UNDERSTANDING THE VIOLENT SACRED

By Mack C. Stirling

In 2 Samuel 21, we read that ancient Israel under King David was experiencing three years of famine. The Lord was consulted, and he informed David that the famine was a result of blood guilt on the land. The blood guilt had been caused one or two generations earlier by King Saul's reckless slaughter of the Gibeonites. In the story, David then goes to the Gibeonites to ask what can be done to assuage the blood guilt and reverse the famine. The Gibeonites suggest that seven of the descendants of Saul be killed and exposed "before the Lord." This amounts to human sacrifice. David complies with this request and ritually kills seven of Saul's grandsons. Afterwards, the rains come, ending the famine.

This text presents the Lord as a violent and capricious deity who personally punishes Israel during the time of David for earlier sins of King Saul. The Lord retracts this punishment only when offered sufficient sacrificial victims. I am personally appalled by such a god and have no desire to get close to him. Furthermore, I simply cannot harmonize this bloodthirsty god with my own personal experiences of God's loving grace, nor with the New Testament.

When forced to confront such problematic biblical texts, Latter-day Saints commonly respond in one of two ways. The first is to suggest that the text may have been "translated" incorrectly and, therefore, may be ignored. The second is to attempt to justify or rationalize the violent actions of God as acts of love. I insist that both these kinds of responses are unsatisfactory and inadequate. Instances of capricious divine violence are simply too numerous and too pervasive to be ascribed to a translation problem. Furthermore, many instances of divine violence simply cannot be justified by any reasonable means. The story from 2 Samuel, with which I began, is an excellent example.

How do we use the Bible profitably to know God in the face of contradictory biblical portrayals of his nature? Do we ignore the parts of the Bible we don't like or understand? Do we simply wait for more canonized scripture? I find neither approach satisfactory. To put a sharper point on the problem, compare the God of the Flood with the Lord of the Gospels. We, of course, consider them to be the same person, Jesus Christ. In the Flood, God became grieved at the violent sins of the human race and responded by violently killing nearly all humanity for their sins. Now, contrast this with the Lord Jesus of the Gospels. This God allowed men to kill Him for their sins in order that they might be enabled to turn out of their sins.

There is a radical disjunction between the nature of the God of the Flood and the Jesus of the Gospels. I do not believe this disjunction can be solved by appeals to mistranslation, nor by attempts to construe the Flood as an act of love, nor by assertions that God treated mankind differently under the "lesser law" of the Old Testament. No, these are not satisfactory answers.

I believe René Girard can help. Girard is a recently retired professor of French language and civilization at Stanford University who through extensive study of the major Western cultural texts—especially in literature, anthropology, psychology, and biblical studies—has developed a wide-ranging theory of culture. To understand Girard's approach to this disjunction between the Old and New Testament God, one must grasp two things: (1) Girard's concept of the violent sacred and (2) his understanding of the cross.¹

The Violent Sacred. For Girard, the origin of the violent sacred lies in the collective action of human beings. From his
studies of myth, ritual, literature, and anthropology, Girard postulates that human culture originated in the violent killing of an arbitrary victim by the collective action of a unified mob. In the process, human beings, formerly at odds because of pervasive rivalry, suddenly find themselves united in blaming one victim for their discord. In killing this scapegoat/victim, a community in chaos becomes unified. Rivalry and resentment dissipate, having been projected onto the scapegoat/victim. The catharsis that arises from the killing is powerful; the resultant peace, overwhelming. This newly found peace and harmony seem miraculous, utterly beyond human ability or comprehension, and, hence, the participants attribute it to a sacred, divine source. Thus human mental projections around a scapegoat victim create the violent sacred. Archaic religion, composed of ritual animal or human sacrifice, myth, and prohibitions, comes out of this violent sacred. And out of archaic religion comes the rest of human culture: law, literature, kingship, economic exchange, and medicine. ²

Hence, in Girard’s understanding, the violent sacred stands at the very origin of the natural man. It is part of our inheritance as we participate in the fall. From the violent sacred comes the concept of a violent god, of a god who desires or requires victims to appease his anger, of a god who justifies humans in killing others in his name. The violent sacred converts the evil we do to others into holiness, into the will of God. We found our culture on the blood of our victims and declare our social order holy or sacred. The violent sacred allows us to justify ourselves, to declare our own righteousness at the expense of our victims, whom we perceive to be guilty. The violent sacred, which is the origin of idolatry, induces us to project our own violence onto the true God. We do this wrongly.

The Truth of the Cross. Girard sees Jesus as having the pivotal role in ending the cycle of violence that has haunted human beings since the beginning of culture. Jesus is God who came into this world and gave his life for us. He submitted to the age-old scapegoating process of the violent crowd. The cross reveals to us the true God of non-violence: a God who wants to be the last sacrifice by ending the shedding of blood; a God who willingly becomes the scapegoat for the world in order to end our sacrificial scapegoating; a God who willingly steps into the hell of the violent sacred in order to destroy its power over mankind; a God who has raised up witnesses to speak the truth of the victim and destroy the lie of the scapegoating crowd. We can see the truth only because of the cross. We must interpret all scripture from the perspective of the cross.

Why, then, does the Bible contain contradictory portrayals of the nature of God? Because, just as Doctrine and Covenants 84 tells us, ancient Israel—like most of us—could not accept the revelation of the cross, the gospel, all at once (D&C 84:23–25). Therefore, ancient Israelite writers produced texts written from the perspective of the violent, self-justifying crowd. These show God as violent. In these texts, the community effectively transfers its own guilt to God, sanctifying itself at God’s expense. However, ancient Israel also produced other texts, more heavily influenced by revelation, written from the perspective of the victim. These show a non-violent God who takes the side of the victim, unmasking the lie of the crowd. Examples include the Joseph story (Genesis 37–50), the story of Elisha and the blind Syrians (2 Kings 6:8–23), the book of Job, and Isaiah’s “suffering servant” passages (Isaiah 42:1–9; Isaiah 49:1–7; Isaiah 50:4–9; Isaiah 52:13–53:12).

Girard’s work, with wonderful extensions and applications by the Girardian scholar Gil Bailie, have given me insights which enable me to read the entire Bible profitably.³ With the concept of the violent sacred in mind, I can begin to neutralize the distortions of God’s nature present in some scriptural texts. By doing so, I come to understand both God and myself better.
like us. The Bible reveals to us our own rivalry and scapegoating violence so that we might have some chance of overcoming them. To avoid these texts because they seem distasteful or to consider them irrelevant because “we are better than them” is to lapse into the age-old reflex of projecting one’s own violence onto someone else in order to preserve the delusion of one’s own innocence.

2. As suggested above, self-justification is a deeply ingrained human reflex. As a natural scapegoater, I have a tendency to justify my behavior at the expense of others. Girard has helped me to see that I have not infrequently stepped into the role of the Pharisee of Luke 18. This Pharisee declared his own worthiness by comparing himself to the publican who stood nearby. Although worthy in his own eyes, he walked away unjustified before God. What does it really mean when we say we are worthy?

3. As a believing Latter-day Saint, I accept that animal sacrifice was in some sense ordained by God and that the animal victims typify Christ (Leviticus 1–7; Mosiah 2:3; Alma 34:9–14; Moses 5:1–10). Girard certainly sees all sacrificial victims as types of Christ and sees ritual sacrifice as essential to the stability of early human communities. However, his thesis that ritual sacrifice (human and animal) had its origin in mimetic human violence is challenging. From Girard’s perspective, the true God would never personally need nor desire animal victims. Girard has led me to consider the probability that God initially acceded to man’s dependence on ritual animal sacrifice while using revelation to forbid human sacrifice, to transform the meaning of animal sacrifice (Alma 34:14; Moses 5:6–7), and eventually to move mankind beyond animal sacrifice altogether (Alma 34:13; 3 Nephi 9:19–20; Hosea 6:6; Jeremiah 7:21–23).

4. Girard has helped me to accept that Christ’s Atonement was necessary because of man—because we required it—and not because God required it to satisfy his honor. This has relieved me of the tremendous burden of trying to reconcile the idea of a God of unconditional love actually requiring the punishment of a surrogate victim in order to be able to forgive us. This idea makes no sense to me.

5. The scriptures tell us that God will destroy the wicked at his coming. From this, it is often assumed that God will personally execute those who remain but who have not met his standards. Girard challenges us to conceive of a God who destroys the wicked by another means: by the word of truth. Those who accept the gospel give up their own evil. Those who reject the gospel descend into ever-increasing violence. Thus do the wicked destroy the wicked, as both the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants tell us. (Mormon 4:5, D&C 63:33).

6. The last verse of Doctrine and Covenants 121 tells us that those who enter into kingdoms in the eternal worlds will attract kingdoms and rule without compulsory means. This suggests that this is how God, even now, rules—without compulsion. Girard has helped me to begin to understand and believe in such a God.


2. To better understand Girard’s theory of culture formation, it is important to look to his insights into the nature of human desire (as opposed to physiological needs). Girard calls human desire “mimetic.” By this, he means that desire is learned (imitated) from others and that desire includes an acquisitive drive to possess what the other has or to be what the other is. We do not desire objects directly; rather, we desire objects through the eyes of others. For example, put two children into a nursery full of toys. The first child will perhaps select a toy at random. It will invariably be precisely that same toy that the second child will want and that he will assume he wanted all along. Adults at a garage sale behave no differently, only realizing how much they wanted an item when their neighbor picks it up.

3. Mimesis is a defining characteristic of human beings. Our mimetic capacity makes it possible for us to learn, to assimilate symbolic communication (language), and to become productive members of society. However, mimetic desire inevitably brings us into conflict with one another. Two hands reaching for the same object, or two people desiring the same position of honor, virtually always result in rivalry. The natural tendency of these mimetic rivalries is to escalate through a process of positive feedback. Due simply to the struggle itself, the contested object increases in value, making it even more desirable in the eyes of the aspirants. The struggle chains the two parties together in escalating conflict, with each person blaming the other for the conflict, each seeing the other as the cause of his unhappiness.

Because of education, rules (prohibitions), law backed up by legitimized violence, and the structure of social hierarchy itself, modern society is not torn apart by accumulated, unresolved mimetic rivalries. Primitive man was different. Girard asks us to imagine a group of early humans wracked by ubiquitous intense mimetic rivalries in a conflict of all against all. The very survival of the group is threatened. Suddenly two members of the group realize that they have a common adversary, who appears responsible for their problems. If this focus on one person is then imitated by yet a third individual, there is a significant likelihood this will lead to a rapid mimetic polarization of the entire group against one individual.

Mimesis itself thus transforms a war of all against all into a war of all against one. Accumulated resentment, accusation, and hate are transferred onto this scapegoat, who is violently eliminated. Peace and stability are restored to the group, or occur for the first time. In human beginnings, such events occurred many times in many different places. These primordial murders engender the violent sacred. Archaic or primitive religion, consisting of prohibitions, ritual, and myth, originates in the violent sacred. Prohibitions are rules against doing the evil things the original scapegoat is perceived to have done. Ritual sacrifice is an organized reenactment of the primordial murder. Myth is the distorted remembering of the murder by the persecutors. Myth transforms dead human scapegoats into living gods and human violence into divine violence. The victims are seen to have been killed by “God,” or it is perceived that God wanted them killed. Archaic religion is the wellspring of human culture, which is born in violent murder and self-deception.


3. In addition to his book, Violence Unveiled (see note 1), Gil Barrie is president of The Cornerstone Forum, a non-profit educational organization. As a lecturer, he travels extensively teaching peacemaking strategies based upon Girardin insights to both domestic and international audiences. For more information about his work, visit www.florilegia.org.