

Mercy, Mr. Harper, Not Sacrifice (Jesus)

By Wayne Northey

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Justice Minister Vic Toews, and Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day are all Evangelical Bible-believing Christians. C.S. Lewis' Professor Kirk (*The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*) might have asked: "Just what *Good Book* are they reading anyway?"

Is the final biblical word for God *love* or *hate*? Is there *any* scriptural word for God that means *hate*? How often did Jesus call God (loving *abba* – 'daddy') *Father*? How often did he call God (harsh sentencing) *Judge*?¹ What has been *the dominant image of God* in (Christian) Western culture since the eleventh century?² Where is the family resemblance to Jesus in their "new" crime policies?

At least Prof. Kirk would have scolded these Christian leaders for deficient logic, vile vengefulness, or both. Can one teach flying from a submarine? Can one teach appropriate citizenship from a (demeaning) punitive institution? Can one find *any reputable criminological/sociological study* that concludes crime may best be stopped through ever-harsher punishments (and society remain "civilized"/non-totalitarian)? Does one find a plethora of academic studies that establish two tenets: "(1) prison rarely rehabilitates, rarely deters, and often increases the risk of recidivism, and (2) a strongly punitive and law-and-order approach to complex criminal justice problems in general brutalizes prisoners, prison staff and society at large."³

Ottawa Citizen columnist Dan Gardner wrote recently (February 24, 2006, emphasis added): "Two flies cling to the side of a stagecoach as it rolls across the desert, trailing a thick cloud of dust in its wake. One fly looks back. 'Wow!' he says. 'Look at what we're kickin' up.' ... [P]oliticians, police chiefs and activists [similarly] delude themselves about crime policies... **Crime policies don't control crime rates.** The broad state of social development does... Nobody wants to hear this, of course, because **it means there are no quick fixes and no way to win elections by beating crime.** But reality is reality. The flies aren't kicking up the dust, no matter what they think."

In another article (April 26, 2006, emphasis added), Gardner asked: "Are Mr. Harper's tough mandatory minimums worth the cost? Will they make people safer? Vic Toews, Mr. Harper's Justice Minister, insists they will. They proved themselves in the United States, Mr. Toews told reporters a few weeks ago. It was tough mandatory minimums that drove down crime in the 1990s. But Mr. Kleck [American criminologist and deterrence expert] says **that's not true: 'The consensus of American experts who have looked at that is that the mandatory minimums didn't help and may well have hurt.'**"

The vast majority of those caught committing crime, and the general public, *have no awareness of how tough any laws are.* "[Most criminals who land in jail] tend to be

¹ I counted them three times. Are you ready for the two numbers in order of the questions?: 177 and 0.

² You guessed it: *Hangin' Judge!* See: *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Harold J. Berman, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1983.

³ Criminologist Matti Joutsen, former Director of the European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, presently with The Ministry of Justice, Finland, is summarizing the professional studies in the field. The answer is: *Yes!* Why don't we *get this* in North America? Crime has been *politicized* and "*mediatized*".

young, semi-literate and dumb. They don't subscribe to newspapers. They don't watch Question Period. They don't read criminology journals or the latest amendments to the Criminal Code. What they know about the system tends to come from equally clueless buddies 'boasting about what they did and got away with,' says Mr. Kleck." (Their ignorance in fact is matched perhaps by the above Christian leaders whose "clueless boasting buddies" are crime policy makers to the south.)

But what about *incapacitation* at least, Gardner asks? Longer sentences have to mean less crime? **"Wrong, unfortunately. In reality, incapacitation is a big, complicated issue and longer sentences deliver diminishing returns."** (Gardner promises future articles on this. You can also read Gary Kleck's and others': "The Missing Link in General Deterrence Research." *Criminology* 43(3):623-659, available on line for a fee.)

In Peter McKnight's "The sham of mandatory sentences" (*The Vancouver Sun*, Saturday, May 6, emphasis added) the Conservatives' recent pronouncements are dubbed **"profoundly destructive justice policies"**. The author says mandatory sentences will result in:

- skyrocketing rates of HIV and Hepatitis C (HCV) infection, and with them, a dramatic increase in health care spending, since rates of HIV and HCV infections are already at 10 times the national average in federal prisons, and will greatly increase with incarceration that more than doubles the risk of HIV infection of people who use illegal drugs;
- soaring costs to the taxpayer, since lifetime treatment costs are currently \$215 million/addict;
- drastic increase in prison use, building and cost;
- significant increase in use of illicit drugs;
- great increase of imprisonment of addicts and of their consequent greater danger and cost to society upon release.

McKnight concludes: "While **Stephen Harper** might be proud of himself for gaining widespread support through his tough-on-crime demagoguery, he really **ought to be ashamed, for his war on drugs is nothing less than a war on Canadian society.**" (So for that matter should all Canada's political parties be ashamed (except the *Bloc Québécois*), since they all joined this punitive, misinformed and dangerous cacophonous chorus.)

Further, the vast majority of those living in the democratic West – in particular the self-proclaimed '*law-abiding*' like... well, Mr. Harper, Mr. Day and Mr. Toews, are what Canadian criminologist Thomas Gabor calls: "*opportunistic repeat offenders.*" He writes at the outset of his peer acclaimed 1994 book, '*Everybody Does It!*': *Crime by the Public* (emphasis added): "I wanted to take issue with the hypocrisy displayed by many citizens who routinely condemn what they consider to be our leniency towards convicted criminals, **while they justify their own illegalities.**"

He adds, as though responding directly to this month's *déjà vu* discredited "new" crime procedures by the Conservative government, **"Draconian policies may appeal to our tendency to project all that we find unacceptable in ourselves onto some identifiable social group, but they do nothing to help us understand or deal with criminal victimization** (pp. xiii and xiv)." World renowned cultural anthropologist René

Girard claims this is fundamentally culturally ubiquitous *scapegoating violence*, and points to Jesus' story as the way out (*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*).

Three final questions to these Christian Conservative leaders are: What do you think Saint Paul means when he claims love (theologically, *ceaseless offer of friendship*) is "*the most excellent way*"? What is meant by Jesus' teaching... "*Love your enemies/[criminals/terrorists, etc., etc., etc.]*"? Might any one of you, one day, be the person needing "mercy not sacrifice" (Jesus)?