: On the Political Meaning of Christianity" (1989) says: If one could love others without judging them, asking anything of them, or thinking of one's own needs, one would meet the Christian standard.... "Agape is the core of Christian morality.... "... the major premise... of all Christian social and political thinking [and action is] the concept of the exalted individual (, Tinder, 1989 pp. 3 & 5).

So what does that say for our work in M2/W2 - and the task before us today? I highlight three things: How we treat the other (neighbour, brother, enemy) is *concretely* how we act out our faith towards God (our "spiritual act of worship" – Rom. 12:1). Our treatment of the neighbour is the *only* measure of our spirituality known to Scripture:

I John 4:20-21

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

2. We are called, not to imitative rivalry of the other, which invariably leads to destructive violence, but to active love of the other – as the only mission and evangelistic strategy Jesus specifically spelled out:

John 17:22-23

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 13:34-35

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

This is the heart of biblical evangelistic strategy: *our imitation of God in Christ leads to a "life of love" (Eph. 5:1 & 2) towards the other which lets the world know about Jesus' coming.*

The only "mimesis" or imitation that is good, and does not invariably spiral downwards towards violence against the other, is in fact our imitation of God in Christ in the loving mutuality of the Trinity – this is the most basic way we are created "in God's image" – this is why we sing:

Jesu, joy of man's desiring/holy wisdom, love most bright/drawn by thee, our souls aspiring/soar to uncreated light./Word of God, our flesh that fashioned/with the fire of life impassioned/striving still to truth unknown/soaring, dying around the throne.

- 3. The neighbour (other, enemy, prisoner!, victim, crime impacted community) is our true self, is in fact “Jesus” encountered!**

Matt 25:34-36, 40

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ ... “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ “

In sum:

- 1. How we love the neighbour/enemy is the only test of true spirituality.**
- 2. Active love of neighbour/enemy is the only antidote for violence.**
- 3. We find Christ and our true selves (ultimately God!) first and foremost in the neighbour and enemy.**

AMEN!

References

Kisly, Lorraine (1987). “Living in Communion: An interview with Father Thomas Hopko”. In *Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition*, 50–59, New York: The Society for the Study of Myth and Tradition, Inc.

Taylor, Simon J. (April 1998). “Cruciform anthropology: an introduction to the thought of René Girard”, *THE MONTH*.

Tinder, Glen (December 1989). “Can We Be Good Without God?: On the Political Meaning of Christianity”, *Atlantic Monthly*. (Also published [here](#).)

Williams, James G. (1996). *The Girard Reader*, New York: Crossroad Herder.