

To the Editor of *New Blackfriars*

Dear Father,

I wonder if you would consider the following observation on the interesting piece by Peter Phillips in your June issue, on the work of René Girard?

A mistake that is regularly and understandably made about Girard is to regard his scapegoating-exposure hypothesis as exegetical, that is, as suggesting what the first faithful interpreters of the crucifixion and its sequel had in their minds. But their attempts to say just what had happened to them *in its ultimate significance for all of us*, for history, and for the world in anguish, cannot be regarded as adequate. We are still trying to understand what has happened in Christ, because what we do know has happened, and did know from the beginning, is that God has 'brought history to an end.' And the hypothesis that best measures up to this continual exigency to catch up with God in Christ on a cross and forever alive is one which looks at the event through a human lens in which all may see, in essence as it were, the human world.

How the first believers put into words what they knew Jesus had done for them and for all is going to be far short of what needs to be said, and will never be said completely, assuming of course that Jesus is who our faith believes him to be. Toward this ever-expanding description, the notion of *sacrifice*, with all its ambiguity, seemed to be a given. The ambiguity consists in the reference of this term at once to a self-gift in love, and violence done to a human or animal. But then the question 'how did they understand Jesus' death as sacrifice?' is the *exegetical* question, not the question that heuristically guides the thinking believer today. *This* question implies another question: is there some fundamental description of the human flaw, such that our salvation could be described as putting this right? An example of the second of these questions would be Donald MacKinnon's heuristic explosion during a lecture: 'Was there that which Jesus alone could do, in the manner in which it had to be done, that was of such moment for humanity that the risk was justified, the cost well spent?'

Now whatever Girard's qualifications as an anthropologist, it seems to me that his account of the human flaw in terms of the scapegoat mechanism understood in the light of a powerful theory of mimetic desire, has something riveting about it. It comprises street wisdom and human polity in all its forms. *And* it 'picks up' on that crucial word 'sacrifice', which was in the original way of describing

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that death. It explicates the essential ambiguity of the word, and thus robs it of the power to convey a violent meaning, as opposed to the sublation of violent cultic sacrifice into love, a sublime love in which Jesus identifies himself crucified with bread and wine for a new and eternal *convivium*.

I know that, in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard wanted to eliminate the notion of sacrifice from the New Testament. This is an understandable excess, given the excess in the uncritical use of the word sacrifice to give an appalling message about Christ's death in relation to God's will, a message one picked up strongly from the old catechism. Fr Illtyd Trethowan once said to me, 'I hope you take seriously your responsibility for doing all in your power to disabuse the Church of a terrible way of thinking of Christ's death as placating an angry God.'

Of course there is a difference between saying that a vengeful God hangs around in the believer's psyche — of course he does, we're not perfect in trust! — and saying that a vengeful God lies at the basis of Old Testament sacrifices, and that Jesus came to clear this up. Stuff in the psyche is one thing, the matter of anthropological research quite another. But the refinements which anthropological investigation of, for instance, Nuer sacrificial custom will want to bring to our concept of sacrificial cult involving blood is not going to take us far toward understanding, at least in flashes, the human hell into which Jesus sweated his way at Gethsemane, to reach the act of love that has shown us God and changed our world potentially into what Schleiermacher called a world of love.

A theology whose discourse on cultic sacrifice fails to let through 'l'horreur humaine de la crucifixion' (Girard's phrase) fails thereby to mediate the mystery of the cross. But how easily the point Girard is making here is missed! It is a mark of genius to make this kind of point. On hearing that phrase, 'l'horreur humaine de la crucifixion', someone is going to say, 'but surely that pertains to spiritual or devotional theology, not systematics!' No, it is God's horribly human interruption of all the words we pile up round the concept of sacrifice. I'm sure Meyendorff is right in saying that revelation is God getting us to look at ourselves as if for the first time.

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