

Scripture's Reversal: Recognizing the Scapegoat
with René Girard and Flannery O'Connor

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The recent election to the presidency of Barak Obama, the first African-American to hold the office, has led some to conclude that racial equality has finally been achieved in the United States. Yet, others would point to the existence of white privilege as evidence that it clearly has not. A critique of white privilege requires that white Americans recognize the advantages they have in a nation whose history has been shaped by the assumed superiority of whites.¹ Part of this recognition requires a reading of American history that understands such events as slavery, the Jim-Crow era, and the Civil Rights movement as a history of injustice. One risk of such a reading that I have seen is that it tends to divide the agents of history into the categories of victimizer and victim. In this way the members of one race are blamed for victimizing members of another race. This can lead to *ressentiment*, a suppressed desire for revenge that carries over into perpetual judgment against the other. It becomes difficult for those who seek to understand this history, especially when they self-identify with the victimizing group, to listen to and to learn from it.²

In countering such a view, a helpful approach is to recognize the deeper roots of *ressentiment*. These are found in our tendency to make scapegoats out of others, a tendency to project blame for the ills that afflict us onto the other. In this essay, I develop this point through the work of René Girard whose work shows how a scriptural text can lead to the recognition of the scapegoat mechanism and begin a process of conversion. I conclude with a reflection on Flannery O'Connor's short-story, "Revelation." My own encounter with this story brought about such a process of recognition in me.

Important texts for understanding Girard's view are *Violence and the Sacred*, *The Scapegoat*, and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. However, Girard effectively summarizes his theory in a

¹ Peggy McIntosh, who is white, describes one aspect of the phenomenon as follows: "Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability." Peggy McIntosh, "The Moral Quandary of Race," quoted in Lawrence Blum's *I'm Not a Racist But*, (Cornell University Press, 2002), 73. For Blum's discussion of the phenomenon see pages 72-77.

² Paul Ricoeur calls such a capacity "ethical memory." This essay is a small contribution to Ricoeur's project of describing this capacity. His thoughts on these issues are found in two essays. Paul Ricoeur, "From *Memory and Forgetting*" and "From *Imagination, Testimony, and Truth*" in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (Routledge: London and New York, 1999). The epilogue to Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2004) is also important in this connection.

small essay called *Mimesis and Violence* and in an interview with John Williams.³ Girard's theory of human motivation can be described as encompassing four primary concepts: mimesis, sacrifice, the scapegoat mechanism, and *ressentiment*. For Girard, these are the root causes of human violence, and understanding them is a crucial part of learning how to act non-violently.

Mimetic desire, mimetic rivalry, and mimesis are interchangeable terms for Girard. Human beings are the sorts of beings that are bound to imitate one another, and mimesis is "a kind of nonconscious imitation of others." However, the imitative act must be linked, according to Girard, to the act of appropriation or acquisition (1996, 290). If A tries to appropriate an object and B imitates A, then B must reach for the same object. In this way, "They become rivals for that object" (1996, 9). Because this tendency is present in both A and B, they will push back and forth against each other in an attempt to gain the object, but now they must try to remove *each other* because they have become obstacles in one another's path to the desired object. Girard explains, "our predicament—is that of trying to beat one's rival at his own game" (1996, 268). Mimesis now generates violence as A, the subject, and B, his rival, endeavors to keep each other from appropriating the desired object by resorting to physical means.

As Girard continues his analysis, he takes into account the role of sacrifice. He notes that if mimesis were allowed to run unchecked, chaos would reign in human communities. Rivalries would engender other rivalries and lead to a downward spiral of violence. In archaic societies, religious rituals, taboos, and cosmological myths provided an outlet for mimesis, an outlet for rivalry. He writes, "Rituals confirm, I believe, that primitive societies are obsessed with the undifferentiation or conflictual reciprocity that must result from the spread of mimetic rivalry" (1996, 10). Moreover, the chaotic state, with which many creation myths begin, provides an outlet for mimesis. Girard observes that the conclusions of many rituals and myths contain a sacrifice. He writes, "Sacrifice stands in the same relationship to the ritual crisis that precedes it as the death or expulsion of the hero to the undifferentiated chaos that prevails at the beginning of many myths" (1996, 11). Sacrifice is also a collective, communal action that brings about a sense of wholeness at the expense of the sacrificial victim. It reunifies the community because it thereby frees itself of the contagion of mimetic rivalry. As Girard explains, "Sacrifice is the resolution and conclusion of ritual because a collective murder or expulsion resolves the mimetic crisis that ritual mimics" (1996, 11).

This periodic action of sacrifice is what Girard refers to as "the scapegoat effect." He describes this as the 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" (1996, 12). The old adage that "nothing unifies like a common enemy" clarifies his meaning. Through the sacrifice, the peace and tranquility of the community has been purchased, at least for a time. Girard's great insight, however, is that now the community is hooked on sacrifice. Since the sacrifice has successfully transferred mimesis, the community now has "a single purpose, which is to prevent the scapegoat from harming them, by expelling and destroying him" (1996, 12). Scapegoating, in effect, substitutes for mimesis, and now the community must keep itself supplied with victims to expel. A further reason that scapegoating can substitute for mimesis so well is because "scapegoat effects are mimetic effects; they are generated by mimetic rivalry itself, when it reaches a certain degree of intensity" (1996, 12). As Girard makes clear, the initial mimetic feud between two rivals for an object induces other members of the community to join in and desire the same object; they thereby transform themselves into a mob. In this way, the scapegoat becomes the object of desire for the mob, and this heightened sense of mimetic rivalry can only be expelled by the death of the scapegoat.

³ *Mimesis and Violence*, which is a helpful summary of his thought, can be found in René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), p. 290. Williams' interview, "The Anthropology of the Cross," is also found there. Henceforth cited parenthetically in text by date and page number.

Although the scapegoat mechanism was in place for primitive societies, Girard observes that today very few modern societies actually engage in communal sacrifice. Yet, mimetic rivalry still prevails. How do we deal with it then? Anticipating Girard, both Nietzsche and Scheler wrote influential commentaries on a human malady that they labeled “*ressentiment*.” As Dean Brackley has pointed out, *ressentiment* is “the sublimated spirit of revenge, the masked and muted desire to prevail over one’s stronger rival.”⁴ For Girard, when our rival blocks our path and presents an obstacle in the way of the object we desire, the only response is that of hatred. Because we cannot defeat the stronger rival, the hatred recoils back upon us in the form of *ressentiment*.⁵ The result is a prevailing, yet impotent, emotion that we have no choice but to experience each time we are forced to acknowledge the victory of our more powerful rival. In *ressentiment* the emotion continuously recurs, not dissipating, even getting stronger, as it feeds upon itself.⁶ Nietzsche traced *ressentiment* to Judaism and Christianity. He believed that they fostered a slave-morality by celebrating the victory of the vanquished at the expense of the more powerful. Girard disagrees, claiming that the true message of the Gospels is perverted by *ressentiment*. He writes, “*Ressentiment* is the manner in which the spirit of vengeance survives the impact of Christianity and turns the Gospels to its own use” (252). If the Gospels are properly understood, they provide the antidote to *ressentiment*. It is by risking an interpretation of the scriptural text that Girard identifies a way beyond both mimesis and *ressentiment*.

In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard demonstrates how several myths perpetuate the structure of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating while the Scripture rejects this structure. Girard uses the term “myth” quite widely, and it seems to encompass any text from antiquity that is not Scriptural. Girard compares the story of Oedipus Rex to the story of Joseph and his brothers. Briefly, the story of Oedipus begins with a crisis that results in his expulsion. The oracle predicts that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother. Consequently, his parents abandon him. Though he barely escapes death, Oedipus later fulfills this prediction and is expelled once again in order to placate the gods who have sent a plague to punish Thebes.⁷ Similarly, Joseph’s eleven brothers unite around the project of ridding themselves of a common enemy, their father Jacob’s most favored son. They trap him in a pit and sell him into slavery in Egypt. He is expelled from the family. Next, Joseph is sent to prison because he rebuffs the amorous advances of the wife of his master, a highly ranked Egyptian official named Potifar. This is a second expulsion. Girard writes “In the parallel beginnings we recognize what we expected to find, a mimetic crisis and a single victim mechanism. In both instances a community gathers unanimously against one of its members and violently expels him” (2001, 107).

It is important to clarify the brothers’ motives in wanting to kill Joseph. According to Girard, there are two reasons for their envy: the fact that Jacob seems to favor him and that Joseph seems to be superior to them. Below both of these, however, Girard sees “mimetic rivalry” (2001, 111-112). The story of Joseph moves towards its climax when, due to famine, his brothers are forced to journey into Egypt to buy food. By this time, Joseph has risen to a post of great authority and has charge of the food supply there. During the first journey, the brothers do not recognize Joseph, but he recognizes them. While concealing his own identity, he charges them with spying and has them imprisoned. After he releases them, he provides them with much grain and even returns their money

⁴ Dean Brackley, S.J., “Expanding the Shrunken Soul,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 34, no. 4 (2002): 11.

⁵ Girard, “Triangular Desire,” in *The Girard Reader*, 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁷ René Girard, *I Saw Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001), 107-08. Henceforth cited parenthetically in text by date and page number. Girard also treats this topic in *Oedipus Unbound: Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

in their sacks, although they do not realize this. The brothers come back to Jacob, but after the grain has run out they return to Egypt a second time. However, Joseph had warned them earlier that they must return with their youngest brother Benjamin.

What happens next is the completion of the story, though not necessarily the end. Girard explains that “we see the hero himself engineer a scapegoat *mise en scene* in order to test the possibility of a change of heart in his brothers” (1996, 17). Joseph does this by planting his own silver chalice in the bag of Benjamin, the youngest and now Jacob’s most-favored son. Joseph feigns anger and orders that Benjamin be imprisoned. Judah then steps forward and confesses to the crime. However, neither he nor Benjamin took Joseph’s chalice. Nevertheless, Judah confesses to the crime and implores Joseph to allow him to become his slave instead of Benjamin.

Girard’s explanation of this act by Judah and its motivation is intriguing. He writes, “This dedication of Judah stands in symmetrical opposition to the original deed of collective violence which it cancels out and reveals. As he hears Judah, Joseph is moved to tears and identifies himself” (1996, 18). Judah’s act is intimately related to the earlier act of selling Joseph into slavery. This new way of acting reveals the root cause of rivalry, of envy, and of the violence that had motivated them to try to kill him. Further, Girard sees the test that was endured by Judah and his brothers as being similar to the one that they failed in the case of Joseph. In that case, they abandoned their youngest and weakest brother. The question is whether they will do this again, but the brothers have been brought to a realization of their earlier guilt and are now taking responsibility for it.

For Girard, then, the crucial difference between a myth and scripture is that the myth does not oppose mimetic rivalry. The fate of Oedipus is sealed from the beginning and there is no way to escape it. Yet, the story of Joseph does. The scripture expresses “an antimythological inspiration,” an opposition to scapegoating (2001, 110). The scriptural text, as exemplified in the story of Joseph and his brothers, performs a reversal of mimesis and presents a notion of conversion in the substitutionary act of Judah, which is part of Girard’s hope for salvation. The scriptural text represents mimesis and shows that it can be subverted into healing. Girard’s own words express this idea well:

Without ever leaving its narrative framework, the Biblical account pursues a reflection on violence whose radicalism is revealed at the point where pardon replaces obligatory vengeance. It is only this pardon, this forgiveness, that is capable of stopping once and for all the spiral of reprisals, which of course are sometimes interrupted by unanimous expulsions, but violently and only temporarily (2001,111).

While this story from the Hebrew Scriptures simultaneously reveals and rejects the scapegoat mechanism and its resulting violence, Girard thinks that the New Testament does this even better.

The Gospels, in particular, illustrate that scapegoating “comes from a cultural mechanism and is not approved by God” (1996, 267). Such texts replace the violent God of the past “with a nonviolent one whose demand is for nonviolence rather than sacrifice” (1996, 267). Girard is convinced that it is a mistake to interpret Jesus’ death as a perpetuation of the scapegoat mechanism. It is not a sacrifice designed to perpetuate mimetic rivalry. Rather, “The Christ of the Gospels dies against sacrifice, and through his death, he reveals its nature and origin by making sacrifice unworkable, at least in the long run, and bringing sacrificial culture to an end” (1996, 18). Through his death, Jesus shows how violence is finally comprehended by nonviolence. As Girard rather plainly puts it: if everyone offered the other cheek then it would be impossible for anyone ever to be struck (1996, 267).

Girard’s work has not been without its critics. Richard Kearney criticizes him for focusing only on Western narratives, such as scripture, to the exclusion of stories from the East, such as are found in the teachings of the Buddha. Kearney is surely right to emphasize that other texts do offer

a path out of scapegoating. Yet, the precise function of some scriptural texts is that they perform a *reversal* of scapegoating. Kearney himself correctly observes that for Girard certain scriptural texts “serve nonetheless to undo the sacrificial mechanism by demonstrating the innocence of the scapegoat.”⁸ These texts expose the falsehood of the guilt of the scapegoat, siding with and vindicating the innocent. This is done more explicitly in the Christ story found in the Gospels.⁹ This, however, is only part of the reason for Girard’s preference for the scriptural text. He upholds it as exemplary because it brings forth an ethical judgment, the precise nature of which is *a judgment about oneself*.

Stories in scripture have shown a capacity to actually involve the reader in the plot such that the reader is brought to recognize her or his own participation in the workings of the scapegoat mechanism. Such recognition makes it possible for the scapegoater to have a change of heart. With this recognition, the reader is in a better position to listen to and to understand histories of injustice, such as are found in the history of racism in America. As I noted at the outset, an understanding of this history, in turn, can help to gain a critical perspective on phenomenon such as white privilege.

The foregoing insight about the precise function of scripture leads to a reexamination of Girard’s own description of what happens in the Joseph story. Girard claims that in that story, “we see the hero himself engineer a scapegoat *mise en scene* in order to test the possibility of a change of heart in his brothers” (1996, 17). Moreover, this very *mise en scene* in which we as readers are involved is engineered precisely to test the possibility of our change of heart. Thus, the ethical response to the story of Joseph is to wonder “Might I, out of envy, have thrown Joseph, were he my brother, into the pit and sold him into slavery, or at least stood by and let the others do so?”

Applying it to the issue of race, the text calls me to ask: “Do I regularly fail to acknowledge my white privilege and actively take advantage of it?” On the other hand, more positively, the text calls us to ask, “Could I have made the same choice as Judah in substituting myself for Benjamin so that the process of scapegoating might stop? Might I make a substitutionary act for another?” “Might I refuse to take advantage of white privilege when the situation presents itself?” “Do I actively seek to bring about awareness of white privilege among those who are not so aware?” The ethical judgment to be made in the case of the “Christ story” is, obviously, not to accuse the Jews, a scapegoating mechanism consistently propagated by those who misread the text, but rather to say, “Ah-ha...I did it too.” This is the reason that Girard claims that the scriptures are, “the ultimate antidote to the sacrificial mechanism of human culture” to use Kearney’s own phrase.¹⁰

By engineering our own examination of conscience, scripture empowers us to act counter to our tendency to scapegoat. What is distinctive about scripture is not that it simply sides with the scapegoats. Were this all that scripture did, there would be ample reason for completely supporting Kearney’s criticism of Girard.¹¹ Instead, it is recognizing the possibility of oneself as the scapegoater, seeing oneself as the victimizer, the one who has misjudged the scapegoat and the one who is powerless in the face of the scapegoat mechanism. This scriptural text poses questions to us in the subjunctive tense—a tense that is non-threatening, non-accusatory, and non-scapegoating—in

⁸ Kearney’s view of Girard is found in “Myths and Scapegoats: The Case of René Girard” in *Theory, Culture, and Society* 12, (1995): 1-14 and in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (Routledge: London, 2003). Here, I draw principally on “Myths and Scapegoats,” 8.

⁹ Kearney, “Myths,” 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ A similar critique of Girard is given by Robert M. Price in *Deconstructing Jesus* (Prometheus Books: Amherst, N.Y., 2000). Price criticizes Girard for failing to see how the Gospels themselves carry forth the scapegoating mechanism and fails to reverse it. Yet, what Price seems to miss is that it is not the text alone that reverses the scapegoat mechanism; instead, the reader himself must appropriate it and learn from it.

order to usher in an examination of our lives with others. Some scripture, the prophets for instance, are much more direct in challenging the powerful to care about justice, but it seems that difficult issues, like acknowledging white privilege, require a more inviting and subtle approach. I have found that such an approach is also available in some classic literature such as Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation." Her text brought me to just such a moment of recognition.

O'Connor narrates the story of Ruby Turpin, a plump, forty-seven year old woman who resides in a small southern town. She has taken her husband Claud to the doctor because, while he was working on the farm, a cow kicked his leg. Upon entering the office, Mrs. Turpin quickly surveys the crowded waiting room. There is one empty chair, and she gives it to her injured husband. As she waits for one of the other occupants to offer her his chair, she places them into their own categories. This was something that Mrs. Turpin did frequently, as O'Connor tells us.

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above her and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well.¹²

In the waiting room with her on this day is a cross-section of humanity. There is a man, a woman, and a little boy, all of whom Mrs. Turpin identifies as "white trash." After awhile, a young black boy enters on an errand but quickly leaves. There is an elegant lady, who Mrs. Turpin finds agreeable, and then there is an ugly teenaged girl, reading a book, who keeps scowling at her. Mrs. Turpin was also in the habit of thanking Jesus that he had not made her other than she was.

If Jesus had said, "You can be high society and have all the money you want and be thin, and svelte-like, but you can't be a good woman with it," she would have had to say, "Well don't make me that then. Make me a good woman and it don't matter what else, how fat or how ugly or how poor!" Her heart rose. He had not made her a nigger or white trash or ugly! He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! she said. Thank you thank you thank you! Whenever she counted her blessings she felt as buoyant as if she weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds instead of one hundred and eighty.¹³

Eventually "the white-trashy man" is called into the office, and Mrs. Turpin takes his seat, right next to the "ugly girl" who continues staring at her. Mrs. Turpin begins to chat amiably with "the elegant lady" telling her how blessed she feels, acknowledging how fortunate she is to have all that she has. She concludes, "There's a heap of things worse than a nigger," those who aren't grateful for what they have.¹⁴ The ugly girl hits Mrs. Turpin right over her left eye with the book that she had been reading. Clearly mentally disturbed, the girl also kicks Claud on his hurt leg and starts choking Mrs. Turpin. After a nurse pulls her off and the doctor gives an injection, Mrs. Turpin looks directly at her with a strange sense of recognition.

¹² Flannery O'Connor, "From *Revelation*" in *Three by Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Signet Classic, 1983), 408.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 411.

There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. “What you got to say to me?” she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation. The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin’s. “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,” she whispered.¹⁵

Keeping a close eye on the girl, the white-trash woman says, “I thank Gawd I ain’t a lunatic.”¹⁶

After the doctor attends to her, Mrs. Turpin and Claud go home and into the bedroom to rest. However, Mrs. Turpin cannot rest; she cannot put the episode behind her, so she goes back outside in order to have it out with Jesus.

“What do you send me a message like that for?”...“How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?”...“There was plenty of trash there. It didn’t have to be me. If you like trash better, go get yourself some trash then,” she railed. “You could have made me trash. Or a nigger. If trash is what you wanted why didn’t you make me trash?”...“Or you could have made me a nigger. It’s too late for me to be a nigger,” she said with deep sarcasm, “but I could act like one. Lay down in the middle of the road and stop traffic. Roll on the ground.”¹⁷

Jesus does not answer her. After a little while, Mrs. Turpin finally calms down enough to reflect. Looking into the sky, she sees a purple streak. She has a vision, a vision not unlike Peter’s in Acts 10 in which he saw all things as clean.

She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.¹⁸

When I first read “Revelation,” I dismissed Ruby Turpin as an unenlightened racist. “Nobody has those attitudes any longer,” I thought. After all, O’Connor completed the story a long time ago in 1963, just before she died. Then something happened to me. In a flash of recognition, I saw how the story involved me in it. This occurred when, while reading it the second time I heard my own voice, deep inside, whisper tentatively, “Thank you, Jesus, thank you that I am not like Mrs. Turpin.” I felt my heart rise within me, and my voice grew louder, gaining conviction, “Thank you, Lord Jesus, that I do not place people in categories like she did, that bigoted woman. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that I am more enlightened and self-aware than she was. I’m not like her, you know. I could *act* in that judgmental way though, but I’m not really like her. You could have made me a racist,

¹⁵ Ibid., 416.

¹⁶ Ibid., 417.

¹⁷ Ibid., 422.

¹⁸ Ibid., 423.

sexist, elitist wart hog if *you* wanted. But you did not. I am not a racist. I am not sexist. I am not elitist.” It was at that moment that I realized that violence is in my own heart.

In O’Connor’s short story, there is a subtle genius in the way that we may come to be involved in it and brought to a moment of recognition where we can see the contours of the scapegoat mechanism vividly displayed in our own heart. It seems to me that such recognition is what Girard appreciates about some scriptural texts like the Joseph cycle. This model of recognition provides an example of a preparatory step that may be necessary before listening to stories of privilege, oppression, and exclusion that comprise a history of injustice. Narratives such as O’Connor’s story and the Joseph story in Genesis are texts that can bring about such recognition. If we are to begin to understand our national history, which we certainly must do in the wake of The Civil Rights Movement, Jim-Crow, slavery, racism and the demise of white privilege, such moments of recognition will prove to be of the greatest ethical importance.