

THE  
SCIENTIST  
HOW A FORGOTTEN REALITY  
CAN CHANGE EVERYTHING  
WE SEE, HOPE FOR, AND BELIEVE

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## Scapegoating, and the “Sin of the World”

For me, the Hebrew Scripture that most lays the foundation for understanding the death of Jesus is found in Leviticus 16, which French philosopher and historian René Girard calls the most effective religious ritual ever created. On the “Day of Atonement” the high priest Aaron was instructed to symbolically lay all the sins of the people on one unfortunate goat, and the people would then beat the animal until it fled into the desert. (The word “scapegoat” came from the phrase “escaping goat,” used in early English translations of the Bible.) It was a vividly symbolic act that helped to unite and free the people in the short term. It foreshadowed what we Catholics would later call “general absolution” or “public confession.” Instead of owning our sins, this ritual allowed us to export them elsewhere—in this case onto an innocent animal. ✱

For our purposes here, the image of the scapegoat powerfully mirrors and reveals the universal, but largely unconscious, human need to transfer our guilt onto something (or someone) else by singling that other out for unmerited negative treatment. This pattern is seen in many facets of our society and our private, inner lives—so much so that you could almost name it “*the* sin of the world” (note that “sin” is singular in John 1:29). The biblical account, however, seems to recognize that only a “lamb of a God” can both *reveal and resolve* that sin in one nonviolent action. (Any *lion of a God* would perpetuate the illusion that we can overcome power with the same kind of power, only doubling the problem.)

Note too that the scapegoat in Leviticus is based on an arbitrary choice between two goats (Leviticus 16:7–10). There is really no difference between the “goat of YHWH, who is offered as a fitting sacrifice for sin” and the “goat of Azazel” (Azazel being a demon of the wastelands), who gets beaten into the desert—except in how the goat was seen and chosen by the people. Presumably God created

both goats, but we humans are the ones who decide which should be driven out. Such dualistic thinking is not true, but our egos find it convenient and helpful—not to mention necessary for displacing blame.

To this day, scapegoating characterizes much personal, political, and public discourse. People on the Left accuse the Right of being merely “pro-birth” while being pro-war and pro-gun, and thus hypocritical when they call themselves “pro-life.” People on the Right accuse the Left of being “pro-abortion” and “pro-choice,” and thus not “pro-life” at all. By concentrating on the other group’s goat, both sides can avoid being completely consistent. Amazing how this logic works quite effectively to keep both of us from being honest. In reality, a full and completely consistent pro-life position would probably please very few because of what it would demand—including the sacrifice of some of our unquestioned assumptions. Very few wear the “seamless garment” of being truly pro-life all the time. There is no completely pure place to stand, it seems, and before we can resolve an issue at any depth, we must honestly name and accept this imperfection. It is the egoic illusion of our own perfect rightness that often allows us to crucify others.

Girard demonstrated that the scapegoat mechanism is probably the foundational principle for the formation of most social groups and cultures. We seldom consciously know that we are scapegoating or projecting. As Jesus said, people literally “do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). In fact, the effectiveness of this mechanism depends on *not* seeing it! It’s almost entirely automatic, ingrained, and unconscious. “She made me do it.” “He is guilty.” “He deserves it.” “They are the problem.” “They are evil.” Humans should recognize their own negativity and sinfulness, but instead we largely hate or blame almost anything else.

Unless scapegoating can be consciously seen and named through concrete rituals, owned mistakes, or what many call “re-

pentance," the pattern will usually remain unconscious and unchallenged. It took until the twentieth century for modern psychology to recognize how humans almost always project their unconscious shadow material onto other people and groups, but Jesus revealed the pattern two thousand years ago. "When anyone kills you, they will think they are doing a holy duty for God," he said (John 16:2). We hate our own faults in other people, and sadly we often find the best cover for that projection in religion. God and religion, I am afraid, have been used to justify most of our violence and to hide from the shadow parts of ourselves that we would rather not admit.

Yet the scriptures rightly call such ignorant hatred and killing "sin," and Jesus came precisely to "take away" (John 1:29) our capacity to commit it—by exposing the lie for all to see. Like talking with any good spiritual director or confessor, gazing at the Crucified One helps you see the lie in all its tragedy. Remember, Jesus stood as the fully innocent one who was condemned by the highest authorities of both "church and state" (Rome and Jerusalem), an act that should create healthy suspicion about how wrong even the highest powers can be. Maybe power still does not want us to see this, and that's why we concentrate so much on the private sins of the flesh. The denied sins that are really destroying the world are much more the sins that we often admire and fully accept in our public figures: pride, ambition, greed, gluttony, false witness, legitimated killing, vanity, et cetera. That is hard to deny.

As John puts it, "He will show the world how wrong it was about sin, about who was really in the right, and about true judgment" (16:8). This is what Jesus is exposing and defeating on the cross. *He did not come to change God's mind about us. It did not need changing. Jesus came to change our minds about God—and about ourselves—and about where goodness and evil really lie.*