

The Double-Edged Sword of Proximity: the Dialectic of Hostility and Hospitality in Light of God's Cruciform Love

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Abstract

Some religious cultures exacerbate conflict by treating people who are of different religious orientations with antagonism - "othering" them - and rationalizing their treatment with a religious view that God's nature includes hostility for the sake of justice. Anthropologist René Girard contended that this perceived hostility was in truth a projection of human nature and an effect of mimetic desire fueling rivalry. Girard theorized that utilizing a scapegoat mechanism through the ritual act of sacrifice eased rivalry-built tensions and temporarily reestablished unity. It naturally followed that this scapegoating hostility would become embedded in religion, including in Judeo-Christian theology. Alternatively, cruciform theology interprets God's nature through what Jesus Christ exemplified on the cross, when he subverted human violence and hostility by absorbing and forgiving it through self-humbling, self-giving love. Contemplative priest Henri Nouwen presents God through this lens, exhorting Christ-followers to move from human hostility into God's hospitality and insisting that this movement is integral to living a life in the Holy Spirit. So how does one reconcile Old Testament biblical narratives that portray God as condoning or responsible for violence? What about the use of animal slaughter and a scapegoat embedded in the origin of Jewish religious law? This paper will highlight the relationship between hostility and hospitality, consider René Girard's insight around mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism, and apply Henri Nouwen's wisdom and a Christotelic interpretation¹ to the Hebrew Bible story of the Israelites establishing their Tabernacle and religious rituals. It will conclude that God's nature is non-hostile and that the church² is meant to demonstrate God's hospitality in a multi-faith world.

¹ By Christotelic interpretation, I mean a hermeneutic or way of interpreting the Bible that views Jesus Christ as the ultimate goal of God's Word. "Christotelic" derives from the Greek words *Christos* (Christ) and *telos* (end or goal).

² This paper interprets the church in a universal sense. The church consists of anyone and everyone worldwide - past, present, and future - who is a believer in Jesus Christ.

Introduction

In an academic conversation between Peace and Justice graduate students, a public theologian, and a scholar professor around the topic of Christian identity in a multi-faith world, one student queried, “Do you have any insight on how to respond hospitably amid pervasive hostility in inter-religious spaces, much less within ourselves?”³ She had been chewing on Henri Nouwen’s wisdom about the spiritual movement from hostility to hospitality, eager to apply it.⁴

“Ahhh,” the theologian mused. “Let me tell you about René Girard’s mimetic theory and how the deep embeddedness of hostility in religion relates to your question.”

“Yes,” added the professor, “the connection between hostility and hospitality in relationships is because they are two sides of the same sword. They are the double-edged sword of proximity.”⁵ Indeed.

Intriguingly, this double-edged sword seems to penetrate through the Hebrew Bible, from Eden’s transgression through Mosaic laws and rituals, to eventually pierce Jesus’ side at Calvary. Its human-hostility-carved swath extends today whenever religions justify hostile “othering” or violence against their proximal neighbors, in the name of so-called “godly justice.”⁶ In contrast, Christian identity should form around the unique person and ways of Jesus Christ, who New Testament writers believed was God Incarnate, living in solidarity with humankind.⁷

So how did Jesus navigate the double-edged sword of proximity with humans? The biblical witness of his death and resurrection seems to depict his subversion of hostility and violence through divine hospitality. Instead of justifiably responding in kind (with hostility) toward his persecutors,⁸ Jesus embodied humble, self-giving love and bestowed forgiveness as he chose to share in, suffer, and absorb

³ Brian McLaren and Dr. Andrew Klager, virtual class discussion for the Religion, Peace and Culture graduate course at St. Stephen’s University, March 27, 2024, https://canvas.instructure.com/courses/8475461/pages/recorded-zoom-session-number-3-brian-mclaren?module_item_id=105338072.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1986).

⁵ The phrase “the double-edged sword of proximity” is credited to Dr. Andrew Klager.

⁶ Mainline Calvinist, Evangelical, Baptist, and Pentecostal Protestant Christian theologies understand God’s justice as retributive, as described in penal substitutionary atonement theory (PSA). Per PSA, God required punishment (specifically death) for human sin and Jesus was substitutionally punished for the sins of humanity.

⁷ John 1:14 and 16-18 (NRSVUE) state, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth...And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is only the Son, himself God, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”

⁸ For example, Jesus could have summoned angels to wage war against his “enemies” (see Matthew 26:53).

the fullness of all sin on the cross.⁹ Having put eternal death to death when he died and resurrected, Jesus demonstrated his authority to overcome hostility and violence as he generously shared his new, restorative life with anyone and everyone who would receive it. If to behold and know Jesus was to behold and know God,¹⁰ then Jesus ultimately exemplified God's nature as merciful, kenotic, cruciform love.¹¹

One wonders, how could religious antagonism be transformed by applying this cruciform love as a salve along hostility's path through Scripture and present day theology? This essay considers the biblical narrative used by some Christian denominations to reinforce their belief that God's holy justice and forgiveness required blood-shedding sacrifice.¹² Integrating insights of René Girard and Henri Nouwen, a Christotelic¹³ interpretation of the story of the Israelites establishing their Tabernacle and religious rituals¹⁴ reflects God's nature as non-hostile within the human dialectic of hostility and hospitality and inspires the church's¹⁵ hospitable role today.

The Dual-Edged Sword of Proximity: Hostility and Hospitality

The Latin word *hostis*, which means stranger, is a root shared by both hostility and hospitality, with a hostile stranger regarded as an enemy and a favorable stranger as a guest.¹⁶ The Latin word *hospes* denotes a guest or a host who entertains or provides sanctuary to strangers.¹⁷ Etymologically related, *hosti-pot-s* translates as "one 'who has power over the stranger,'... [where] a host may be benevolent and generous or, with the slightest shift of emphasis, hold someone hostage."¹⁸ The potential

⁹ 1 Peter 2:24 (NRSVUE) states, "He [Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."

¹⁰ See John 1:18, Colossians 1:15-20, Hebrews 1:3.

¹¹ Cruciform (metaphorically cross-shaped) love was revealed by and through Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection, as just described.

¹² Hebrews 9:22 says that Mosaic law required "that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (NIV).

¹³ By Christotelic interpretation, I mean a hermeneutic or way of interpreting the Bible that views Jesus Christ as the ultimate goal of God's Word. "Christotelic" derives from the Greek words *Christos* (Christ) and *telos* (end or goal).

¹⁴ As recorded in Exodus 35-37 and Leviticus 1-7 and 16.

¹⁵ This paper interprets the church in a universal sense. The church consists of anyone and everyone worldwide - past, present, and future - who believes in and follows Jesus Christ's teachings.

¹⁶ "7: Hospitality," Harvard.edu, accessed May 6, 2024.

<https://archive.chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/3898.7-hospitality>.

¹⁷ Panu Minkkinen "Hostility and Hospitality," Nofoundations.com, accessed May 6, 2024, <https://www.nofoundations.com/issues/NoFo4Minkkinen.pdf>.

¹⁸ Ligaya Mishan, Kyoko Hamada, and Victoria Petro-Conroy, "When Did Hospitality Get So Hostile?" *The New York Times*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/10/t-magazine/restaurants-hostile-eating-out.html>.

for an encountered stranger — or even a co-worker or friend — to switch intention at any time sharpens the dual-edged sword of proximity.

René Girard's Mimetic Theory, Hostility, and Jesus

René Girard's theory of mimetic desire sheds light on proximity's dialectic that traces back to the origins of culture and religion, when humans were emerging as a species.¹⁹ Neuroscience confirms that humans learn as "mimetic, or acquisitively imitational creatures."²⁰ The hardwiring of our brains to imitate one another connects us in "deep and powerful ways with everyone, those we love and those we despise," producing an evolutionary advantage through this sense of being united in similarity.²¹ Girard noticed that humans not only imitate others' actions, but they also copy each other's desires — wanting something only because they observed someone else wanting it first. This mimetic desire or non-conscious imitation makes humans prone to rivalry, since their ideas and objects of desire are based on their model's ideas and desires. Girard noted that mimetic desire "carries the potential of bringing us into conflict, even violence, with the models we imitate, for there always lurks the danger that we might compete with them for the [same] objects of desire we have learned from them."²² Rivalry and escalating imitative violence fracture relational connection and threaten survival.

Our early ancestors dealt with the problem of intra-communal rivalry and violence by "transferring their collective hostility onto a random victim, a scapegoat."²³ Girard described the effect of utilizing a scapegoat as

"that strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters. They feel relieved of their tensions and they coalesce into a more harmonious group. They now have a single purpose, which is to prevent the scapegoat from harming them, by expelling or destroying him."²⁴

The euphoric unity elicited by the scapegoat mechanism stimulated its adoption as repetitive ritual violence implemented to stop internal communal violence. Furthermore, it undergirded the process of

¹⁹ Michael Hardin, *The Jesus Driven Life* (Lancaster, PA: JDL Press, 2013), 158.

²⁰ René Girard. *The Girard Reader* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), viii.

²¹ Hardin, 155.

²² Girard, viii.

²³ Hardin, 158.

²⁴ Girard, 12.

developing broader civilization by “using violence to stop the threat of greater violence.”²⁵ That this survival strategy was also deeply embedded in religion is reflected in a “very well-known word, *hostia*,...[which means] ‘the victim which serves to appease the anger of the gods.’”²⁶

The biblical account of Jesus’ lifetime indicates an intense cultural lust for a *hostia*, fueled by the rivalrous political, economic, and religious power dynamics and unrest. Jesus revealed a countering truth about God’s nature and violence by modeling a new way to live and love. Girardian philosophy expert James Williams described Jesus as “the innocent [scapegoat] victim who [was] crucified [and] vindicated through his resurrection from the dead” and who overcame “mimetic desire and violence through the nonviolence of love and forgiveness.”²⁷ Jesus’ forgiveness subverted man’s hostility and became a transformative invitation of radical hospitality to “undergo a complete conversion as [people] move from being lost in the mimetic desire of [their environment] to imitating Christ.”²⁸

Henri Nouwen’s Movement from Hostility to Hospitality, and Jesus

Henri Nouwen considered the gracious move from hostility to hospitality as integral to living a life in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.²⁹ “Reaching out” instead of lashing out and “inviting in” instead of retracting can help “offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.”³⁰ Nouwen wrote,

"Society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. But still — that is our vocation: to convert the *hostis* into a *hospes*, the enemy into a guest and to create a free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.”³¹

Nouwen believed that in offering space where people can be encouraged to disarm themselves of *hostis* and to listen to the voices speaking in their own center, we could also become recipients of

²⁵ Hardin, 158.

²⁶ “7: Hospitality,” n.d. Harvard.edu, accessed May 6, 2024, <https://archive.chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/3898.7-hospitality>.

²⁷ James Williams, Foreword to *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* by René Girard (Orbis Books, 2001), ix and xviii.

²⁸ Williams, ix.

²⁹ Nouwen, 65.

³⁰ Nouwen, 65.

³¹ Nouwen, 66.

gracious gifts, of *hospes* from God, carried within those we welcome.³² Nouwen exhorted, "When hostility is converted into hospitality then fearful strangers can become guests in revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them. Then, in fact, the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial and evaporates in the recognition of the new found unity."³³

Profoundly, Jesus seemed to raise awareness of this evaporation of distinction in his prayer, as recorded in John 17, when he invoked an infinitely hospitable oneness realized in the unity of Christ.³⁴ The communing love relationship between Jesus and his Father offered a space of God's *hospes* where Jesus-believers could disarm themselves of *hostis*, could become one with what Nouwen considered the voices at one's own center, and could share in Jesus' belovedness and gracious glory. Jesus' apostle Paul later expounded that in Christ, everyone was unified as beloved children of God, which nullified the cultural categories and prejudicial delineations conjured up by humanity to manipulate power and justify hostility.³⁵ Paul beseeched early Christians to be free of the world's ways and to fearlessly embody their identity as God's transforming mimetic image-bearers, through imitating Jesus.³⁶ Paul also conceived of Christians as sanctifying hosts — metaphorical temples — of the indwelling Spirit who gave various gifts to them, to be used for the common good.³⁷ They would each carry their gifts as members of a unified body of Christ, comprised of many diverse, valuable, and integrated parts.³⁸ Their lived expressions of sharing in Jesus' oneness with God would distribute gifts of God's *hospes* — to convert or transform the *hostis* around them through love.

God's Hospitality During Moses' Time

A deeper look at God's hospitality during the time of Moses shows a dire need to recalibrate the Israelites from the pagan customs of their surroundings — where ritual human sacrifice to Molech was common — into a reformed sense of identity around God's revelation as Yahweh.³⁹ Initially, God's proximity presented a terrifying dialectic: while Moses reflected God's hospitality with a radiant face,

³² Nouwen, 76.

³³ Nouwen, 67.

³⁴ See John 17:20-26.

³⁵ Categories like Jew or Greek, slave or free, and male or female were nullified - see Galatians 3:36-38.

³⁶ See 2 Corinthians 3:18.

³⁷ See 1 Corinthians 6:19 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-7.

³⁸ See 1 Corinthians 12:4-27.

³⁹ See Leviticus 18:21, Exodus 42:6, 29-30, and "First Person: Human Sacrifice to an Ammonite God?" N.d. Biblicalarchaeology.org, accessed May 8, 2024. <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/daily-life-and-practice/first-person-human-sacrifice-to-an-ammonite-god/>.

nearness to God for everyone else was experienced as a hostile threat of violent death.⁴⁰ Over time, Moses mediated God's incremental self-revelation to his community, eventually establishing a foundation of prohibitions (Mosaic Law) and religious rituals that would increase the Israelites' cohesion as well as transition them out of the hostility of their paganistic influences into more hospitable fellowship with God and each other. Applying Henri Nouwen's wisdom to this ancient time,

“if we expect any salvation, redemption, healing and new life, the first thing we need is an open receptive place where something can happen to us...To convert hostility into hospitality requires the creation of...space where we can reach out to [God and] our fellow human beings and invite them to a new relationship. This conversion is an inner event that cannot be manipulated but must develop from within.”⁴¹

The symbolism of the Tabernacle with its corresponding offerings and non-human sacrifices created this receptive place of inner transformation and prefigured the cruciform welcome of God.

Hospitable Building

When the Israelites built the Tabernacle based on the spoken blueprints given by God to Moses, the entire process of construction was initiated and sustained in a spirit of hospitality. Moses invited those “whose heart urges him, let him bring it, a donation” for the Tabernacle, its furnishings, and priestly garments.⁴² In glorious generosity, “every gifted artisan in whose heart the Lord put wisdom, everyone whose heart willed freely to come and do the work” brought “more freewill gifts morning after morning” until they contributed more than enough.⁴³ Out of the lavish provision of wisdom and materials donated by the Israelites (who first received God's lavish provision), they gave of their time and treasure to fashion what God envisioned for them: a place where they would learn how to reach out to God, converting inevitable human hostility through a renewed relationship of hospitality.

Recalibrating Violence

⁴⁰ See Exodus 34:29-35 and Exodus 19.

⁴¹ Nouwen, 76.

⁴² Exodus 35:5, from Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: WW Norton, 2018).

⁴³ Exodus 36:2-5, from St. Athanasius Academy of Orthodox Theology, *The Orthodox Study Bible, Hardcover: Ancient Christianity Speaks to Today's World* (Thomas Nelson, 2008).

The Tabernacle was the place where “a comprehensive system of ritual sacrifices [was] offered by the priests on behalf of the people, thus giving the Hebrews a means to be reconciled with God and to restore harmony amongst themselves, relationships disrupted by sin.”⁴⁴ Interpreted through a literalist, non-Christotelic hermeneutic, the blood-shedding of Hebrew offering rituals has misled many Christians to believe that God’s disposition is sometimes violent, in a “holy hostile” respect. In truth, the Israelites’ sacrifice rituals limited violence compared to their surrounding culture and recalibrated them with the sanctity of human life and the dignity of animals. With every animal sacrifice, there was an identification between the domestic animal and the one on whose behalf it was offered, allowing the person or community to sense the transference of their own hostility and infractions into the animal and to experience forgiveness.⁴⁵ Through the Tabernacle rituals, the Israelites’ consciousness of gracious mercy and compassion grew, subverting the destructive patterns of human mimetic desire and violence in a sacramental framework that would express the ancient Hebrew cosmological emphasis on union between God and creation.⁴⁶

Offerings and Day of Atonement

Interpreted through a Christotelic lens, the Tabernacle offerings prefigured God’s cruciform hospitality.⁴⁷ Every morning and night, people offered burnt offerings, also called ascension offerings based on the Hebrew word *olah* which means “ascent” or “that which goes up.”⁴⁸ An animal was offered and accepted as atonement on a person’s behalf and then burned entirely in order to generate “a fragrant odor to the Lord.”⁴⁹ The whole animal’s value was surrendered to God through fire as a sort of purifying agent that transformed the atoms of wood and animal into smoke — a new mode that could go

⁴⁴ *The Orthodox Study Bible* note, 140.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Matt Tebbe and Ben Sternke. “Andrew Rillera: Debunking Penal Substitutionary Atonement.” Gravity Commons, June 26, 2024. <https://gravitycommons.com/podcast/andrew-rillera-debunking-penal-substitutionary-atonement/>.

⁴⁷ Cruciform (metaphorically cross-shaped) hospitality was revealed as when Jesus forgave (instead of imitating) the hostility and violence of the cross and subverted and transformed them through his resurrection and offering of new, Spirit-filled and guided life.

⁴⁸ Note on Leviticus 6:12-16, *The Orthodox Study Bible*; and “Strong’s Hebrew: 5930. עֹלָה (Olah) -- Ascent.” n.d. Biblehub.com, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5930.htm>.

⁴⁹ See Leviticus 1:9, *The Hebrew Bible*.

up to heaven.⁵⁰ The fire was to never go out; and to onlookers, the flames of the *olah* altar appeared to cover the Tabernacle door as it burned through the night.⁵¹

Integrated with the whole burnt offering was the gift or grain offering that returned to God the first-fruits of what had been provided, as an act of gratitude. The priest would present as a burnt offering a handful-sized memorial portion of the gift of fine flour — sprinkled with oil (foreshadowing the Holy Spirit), frankincense, and salt (symbolizing covenant relationship). The rest of the grain would be kept for his family to be enjoyed in the spirit of fellowship.⁵²

People often brought an additional peace or fellowship offering or communion sacrifice that was associated with *zevah shelamim*, translated as aspects of *shalom*: wholeness, well-being, greeting, or peace.⁵³ An animal was sacrificed, with a portion (the unusable parts) given as a burnt offering and a choice portion given to the priests. The remainder was gifted to the community to be immediately enjoyed as a feast in the presence of God.⁵⁴ The continual smoke of these offerings typified what was later described as the incense of prayers,⁵⁵ and it visually represented the gracious heart exchanges among the worshipful Israelites and God.

Guilt and sin offerings were both proffered “to expunge the effects of an inadvertent offense” by a common individual, a priest, an entire congregation, or a ruler.⁵⁶ For a guilt offering, a person could confess transgressions that required remittance or restitution and offer a sheep (or an alternative “sliding scale” offering) for atonement.⁵⁷ “Full restoration was to be made, with one-fifth more added to it...[demonstrating] genuine repentance toward God and love toward neighbor.”⁵⁸ This prefigures Jesus’

⁵⁰ Jon Collins and Tim Mackie, “What Did the Burnt Offerings Really Mean?” Episode 3 of Leviticus Scroll Series, BibleProject Podcast, June 13, 2022, accessed June 18, 2024, <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/what-did-burnt-offerings-really-mean/>.

⁵¹ See Leviticus 6:8-13, and Jon Collins and Tim Mackie.

⁵² See Leviticus 2:1-3, 2:13, and 6:8.

⁵³ Leviticus 3:1, *The Orthodox Study Bible*, Leviticus 3:1 *The Hebrew Bible*, and Note on Leviticus 3:1, *The Hebrew Bible*.

⁵⁴ See Leviticus 7:15-16.

⁵⁵ See Psalm 141:2 and Revelation 8:3-4.

⁵⁶ Note on Leviticus 4:1, *The Hebrew Bible*.

⁵⁷ See Leviticus 5 and 6.

⁵⁸ Note on Leviticus 5:24-26, *The Orthodox Study Bible*.

Sermon on the Mount teaching⁵⁹ about how the justice of God's kingdom is of a restorative, *teleios*⁶⁰ nature that goes beyond "law" to engage people's hearts toward love of their enemies, persecutors, and those unlike them throughout the conflicts of everyday life.

For sin offerings, a bull, goat, or sheep would be sacrificed; and the priest would sprinkle the blood before the veil of and also inside the Tabernacle.⁶¹ The rest of the animal was taken out beyond camp to be burned. In the related annual Day of Atonement ordinance, the priest would make atonement for himself and the whole community.⁶² The ordinance included the priest casting lots over two goats to determine which one would be sacrificed as a sin offering and which one would be sent as a scapegoat carrying all the transgressions and sins of the Israelites outside the camp, into the wilderness. The Day of Atonement, considered "a Sabbath of Sabbaths," allowed the Israelites to see God's forgiveness displayed before them every year.⁶³ This ancient ordinance prefigured religion's and empire's treatment of Jesus as both the sin offering and the scapegoat. The "Sabbath of Sabbaths" also foreshadowed how the "Lord of the Sabbath's"⁶⁴ atonement provided an eternal Sabbath-rest from needing to work for or to try to earn salvation.⁶⁵

Overall, through the Tabernacle offerings, people could choose to bring gifts of worship — whether reflecting gratitude or repentance — and simultaneously transform or allay any pent up mimetic rivalry and offenses they experienced over the course of their daily lives. Practicing an ethic of responsibility rather than blame,⁶⁶ they confessed their sins and offered animal sacrifice for purification, setting themselves apart from practicing pagan rituals of human scapegoat sacrifice. Amid the tension-laced tendencies of human hostility stood God's hospitable invitation extended to "unclean" people to regularly approach the brazen altar to receive reconciliation. In response, the Jewish people humbly invited God to receive a returned portion of God's own provisions of creation — whether grain, animal,

⁵⁹ See Matthew 5:38-48 as an example from Jesus' Sermon.

⁶⁰ Translated into English as "perfect," *teleios* denotes "having reached its end, i.e. complete, by ext[ension] perfect." Strong's Greek: 5046. *τέλειος* (Teleios), n.d. Biblehub.com, accessed June 21, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/greek/5046.htm>.

⁶¹ See Leviticus 4:6-7.

⁶² See Leviticus 16.

⁶³ Leviticus 16:31, *The Orthodox Study Bible*.

⁶⁴ See Matthew 12:6-8.

⁶⁵ See Hebrews 4.

⁶⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Scapegoat: Atonement and Purification." N.d. Chabad.org. Accessed February 6, 2025. https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1846869/jewish/The-Scapegoat-Atonement-and-Purification.htm.

or bird — as a tangible offering of their heart and hands. Through this gracious exchange of giving and receiving, the human nature of violence was overcome and vulnerability to receive God's *hospes* in their shared community grew.

Further Reflection and Implications

Not everyone finds René Girard's theory of sacrifice and scapegoating relevant to Old Testament sacrifice. For example, Andrew Rillera, in his astute book *Lamb of the Free: Recovering the Varied Sacrificial Understandings of Jesus's Death*, characterizes Girard's interpretation of Jesus' death as "expos[ing] Israel's sacrificial system for the deplorable violent system of scapegoating that it is (and thus Jesus saves humanity from it by ending sacrifice)."⁶⁷ Rillera disagrees with Girard and asserts that Mosaic Law had nothing to do with substitutionary death, violence, or scapegoating, with its "primary function being 'togetherness' as a religious community and with God."⁶⁸ Rillera envisions the sacrificial system as a "living enacted sacramental diorama" that addressed moral impurity and communicated the ancient Hebrew cosmological view of God's hospitable goal or telos desire for union with humans who would thrive and flourish in the participatory sharing in God's life.⁶⁹ Even though Girard both recognized Jesus' death as non-substitutionary and his own theoretical "use of 'scapegoat' as different from what is found in Lev [sic] 16,"⁷⁰ Rillera nonetheless concludes about Girard's influence on biblical scholarship: "But whatever the merits or demerits of Girard's inquiries into other cultures' sacrificial rituals, he gets sacrifice in the OT completely wrong, and this fact undermines all understandings of Jesus's death that are based on Girardian theories."⁷¹

Despite this somewhat scathing generalization, Girard's insights are intrinsically valuable to understanding some of today's Christian theology. Even as the purpose of ancient Tabernacle rituals was not explicitly Girardian, the effects of anthropological mimetic desire, rivalry, and scapegoating permeated culture — including prior to and when Moses lived, when Exodus and Leviticus were recorded, and over millennia as interpretation of Mosaic Law rippled through Christian doctrine.

⁶⁷ Andrew Remington Rillera, *Lamb of the Free: Recovering the Varied Sacrificial Understanding's of Jesus's Death* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024), 10.

⁶⁸ Matt Tebbe and Ben Sternke. "Andrew Rillera: Debunking Penal Substitutionary Atonement." Gravity Commons, June 26, 2024. <https://gravitycommons.com/podcast/andrew-rillera-debunking-penal-substitutionary-atonement/>. Rillera's perspective is fleshed out in his book *Lamb of the Free: Recovering the Varied Sacrificial Understandings of Jesus's Death*.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Andrew Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 9.

⁷¹ Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 10.

Significantly, Girard did not *prescribe*, but rather he *named* or diagnosed the ideology he noticed feeding the hostility embedded in religious development, the hostility that Jesus came to supplant.

Lamentably, Girard's theory is very relevant as even now some Christian theology inadvertently preaches a hostile, rivalrous God. Presuming original sin doctrine,⁷² sacrifice is viewed as "designed to influence God, to appease him and satisfy his demand of judgment[;]...it is only with this satisfaction secured that the worshiper finds forgiveness."⁷³ Accordingly, all of the Mosaic, religious blood-sacrifice of Leviticus was retributively and transactionally necessary until Jesus came along as an atoning substitutionary sacrifice to pay for sinners' debts and to take on the punitive godly wrath they deserve.⁷⁴ Ironically, in the foundational original sin narrative, it was Satan who first painted God as rivalrous, suggesting that God withheld from Adam and Eve to prevent them from becoming like him (though Scripture says that God intentionally created human beings in God's image and likeness).⁷⁵ This rivalry brush stroke continued — through Old Testament writers' portrayal of God as jealous⁷⁶ for all worship, honor, and glory and therefore hostile against idols, Satan, Israel's "enemies," and human ego. And presently, some theological leaders herald God's ultimate, rivalrous victory⁷⁷ over evil as justification for their hostile rivalry against differing faith traditions or for their Christian nationalism.

This religious paradigm spins a convoluted soteriological Catch-22 by transmitting a confusing interpretation of God's nature as "holy," in which holiness demands that God cannot abide anything or anyone *not* holy. The "answer" to this conundrum is that God will eventually — at a time of heavenly judgment — have to pour out "holy" wrath onto unsanctified, inherently sinful humans bound for eternal conscious torment. Thankfully, God mercifully gave Jesus as an eternal, substitutionary scapegoat that can save people from this terrifying destiny. However, people need to know about, understand, and trust in this divine scapegoat sacrifice before they die; otherwise, they remain subject

⁷² Original sin doctrine construes that all humans deserve separation from God and death or eternal conscious torment because everyone is born with inherent depravity (sin) that is spiritually inherited from Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God and chose Satan's lies over trusting God's wisdom and communion (this story is recorded in Genesis 3).

⁷³ Fred Zaspel, "The Theology of Sacrifice," *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), January 14, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-theology-of-sacrifice/>.

⁷⁴ This is the paradigm of Penal Substitutionary Atonement theory.

⁷⁵ See Genesis 2:17, Genesis 3:5, and Genesis 1:26. Brian Carpenter writes about the Genesis account and rivalry in note 20 of "René Girard and the Eucharist as the Eschatological Sacrifice," n.d Church Life Journal, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/rene-girard-and-the-eucharist-as-the-eschatological-sacrifice/>.

⁷⁶ For example, in Exodus 34:14 and Deuteronomy 6:15.

⁷⁷ They consider this victory won through the hostile sacrifice of Jesus.

to a hostile “holiness,” whether by their naivety or choice. In this religious model, many people experience God’s love as conditional. The gnawing fear of being a recipient of hostile holiness and/or the religious pressure to imitate this type of “holiness” is spiritually and emotionally traumatizing and bolsters a desperation for a scapegoat mechanism to solve the violence of God’s “holy” retributive justice.

For both individuals and communities, theological interpretation that God’s nature includes hostility carries monumental ramifications. This belief can lead to self-loathing and self-righteousness that perpetuates cycles of inward and outward shame that can spiral into depression. In the name of distorted “fear of God” or of exercising “godly” retributive justice, antagonistic “othering” and/or all kinds of violence, including war, can be justified and labelled as righteous. For example, recent funding of weapons and sectarian violence in the Middle East and Ukraine (among other regions) has been justified using religion; and political parties consistently wage wars of spiteful rhetoric and unsympathetic policy against each other and marginalized groups, citing their theology to defend their hostility.

In stark contrast, the theology of Jesus revealed God as unconditional, kenotic, “immutable Christlike love, light, and life,”⁷⁸ with no hostility or rivalry in God’s unchanging nature. Rather “Jesus saw the offering of sacrifices as a perpetuation of the [false] idea that God is violent and sanctions hostility,”⁷⁹ and he reiterated what the ancient prophets proclaimed: God desires mercy and *not* sacrifice.⁸⁰ The New Testament’s symbolic names for Jesus narratively weave him back into Israel’s ancient religious rituals, so that we do *not* misinterpret Mosaic law through a “scapegoat mechanism” lens. As the Bread of Life, Light, and High Priest,⁸¹ Christ participated in Israel’s feasts, fires, and mediation to further illuminate God’s hospitable nature. Looking through a Christotelic lens at the beginning formalizations of Moses’ revelations, one can imagine Christ’s identification with every person building the Tabernacle and every accessory created, and with every altar-approacher and every animal sacrificed. Every grain pulverized into fine flour, every fire, and every atom of incense-bearing smoke was

⁷⁸ Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike Word A More Christlike Word: Reading Scripture the Emmaus Way* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2021), 93.

⁷⁹ Brian McLaren, “Christian Identity in a Multifaith World.”

⁸⁰ See Matthew 9:13 and Hosea 6:6.

⁸¹ See John 6:35, Isaiah 60:19, John 8:12, and Hebrews 4:14.

part of “all things [that] have been created in and through Christ.”⁸² In this way, God infused, poured out, and was present as hospitable, kenotic love through Christ — unconditionally.

Through this same Christotelic lens, one can also notice how the ancient gifted artisans inspire the church to *become* Christ’s mobile Tabernacle today, to create space where *hostis* can convert to *hospes* in Jesus’ unconditional love. Likened to “living stones,...being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ,” the church is urged “by the mercies of God” to “present [their] bodies a living sacrifice [in service], holy, acceptable to God.”⁸³ If one considers the ancient Tabernacle artisans as prefigurements of Christ, then the church today is empowered as Christ’s progressive “post-figurements,”⁸⁴ meant to be prototypes of the loving mystery or wisdom of God.⁸⁵ As *teleios*, Spirit-of-wisdom artisans, the church bears gifts they’ve received as disciples of Jesus’ renewing way, as humble citizens of what he called “the kingdom of God.”⁸⁶ Summoned to offer fragrant, beatitude blessings that incubate Jesus’ metaphorical maturing body,⁸⁷ the church’s vocation is to unveil (through progressive illumination) and to embody the full measure of Christ through engaging in loving works of service and through honoring in unity Christ’s gracious and spacious diversity.⁸⁸ As the church uses their grace-recalibrated⁸⁹ mimetic nature to imitate Christ, they cease any hostile rivalry and perceive life “as a gift not to possess but to share.”⁹⁰ Beholding Christ, they encounter God’s cruciform hospitality and are transformed to generously offer God’s goodness and mercy to the world — without conditions.

Conclusion

⁸² See Colossians 1:16.

⁸³ See 1 Peter 2:5 and Romans 12:1, *The Orthodox Study Bible*.

⁸⁴ Jersak, 160-161. This thought is inspired by Melito of Sardis’ insight. If we consider the ancient Tabernacle artisans as pre-figurements of Christ, then the church today should aspire to mature as post-figurements whose lives tangibly embody Christ’s wisdom, presence and ways.

⁸⁵ In 1 Corinthians 2:7 Paul wrote, “We declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.”

⁸⁶ Mark 1:14-15, Luke 12:31-32, Luke 17:20-21.

⁸⁷ Matthew 5:3-12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

⁸⁸ Ephesians 4:12-13.

⁸⁹ By “grace-recalibrated,” I mean the transformed through recognizing the merciful, unmerited favor of God/Jesus that meets a person wherever they are and empowers them to change for the better.

⁹⁰ Nouwen, 109.

Within the dialectic of hostility and hospitality surges the presence of Love,⁹¹ of the same essence the ancients came to know. The Israelites responded through religious laws and altar flames — a fragrance of their reverent self-offering to God and a tribal sign of unity and “set apartness” from their hostile polytheistic world. Centuries later, cruciform Love died and resurrected, meekly transforming the human proximity sword into a proverbial plowshare⁹² to cultivate a *renewed* civilization of divine hospitality: the kingdom of God. The journey of conversion of human *hostis* into kingdom of God *hospes* has been a long-suffering, syncretizing process of incremental revelation, some of which was recorded in Old Testament narratives and prophesied through metaphorical, metaphysical visions of Jesus and his apostles (like Paul). This patient recalibration of the human soul graciously carries on as people apply these visions and consider contemporary prophetic voices, like those of René Girard and Henri Nouwen.

In the human dialectic of hostility and hospitality, Jesus-followers are urged to recognize his gracious identification with every person and circumstance to absorb hostilities and convert them into renewed gifts and offerings to be honored and cultivated within and shared beyond Jesus’ embodied Tabernacle, the church. As the kingdom of God knows no strangers, just God’s beloved, the salve of cruciform love can repaint and heal the swath of hostility forged by theological distortions. And so there is an invitation to the church to respond with curiosity toward people of differing religious orientation and to behold Christ’s omnipresence in “others”⁹³ and themselves, attuning to the unifying movement of God’s cruciform love. Even in the midst of pervasive hostility around or within ourselves, gifts of God’s *hospes* — as diverse as all peoples of the world — are awaiting discovery. If only we’ll reach out, offer, and receive.

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⁹¹ I capitalized “Love” because I am referring to love’s embodied divine source (in my personal view), Jesus. As the Christ, I imagine him eternally present (before, during, and beyond all notions or realities of time; and most often in spirit), always meeting people where they were at to co-suffer hostility and co-celebrate joy (and everything in between) with them.

⁹² See Isaiah 2:4.

⁹³ Recognizing that they too are “others” to those who are different from them.

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