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## Sacred violence and family violence

topics:

- *pastoral counselling with incestuous and violent men*
- *family violence*
- *ways of “learning violence”*
- *violence of men vs. violence of women*
- *race and violence*
- *power and love in pastoral counselling*
- *responsibility vs. empathetic identification?*
- *the theory of Rene Girard*
- *towards a relational and ambiguous image of God*

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I am a Presbyterian pastor from the United States. I teach pastoral theology in a Methodist Seminary near Chicago, Illinois. By training and employment, I am part of the white professional bourgeoisie. In addition to my pastoring, teaching, and counselling, I have been working in the area of family violence. I became interested in this topic for professional reasons when I started hearing stories from my parishioners and students about their experiences of violence, and for personal reasons when I realized the presence of incest in my extended family, as close as first cousins.

Some of my pastoral clinical experience for the last twelve years has been with incestuous fathers from working class and poor backgrounds, that is, biological fathers, step-fathers, and live-in boyfriends, who engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviours from fondling to intercourse with boys and girls from ages five to sixteen. I have also worked as a therapist in groups for men who have battered women, usually their wives, girlfriends, ex-wives, and ex-girlfriends, and often their children. All of these men, the incestuous fathers and the batterers, were in treatment because they had been convicted of crimes, and their attendance in therapy or group re-education was a condition of probation. In all cases, there were other professionals involved with the victims and survivors who were watching out for safety issues. I consulted frequently with other therapists to ensure that my work was not increasing the danger to vulnerable children or women. In most cases, the men were separated from their families by the court until successful treatment, however it was defined, was completed.

In a pre-conference workshop earlier this week, I talked about my clinical work with perpetrators of family violence. I work as a victim-advocate, which means that I work self-consciously to prevent violence against women and children and hold myself accountable to the community of survivors who are trying to prevent

interpersonal violence in the United States. Theories and interventions with this population are significantly different from usual pastoral counselling and psychotherapy. Most counselling is based on a premise of motivation and honesty, that is, the person wants to change and tries to be honest with the therapist. With perpetrators of violence, manipulation, denial, and dishonesty are conscious and unconscious patterns that always have to be included in diagnosis and treatment. Sociopathic traits are often part of the formal diagnosis. The art of therapy with this population is finding some ambivalence in the men that can be worked with inside a container of external coercion, that is, the risk of going to jail if treatment is terminated. Often, the ambivalence of men who make progress in therapy is generated by a fear of the consequences for their illegal and stigmatised behaviours *and* a genuine wish to be a good husband, a good parent, a good citizen, and/or a good Christian. This kind of counselling sounds impossible given the history of pastoral care and counselling theory, but I believe it is possible based on my experience.<sup>1</sup>

In my opinion, pastoral counselling has basically failed to respond adequately to the pastoral care needs of victims, survivors, and perpetrators of family violence. The problems of family violence have been overlooked, minimised, misdiagnosed and mistreated by most pastoral counsellors. I am beginning to develop a hypothesis about why this is true. In one sentence, I believe that pastoral counselling is a “love theory” that is naive regarding issues of power in human families. The reasons for this are complex and beyond the scope of this paper, though they are related to the influence of Freud, Erikson and Carl Rogers and the historical development of liberal and progressive theologies. I am interested in Girard because he is developing what I call a “power theory” of human relationships. In his system of thought, power and violence play a central role in the diagnosis and treatment of human sin. My work with perpetrators of violence confirms this hypothesis about the centrality of power.

### Points of contact with the theory of Girard

In this lecture I want to explore the inter-relationship between Girard’s theory and pastoral counselling with perpetrators of family violence and ask what difference this could make for pastoral counselling. How does a power analysis challenge traditional pastoral counselling in its misunderstanding of family violence, and how would pastoral counselling have to be revised in order to take power into account? Even as I ask this question, I remind myself that I am a pastoral counsellor – a product of pastoral counselling training and practice. I believe in love, that is, I believe that nurturing attachments have transformative potential in the lives of people. Attachment is a primary dynamic between parent and child, between partners in intimate relationships, between student and teacher, between client and counsellor. So I will be asking this theoretical question, namely, how can we develop a form of pastoral counselling which adequately takes into account both love and power as primary forms of sin and redemption in human life? In one short lecture, I can only develop the beginning of such an argument, but I hope it will be a helpful exercise and stimulate us to further thinking.

I am delighted to be able to reflect on Girard’s theory of the origin and cure of interpersonal and social violence in relation to my clinical experience with perpetrators of family violence because I share several assumptions with Girard, to the extent that I understand his theory:

First, Girard says that power and violence are endemic to human experience, not only an unfortunate side effect of the search for love. Violence is a root cause of many other social and religious problems, and not just a symptom that occurs when social systems break down. Therefore we need to understand power and violence in order to improve the quality of human life.

Second, Girard says that the main function of the official religions is to sanction “good violence” and condemn “bad violence” through ritual enactment of the sacrificial crisis. This contrasts with the view of religion which understands itself in idealized terms as opposing violence and promoting non-violence. Girard’s understanding of religion requires us to ask about the difference between false religion which hides the sacrificial crisis and true religion which frees human beings from this sinister dynamic and its violence.

Third, Girard believes that the lie of the sacrificial crisis and its violence must be honestly confronted in order to create social systems which are healing and transformative for all persons.

I think that my work with perpetrators validates these three assumptions and I hope that the details of my lecture will add evidence in its favour.<sup>2</sup>

I have developed five questions to guide my reflection today, and in each question I ask how my clinical experience with perpetrators of violence confirms aspects of Girard’s theories and/or raises questions for further development of the theories. What does Girard’s theory disclose and what does it obscure?

### Question 1: Sin and Diagnosis

*To what extent is Girard’s theory of “mimetic violence and surrogate victimage” (Hammerton-Kelly, Sacred Violence, p.38.) offers an adequate diagnosis of what is wrong with incestuous and violent men and their families in U.S. society?*

“Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires BEING, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being. It is not through words, therefore, but by the example of his own desire that the model conveys to the subject the supreme desirability of the object” (Girard, p.146).

“In this light sin appears as mimetic rivalry with God...” (Hammerton-Kelly, p.92)

#### *Mimetic desire*

My understanding of Girard is that persons seek to grow into maturity and be fulfilled by imitating the desires of someone who seems to be more mature and more fulfilled, such as a son imitating a father, a student imitating a mentor, or a younger brother imitating an older brother.<sup>3</sup> In order to be like the admired person, one imitates the form of that person’s desires. By desiring the same objects as the admired one, the person hopes to become like the one he admires and to decrease the distinctions between them. The possibility of violence erupts at the point when the social distinctions actually begin to dissipate. This loss of distinction creates mimetic rivalry from both directions. The son begins to feel competi-

tive with the father, and the father also begins to feel threatened by the son. The student begins to feel competitive with the mentor, but the mentor also feels threatened by the student. The older brother notices the growth of the younger brother and fears the loss of his domination as the younger brother begins to savour the possibility of having the objects of the older brother. Since, within a zero-sum competitive system, both persons cannot have the same desired objects at the same time, one or the other feels he must dominate and win. In the Oedipal struggle between father and son, the father usually wins and the son is forced to seek other objects. In the process the son learns what it feels like to lose and be humiliated by the greater power of the powerful father, a lesson with long-term consequences for gender relationships.

In situations of potential peerage, between student and mentor or between brothers (in blood-line or social status), such violence threatens to escalate and destroy the fabric of the community itself. This is the sacrificial crisis. At the right time, the persons in competitive rivalry discover the possibility of destroying the objects instead of each other, and, almost as if by magic, the violence between them dissipates. Therefore, scapegoating becomes the mechanism whereby mimetic violence is projected onto a “deserving” object, and after the sacrifice of that victim, peace is restored. After the objects are destroyed, they are made sacred because they saved the community from violence. Ritual re-enactment of the sacrificial crisis helps the community to remember the dangers of mimetic violence but obscures the universal responsibility for violence.

The question this description raises for me is this: To what extent does “mimetic rivalry and surrogate victimage” explain the intergenerational transmission of violence (Girard, p.174ff) with its corollary of arbitrarily constructed guilt.

The violent men I have worked with seem to learn their violence from two sources: (a) their own experiences of being abused in the past, often as children; (b) the power, privilege, and encouragement they get from race, gender, class, age and other ideologies that construct dominance as a way of being human (male). That is, race, gender, class, age, and other inequalities of social power ensure that everyone will have some object to exploit in exchange for the abuse they endure from others. Even an abused child will be able to kick the dog. Chase the cat or mutilate the doll.

### *Learning violence by experiencing violence*

To take the first point first, every violent man I have seen in pastoral counselling has been severely abused in his own childhood. My experience confirms Alice Miller’s view from her earlier books (*For Your Own Good*) that violence is passed on from one generation to another by actual experience. George was sexually abused by his older brother and two friends when he was twelve years old. At first he thought it was exciting sexual play, but when they forced him to perform oral sex, it stopped being fun and he became the scapegoated object for the older boys. Sam was rescued from a violent home of drug addicts when he was only four, only to be beaten with a bull whip in a foster home, and then forced to tolerate emotional abuse while watching his sister being sexually abused during adolescence. Phil was the excluded child in an incestuous family. While his father engaged in incest with his younger sister, Phil was forced to grow up in the streets where he got into all manner of trouble. All three of these men were arrested for fondling their adolescent daughters. If they hadn’t been stopped by being arrested, their abuse would have proceeded to intercourse, by their own witness.

I think this experience confirms Girard's thesis that the mimetic rivalry of one generation is taught to the next generation in an unending cycle. If we could trace it back, I think we would find centuries of intergenerational abuse. My own clinical experience can validate three and four generations of violence within some families. Being abused as a child gives one the primal injury that leads to mimetic rivalry with other adults and the choice of children as available scapegoats. Girard does not emphasise the importance of prior injury as a motive for mimetic rivalry, but it seems to be true in my clinical experience.

### *Violence as an ideology of our society*

The second point is that social oppression by race, gender, class, age, etc. sets up the dynamic of mimetic violence. In the stratified, oppressive capitalistic society in the U.S., everyone is exploited by someone. The silent agreement in operation is that no matter how exploited one is, there is someone more vulnerable to be exploited. For example, in therapy I heard constant stories of humiliation and injury at work. If the men could not compete and win at work with bosses and peers, then they surely could be dominant at home, and they could hate other scapegoated social groups such as the poor, African Americans, immigrants, and women. Abusing a child served to make them feel sufficiently powerful to make up for the injuries from work. Personal prejudice gave them others on whom to project their hatred with social sanction. The sexual gratification that came with the abuse became a strong positive reinforcement for the abuse.

### *Constructed guilt*

One of Girard's corollary theories is what I call "constructed guilt." He says: "Anybody can play the part of the surrogate victim... It is futile to look for the secret of the redemptive process in distinctions between the surrogate victim and the other members of the community. The crucial fact is the victim is arbitrary." (Girard, p.257) Survivors of family violence are often relieved and enraged when they discover that their victimisation was arbitrary. They are relieved because it assuages their own guilt that they deserved the abuse. They begin to see that even their attempt to manipulate the adult abusing them in order to survive does not make them guilty for the abuse. Working through the consequences of the abuse is enough without also feeling guilty for causing the abuse. On the other hand, arbitrary guilt makes survivors enraged because there is no justification for what happened. Their abuse is without cause or meaning. Such anger is healing because it often leads to action to protect other innocent victims. Discovering that their guilt is arbitrary discloses the lie of the scapegoating mechanism. Anselm Strauss' answer to why men batter is "because they can." One molester's answer to his daughter when she asked "why" was: "because you were there." There is no reason. The scapegoat was innocent. Therefore the violence is evil and should be stopped.

### *Power and love*

Theories of diagnosis of perpetrators of violence are divided into theories of power and control and theories of gratification, especially sexual gratification. Some programs challenge the abuser's need to dominant others, while other programs prescribe Depoprovaran or even castration to diminish the sex drive. In my opinion, theories of gratification cannot explain why certain people engage in interpersonal violence including rape of children. Power and control seems to be a foundational reality for abusers. Girard's theory takes a clear position on the side

of power, for example, when he says, “The hidden basis of myths is not sexual; it cannot be, for that motif is openly revealed. Nonetheless, sexuality is important insofar as it stimulates violence and provides occasions for it to vent its force.” (Girard, p.188) I agree with Girard as a corrective to the overemphasis on theories of love. But, in the final analysis, I think we need a theory that integrates power and love. Men who sexually abuse children are trying to make up for narcissistic injuries from childhood and from victimisation in society. They seek domination, that is, power and control over someone, to make up for a fragmented self. But they also receive sexual gratification and pseudo-connection with another human being which is a substitute for being loved. It will require much theoretical and theological work to understand how power and love can be combined in one complex theory of pastoral counselling. Until we do, we will be unprepared to work with perpetrators of family violence.<sup>4</sup>

### Summary

Girard’s theory does help to interpret sin and diagnosis when working with perpetrators of family violence by emphasising power and mimetic rivalry and the arbitrary choice of scapegoats. His theory probably underestimates the importance of direct gratification as a motive for abuse.

### Question 2: Redemption and Healing

*To what extent is demythification an adequate theory of redemption and healing for incestuous fathers and their families? Demythification is defined as dissent (resistance) by way of “retelling the story from the point of view of the victim, exposing the lie, and revealing the founding mechanism.”(Hammerton-Kelly, Sacred Violence, p.38.)*

“We can no longer ritualise or rationalise our violence... We are thrust into a time of absolute responsibility. (Hammerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, p.39) As I read and try to understand it, Girard’s theory of redemption and healing is radical honesty about our own participation in violence, solidarity with victims, and accepting responsibility for changing the communities in which we live. A corollary principle must be a changed social consciousness and a life of resistance to the forms of ritual and rationales that make mimetic violence and surrogate victimage work.

This viewpoint describes much of what must go on in therapy and re-education groups with perpetrators of family violence. One way I distinguish clients who can benefit from pastoral counselling as I practice it and those who cannot is whether they have enough healthy self to engage in therapy. One way to assess this readiness is whether being arrested and having their violence disclosed creates a crisis at the core of their being. Many perpetrators of family violence are not ready for pastoral counselling because their only crisis is the shame of having their sins exposed. There is not enough healthy self accessible to form a therapeutic attachment with a pastoral counsellor. While I cannot address the therapeutic issues of the more damaged, but statistically large, group, the principles about safety for victims and accountability for perpetrators do apply. All perpetrators of violence need to be held accountable for their behaviours for the safety of victims. The art of therapy for the clients I am most familiar with depends on sustaining their internal crisis over enough time that their sociopathic and sadistic attitudes and behaviours can be addressed. Most of the perpetrators I have worked with try

to manipulate the counsellor to join them in a premature resolution of their crisis. This premature resolution can take two directions:

- a) over-identification of oneself as a victim;
- b) rationalisation and minimisation of the damage one has caused.

### *Healing or remembering?*

Since every perpetrator of violence in my practice has been a victim of violence from childhood and was further exploited by race and class oppression, the therapist can be tempted to focus on healing only for the victimised self of the past. Significant time must be spent on remembering the stories of injuries from the past because they are real. But the therapist must remember that the client is not only a victim, but also a victimiser. The shame around the injury done to others is usually greater and harder to explore. One reminder I use is to make sure the abuse gets half of the attention in each session. In this way I agree with Girard that absolute honesty in facing one's complicity with violence is part of the transformative process.

### *Responsibility or empathetic identification?*

Some therapists make the mistake of joining the client in rationalising and minimising the damage done. Many abusers feel entitled to the dominance they have established and the power and sexual gratification they obtain from that dominance. They will say things like: "A father has a right to educate his child however he wants. My father beat me and I turned out o.k.. It is better for my daughter to learn about sex from me than from some rapist out in the streets." There are many versions of such entitlement that men use to justify their abuse, but it all has the same effect – these defences are ways to avoid the actual consequences of their violence on victims. Therapists who have not faced their own history as abusers may unconsciously join the client in minimising the effects of violence on others. Because of these dangers, accountability for therapists is very important, in the form of co-therapy and regular participation in a community of therapists who agree to hold one another accountable for their work.

Girard's theory helps me understand the delicate balance involved in therapy with perpetrators of violence. "Absolute responsibility" means facing the terrible reality of one's participation as a perpetrator of violence. "Identification with the victim" means more than locating my own experiences of being a victim. It means listening to the stories of victims over and over again until they cannot be denied. Healing for perpetrators of violence is a difficult road that balances empathy and ethical responsibility.

"Absolute responsibility", in my theory of pastoral counselling, is only possible within a relational context of love and power. That is, the perpetrators of violence in therapy slowly change when they begin to trust a counsellor who displays sufficient empathy for their pain and enough strength to hold out an alternative ethical vision without being abusive. In this view, I follow Winnicott and Kohut. The person who depends on violence to prop up his fragmented self and fill up his empty self is not capable of the "absolute responsibility" Girard calls for, even though it is eventually necessary. What is needed is loving attachment within a powerful social system that protects others from victimisation. Love and power in a proper relational balance is crucial – "Fierce Tenderness", as some of my feminist friends call it (Hunt, Ramsay). Where in Girard's theory is the role of loving and powerful attachments, actually an image opposite to mimetic violence?

Unless I am missing it altogether, Girard does not attend sufficiently to the role of love and empathy.

### Summary

Pastoral counselling theory is severely deficient in its understanding of power. Empathic bonding with a perpetrator of violence without external control of his or her abuse of others is nearly useless. The inability to address the power dimension is a form of collusion with perpetrators of violence who feel entitled to continue their abuse. Girard helps us a lot in describing the distortions of aggression on a personal and social level, but he underestimates the power of eros and love as healing agents.

### Question 3: Gender and Violence

*Does mimetic rivalry and surrogate victimage work the same for men and women under patriarchy? Are men more violent than women? If so, is it because of nature or social class?*

“At the core of the Oedipus myth, as Sophocles presents it, is the proposition that all masculine relationships are based on reciprocal acts of violence. . . . Both parties in this tragic dialogue have recourse to the same tactics, use the same weapons, and strive for the same goal: destruction of the adversary.” (Girard, p.48)

#### *Violence of men*

Girard himself suggests that his theory is primarily a description of male violence. By use of male authors, male examples, and focus on women as victims, Girard seems to agree with some feminist theory that the structures of violence are primarily male.

“The preponderance of women in the Dionysian cult remains a subject of conjecture. ... We may therefore wonder whether the preponderance of women does not constitute a secondary mythological displacement, an effort to exonerate from the accusation of violence, not mankind as a whole, but adult males, who have the greatest need for forget their role in the crisis, because, in fact, they must have been largely responsible for it. They alone risk plunging the community into the chaos of reciprocal violence. ... The woman qualifies for sacrificial status by reason of her weakness and relatively marginal social status.” (Girard, p.139 and p.141)

Girard’s theory fits some of the data about family violence. In terms of battering, men are arrested for battering adult women ten times as often as vice versa (Dep. of Public Health, Chicago); one-third of murdered women (1,500 in the U.S. in 1994) were murdered by a present or former intimate male partner while only 3% of murdered men were murdered by a comparable female partner (Dept. of Public Health, Chicago); women are three times more likely to seek emergency room treatment for violence inflicted by a man than vice versa. (American Medical Association). In terms of sexual abuse, girls are three times more likely to be sexually abused than boys, and the perpetrators of sexual abuse of both boys and girls are ten times more likely to be men than women. (Diana Russell). This imbalance of male violence over female violence in research statistics and health care programs has led to the creation of many programs to support female victims and survivors and almost none for men, many programs to treat male perpetrators of

violence and almost none for women, and certain groups overlooked completely, namely women abused by women, gay and lesbian victims and perpetrators, and others. The data seem to support Girard's assumption that mimetic violence is a problem of patriarchy, and that women are more likely victims than perpetrators.

### *Violence of women*

There is a growing debate and anecdotal material about the violence of women. Within feminism itself there is a vigorous debate about whether and how women socialise children into patriarchy and acceptance of its violence (Jessica Benjamin). Child welfare programs have always had programs of therapy and re-education for mothers of young children who cause many serious injuries (Parents Anonymous). The increase of drug addictions like cocaine and heroin appear to increase the rate of neglect and violence perpetrated on children by women. In my own clinical experience, it is not unusual for male clients to report severe physical and sexual abuse by mothers, older sisters, and older women in the community. One theoretical question is whether the violence of women is an extension of competitive power relationships under patriarchy, a reactive violence to the reality of oppression, or a part of basic, pre-gendered human nature.

### *Gender asymmetry*

Girard himself does not present his theory as gender-specific, that is, it is not a feminist theory. This implies that the mechanism of mimetic rivalry, violence, and scapegoating are at work in most social systems, even when women are in leadership positions. Whether the mechanism works independently of gender or in some complex interaction with it is, of course, a matter for the further development of theory. Catherine MacKinnon, a feminist legal scholar, has a similar view as Girard that power is more basic than sexuality, and once patriarchy is in place as an ideology, is influential on the behaviour of women as well as men. MacKinnon believes that "violence is sexy" in the sense that eroticism is defined by culture as violent, though men are more likely to be sexually predatory and women to be victims. The episodic reversal of gender roles (the dominatrix, the passive male) so popular in the media may be a form of obfuscation of reality or an illustration of the power of mimetic violence under patriarchy to victimise anyone who is vulnerable regardless of gender.

The remaining question, though, is whether some women, who have been oppressed for millennia under patriarchy, have developed a subversive wisdom through their resistance to the consequences of violence in their lives. Patricia Hill Collins makes an argument like this regarding black women. The resistance of some women to gender, race, class, age and other forms of oppression have been necessary for survival. Much scholarship is being done by womanist scholars to retrieve the wisdom and resources of resistance from the oral traditions of the past. Therefore, it is important to identify the subversive traditions of resistance that make possible "retelling the story from the point of view of the victim, exposing the lie, and revealing the founding mechanism." (Hammerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, p.38.)

Until very recently, with the help of a new generation of women scholars, pastoral counselling has not addressed issues of gender asymmetry in its theories and practices (Moessner and Glaz/Moessner are exceptions). Analysing the power of gender oppression in pastoral counselling is crucial for understanding family violence. Violence organised by gender relationships is a major ethical and theological problem in Christian families which has been overlooked by scholars. A the-

ory based on love too easily falls into blaming those who are vulnerable for their own victimisation and minimising the exploitation that perpetrators of violence impose on persons in families. As we have explored the power dimensions of our theory, we must integrate these insights with our love theory of empathy, attachment, and transference.

#### Question 4: Race and Violence

*Does Girard's theory of "pharmakos" help explain the persistence of classes of permanent scapegoats in the U.S., such as African Americans and other ethnic groups, women and children, and the poor?*

"The sacrificial crisis – a repetition of the original, spontaneous 'lynching' that restored order in the community by re-establishing, around the figure of the surrogate victim, that sentiment of social accord that had been destroyed in the onslaught of reciprocal violence... If my thesis is correct, the pharmakos, like Oedipus himself, has a dual connotation. On the one hand he is a woebegone figure, an object of scorn who is also weighted down with guilt; a butt for all sorts of gibes, insults, and of course, outbursts of violence. On the other hand, we find him surrounded by a quasi-religious aura of veneration; he has become a sort of cult object. This duality reflects the metamorphosis the ritual victim is designed to effect; the victim draws to itself all the violence infecting the original victim and through its own death transforms this baneful violence into beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance." (Girard, p. 95)

The above quote from Girard seem to describe the U.S. situation well. African Americans, foremost in the public mind among the ethnic groups, serve as projections of every form of violence in our society -- murder, rape, drugs, gangs, child abuse. At the same time, African American images in sports and music create an "quasi-religious aura of veneration." The paradox is startling: five percent of the population (black men such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods) make up a huge percentage of superheroes in the major sports of football, basketball, and baseball, and at the same time make up 50% of the U.S. prison population of one million persons (Michael Tyson and O.J. Simpson are prominent images of violent black men).

According to Girard, the need of a society for a class of permanent scapegoats indicates a firm commitment to the sacrificial crisis as a way of life. I feel uncomfortable with Girard's observation that modern, western societies are less captivated by the sacrificial crisis. (Girard, pp.15-27) Perhaps being an empire means that the U.S., in spite of its judicial system, has enough power to project its violence away from the elite and middle classes onto permanent scapegoats such as African Americans, immigrants, the poor, and other nations. The recent mimetic rivalry between the U.S and Russia might verify this dynamic and help to explain the internal crisis in the U.S. now that it has no rival as a global superpower.

The analogy I want to make is that incestuous fathers in families seem to be an accurate reflection within families of the larger social forces I have just described. Perpetrators of family violence act with greater impunity whenever their chosen victims are less valued in the larger society, and when protection for them is less likely to be effective. For example adopted and step-children are more likely to be sexually abused within families, and children with disabilities are even more likely. Likewise, African American children are more likely to be abused in fami-

lies. There seems a direct correlation between how much the children of certain social classes are valued and how much they are abused. The more vulnerable a child is, the more likely that child will be victim of physical and sexual violence. With child abuse rates running between 30-50%, the vulnerability of all children is high.

Girard's theory of the "pharmakos" as a class of permanent scapegoats begins to make sense of the role of children, women, and oppressed economic groups in the United States. When race, gender, class, age and other forms of oppression accumulate to create multiple jeopardy for African American children (Patricia Hill Collins), the rates of violence increase. (Add section from notes)

An increasing literature from African American pastoral counsellors in the U.S. is challenging our field to understand the oppression of race, class, gender, age, etc. These power relationships create a different reality for some families, and have generated a subversive culture of resistance that must be respected as health-giving rather than pathologised. Their work discloses the collusion of pastoral counselling with the ideologies of the dominant white supremacist culture. As long as pastoral counselling remains a theory of love rather than a theory of power, its complicity in racial evil will continue. (Poling, *Deliver us from Evil*)

### Question 5: Jesus and Violence

*How has the image of Jesus Christ transformed humanity in the midst of sin and evil? How has Jesus helped to demythify the sacrificial crisis, according to Girard and others (Hammerton-Kelly, Schwager, et al.), and liberate humans from "mimetic violence and surrogate victimage"?*

The central Christological question for pastoral counselling can be crudely stated this way: What has Jesus done for me lately? What could Jesus do for me if I believed in him and followed his way? In more scholarly language, Christology is the question: What was accomplished in Jesus life, death and resurrection that leads believers to liberation of human bodies, spirits, and communities?

For the sake of this paper, I am interested in Girard's Christology: How does Christ transform humankind? The heart of Girard's argument, as I understand it, is that the sacrificial crisis and its sanction by religion depend on secrecy and lies. That is, the community must actually believe that mimetic violence is caused by outside forces, that the scapegoat deserves to be abused and killed, that this sacrifice actually transforms the community and restores non-violence, and that the scapegoat then deserves to be ritually honoured to help the community to distinguish good from bad violence. Girard's Christology asserts that Jesus lived and died in such a way that he exposed the scapegoating mechanism itself as pathological. He disclosed that violence comes from the hearts of men, not from outside forces, and he revealed that the sacrificial victim is innocent of any guilt. This disclosure of the lie shows a way out of the sacrificial crisis, that is, humans have the choice of "retelling the story from the point of view of the victim, exposing the lie, and revealing the founding mechanism." (Hammerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, p.38). According to Hammerton-Kelly, this gives humanity a new religious and ethical choice.

"To leave the community of sacred violence is to refuse the unanimity of conflictual mimesis. As soon as one dissents, one becomes a victim oneself. Such dissent is tantamount to identifying with the victim, because the group of conflictual mi-

mesis needs unanimity to function and can treat dissenters only as victims. Thus Paul is transformed from persecutor to persecuted, he is crucified with Christ.” (Hammerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, p.69)

By identification with Christ crucified, we dissent from the sacred violence of the community and join in the forces of resistance to live in “absolute honesty” as free people within the love of God. Girard’s theory has a Christology. Either historically constructed (process theologies) or revealed as the eternal love of God (essentialist theologies), humans have the choice of dissenting from the sacrificial crisis. By believing in Jesus, that is, that Jesus was innocent even though he was a scapegoat, and by following Jesus, that is, following his way of non-acquisitive sacrificial love, we can be liberatory in our personal, interpersonal, and social lives.

In some ways, this is a Christology that works in good pastoral counselling with perpetrators of violence. A pastoral counsellor must believe that all people are capable of change given the right circumstances, be willing to engage with perpetrators of violence with a sense of hope, be unafraid of allying him or her self with coercive power in order to control evil, and be willing to engage in mutual and sometimes sacrificial love for the salvation of his or her clients. This mechanism is similar to the needed spiritual transformation for the perpetrator himself. A client in therapy must believe in himself enough to want change, be willing to engage with the counsellor, be willing to comply with the imposition of external power and control to stop his abuse, and be willing to engage in mutual and sometimes sacrificial relationships for the sake of his own salvation and the protection of future victims. This deconstructive and reconstructive task is complex given the many layers of defence against such change, and the fears and terror of confronting his own emptiness. But the promise of the gospel is that salvation is possible.

### **A relational and ambiguous image of God**

What image of God is helpful to perpetrators of violence as they engage in such a theological task? In my own writing I have rejected both orthodox and liberal theologies because they are naive about the power dimension of salvation. I have held out, instead, an image of the relational, ambiguous God who is engaged in the world and does not shrink back from the ambiguity involved in sharing responsibility for the good and evil of the world. Images of God as unified, omnipotent, and perfectly loving, I believe, are counterproductive for perpetrators of violence in their search for salvation. (Poling, *Deliver us from Evil*).

I find support for my view in the work of Girard, especially his discussion about fathers and sons: “The ‘father’ projects into the future the first tentative movements of his son and sees that they lead straight to the mother or the throne. The incest wish, the patricide wish, do not belong to the child but spring from the mind of the adult, the model... The son is always the last to learn that what he desires is incest and patricide, and it is the hypocritical adults who undertake to enlighten him in this matter. ... If the Oedipus complex constitutes an erroneous reading of the double bind, then we can say that those desires that the world at large, and the father in particular, regard as emanating from the son’s own patricide-incest drive actually derive from the father himself in his role as model.” (Girard, p.175)

In this passage, Girard clearly lays the responsibility for the sacrificial crisis on the religious imagination of the father or mentor. The mentor imagines the mimetic rivalry before the student has the conceptual tools to make sense of it. Therefore, the mentor “teaches” the son about mimetic rivalry while the son is still introjecting the mentor uncritically.

In theological terms, this means that mimetic rivalry is constructed by humans out of their relationship with God.<sup>5</sup> In the crucifixion God reveals a full understanding of mimetic violence and also reveals God’s capacity to abstain from its full implementation from the divine side. In a sense, this means that God has the potential to engage in mimetic violence and the potential to abstain from it. Therefore God has the power to engage humans in either violence or nonviolence. This is what I mean by the relational, ambiguous God. Every good or evil desire and behaviour that is possible for humans is also possible for God. God is not, by definition, limited to being good all the time, but God has revealed Godself through history as one who commits Godself over and over again to be good. In faith we pray that God will be good, but we know that our lives could be snuffed out in a moment if God chooses to be evil. Never forgetting the holocausts of history is a reminder of the terrible power of God over life and death.

This image of God is very important for pastoral counselling with perpetrators of violence. In order to be an effective counsellor when I sit down with a perpetrator of violence, I must know that I am potentially capable of whatever violence that person has imposed on others. He and I are no different at the level of potential good and evil. I am capable of whatever good and evil he has done, and he is capable of whatever good and evil I have done. If this is not true, then there can be no empathy between us.

In actual practice, I have met several perpetrators of violence who so horrified me that I could not work with them. This does not mean that I am not capable of the violence they committed, but I was not capable of living for very long in the religious world they had created by engaging in such violence. One example was a paedophile who had been arrested for molesting a nine-year-old boy in Times Square, New York. After several sessions of therapy, I asked him whether he would mind if his own adolescent son (he was the noncustodial parent) were molested. He said he would not mind such an event. At that point, I bailed out and hoped that someone else could help him. My own moral strength was not sufficient to enter into his world for the sake of therapy. In a second case, I did an assessment with a man who had violently raped a woman in Central Park, New York in broad daylight. He had already spent eight years in prison for several rapes. I could not contain my own feelings of fear and revulsion enough to help him. As opposed to Scott Peck, who labels such persons as evil and beyond hope, I am cognisant of my own limitations. Given my own development and maturity, these men were beyond my ability to cope.

However, my theological view is that God is not beyond understanding such violent men. The crucifixion reveals the unanimous consent, including the disciples (Hammerton-Kelly), of the whole community to the death of God. God was not shocked by such a depth of evil, and God responded with non-violent love and power in a way that changed the world. I believe in the God of Jesus Christ, and in his act of salvation for all people. I commit myself to believe in and follow Jesus in my ministry of pastoral counselling, to try to be a relational, ambiguous presence for perpetrators of family violence.

## Conclusion

I have engaged in dialogue with René Girard and his theory of violence and the sacred in relation to my clinical work as a pastoral counsellor with perpetrators of family violence. I have pursued five questions about sin, redemption, gender, race, and Christology. I think Girard's greatest contribution to pastoral counselling is his brilliant description of the role of power in human relationships. Pastoral counselling has much to learn about power as an aspect of theory and practice, and I hope that attending to issues of power will help pastoral counselling to become a resource for victims, survivors and perpetrators of family violence. I think pastoral counselling has a contribution to make to Girard's theory by insisting on the healing role of love and attachment in human relationships. In the end I hope for a new theory of pastoral counselling which understands both power and love. I thank you for the chance to stretch my own thinking about these matters and I look forward to our dialogue.

## Notes

- 1 My views on these issues have been published in the books *The Abuse of Power, Deliver us from Evil*, and various articles.
- 2 I need to emphasise the limitations of my knowledge of Girard and his theories. I have read some of his articles and books, and I have read some commentaries on his thought. But I am no expert on the complexities of Girard and the social science context in which he works. *What I can do* is to test what I know of Girard against my experience as a practical theologian and a pastoral counsellor and hope that my questions will be useful to others in their work. My knowledge of Girard is based primarily on his *Violence and the Sacred* and the works by Hammerton-Kelly and Raymund Schwager.
- 3 I have chosen to keep Girard's non-inclusive male language because I believe it is a more accurate description of male reality under patriarchy than of female reality. Some of the implications of this will be clearer in the discussion of Question 3.
- 4 A consultant from the survivor movement, Linda, recently wrote the following on gratification as an aspect of abuse. "Satanic ritual has a long tradition of sacrifice of the child in the belief that the child's power can be harnessed for the group's use. I have no way to explain it, but I believe that my mother somehow wanted to drain my life force -- it was like she tried to suck out my soul with what she did." Lloyd DeMause writes: "...the psychodynamics of the full cultic ritual is clear. It is the same as with all sadist torture and the killing of children. First, the sadist terrorises the child to increase his or her fear, his or her 'power', watching the child's growing panic and agony in order to see the sadist's own fear 'injected' into another. Then he rapes the child at the moment he stabs with the knife, so he can have the sexual climax at the point of the death of the child and absorb all of the child's power."
- 5 I disagree with Hammerton-Kelly who seems to suggest that God is incapable of evil or violence, and that the whole sacrificial crisis is an invention of humans within history. "What about desire in God?" (D.D. Williams); Williams' insight needs to be restated and corrected in mimetic terms. The divine need arises primarily from plenitude, not lack and is therefore, the need to give. Since there is no envy in God, the one need God has is to give and to share. It is essential to maintain this self-sufficiency of God as the antidote to the mimetic misinterpretation of the divine as envious and rivalrous. However, the relationship between the divine and the human is mimetically constituted and, therefore, the divine needs the mimetic reciprocity of the creature for the relationship to succeed. When the creature misinterprets the divine desire as envious and turns to mimetic rivalry, the loss sustained by the divine is not ontological but mimetic. The divine suffers not diminishment but violence, as the Cross reveals. Thus the divine suffering occurs in the divine desire, not in the divine substance. In this way we maintain both the traditional doctrine of God's self-sufficiency, and the concept of the necessary reciprocity of love. (Hammerton-Kelly,

*Sacred Violence*, p.169).

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