

Scapegoating – The Artery Of Common Blood

By Philip J Hunt, Regional Vice President, Middle East & Eastern Europe Region, World Vision International

An artery of common blood flows through Chechnya, Iraq and Austria. And beyond to every part of the earth.

It is the blood of the scapegoat. One of the ancient and most deeply ingrained characteristics of human society continues to be acted out. And remarkably, few see it. Well, maybe that's not so remarkable at all. Something so deep and essential to human nature seems unremarkable to those locked within their own nature.

Scapegoating has been going on since the Garden of Eden: long before the Hebrew Torah gave us the label. Scapegoating is the phenomenon in society in which social cohesion is created at the expense of the victim. It is the creation of social harmony by the creation of a common enemy. It is practised because it works. For everyone. Except the victim.

It is always easier to see scapegoating at work in someone else's society. So let's look at modern Russia. Here we have Vladimir Putin who celebrated his New Year's Day elevation to the Presidency by making a much publicised visit to Chechnya. There, he accused the Chechens of a number of bomb attacks against other Russian citizens. Although to separate the scapegoats from the rest, he did not call them "other" Russians.

The war on the Chechens has been very popular in the rest of Russia. As any anthropologist or politician would predict. Of course, that's the real reason Putin has his war. Popularity is important to someone who is about to face an election.

Social cohesion (popularity) is created at the expense of the victim. It is a fact of human society. But this common fact runs through other societies as well.

Thousands of children are dying in Iraq every month. In a society that little more than ten years ago had the best health care in the Middle East. Under the same President. But Saddam Hussein, once the darling of the arms sales force in the US, has now become the scapegoat. And all the mechanisms of State propaganda feed a frequently compliant media to remind American citizens that "few world leaders pose more of a potential threat to US and western interests than Saddam Hussein does." (from a recent letter circulating in Congress)

Two powerful symbols are pressed unwillingly into service. First, the sanctions themselves. Obviously, the public think, anyone this dangerous must have sanctions imposed on him. Second, the dying children. Their existence only proves how bad Mr Hussein really is. With good-heartedness, the oil-for-food program offers assistance, but, so the story goes, Mr Hussein doesn't deliver.

The truth is different. The oil-for-food program does not work. The regular resignation of disgusted UN officials suggests as much. But the facts are clear. US and UK obstruction in the oil-for-food program is currently holding up USD1.5 billion worth of goods. That's a lot of aid. Three times the annual budget for World Vision for the whole world! Worse, the infrastructure that allowed Iraq to lead the Middle East in social services was destroyed in the Gulf War and since. And now no

aid is permitted to restore the infrastructure that might help to deliver the aid. And no US citizens, or US-based organisations, are permitted to go and help.

Scapegoating Mr Hussein is enormously popular in much of the rest of the world. In common with all scapegoating events, the pointed finger of accusation is highly contagious. Even in Israel, it's popular to vilify Mr Hussein. I say "even in Israel" because surely the Jews understand what it is like to be made into scapegoats. Yet, it is a characteristic of this phenomenon in society that the scapegoaters almost never see the underlying cause of their behaviour. At almost no other level of human behaviour is there a more powerful mechanism of rationalisation and self-justification.

Which brings the common artery to Austria. Even Israel objected to a right-wing party forming a coalition government in Vienna. The rationale is clear. It was right-wingers, Nazis in fact, in Austria who perpetrated the gross scapegoating of European Jews in the last century. But something deeper may be going on here that is a little harder to see.

On the one hand we have the ideal of European Union. On the other hand, we have the need to create social cohesion. The most effective and primordial mechanism for that is scapegoating. Yet, since the rusting away of the Iron Curtain, Europe has lacked scapegoats. In many former Iron Curtain regimes, this has resulted in the rediscovery of ancient scapegoats. Serbs and Albanians. Roma (gypsies) and Romanians. Armenians and Azeris. In Western Europe, it is mostly migrants who have been accused. Until now.

Suddenly, with the democratic election of a populist right wing party in Austria, the rest of Western Europe has decided to pull together against a new foe. The "pulling together" and the "foe" are both essential to the scapegoating mechanism.

Is there a way to overcome this phenomenon? Or are we forever damned to live in societies which victimise? The answer is a religious one.

Around two thousand years ago a religious leader advised that it was expedient that one man should die for the people. In so doing Caiaphas articulated the scapegoating mechanism as well as any anthropologist. And Jesus died, a victim of State violence. And the crowds cheered.

But this is the One who showed us the way to live without scapegoating. He announced a world in which love and justice and peace would create social cohesion. Not hate, injustice and victimisation.

What would it take to have such a world? More than any of our present human institutions can offer. So much is clear. To rise above the scapegoating tendency of human nature will take a complete transformation of human nature. It might actually take an Act of God. It might require such a change that it would be like being born again.