

become ashamed of him, and because of him, they often are ashamed of the Gospels themselves. Non-Christians point to Satan as proof that the Gospels are outmoded and the always timid Christians obediently try to censor Satan out of their own Scriptures. We must do the very reverse; we must focus on Satan and discover that the Gospels are their own best source of modernization.

We must focus on Satan to realize that far from being the archaic myth that we imagine, the defeated Satan of the Gospels is an enormously powerful critique of all archaic myths, a conception of culture and history so rich that its relevance to our own world is still unfathomable.

Chapter 14

The Question of Anti-Semitism in the Gospels

The accusation of anti-Jewishness in the New Testament Gospels is one of the favored attacks on the Gospels among many biblical critics, feminist critics, and other intellectuals. The agents of this hostile criticism range from certain members of the Jesus Seminar engaged in a renewed quest of the "historical" Jesus to practitioners of a more rarefied ideology criticism that appears in academic journals like *Semeia*. This now fashionable accusation was anticipated by Friedrich Nietzsche, who saw quite clearly that Christianity at its very core, stemming from the crucifixion of Christ, opposed the violent imposition of power and authority and held to a doctrine of divine concern for the weak and oppressed. He understood this morality, which took its Jewish legacy to a radical extreme, as the origin of *ressentiment* or the sublimated mimetic rivalry and desire for revenge stemming from envy of those who are powerful. In his view this resentment characterized the decadence of European culture. Nietzsche argued that Christianity, in its twofold inculcation of the desire for truth and for identification with the plight of the other, was in the process of destroying itself. His insights were prophetic if we view them in relation to recent postmodern theology and biblical criticism.

The following selection is an essay by Girard which appeared under the title "Is There Anti-Semitism in the Gospels?" in *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993): 339-52, with two pages deleted in order not to duplicate other material in this Reader. He points out that in the Gospels mimetic rivalry, scandal (the dead-end of the model-obstacle), crowd contagion, and the public need for order are set in a Jewish context, and involve primarily Jewish people (as well as the Roman government in some important instances), but the primary point is not to indict the Jews for the fate of Jesus;

it is rather to reveal things hidden since the foundation of the world, to expose all the murders since Cain and Abel, the beginning of human culture. If the significance of the founding murder is not understood in reading and interpreting the Gospels, many Christians will see their only options as an anti-Jewish Gospel or no Gospel at all. "What is needed," says Girard, "is a critique of the narrowly anti-Jewish reading of the texts, not an indictment of the Gospels."



The possibility of an anti-Jewish or even "anti-Semitic" bias in the Gospels is often discussed nowadays. In order to be significant this discussion should not focus on matters of speech, such as the blanket substitution, in John, of the expression "the Jews" for the various religious groups mentioned under their specific names in the Synoptic Gospels. The real issue centers upon the large body of texts that seem to accuse the Jews, before the Passion, of preparing to kill Jesus in the same manner as they did many other victims. In the "Curses against the Pharisees," Jesus says: "You have killed all the prophets." The Jews are singled out, it seems, as a uniquely bloodthirsty nation that makes a habit of killing its holy men.

The parable of the murderous winemakers is an allegorized rendition of the same idea. After planting a vineyard on his own land, the owner entrusts it to tenants and departs for some distant land. From time to time, he sends messengers to collect his share of the crop, but, every time, all the winemakers get together and violently cast out these messengers, wounding or killing them in the process. The winemakers always act together and then, all together once again, they cast out and kill the last messenger, the owner's own son. This son is Jesus and the messengers are the prophets.

In the debate about the possible anti-Jewishness of the Gospels, the main evidence consists of this parable, plus the Curses against the Pharisees in the Synoptics, plus various texts in John, especially the one in which Jesus accuses his listeners of being the sons not of Abraham, as they claim, but of the devil "who was a murderer from the beginning."

Since I want to provide a global idea of my views, I must discuss all these texts; in the interest of space, however, I will greatly streamline my observations. In the texts mentioned above, the Jews are the foremost target of attack, but not the only one. In the statement about the murdered prophets, for example, Luke speaks of the blood "shed from the foundation of the world, the blood of Abel the just." There were no Jews at the time of Abel.

It can be objected that among both Jews and Christians, there is a tendency to regard the whole of Genesis as Jewish history. True enough,

but then, in the statement about the murdered prophets, how are we to interpret the expression *epi tēs gēs* in both Matthew and Luke? It means on the earth, all over the earth. If the murders at issue were committed all over the earth, how could the Jews alone be responsible for them?

This idea of worldwide murders interests me not because it spreads the guilt thinner, so to speak, but because it makes us wonder why the Gospels should mention these murders at all. As long as they seem exclusively Jewish, we read them as a rhetorical amplification of Jewish ferocity. "No wonder these Jews killed Jesus; they indiscriminately massacre all their holy men." This reading is certainly wrong, but, incredibly, it is still the only reading available, and that is why the question of an anti-Jewish bias in the Gospels has some legitimacy.

If the Passion is only one example of a kind of murder that occurs all over the world, the Gospels are saying something about human culture as such, something we still do not understand. In order to discover what that is, we must ask: which features of the Passion are characteristic of all these murders?

The parable of the vineyard suggests one feature: the murders are never individual but collective, or collectively inspired. This is good to know but not yet enough. We need a comparative analysis. Fortunately the Passion is not the only portrayal we have of one of these murders. Two of the four Gospels, Mark and Matthew, contain an account of a second murder, the beheading of John the Baptist. Since John is regarded as a prophet, his violent death should conform to the principle formulated by Jesus. It should be like the Passion. And indeed it is. In both accounts the main phenomenon is a polarization, or mobilization, of many people against a victim who, until that moment, had not aroused the hostility of his future murderers. As a matter of fact, a few days before the Passion, the people of Jerusalem had greeted Jesus with enthusiasm.

In both instances, it all begins with a few instigators or even a single one: the religious leaders in the case of Jesus, Herodias in the case of John. They are the only people whose hostility to the victims predates the polarization that they do their best to trigger. They are not essential. The polarization alone is essential. What is its cause? In the case of John, the answer is disconcertingly obvious. Herod's guests and Herod himself are mimetically carried away, possessed by the famous dance of Herodias's daughter. In pagan sacrifices the immolation of the victim is often preceded by ritual dances. The effects of such dancing, traditionally, are defined as mimetic. The purpose is to unite the participants against the victim. This is what happens in the case of John.

The Passion contains no counterpart to Salome's dance, but all observable instances of someone joining the hostile crowd are also mimetic. The most spectacular is the text traditionally entitled Peter's

denial. Like us moderns, Peter cannot stand the disapproval of his neighbors. In a Jerusalem crowd, he feels like an outsider and he wants to become an insider. He wants to show the people in the high priest's courtyard that he shares their feelings. He mimics what he presumes is the crowd's contempt for Jesus. He is the individual with the greatest spiritual investment in Jesus. If fidelity and steadfastness might be expected from anyone, they would be expected from him. The purpose of Peter's denial is not to indict a specific individual but to reveal how vulnerable even the best human beings are to mimetic polarizations such as we have in both murders.

Since we have reason to believe that all the violent murders mentioned in the Gospels are similar to the crucifixion and the beheading of John, we may also assume that they all result from mimetic polarizations. When Jesus says that he will die like all prophets before him, he means that his death will repeat a most ancient and worldwide pattern of mimetic violence. The common essence of these murders is something that modern observers vaguely identify as mob violence. Both the Passion and the death of John are sanctioned by a political authority, but this legal disguise does not really change the nature of the murders.

It has been suggested that Pilate's handling of Jesus reflects a pro-Roman bias or rather, once again, an anti-Jewish bias. The parallel handling of the Herod/John the Baptist relationship makes this interpretation most unlikely. There must be an intention common to both scenes, and it is readily intelligible. The sovereign, each time, must make his subservience to the crowd manifest. It will be manifest only if his personal desire differs from that of the crowd and yet, in the end, the crowd has its way. Herod and Pilate would like to save John and Jesus, but it cannot be done without antagonizing the crowd, and the two sovereigns yield to mimetic pressure; they become part of the crowd. The purpose is to show that a crowd in a lynching mood is the supreme power. For the Gospels, political power has been rooted in the crowd since the foundation of the world.

The coupling of the foundation of the world (*katabolē tou kosmou*) with the first murder is not a mere chronological coincidence. The importance of the idea is confirmed by the Gospel of John, which also has it, and in completely different words: "He [the devil] was a murderer from the beginning [*archē*]." Both statements refer not to divine creation, of course, but to the first human culture, which, in Genesis, is attributed to Cain. And Cain, indeed, has two titles to fame. The first is Abel's murder and the second is the creation of the first civilization or culture. A look at the text shows that the two events are one. The first law is the law against murder, and it is rooted in Abel's murder. The name Cain stands not for a single individual, but for the

entire community cemented by the first collective murder analogous to the Passion.

Human society began and continued with mimetic murders similar to the Passion. In order to explore this amazing idea, I will summarize everything in the Gospels that pertains to mimetic contagion, mimicry, imitation.

Both Jesus and Satan are teachers of imitation and imitators themselves, imitators of God the Father. This means that human beings always imitate God, either through Jesus or through Satan. They seek God indirectly through the human models they imitate. When the model determines his imitator's desire through his own acquisitive desire, they both desire the same object. This is mimetic rivalry; once it is triggered, the two competing desires mutually keep reinforcing each other and violence is likely to erupt.

Imitation must be intrinsically good, nevertheless, since Jesus recommends it. It will never lead us into temptation as long as we imitate him, Jesus, who, in turn, imitates God in a spirit of childish and innocent obedience. Since there is no acquisitive desire in God, this imitation cannot cause mimetic rivalry. Mimetic rivalry is not sin but rather a permanent occasion of sin. The sin occurs when our relentlessness makes the rivalry obsessive. Its name is envy, jealousy, pride, anger, despair. For this satanic exasperation of mimetic rivalry, the Gospels have a marvelous word, *skandalon*. The idea is biblical, and it means an obstacle against which one keeps stumbling. The Greek word appears first in the Greek Bible and it comes from a verb that signifies "to limp." The more we stumble against an obstacle, the easier it should be to avoid further stumbling, but, most frequently, the opposite happens: we stumble so much that we seem to be limping.

Skandalon designates the intersubjective process that results from a very general but not universal human failure to walk away from mimetic rivalry. *Skandalon* is the process through which we are attracted to whatever or, rather, whoever treats us badly. *Skandalon* is destructive addiction of all kinds: drugs, sex, power, and, above all, morbid competitiveness — professional, political, intellectual, spiritual. *Skandalon* is the aching tooth that we cannot stop testing with our tongue, even though it hurts more.

Scandals, Jesus says, must happen. When scandals start happening, their contagiousness ensures their endless proliferation. The disorder becomes so pervasive that society, it seems, should disintegrate. Since society more often than not endures, some counter-force must be at work, not decisive enough to keep scandals from happening, which they must, but powerful enough to moderate their effects, to keep them under some form of control.

Scandalized people, meaning all of us, feel that their scandals, their

personal problems, their most intense conflicts express something genuinely personal and unique in them, their innermost self. They are wrong. Being mimetic from the start, scandals become more so as they multiply and intensify. They become impersonal, anonymous, undifferentiated, and interchangeable. Beyond a certain threshold, they substitute for one another, with little or no awareness on our part. Scandals begin small, with two or three individuals, but, as they turn gregarious, they can grow very large.

People become so burdened with scandals that they desperately, if unconsciously, seek public substitutes, collective targets upon whom to unburden themselves. All those who join a belligerent crowd transfer their private scandals to some public target. As more and more people join in, the common victim's attractiveness as a victim increases, and the process becomes irresistible. This explains why Jesus uses the word scandal in connection with his Passion. When he warns his disciples that he is about to become a scandal to them, it really means that they will be affected by the mimetic tidal wave. In the case of Peter, we can follow this contamination in great detail, and what is true of him is true up to a point of the other disciples.

The violent unanimity of the Passion results from a snow-balling of scandals so powerful that even the disciples cannot escape it. The notion of scandal bridges the gap between individual and collective violence. When violence becomes unanimous, the victim has truly become the collective embodiment of all scandals and his or her destruction is experienced by individual participants as a destruction of his or her own scandal, a personal liberation. When this happens, peace immediately returns and the mob is no more. After Pilate surrenders to the crowd, all agitation subsides. The Cross becomes a spectacle at the end of which the mob peacefully disperses.

The crowd is appeased at the expense of an innocent victim. For this vicarious relief, the modern world has a word which, significantly, is borrowed from the Bible, "scapegoat." If scandals must keep happening, the survival and the very existence of human society may be dependent on periodical evacuations of scandals, on successful scapegoating.

We can understand now why, according to the Gospels, the foundation of the world should coincide with the first collective murder of the type exemplified by the Passion. Human culture and, no doubt, human religion are dependent on these murders. Jesus does not use the word "scapegoat," but he unquestionably refers to the process itself, and he identifies it as the founding mechanism of human society. He does this, I believe, when, right after the parable of the vineyard, he asks his puzzled listeners to interpret a quote from Psalm 118: "Do you understand what is said in this saying: The stone that the builders rejected has become the keystone?" The stone is rejected not by one builder, or by a

few, but by all. Since nothing else is said about that stone, except that it is rejected, it can only be the rejection that transforms the stone into the keystone, and those who reject it into the builders that they might not be otherwise. The metaphor is transparent and made more so by the proximity of the violent winemakers. The idea of the rejected stone applies not merely to Jesus, as we are always told, but to all previous victims of the united winemakers. It applies not to Christianity alone, therefore, but to all religious and cultural institutions of humankind.

The Gospels clearly understand the key role of scapegoat expulsion in human society and in countless religious cults, as well as in Jesus' death. Traditional Christians have not really absorbed all implications of this teaching. We can well understand why. If Jesus is right, how can the Christian religion be as unique as it claims? Is it not fundamentally the same as other scapegoat religions?

At the end of the last century, comparative anthropologists showed that the overall scheme of Christianity is very similar to the overall scheme of archaic religion. The rationalist conception of Christianity as hardly less mythical than other religions seemed to be confirmed. This conception began to spread, even inside the Christian churches, the Protestant first and the Catholic later. It was the main cause of the *modernist* movement, which has now expanded into the greatest crisis in the history of Christianity, a disintegration of the faith more radical than the earlier rationalism since it incorporates the suspicion that the Gospels might be not only mythical but belligerently so because of their alleged anti-Semitism.

The resemblances are no doubt striking between the overall Christian scheme of collective death and resurrection, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the sacred epiphany of many cults that may or may not be labeled a resurrection but that is also rooted, as a rule, in a collective murder. Primitive gods, primordial heroes, sacred kings, and founding ancestors are certainly keystones, each one in his or her territory, as a result of being the stones that the builders rejected.

The Gospel passages that I have discussed clearly confirm the structural similarities between the Christian revelation and countless other cults. By restricting their significance to the Jews, Christians have eluded this universal dimension, in an unconscious effort, perhaps, to postpone the crisis of faith that must have threatened Christianity almost from the beginning.

In order to bolster the uniqueness of their religion, Christians have always exaggerated the singularity of the Passion, its uniqueness as a violent event, and this tendency, inevitably, leads to an emphasis on the exceptional ferocity of the Jews. This trend contradicts the spirit and the letter of the Gospel texts discussed above. In the parable of the vineyard, the violence against the son is singled out because the victim is the son,

but not because of the violence itself, which is the same as always. If Jesus himself says that the Passion is one example among many similar murders, Christians must resign themselves to this idea. They cannot be more Christian than Jesus Christ, more evangelical than the Gospels.

If there is something genuinely unique about the Christian revelation, it will become visible on the basis of the similarities between the Christian and non-Christian religions, on the basis of the total Gospel, and not of a slightly rearranged or incomplete Gospel.

The Christian fear is suicidal nonsense. Far from leading to the end of all distinction, the acknowledgment of the founding murder as something that all religions share, including Christianity, is the real prerequisite for reaching the plane upon which Christian uniqueness becomes a matter of immediate evidence, an incontrovertible fact. In order to reach this plane we must go back to the moment when, in the aftermath of the Passion, the people involved divide into two groups. On the one hand, there is the large group of those united against Jesus: the religious and political leaders, as well as the bulk of the crowd. On the other hand, there is the small group of the first Christians.

Even though the Christian group is made up primarily of the original disciples, it is not some previous association with Jesus that determines its composition. For a while, during the Passion, it seemed that the mimetic consensus against Jesus was going to be unanimous. The Christians are the people who break away from the scapegoat consensus. Their communion is rooted in a passionate conviction that Jesus is innocent and was vindicated by God himself. This conviction is not an acceptance but a rejection of the founding murder that is uncritically espoused by the larger group.

Christianity, and prophetic Judaism, are the only examples of religions founded not on the blind acceptance of the founding murder but on a lucid rejection of it. The Gospels are the only example of a division of opinion regarding the founding murder. All other religions are continuous with this murder, which, as a result, does not appear as such. The people cannot distance themselves from it and challenge the justice of the victim's death. Everything we know about scapegoating comes from the Bible and, above all, from the New Testament.

The Gospels alone enable us to understand that religious epiphanies everywhere are rooted in scapegoat processes that must be spotted through indirect clues, such as the presumed guilt of the victim. We must question and demystify this guilt, just as the first Christians questioned and demystified the guilt of Jesus.

Whenever scapegoats truly function as scapegoats, they are seen as monsters of iniquity, whose expulsion is indispensable to the survival of the community. If the scapegoats were not unanimously feared and hated to start with, they could not sponge off the cesspool of scandals in-

side the community; they could not restore the peace. As a result of this process, these same scapegoats may arouse such gratitude and reverence that they are ultimately made divine. But their peace-making power is always dependent on a previous belief in their power as troublemakers.

Just as Jesus is guilty in the eyes of his persecutors, Oedipus is guilty in the eyes of his myth. Greek heroes are guilty; primitive gods are guilty; sacred kings are guilty. Archaic sacrifice runs parallel to myth. Before the immolation, the victims are regarded as malevolent and dangerous, and this is why they are often reviled before being killed. Only after the immolation do they become an object of reverence. This about-face reflects the effectiveness of unanimous scapegoating, which all rituals try to recapture in a spirit of religious piety, not of intersubjective manipulation.

Many myths and rituals conform to the pattern just outlined. Many others do not, and the reason is that religions keep evolving. After a while, the malevolence of the scapegoat is covered over by the benevolence of the god, which is retroactively extended to the preimmolation period. For a long time, however, many traces of scapegoating remain. Then, even these traces may disappear, except for two, I believe, that remain forever. The first is the innocence of the sacrificers; and the second, inseparable from the first, is the idea that the violence is necessary, justified by some higher good, even when it degenerates into political opportunism. This is exemplified in another great Gospel definition of scapegoating, Caiaphas's definition: "It is better that one man should die and that the whole nation not perish."

In non-Christian religions, scapegoat effectiveness is misinterpreted as something divine around which the people unite, but this "around" is necessarily preceded and determined by an "against." Only the Gospels do away with the initial "against." Only the Gospels denounce the founding violence as an evil that should be renounced. Only the Gospels put the blame not on the victim, but on the violent perpetrators. Only the Gospels do not regard the violence as sacred and do not transfigure it. Only the Gospels portray this violence as the vulgar scapegoat phenomenon that it is, the fruit of mimetic contagion. Only the Gospels reveal the founding murder as a fruit of humanity's fallen state, a sin that God alone can absolve.

The same scapegoating that myth misunderstands and therefore reveres as sacred truth, the Gospels understand and denounce as the lie that it really is. This denunciation is the alpha and omega of all genuine deconstruction and demythification.

When Jesus is called "the lamb of God," it means that he is an innocent scapegoat. But the expression is both more beautiful and more appropriate than scapegoat. The idea of vicarious immolation is retained, but the ugliness of the goat is eliminated. The injustice of the

victim's death is made more obvious. Far from being the scapegoat religion par excellence, Christianity is the only religion that explicitly rejects scapegoating as a basis for a religious epiphany.

Many critics reject my views on the grounds that, being as visible as it is in the Gospels, the scapegoat mechanism must be operational in them, whereas myth and ritual are ambiguous about it and therefore one should wisely remain silent about their connection with scapegoating. These critics do not realize that the word "scapegoat," in the modern usage, which I make mine, defines a principle of collective self-deception, which, by definition, cannot be formulated in the texts that it structures. They always think in terms of a scapegoat "theme" or "motif." They find it extremely easy, therefore, to refute the mimetic theory, but the objections they brandish are misinterpreted evidence in its favor. They simply do not understand what I mean by generative scapegoating.



I can now return to my original question about the presumed anti-Jewishness of the Gospels. This accusation is false. The texts upon which it relies have a much vaster scope than New Testament exegetes have realized: they reveal the violent origin of all human societies. The anti-Jewish reading of these texts is the reason their real meaning is still generally misunderstood. All misunderstanding of the Gospels inevitably triggers a relapse into scapegoating, which occurs this time at the expense of the Jews. And another necessary consequence is that some of the violent sacred is reinjected into the text of the Gospels, in the violence of the Passion, which tends to be regarded as not quite human. In the Middle Ages, it seemed superhuman, in the sense of the Homeric gods intervening in the battles between the Greeks and the Trojans. With the waning of religious faith, this distortion turns into an indictment of the Jews. The disintegration of a Christianity somewhat contaminated with the spirit of scapegoating (sacrificial Christianity) is bound to generate Christian anti-Semitism.

The Gospels are not anti-Jewish, but as long as the significance of the founding murder in the texts that have nourished Christian anti-Semitism is not widely acknowledged, many Christians will believe that the only choice is between an anti-Semitic Gospel and no Gospel at all. What is needed is a critique of the narrowly anti-Jewish reading of the texts, not an indictment of the Gospels. The critics who indict the Gospels take for granted that the traditional reading is the good one, the only possible one. Their negative conservatism exonerates Christians from any feeling of guilt regarding their own anti-Semitism, which is quite real, of course, unlike the anti-Semitism of the Gospels.

The Christians can thus say to themselves: we are not responsible for scapegoating the Jews. We were misled by our religion. We sincerely be-

lieved what the Gospels taught us and they made anti-Semites out of us. It is probably inevitable that the relentless human effort to elude the substance of the Gospels should end up with this remarkable new twist: a scapegoating of the very text that made scapegoating intelligible to us by refusing it in all its forms.