

RELIGION

Learning how to explode the power of scapegoating

In one act, Jesus showed he could defeat the mechanism of sacrificial violence

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When I was in Grade 6, there was a group of us that picked on Colin. Colin was in our class and always got better grades than everyone else. He was also ungainly and preferred sticking to himself. In short, Colin was a natural outcast.

I remember one day agreeing with a few of the bigger boys in our group to corner him after school and beat him up. Colin somehow smelled our plan and when the bell rang to end class he was the first one out the front doors, running as fast as he could to his house a few blocks away.

But I was a fast runner. I caught and tackled him before he made it out of the school grounds. The other boys, having caught up to us, began to beat him up while I stood there watching.

The utterly detestable thing about this, besides the act itself, was that at the time, I had no remorse for Colin, only relief that it wasn't me flailing away on the ground.

I knew my action gave me a place within the group; but I remember having the vague feeling that without Colin around I might have been the target. In some twisted way, I needed Colin to occupy this place.

I've since learned from anthropologist Rene Girard, that Colin was our "scapegoat." In some elemental way our identity was bound up by being something that Colin wasn't.

And so, while he was the "outcast" he was also the thing that unified and solidified our group. For a while at least, any conflicts in our group could be solved by a new round of bullying, or "scapegoating" Colin.

Now while we pretty much knew that abusing

Colin in this way was wrong, we didn't understand the dark dynamics of our involvement in this "scapegoating violence."

We didn't know, as Rene Girard has shown, that this "scapegoating mechanism," in all its limitless permutations, is at the bottom of all kinds of "power plays" and power structures—from schoolyard bullying and teen "swarming" to "office politics;" from church splits to gang wars, and from the creation of cultures to the founding of religions.

We didn't know because the "mechanism" has an uncanny ability to stay hidden when we are personally caught up in it. And it stays masked because it has the curious ability to contain larger outbreaks of violence. A kind of Caiaphas principal. That is, it's better for one to perish than all the people.

And so we are led to understand that scapegoating has a redemptive quality ... that there is such a thing as redemptive violence.

It's usually only when confronted by our own deep complicity in scapegoating violence that we are able to choose another way. Mercifully (and I credit James Alison's *On Being Liked* for this application), there is a story that can confront us, and begin to heal us.

Imagine when we were chasing Colin, he had run into traffic and been hit by a car and was hospitalized for a few months.

It's not hard to see that after a short time of regret, perhaps even genuine remorse, our group would be irritably off balance until we found someone else to pick on. And of course, with Colin gone, all of us on the lower levels of the prevailing power structure would be seriously worried.

But now suppose that Colin, having healed, came back to school not sullen, or angry, or vengeful; not holding on to any resentment, but entirely free and open and wanting to play with us, because he truly liked us.

And what if it became apparent that he always did like us, had always wanted just to play with us, but that before our causing his injury, we just could-

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n't see it. Because the relationships in our group depended on there being an outcast, this would be hugely destabilizing.

But at the same time, Colin's presence would now offer us a way of relating that was free from there being others who were supposedly inferior or superior to us. That is, free from structures of power.

And in this buoyant freedom we could find ourselves called into being people we had no idea we could be. Because Colin's non-violent "liking-presence," would be our forgiveness. In this way, Colin could become our radical counter model.

This, of course, is what is offered to us by Jesus Christ. Jesus, in allowing himself to be the ultimate scapegoat, and through his resurrection—as his forgiving and merciful return, is now our radical counter model that has nothing to do with retaliation, shame, or any sort of violence.

In his dramatic self-giving act, Jesus exploded the power of the "scapegoating mechanism" and its false unity through sacrificial violence, offering us the possibility to renounce involvement in it and embrace true peace.

As Christ put it, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." S. Thomas Berg is a freelance writer who attends a local Baptist church as well as an inter-faith small group. He works for Hope Mission, an inner-city agency that cares for Edmonton's homeless people. He can be reached at stthomasberg@growmercy.org