

Theological Trends

JESUS AS SCAPEGOAT

By JOHN P. GALVIN

And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and send him away by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land; and he shall let the goat go in the wilderness.

(Lev 16:21-22)

The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. (Ps 118.22)¹

EFFORTS TO INTERPRET THE SALVIFIC significance of the life and death of Jesus Christ have varied widely over the course of Christian history. Even in the New Testament there is considerable diversity, as different authors and traditions focus in distinctive degrees and ways on Christ's incarnation, public life, crucifixion and resurrection, and specify in varying respects the evils (error, sin, death) from which he has delivered us. In the later history of the Church, from the patristic period to the present, an even greater variety has developed. Different emphases have been characteristic of different ages, as the sheer inexhaustibility of the topic and the perennial need to express anew in relation to the specific hopes and fears of each succeeding generation the central convictions of Christian faith have occasioned ever new attempts to grasp and convey what salvation is and how it is mediated by Christ's life and death.

Such diversity is not surprising, for the salvation mediated by Christ is a multi-faceted reality which encompasses the whole of human existence and is for that very reason not open to succinct and definitive expression. Formulations of the doctrine of salvation are inevitably partial and incomplete, as certain aspects of Christ's life and certain dimensions of its impact are accentuated while others, though not necessarily denied, recede into the background. Thus even influential interpretations of Christ's saving significance (such as Anselm of Canterbury's theory of satisfaction, according to which Christ offered himself in death as satisfaction for human sin) leave room for further illumination from different perspectives.

Prominent among recent attempts to articulate the doctrine of salvation is a school of thought which envisions Jesus as the scapegoat who bears and thus takes away human sin. The background for this conception lies in the thought of the French cultural anthropologist and literary critic René Girard

(1923–), who over the course of several decades has developed an original and relatively comprehensive theory of religion and society.² While Girard has on several occasions applied his anthropological thought to biblical texts, addressing among other matters the interpretation of the crucifixion,³ the Swiss Jesuit theologian Raymund Schwager has drawn heavily upon Girard's theory in presenting a more thorough and complete Christology than is available in Girard's own works.⁴ In an effort to introduce this intriguing new model of christological reflection, this essay will provide an account of the chief elements of Girard's theory, discuss in greater detail Schwager's dramatic conception of redemption, and conclude with some comments on the theological reception of this distinctive contemporary approach to Christology.

Girard's anthropological theory

Appealing to a multiplicity of ethnographic and literary sources, René Girard has presented an anthropological theory of considerable breadth and interest. At least for present purposes, the salient feature of his thought is his conception of the origin and function of sacrificial rites, which he envisions as both the primordial form of human religion and the social institution which enabled primitive forms of human society to stabilize and function. Since in his judgement sacrificial rites developed in response to conflict caused by imitative desire, Girard's understanding of religion is best approached by beginning with his analysis of human longing.

According to Girard, human desire is essentially mimetic and for that reason inherently conflictual. The object of human desire is not specified in advance; it derives from imitation of a model. An object is found desirable and pursued, not because of its inherent worth, but because it is possessed or sought by the chosen model. The result is a relationship triangular in structure, as both the model and its mimic seek the same object; since the objects of desire are finite, the inevitable outcome is rivalry and conflict. If unresolved, these clashes would escalate, as violence begets violence, and eventually imperil the existence of human society.

That the cycle of violence is interrupted and thus contained is owed, ironically, to its own ability to elicit imitation. A fortuitous violent deed entices others to join in the attack, and the joint destruction of the victim brings about a certain solidarity among its triumphant foes, thus creating a degree of social stability. But the cohesion effected by this 'scapegoat mechanism', in which the victim is simultaneously a target of wrath and a mysterious saviour, is fragile and ephemeral. Periodic re-enactment of the primal deed, in the form of institutionalized sacrificial rites, is therefore necessary if social order is to be maintained over an extended period of time. This in turn accounts for the emergence of religious rites, among which, despite their great variety, Girard detects a fundamental unity in violent origin and social function: 'All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim, and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from ritual'.⁵

It is against the background of this general conception of religion that Girard presents his interpretation of the Bible, which he assesses as a gradual revelation of 'things hidden since the foundation of the world' (Mt 13:35). While mixed with conceptions supportive of violence and its sacrificial superstructure, the Old Testament contains a critique of sacrificial rites and their presuppositions (cf e.g. Ps 50:9-15; 51:16-17; Hos 6:6). The resolution of the issues thus raised remains unclear in the Old Testament, for the relationship of God to violence is not yet fully clear. Only in Jesus is the understanding of God purged of all violent traits. Jesus' ultimate rejection by all parties and his crucifixion expose the true nature of the scapegoat mechanism and its underlying system of sacred violence, as is evident especially in the Gospels' portrayals of Jesus' passion from the perspective of the innocent victim. Since the efficacy of the scapegoat mechanism presupposes ignorance of its true nature, the world of sacral violence has been under challenge since this time. Yet full recognition of the implications of Christian revelation has required centuries, in part because the history of Christianity has been marred from its infancy by recourse to the scapegoat mechanism and by interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion within the established sacrificial framework. Girard therefore proposes, notwithstanding the Epistle to the Hebrews, a non-sacrificial interpretation of the passion. Responsibility for Jesus' death lies fully with human beings; any conception of God exacting the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin must be rejected as incompatible with Jesus' definitive revelation of God as non-violent.⁶

Girard's interpretation of the crucifixion has been subjected to criticism, especially in so far as his rejection of sacrificial terminology is concerned.⁷ Before noting other criticisms of the scapegoat theory, however, it will be well to consider the dramatic soteriology (or doctrine of salvation, from the Greek *soteria* [salvation]) developed from an explicitly Girardian perspective by the Swiss Jesuit theologian Raymund Schwager.

Schwager's dramatic soteriology

While strongly influenced by Girard's analyses of the scapegoat mechanism, Raymund Schwager's Christology also reflects other theological interests. Deeply concerned with the perennial Christian question of the unity-in-difference of the Old and New Testaments, he is also attentive to the unity of the New Testament in itself, notwithstanding its diverse theological components. Major aspects of these issues are the unity of the biblical conception of God, the tension between Jesus' message of divine mercy and his threats of eternal damnation, and the apparent conflict between the unconditional offer of salvation in Jesus' preaching of the kingdom and later soteriologies which attribute salvific value and even salvific necessity to Jesus' death.

In Schwager's judgement, the vehicle most suitable for presenting the doctrine of redemption is a dramatic structure designed to allow the various phases and dimensions of the divine offer and human reception of salvation to come to the fore in their proper context and thus in their proper position in

relation to the whole. In itself, the dramatic form is not original; Schwager is explicit in acknowledging his debt on this score to the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88), whose soteriology he has analysed in an important study.⁸ But Schwager's theological conception departs from Balthasar's in allowing greater scope to Jesus' preaching of the kingdom and in developing a different theological interpretation of the crucifixion. The result is a distinctive presentation, in five acts, of Jesus' role in the drama of salvation.

Act I of Schwager's depiction of the drama comprises Jesus' offer of unconditional divine forgiveness and salvation to Israel. At this stage, Jesus strives to elicit conversion to the God of the kingdom which is present and operative in Jesus' word and deed. Intimately linked to Jesus' person and to claims which were at least in substance messianic, Jesus' preaching accents divine initiative in forgiving, yet remains oriented toward appropriate human response. While unconditional in the sense of not requiring prior repentance or other presuppositions on the part of those addressed, the message of the kingdom remains an appeal to human freedom: it requires public acceptance and conversion for its full presence to be accomplished.

At the stage represented in Act I, Jesus' preaching can be summarized appropriately in the words of Mark 1:15a, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand'. Yet the course which events will take in the unfolding of the dramatic dialogue thus inaugurated is still unresolved. The further specification of God's stance toward the world awaits determination in the contexts to be depicted in the later acts of the drama.

Act II of the drama of salvation includes both the negative public response to Jesus' summons to 'repent and believe in the gospel' (Mk 1:15b) and Jesus' reaction to the general rejection of his message.⁹ At the core of this stage of Schwager's presentation is Jesus' threat of punishment, even of eternal damnation, to those who reject his message of the kingdom. In his judgement, the tension between the pronouncements of salvation and damnation is best accounted for by classifying each as an element of Jesus' preaching, not fully compatible if taken synchronically but reconcilable if associated with diverse phases in Jesus' public life. But ascribing such passages to Jesus (rather than the theological reflection of the later Church) raises more urgently the theological problem of their content and implications. To Schwager, these words of condemnation are not threats of extrinsic divine retribution. They serve rather to expose the underlying causes of the rejection of Jesus' preaching as age-old deceit and violence, operative in the past as hostility to the prophets and now culminating in rejection of God's definitive messenger; they also underscore both the radical nature of his proclamation of the kingdom and the far-reaching implications of Israel's collective response to it. Seen from this perspective, Jesus' announcement of impending condemnation reinforces his offer of salvation by portraying the urgency of positive public response on the part of Israel. Like Act I, Act II is also inconclusive; it leads of itself to a further phase marked by the reaction of Jesus' audience to his intensification of his message and by his response to that reply.

The central third act of Schwager's account of the drama of salvation is devoted to a presentation and interpretation of the crucifixion. At this stage of the drama, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom still remains without the desired corporate response, and Jesus symbolically completes his mission to Israel through the cleansing of the Temple. With the future of the kingdom called into doubt by the united force of Jesus' foes and by the weaknesses and failures of his disciples, the fate of the kingdom now rests with Jesus alone.

At stake in this conflict is a fundamentally religious question, intelligible only against the background of Israel's history: which of the contending parties rightly claims divine support for its account of God's nature and intentions? While his opponents plot his death, Jesus acts in a manner consistent with his own preaching. His response to evil is not retaliation in a spirit of mimetic violence, but intensification and expansion of his love to encompass even the misdeeds of his foes. In a free decision above and beyond his commitment to the initial offer of salvation in his preaching of the kingdom, Jesus now offers his life as an act of atonement for the collective force of human sin. It is, in the language of Psalm 118, precisely as a result of being rejected by the 'builders' that Jesus becomes the cornerstone.

Theological analysis of the crucifixion must consider both the actions of Jesus' foes and those of Jesus himself – and in that sequence. When 'both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel' (Acts 4:27) gathered together against God's servant, human beings, blinded by sin in such a way that they are both its agents and its victims, played the role of the immediate judges in Jesus' death and imposed upon him the burden of their own sin. The judgement passed upon Jesus – a prime instance of the scapegoat mechanism unconsciously at work¹⁰ – is thus a human deed, not a direct divine act. But Jesus' response to the actions of his enemies is also operative in the crucifixion. Here Schwager speaks of Jesus as identifying himself with sinners. This identification is not merely juridical, but personal and corporal: as Jesus bore the infirmities of those whose maladies he healed, so too he now bears the sins of his persecutors. Unwilling to think of Jesus as identifying himself with the deeds which eventuated in his own condemnation and crucifixion, Schwager differentiates between sinners as responsible agents and sinners as victims of sin's destructive power. Only in the latter respect does Jesus identify himself with them: the victim of human misdeeds, he unites himself in solidarity with all victims of the overriding power of sin.

In this regard, Schwager suggests that Jesus was able to identify with the deeds of his foes only inasmuch as he was able to transform their actions. As both they and he were (in different ways) victims of sin, he began the reversal and transformation of evil by incorporating his enemies into his death and thus consciously and vicariously appropriating that dimension of their actions which was in fact a suffering. While purely passive suffering would not yield a positive meaning, Jesus' acceptance of suffering transformed his passion into a new form of activity. By the power of the Holy Spirit he fully transformed human death, in itself an ambiguous mixture of active and

passive elements, into an act of self-giving, entrusting himself totally into the hands of his heavenly Father. Thus his identification with his foes (acceptance of death at their hands without retaliation in kind) is salvific inasmuch as it is the presupposition of the transformation of their evil deed into an act of total self-giving love.

Thus Schwager sees the crucifixion as involving inclusive representation on Jesus' part in a twofold manner: he was condemned to death by sinners, and in death he acted vicariously for all. But 'if he identified himself with all the victims of sin, then every offense against a fellow human being or against oneself is directed against him'¹¹ and responsibility for his condemnation is universal. Each human being is both the enemy of Christ (as a sinner) and the beneficiary of his redeeming power (as a victim of sin); in a manner which permanently excludes self-righteousness, the dividing line runs, not through two groups of human beings, but through each individual. 'In the long run, the identification of the Crucified with the victims of sin is more efficacious than one's own failures',¹² for individuals are more profoundly victims of sin than its perpetrators. Nonetheless, while Jesus' inclusion of sinners encompasses all, his vicarious action in their behalf includes them only to the extent that they are victims of sin; there remain both a sphere of individual responsibility in which no representation is possible and a corresponding need for personal conversion.

At this stage of the drama God's presence does not make itself perceptible. In so far as he is not present as a vengeful force, this absence is consistent with Jesus' persistent proclamation of God's true nature. But Jesus' violent death is not as such directly revelatory of God, though revelation of God as non-violent love may well be seen in Jesus' obedience to a mission which exceeds the capabilities of human nature alone. The truth of Jesus' message and of his (implicit or explicit) personal claims remains at this point an open question which can be answered solely by an act of God.

The ambivalent situation with which the third act concludes is resolved in Act IV, which presents the resurrection of Jesus as the conclusive judgement of his heavenly Father. Schwager's chief interest in the resurrection lies in its characterization as an act which encompasses both divine judgement in favour of the crucified Jesus in the conflict which eventuated in his death and an advance to a new and unexpected stage of God's self-revelation. Far from being simply a divine act in favour of Jesus and against his foes, it is a judgement in favour of Jesus who gave himself up to death for his enemies; it is thus a judgement on behalf of Jesus' sinful foes as well. While functioning as a confirmation of Jesus' preaching about God and of his actions in the face of death, the resurrection also adds a new element of divine forgiveness to what had been present earlier. Exceeding even the degree of mercy reflected in such texts as the parable of the vineyard (Mk 12:1-12), which presents divine forgiveness as extraordinarily extensive but not boundless (12:9: 'What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others'), God now exhibits a hitherto unexpected mercy,

forgiving even the murder of his Son. Thus the resurrection reveals an infinite mercy, a mercy greater than which none can be conceived.

But the drama of salvation would nonetheless remain incomplete without its fifth and final act, in which Schwager locates the descent of the Holy Spirit and the new gathering of the Church. Though manifest in such outward events as glossolalia, the Spirit is operative above all in the internal transformation of individuals and in the new assembly of a community as an anticipation of the still awaited definitive eschatological gathering. While Jesus' initial efforts to gather Israel had failed owing to human resistance, the Spirit – sent by the Father as a second aspect of his response to the rejection and the obedience of the Son – is now able to reach and transform the innermost core of the human heart. The Spirit's presence leads to celebration of the eucharist in memory of Jesus' life and death and to the deeper understanding of Jesus' activity and fate which is reflected in the preaching of the early Church.

Thus Schwager has developed a Christology in which the understanding of Jesus as the scapegoat who bears the collected force of human sin and violence occupies a prominent interpretive place. His thought, which is also influenced by various theological considerations that exceed the immediate concerns of Girard's theory, diverges from Girard's in its willingness to apply sacrificial terminology to the crucifixion if suitable precautions are taken against misunderstanding. Nonetheless, Schwager's dramatic soteriology represents the most thorough application of Girard's conception of the scapegoat mechanism to christological questions.

Reception and outlook

The voluminous and interdisciplinary literature on Girard's mimetic theory cannot be examined here, though it may be noted that praise for the theory's comprehensive nature and explanatory power is balanced by critics' charges of selectivity and of forcing material to fit a predetermined framework.¹³ Schwager's theology has also been received with considerable interest, especially in Europe, as is evidenced by the symposium on his dramatic soteriology conducted at the University of Innsbruck, 25–28 September 1991.¹⁴ At a minimum it can be said that the understanding of Jesus as scapegoat has brought the important issue of violence to the centre of discussion in systematic theology and that it paves the way for fruitful reflection on the salvific character of Jesus' public life and death.

Inevitably, however, questions remain. Some aspects of Schwager's depiction of the historical Jesus have been criticized by biblical scholars,¹⁵ and important theological issues concerning God's universal salvific will, the relationship of nature and grace, and the relationship of the crucifixion and the resurrection all require further clarification.¹⁶ But reservations concerning these matters do not preclude recognition of the stimulating contributions which have been made by this significant new approach to Christian soteriology.

NOTES

¹ This verse is cited several times in the New Testament in connection with Jesus' crucifixion: Mt 21:42; Mk 12:10; Lk 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7.

² Cf *Deceit, desire, and the novel: self and other in literary structure* (Baltimore, 1965) and *Violence and the sacred* (Baltimore, 1977). For useful accounts of Girard's thought cf Robert North, 'Violence and the Bible: the Girard connection', *CBQ* vol 47 (1985), pp 1-27, and Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred violence: Paul's hermeneutic of the cross* (Minneapolis, 1992), pp 13-39.

³ Cf *The scapegoat* (Baltimore, 1986) and *Things hidden since the foundation of the world*, with Jean-Michel Ourghoulian and Guy Lefort (London, 1987).

⁴ Cf *Must there be scapegoats?: violence and redemption in the Bible* (San Francisco, 1987), *Der wunderbare Tausch: zur Geschichte und Deutung der Erlösungslehre* (Munich, 1986), and *Jesus im Heilsdrama: Entwurf einer biblischen Erlösungslehre* (Innsbruck, 1990).

⁵ *Violence and the sacred*, p 306.

⁶ Cf *Things hidden from the foundation of the world*, pp 139-280.

⁷ In addition to Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Die neue Theorie von Jesus als dem "Sündenbock"', *Communio* vol 9 (1980), pp 184-185, and *Theodramatik III: Die Handlung* (Einsiedeln, 1980), pp 276-288, cf Raymund Schwager, 'Christ's death and the prophetic critique of sacrifice' in Andrew J. McKenna (ed), *René Girard and biblical studies (Semeia, 33; Decatur GA, 1985)*, pp 109-123.

⁸ *Der wunderbare Tausch*, pp 273-312. For Balthasar's conception, cf especially *Mysterium paschale* (Edinburgh, 1990) and *Theodramatik III*.

⁹ Schwager does not seek to pinpoint in Jesus' public life a specific historical turning-point which would demarcate the line between Act I and Act II; he acknowledges that a certain overlap may exist between the two stages inasmuch as Jesus' offer of salvation could well have continued into the second stage. But since the themes developed in Act II reflect or presuppose a response to Jesus' message they must be distinguished from his initial proclamation of the kingdom and cannot be located at the start of his public ministry.

¹⁰ At issue is the unconscious operation of the scapegoat *mechanism*, not the deliberate performance of the scapegoat *rite*.

¹¹ *Jesus im Heilsdrama*, p 243; emphasis omitted.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 245.

¹³ Literature on the mimetic theory is recorded regularly in *The Bulletin of the Colloquium on Violence & Religion* (COV&R).

¹⁴ The papers delivered at the symposium, together with a response by Schwager, have been published in Jozef Niewiadomski and Wolfgang Palaver (eds), *Dramatische Erlösungslehre: Ein Symposium* (Innsbruck, 1992).

¹⁵ For the criticisms of Peter Fielder and Lorenz Oberlinner, cf *ibid.*, pp 19-48; for Schwager's reply cf *ibid.*, pp 339-354.

¹⁶ Schwager has recently addressed major issues in theological anthropology in 'Evolution, Erbsünde und Erlösung', *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* vol 117 (1995), pp 1-24.