



Ever noticed how the previous chief

executive always gets the blame? At least until he or she becomes the one before the previous one? Then, very likely, they will be restored to a position of honour and praise. What's going on there?

When Slobodan Milosevic's plan to be the new Tito fell apart into the Balkan wars of the last decade, the West, led by the USA, made various attempts at peace and included Milosevic as a necessary part of the peace making process. By the time NATO got round to bombing Serbia, and a million Kosovars were running for their lives, Milosevic had become *persona non grata*. Why the turnaround?

After a monumentally bad season, the Fremantle Dockers sacked their coach, Damian Drum. Drum heard the news from the media. What's going on there?

Joe Gutnick saved the Melbourne Football Club when the merger with Hawthorn failed. They appreciated it so much they made him Club President. After a few years he fell out of favour and was sacked/pushed/resigned (select one). The fact that Joe is

Jewish and does not fit the stereotype of a Melbourne Football Club member, let alone President, of course, had nothing to do with it. When an ABC commentator asked Alan Stockdale whether Joe's ethnicity was a factor, Stockdale exploded in rage as if a Big Red Button had been pushed. What's happening here?

Melbourne University researchers have been investigating the activities of the Greek General, Xenophon and his army of 10,000 men in the year 401 BC. The Sunday Age reported on their discoveries recently. The second paragraph read like this:

"Ten thousand men once passed this way. They travelled light and lightly armed, leaving behind the charred remains of camps, bodies of the dead and those who had succumbed to snow-blindness or lost toes to frostbite. A soothsayer proposed a sacrifice to appease the cold north wind and there was 'a distinct falling off in violence' wrote the Greek General."

What connects all these stories?

Rene Girard unlocked the key to understanding the connection between violence and society. When cultures fall apart, they fall into violence: and when they revive themselves, they do so with violence.

Girard was a French Catholic academic working in the United States. He wrote two seminal works, *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and *Things Hidden Since The Foundation Of The World* (1978 in French, 1987 in English).

He described the mechanism by which cultures are created, and the structure of myth that keeps them going. This mechanism is called the scapegoating mechanism, and it works like this:

Violence in a society is resolved by blaming a victim. A victim is identified. They are accused as being responsible for the violence in the society. They are killed.

When I describe this mechanism to a group and ask for examples, the three that are identified most commonly are witches, the Jews in Hitler's Germany and the French aristocracy at the time of the French revolution.

When the victim is accused, something miraculous happens. The community finds itself of one mind. There is enormous common purpose and wondrous social cohesion. Indeed, a kind of peace.

Football crowds provide examples of this kind of response. All the supporters of one team unite in disparagement of the “white maggot” when an umpiring decision goes against their team. Anyone who has not felt the thrill of unanimity when you rise with 50,000 other people at the MCG in common vilification of a bad umpiring decision, must be emotionally dead.

Finally, when the victim is killed, peace and stability returns to the community.

Now Girard was not the first to observe that there is a link between violence and social solidarity. It is a common phenomenon observed by sociologists and writers for centuries. Just read how George Orwell’s Big Brother creates social cohesion by ensuring everyone believes the society is under siege from a violent enemy. And most managers and leaders know that the easiest way to get a group to work together is to create a common enemy.

Girard’s insight is to see that the scapegoating mechanism is at the very heart of our modern society.

Why is this an insight at all? Why is it not more obvious? Why has it taken aeons for such an insight to become possible? The answer to this lies in the way myth works in society. Myth often works to obscure and reinterpret the violence. Myth makes the unacceptable acceptable.

For example, in Nazi Germany a myth emerged that the Jews were (a) manipulators of world finances and (b) responsible for poverty in Germany in the 1930s. If anyone were to be held responsible for poverty in Germany between the wars it was the victors of World War I who crippled the German economy with retribution. The poverty caused by the revenge of the winners provided the social milieu in which Nazism could rise. It also created economic violence which needed to be scapegoated. The myth that the Jews were responsible created a justification for their murder. And, coincidentally, their murders created social cohesion in the rest of society. But only so long as the myth served to obscure the innocence of the victims. Most people in Germany believed the myth of their culpability. They deserved to die, or so people believed.

Without myth, we would see what we had done. Myth obscures the truth of the event. It prevents us from saying sorry.

When I worked in World Vision I observed that people who get caught up in mob violence sometimes reach a point of contrition. People would say, “How could I have done that?” For some it may be the next day. For others, longer. For many, never.

The role of myth is to extend the gap between the violence and the contrition. So long as the myths hold true, the violence can be viewed as justified and necessary.

What forms does myth take?

In ancient society it took the form of religion. Most often, the victim became a god, which is a pretty effective way of obscuring their status as a victim!

But what kind of god? Invariably, a god who demanded more victims. So human sacrifice became an essential part of early religion.

The effect of human sacrifice was to re-enact the scapegoating event with as much horror and blood as before. The re-enactment attempted to recreate the sense of social cohesion that the mob murder of a victim creates.

In time, human sacrifice was transformed into animal sacrifice. And then into evermore symbolic sacrifices.

Until today, most of our sacrificial rituals are symbolic and so clouded in myth that we do not even have an inkling of what lies beneath them. These are “things hidden since the foundation of the world.”

What are our modern sacrificial rituals? Removal of leaders (elections, succession), sport (what Orwell called “war without guns”), actual wars (against the Taliban, the Iraqis, etc), ambition (victory over others in promotion), keeping up with the Joneses (which is really about beating up the non-Joneses).

Getting tired? Let’s play a word association game. If I say the word “victim” what pops into your head? Most people will answer “innocent.” What makes us, in the 21st century, associate innocence with victims. It was not always thus.

For example, let me tell you a story from 14th century France. There was a certain village which had four bad harvests in a row. After some discussion among the townspeople it was discovered that there was an old woman living on the edge of the village who was a witch. The witch was accused of causing the bad harvests and was killed by the townspeople. The next year’s harvest was much improved.

Was the woman a witch? Most people today would say she was not. And even those who still believe in the possibility that she was a witch would probably agree that she was not responsible for the bad harvests. We know today that she was innocent.

How do we know that?

The usual answer is that since we invented science, we know that witches do not cause bad harvests. But, if we understand the role of scapegoating and myth in society we might see that we could not have invented science, until we had stopped believing in witches. Why should we put effort into inventing science, when we already had a perfectly satisfactory way of understanding what was going on with our agriculture (viz., that bad harvests were caused by witches)?

As long as we believed in witches we needed no other explanation.

As long as Robespierre could maintain the myth of the guilt of the French aristocracy, he could have a cohesive revolution.

As long as Hitler could maintain the myth of Jewish guilt, he could hold the Nazi Reich together.

And, the reverse idea is also true. Victims can have social cohesion by believing the myths of their victim-ness.

As long as Milosevic could maintain the idea that the Serbian people were the perpetually innocent victims of the Turks, Austrians, Croats and NATO he could hold the Serb people together.

Similarly, as long as the Jews see themselves as the perennially innocent victims, a form of social cohesion is maintained.

The important historical question is why these mythical structures broke down.

Why is it that stories like “The Scarlet Pimpernel” arose to puncture the idea that all the French aristocrats were guilty?

How is that we no longer believe in the guilt of the Jews? Even in Germany and Austria, hardly anybody believes this today—even if their parents or grandparents may have once.

Why is it that Milosevic, who once held the Serbian nation together, is now handed over by them in exchange for the modern equivalent of thirty pieces of silver? And the deed is done in the most symbolic way possible for Serbs, on St Vitus Day. The answer to this question is “Jesus Christ.”

Girard writes that the New Testament “is the essential text in the cultural upheaval of the modern world.” Gil Bailie, writing in *Violence Unveiled* (1995) says the central event in the New Testament is “a public execution, an act of official violence regarded as legally righteous by the political authorities and as a sacred duty by the religionists.”

Did the people who killed Jesus think he was innocent? No way. They were certain he was guilty. The political authorities were certain they were legally right. The religious authorities were certain they were within God’s will. Caiaphas avows that “it was expedient that one man die for the people” thus stating the scapegoating principle with perfect precision.

Jesus was a scapegoat. And in most respects, the crucifixion of Jesus is not dissimilar to the official murders of thousands of victims before or since. Yet in one respect it is very different.

“The Gospels tell a perfectly typical story of victimisation with astonishing insight into the role religious zeal and mob psychology played in it. Most importantly, and contrary to all myth, the story is told from the point of view of the victim and not that of the religious community of persecutors” says Gil Bailie.

The voice of the victim is heard. We see the innocence of the victim. And the scapegoating mechanism is unveiled.

We hear the victim’s cry from the concentration camps, and the Nazi myth is destroyed.

We hear the voices of Kosovars while the Serbian paramilitaries are burning their houses, and the myth of Serb victimhood is shattered.

And, later, we hear via the Internet what it is like to live in Belgrade while NATO bombs away, and the myth of Serb aggression is likewise demolished.

Once we see how scapegoating works, it does not work too well any more. It is as if our minds have been “infected with a demythologising virus that the Gospel has let loose in the world.” (Bailie).

And so we have been living these past 2000 years in a time when the scapegoating mechanism, upon which culture has relied for its security, is being systematically subverted by the message of the Cross. The revelation of the Gospel makes us aware of the innocence of victims and it deconstructs the justifying myths, rendering them impotent.

I leave the last word to Gil Bailie—“Empathy for the victim and the need for our rituals of victimisation are incompatible. Sooner or later one of them will have to prevail over the other.”

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The best introduction to the Girardian Hypothesis is Gil Bailie’s book “Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads.” It is available at www.florilegia.org