

VIOLENCE AND THE SACRED IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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For 25 years Northern Ireland has been a society characterized not so much by violence as by an endemic fear of violence. At a purely statistical level the risk of death as a result of political violence in Belfast was always between three and ten times less than the risk of murder in major cities of the United States. Likewise, the risk of death as the result of traffic accidents in Northern Ireland has been, on average, twice as high as the risk of death by political killing (*Belfast Telegraph*, 23 January 1994). Nevertheless, the tidal flow of fear about political violence, sometimes higher and sometimes lower but always present, has been the consistent fundamental backdrop to public, and often private, life.

This preeminence of fear is triggered by past and present circumstances and is projected onto the vision of the future. The experience that disorder is ever close at hand has resulted in an endemic insecurity which gives rise to the increasingly conscious desire for a new order, for scapegoats and for resolution. For a considerable period of time, Northern Ireland has actively sought and made scapegoats but such actions have been ineffective in bringing about the desired resolution to the crisis. They have led instead to a continuous mimetic crisis of both temporal and spatial dimensions. To have lived in Northern Ireland is to have lived in that unresolved crisis.

Liberal democracy has provided the universal transcendence of Northern Ireland's political models. Northern Ireland is physically and spiritually close to the heartland of liberal democracy: it is geographically bound by Britain and Ireland, economically linked to Western Europe, and historically tied to emigration to the United States, Canada, and the South Pacific. Nevertheless,

Northern Ireland has continuously failed to obey the norms prescribed by the myths of liberal democracy. It has distinguished itself by the presence of systematic political violence and terrorism and by the ineffectiveness of its legal order to carry out the primary function of halting the cycle of revenge. In the myths of the West, disorder is generally attributed to individuals who live on the 'edge' of the community, to those who are ontologically different, as in the case of criminals, by virtue of existing 'outside' the community. This implies that the defiantly nonindividual public disorder of Northern Ireland is distinctly dysfunctional. As a result, Northern Ireland has been regarded as an aberration.

Northern Ireland is mimetic not only with liberal democracy but also with Christianity. Christianity retains an importance within the society which is unusual in comparison to other countries of Europe. More than 80% of the population maintains an active involvement with a church (Stringer 5). Also, the immigration of non-Christian minorities, unlike in other parts of Europe, has been very limited. Institutional Christianity in Ireland nevertheless has not been successful in transcending; it has been frequently the axis of rivalry. As a result, the religious question is commonly reduced to an analysis of the failure of Christianity to transcend political division.

Northern Ireland represents a strange space in the mimetic evolution of communities. Transcendence in the form of legal norms, of liberal democratic values such as human rights, and of Christianity has not entirely disappeared. Whereas historic and accepted structures of relationship such as family relations have diminished elsewhere, in Northern Ireland such structures still remain relatively intact. At the same time, fascination with mimetic violence has become a permanent feature of life. Everywhere people see in some 'other' the ontological face of evil and they seek to drive it out. Although liberal democracy and Christianity have prevented the conscious resolution of the crisis in all out violence, these institutions have failed to provide positive models of how to resolve that crisis in freedom.

As someone born and living in middle-class Northern Ireland, it is impossible for me to write about these themes without open acknowledgement of my own participation in, and belonging to, them. Not only do I live in Northern Ireland, but I, like many others, make much of my living from my indirect relationship to political conflict. Many of the feelings of frustration and anger which underpin political violence I readily recognize in myself. Nothing that is written here can be understood without a recognition of this context with its potentially crucial trap of romantic scapegoating, dividing again into the good and the bad. This paper is an attempt to move beyond

'objectifying', and ultimately scapegoating, social science. My task, therefore, will be to stay as romanesque as possible.¹

Throughout this study, I assume a Girardian model of cultural origins, particularly as interpreted by Roel Kaptein. My goals are fourfold: first, to examine the failure to establish transcendent order in Northern Ireland; second, to identify the religious element in the Northern Irish situation and expand our understanding of the problem; third, to explain the inexorable impact of public fear upon the breakdown of social structure illustrating the multiplication of double-binds and model-obstacle relationships that result from ongoing religious attempts to drive out the scapegoat; and, finally, to explore some of the possibilities for moving beyond crisis.

Sacred law and sacred causes in Northern Ireland

The state in Western society is the modern inheritor of the sacred. The establishment of transcendent order is of primary importance not only for the state but for the existence of common life within the state. In political terms, there are three potential sources of transcendent order in Northern Ireland. First, there is allegiance to the authority of the nation-state which has been the foundation of European and North American rule of law since the eighteenth century. Second, there is the order of the Western world, which is, at least mythically, founded on core principles: allegiance to universal human rights, the universal franchise, and the market economy. The absence of any agreed definition of human rights or of any authority to impose such an international law makes this the most abstract of the potential transcendences. Third, the historically rooted transcendence of Christianity, to which many remain loyal, is still potentially central.

In referring to these three sources of political authority, Northern Ireland is clearly placed within the western political tradition. The successful states are those that reconcile the three authorities and maintain, in spite of occasional violent clashes, some kind of social order. The existence of nation-states allows each state to attempt to solve the potential problem of church/secular rivalry in its own way, usually by the slow yet inexorable privatization of public morality, with all the pluses and minuses that process entails.

¹ In his first work, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Girard distinguishes between the 'romantic' world of human culture which divides between the good and the bad, and the 'romanesque' world which acknowledges the same potential for good and evil in each of us.

In this respect, Northern Ireland has evolved somewhat differently. Political and church rivalry never came to a final resting point; it led to repeated turmoil. This explains one of the common jokes about Northern Ireland, that passengers arriving at Belfast Airport are advised by air hostesses to please turn back their watches 300 years. The ongoing rivalry and turmoil encourages the deep temporal mimesis with manifestations of political disorder in the past. As Kaptein notes, political violence in the present is always mimetic with a previously established pattern of relationship (1993, 24).

Two examples from history will suffice to show the nature of the dominant mimetic pattern. In 1641, a time of considerable turmoil in British politics, Protestant settlers in Northern Ireland came under attack from the Catholic descendants of those whose land had been confiscated for the sake of the settlers. The resulting turmoil and panic which gripped the Protestant community of all denominations was immense. From that time on, the so-called 'genocide myth', the idea that the ultimate goal of Catholics in Ireland is the murder and slaughter of Protestants, entered Protestant consciousness. This easily reawakened fear of being made the ultimate scapegoat of Irish rivalries has haunted Protestant culture ever since. By the same token, the establishment of Protestant supremacy in Ireland after William of Orange's victory in 1690 was regarded as deliverance from that potential apocalypse (Stewart 43-70). The close link between the invocation of these memories and the present political insecurity has heavily influenced the modern political history of Ireland (Bruce 12-4).

For Catholics, however, the consequences of defeat in 1690 were enormous. They were impoverished by a series of draconian anti-Catholic laws which attempted to crush the church and impoverish its believers. The policy served instead to unite the Irish Catholics in opposition to the state and in ever closer alliance with the church. A hundred years later more than a million people died as a direct result of starvation and famine, and one and a half million emigrated from Ireland, all within a period of five years. The survivors, including those in America and England, would hold the unshakable conviction that the Irish had been systematically victimized by the British authorities. Again, the trauma of being the victim of power politics shaped the outrage of Irish politics and set the pattern for future generations. The power of these temporal myths to 'read' spatial experience in the present will continue to be enormous until something radically alters that established pattern of relationship. Any political violence between Britain and the Irish people will reawaken

mimesis with those memories (see Foster 170-235; Lyons 15-70). Relatively little violence thus terrorizes an entire population.

The current, or spatial, experience of each group is deeply mimetic with this temporal framework. For significant numbers of Protestants and Catholics current experiences of violence along the lines of the remembered catastrophes of the past form part of a continuous pattern. Significantly, each community carries the sense that it is the potential scapegoat of the violence and each fights madly to prevent its victimization. The beastly choice, to kill or be killed, is relatively easily inspired.

Fear also is deeply mimetic in the present. Although many consciously wish to avoid mimesis with the historical past, they nevertheless fall into mimesis with the fears of their friends and neighbors. During the years 1968-1972 when many fled their homes in acute fear of immediate destruction, the panic spread quickly throughout the entire community (see Downing 142-72).

The combination of spatial and temporal mimesis polarizes the community around the Catholic-Protestant, Nationalist-Unionist, Irish-British axis. Each transcendence—Catholic, Nationalist, Irish and Protestant, Unionist, and British—tends simultaneously to reinforce the internal unity and destroy the relations between the groups. The potential transcendences of Christianity and the nation-state, and even of the democratic system itself, are seen as transcendent over one part of the society as opposed to the society as a whole. The transcendent authorities that serve to ensure order elsewhere become, in Northern Ireland, weapons in the fight between our own (good) violence and the (bad) violence of the others.

Law and the nation-state in Northern Ireland

The law in the modern West is the sole final legitimate arbiter of disputes. As Girard points out in *Violence and the Sacred*, the law also efficiently functions to hide from us the hypocritical truth about culture: that it uses violence to control violence. As long as the vast majority are convinced that the law identifies the evil ones, that is, as long as the law can exercise the ability both to define who is and is not a criminal and to demand obedience, it can operate effectively to prevent the emergence of the cycle of revenge. This process necessarily remains hidden, because to acknowledge its random and scapegoating basis would be to destroy its effectiveness. It thus functions in the same way as the ancient sacred. The law and the state—the foundational basis of order in functioning liberal democracies—are the inheritors of the sacred.

For the law to be transcendent it must in fact have a clear and direct relationship with the sacred. As Girard has shown, the Enlightenment attempt to abolish religion did not reach beyond its most superficial features. The endeavor to replace the sacred law consequently unleashed new forces which demanded religious solutions. Consciously, and often violently, democracy drove out the divine right of kings and supplanted it with the myth of popular sovereignty and rationality. In spite of the fact that the new states often claimed for themselves the authority previously given to the king, the act of regicide removed in effect one of the main planks of transcendent order. Power was vested ultimately only in the voting majority. By the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville, like Hobbes before him, had clearly noted the dangers of mob tyranny inherent in the utilitarian democratic experiment divorced from any other transcendence (114).

From the outset, the nation-state contained two sacred, or religious, claims within itself: the nation and the state. In most of Western Europe, the end of absolute monarchy brought with it the transfer of monarchical territories to the new parliaments and assemblies. The transcendence of the monarch passed to, or was adopted by, the new democratic rulers without great disturbance to the territory of the realm. The newly emerging transcendent nations which were opposed to the old monarchies took over the power of state. In these settings, the power of the state came from its attachment to the nation. There was no gap between the concept of state and nation, and definitions of who did and did not belong, of who was inside and who was outside, could be taken for granted. Social differences, which serve as the foundation of cultural order, were to this extent still protected by the boundaries of the state.

The end of absolute monarchy in Eastern and Central Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted, however, in the emergence of rival nations fighting over the authority of the state on the same territory. In the case of Austria-Hungary, the abolition of a relatively international monarchy removed the last guarantee of the state's protection of, and respect for, internal national differences. In the case of Germany, the rolling-back of its frontiers left deeply rivalling groups in the struggle to secure their existence against one another. Most of these nations also engaged in rivalry with external powers, as well as with the historic failure of their own national entity to protect them (Kaptein 1993,2-3). In the midst of chaos, they sought solutions in driving out the opponents and establishing a new kind of order. They sought, in other words, deeply religious solutions.

Rivalry between nations for the power of state meant dividing within the state territory between those who belonged and those who did not. It resulted

in the attempt to violently reestablish the social differences which are the basis for a sense of security. The insecurity and desire for an end to the violence led to the search for scapegoats: enemies of the nation took on the face of the scapegoat who destroys everything and breaks all rules. In Northern Ireland unlike other nations of Western Europe, this gave rise to *two* insecure and well-defined rivals, demanding their right to sacred transcendence in the same territory, each finding its scapegoats in the opponent (Wright 288-90).

The result is the existence in Northern Ireland of two competing authorities, neither of which is transcendent. The political settlement of 1921 by which Britain granted independence to much of Ireland left two insecure groups in the north, each looking elsewhere for reassurance. The continued rivalry between Ireland and Great Britain made it enormously difficult for Northern Ireland to escape the bind of internal division.

For the law to fulfil its task of dividing good from evil, its transcendence must be taken for granted. When it is viewed by each party to the conflict as a tool to be used against the other, the result is a deepening of the classic spiral of mimetic rivalry. The (potential) transcendence thus becomes a powerful part of the power struggle. In such instances when the law itself becomes the object of mimetic rivalry, its hypocritical aspect is exposed and it clearly reveals itself as part of the scapegoat mechanism.

In Northern Ireland, rival systems emerged whose images of good and bad, and all that flows from them, are in effect mirror doubles. As Kaptein explains, under the conditions of rivalry each party comes to resemble the opponent more and more (1993, 17-21). Each has its scapegoat who, like all scapegoats, takes on mythical qualities and loses its humanity. Each believes that everything can and indeed must be done to stop the enemy who is conceived as ontologically evil, yet powerful: devil-gods.

The escalation of this rivalry into terrorism is well known. The defenders of the established British system (the state) react to terrorism with an ever more brutal demand for the enforcement of law, but their attempt to criminalize terrorist opposition has failed largely because the perpetrators of terrorism are not marginalized. There is no unanimity on the part of the crowd with regard to the terrorist role in the crisis. There is instead a deep ambivalence on the part of many who view the terrorist as a scapegoat of state brutality. Counter-terror thus further erodes transcendence, for far from eliminating violence such measures undermine all remaining claims to the transcendent authority of the state and risk further deepening the crisis. The inability of the law to eliminate its rivals results not only in the spiral of

revenge but in the threatened end to any differentiation between terrorism and the law as well.

The legal order in Northern Ireland is often the object rather than the arbitrator of disputes. The absence of the sacred legal order means that the state has not provided a structural basis within which difference is guaranteed and human relations are regulated. Neither the British or the Irish nations are, likewise, able to encompass necessary difference.

The logic of terrorism and counter-terrorism is clearly religious: it is rooted in the logic of the sacred, in the expulsion of the enemy. This is implicitly, if only vaguely, grasped by large numbers of people in Northern Ireland. The move towards purification and new order has not taken the shape of mass ethnic cleansing but there are obvious indications of that trend. When the tensions of the Civil Rights movement exploded in the early 1970s, the urban working class fled into scapegoated ghettos. According to the 1991 census, 50% of the population of Belfast lived in areas that were more than 90% Catholic or Protestant. The census also identified the sharp movement of Protestants away from the violence-ridden city of Belfast as well as from the west of the province where they constitute a minority.

In working-class parts of Belfast, groups are physically separated by unbreachable walls, known as 'peace walls', which reduce the sense of imminent scapegoating. The migration of the rural and middle-class population has been less consciously, yet nevertheless clearly, mimetic with this movement. Different groups slowly but inexorably moved out of areas where they were scapegoated, or in fear of being scapegoated, into areas where they could enjoy the security of forming part of the 'crowd'.

As the crisis continued, religious attempts to drive out the scapegoat and reestablish order also escalated, as I will explain further on in this study. The result was again, however, greater disorder and the progressive increase of rivalry. Demography, geography, and (probably) Christianity have all operated in Northern Ireland to ensure that the scapegoat constantly returns to haunt the victimizers and is never, finally, driven out.

Western values and Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland longs for a sacrificial expulsion in a context where the right to sacrifice is still reserved solely to the law. In this regard, the political order has not completely broken down. The liberal democratic order of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland has acted to mitigate the potential for breakdown.

At the same time, however, liberal democracy in nearby and related states represents the unanimous crowd and a conscious basis for the crowd's unanimity. At a deep level, Northern Irish politics is in mimesis with that unanimity.

Liberal democracy is the meta-law of Northern Irish political life against whose values public actions are measured and validated. Public authorities and institutions continue to reinforce this framework. The recurrent transgression of liberal democratic norms not only prevented the crisis from being resolved in this relationship but deepened it into a persistent model-obstacle relationship with the Western world as a whole.

There are two obvious roots of this problem. The first is the inadequacy of cultural means to deal with fear as it exists in Northern Ireland. In the context of endemic insecurity, rationality and order do not prevail. Attempts to impose or insist on rational laws without eliminating the fears only results in deeper fears and more obstinate model-obstacle relationships. Under such circumstances, even universal concepts such as human rights become part of the rivalries.

Transcendent human rights depend on a clear conception of the proper relationship between the state and the citizen. In the context of rivalry over the state which existed in Northern Ireland until the cease-fire, the state-citizen relation lost much of its objective quality. Human rights were alternately adopted and rejected to the extent that they justified the fears and actions resulting from them. It was presumed that those rights included the right to protect ourselves from the abuses of the scapegoater-others and never the other way around.

The second reason for the failure of liberal democratic transcendence is the deepening insecurity and indifferentiation of the neighbors themselves. With racism, public violence, unemployment, and international tensions on the rise throughout Western Europe, distinct identities can no longer be taken for granted. In the midst of such tensions the necessity for scapegoat victims is also on the rise. In the case of Britain and Ireland, rivalry within and between these states is obscured by their scapegoating and quarantining of Northern Ireland.

Over the last twenty-five years, Britain and the Republic of Ireland have become increasingly parallel in their relationship to Northern Ireland. The assumption of individualism in liberal democracy allowed both states to continue to maintain that the problems of Northern Ireland were entirely created within Northern Ireland. The description of those problems as a conflict between Catholics and Protestants has further served to protect Britain

and Ireland from their connection to the rivalry: so long as the roots of violence were restricted to Northern Ireland, the integral nature of the British-Irish relationship with Northern Ireland could remain hidden. In this classic case of scapegoating Northern Ireland alone was made to bear that responsibility. Ultimately, this mechanism also failed.

The liberal democratic order of the United Kingdom and Ireland, therefore, acted at one and the same time to limit the crisis in Northern Ireland and to stop its resolution. Increasingly, a number of model-obstacle relations were created in which the fears of Northern Ireland and the associated relationships of Britain and Ireland could not be resolved. Furthermore, the most important mimetic movement emerging from neighboring areas was no longer the strengthening of liberal democratic values but the move towards individualism: those who managed to remove themselves from the direct fear of becoming scapegoats (largely the middle class) no longer sought transcendent values but pursued their own interests in the economy instead. This has not resolved the indifferentiation in society but deepened and complicated the problem.

The church and society

The churches of Northern Ireland have never offered a complete transcendence for the society as a whole. Inter-church rivalry was indeed the primary guarantor of the development of a loyal pro-British community. The different strands of Christianity are, therefore, caught in the predicament that, within the society, they have always represented rivalry rather than transcendence. The churches have undertaken their politically appointed task of protecting and legitimizing rival groups since 1600, but they have been unable to find a way out of the binds that resulted from the rivalries of church and politics.

The danger of focussing on the churches is that such a view blinds us to the full religious dimension of the conflict. An anthropological approach to the links between the churches and religion is essential if we are to illuminate the links between religion and conflict. Girard's description of religion as the sacred system founded on sacrifice with the purpose of containing human violence is particularly useful in showing that 'the religious' and 'the church' are not always co-identical. Although the churches in Northern Ireland certainly have never been free of sacrificial religion, sacrificial religion has equally, and clearly, not been confined to the churches.

Historically, the rivalry between Christian factions was the precise factor which made Protestantism crucial in ensuring political loyalty. During the convulsive movements and rivalries of the Reformation and Counter

Reformation, a small minority of settlers in Northern Ireland were Roman Catholic; the overwhelming majority were Presbyterian or Anglican. Set deliberately in the midst of a hostile, and Catholic, territory, neither Catholic nor Protestant could feel secure and neither group could disregard the other. Both looked to different political allies to protect them and to stop them from becoming scapegoats, but, significantly, neither group felt assured that such protection was forthcoming.

The churches, therefore, found themselves in rivalry with one another not only as theological systems but as political systems as well. The fact that Christian denominations across Europe were already engaged in the scapegoating of one another in the midst of real political rivalries about the state only fostered the deepening of the sacrificial potential of Christianity. Whereas the German settlement (*Cuius regio, eius religio*) created the territorial separation of denominations as a means of reducing rivalry, the settlement of Ulster created increasingly mixed territories where rivalry was effectively encouraged. The political scapegoat was found among those who conformed to the general pattern of the scapegoats of Protestants and Catholics. Sacrificial politics and sacrificial theologies, in other words, chose victims in the same places. The two, church and state, developed in a comparable manner, each calling on the other to reinforce the sacred system. Neither group was certain that victory was secure. The religious impulse, the desire to create order in the midst of chaotic feelings, became, in this way, a permanent reality.

Insecurity drives people to look for the cause of their difficulties. In Ireland, each denomination sought to identify that cause along clearly distinguishable lines. In the midst of the deep insecurity that followed the Reformation, each church offered a vision of order for part of the population but never for the population as a whole. Religious rivalries crystallized in Britain when the Dutch prince, William of Orange, was invited to secure the British throne for Protestantism against the Catholicism of James II. This cemented political and church loyalties in Ireland and thrust the Britain-Protestant, Ireland-Catholic axis into a new age. Harsh legal efforts in Ireland to build an established (Anglican) church served to bind the suffering Irish Catholic majority ever more closely to their church. Anglican domination threatened also to alienate Presbyterians who had emigrated in large numbers to North America. Nonetheless, the main thrust of the policy was anti-Catholicism. In this context, suffering Catholicism—identified with the suffering Christ—gave ritual expression to the Irish nation long before such a concept had developed any practical political meaning.

Democratization in the nineteenth century and the easing of religious tensions in much of Europe after the Enlightenment led to the mobilization of Irish Catholics and to the demand for the removal of anti-Catholic law. The community formed in the shadow of the church, as scapegoat of the law, became the foundation of modern political organization in Ireland. The Protestant churches were excluded from this rising tide and were ministering to an increasingly insecure community. In effect they found themselves ritualizing a different political nation.

Initially, anti-Catholic Protestants focussed on integrating Catholics into the secular state. This had the effect of pitting the Roman Catholic Church once again against the state, especially on the crucial issue of the control of schools. The reaction of the Irish peasantry to the establishment of the British state-versus-church rivalry was to almost uniformly back the church position, thus reinforcing the prominence of the Catholic Church as the most important symbolic institution of Irish Nationalism.

This resulted, especially in times of economic and social dislocation, in the renewal of Protestant anti-Catholicism and the increasing sense of the fragility of the Protestant settlement in Ireland. During such times of tension, the Orange Order, which tied together elements of the British crown and the Protestant bible, became increasingly important. Whenever violence intensified, the annual Orange ritual of marches to commemorate the Protestant victory of 1690 took on heightened significance. When Home Rule was proposed for Ireland, the vast majority of Protestants opposed it under the slogan, "Home Rule is Rome Rule." The fundamentally religious nature of their opposition was symbolized in 1912 when some of the 300,000 who signed the "Solemn League and Covenant," a reference to Presbyterian opposition to the state, did so in blood—identifying once again with the blood of Christ.

The deeply mimetic nature of the movements in Ireland is immediately clear. Each group imitates the other in almost uncanny fashion. As the groups become more and more alike, each also becomes more convinced of its own distinct and contrary qualities. As the similarities increase, the rivalries multiply.

The result is a religious crisis at every level. The fact that different forms of sacrificial religion, whether secular or church-based, often coalesce in a sacrificial unity explains one of the paradoxes of Northern Irish political life: the strong political relationship between the secularized, Protestant working-class community and the fundamentalist religious political party led by Ian Paisley. Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church is fundamentally opposed to

Roman Catholicism, which makes it opposed to everything which would lead towards a (Catholic-dominated) united Ireland, particularly to the Irish Republican Army. The Protestant working class also regards the IRA as the evil enemy, which explains why, in spite of the low church-attendance rates in Northern Ireland, Paisley's religious anti-IRA stance has found widespread support among secular Protestants (Bruce 1986, see especially 150-207).

Recently, a branch of liberation theology has developed within Catholicism which identifies the Nationalist (Catholic) working class as the victim of imperial aggression (see Wilson). Violence from this quarter becomes symptomatic, never causal; its perpetrators, mostly the IRA, are reactive to the provocation of British aggression. Victim and perpetrators, however, are ontologically fixed categories whose transcendent framework is provided by sacrificial Christianity. Indeed, the deep sacrificial tradition of Irish Nationalism, most famously developed by Patrick Pearse and continued with the hunger strikers of 1981, identifies the suffering of Ireland with the death of Christ on the cross. In this version, Ireland is always the crucified, never the crucifier, the role assigned to Britain.

In a society structured in parallel and rival religious forms which remain unresolved, everyone fears becoming the scapegoat and also longs for resolution. In such a setting, as Kaptein explains, terrorists seek to provoke the ancient religious structure of sacrificial scapegoating, offering themselves as victims in the process (1992, 13-7). In such cases, relatively little violence serves to recreate temporal mimesis with the potential crisis. In the absence of external mediation the mimetic pressure of the crowd to conform to the scapegoat pattern is enormous. People who are born and live within a system of constant rivalry and insecurity thus find themselves irresistibly tied to the mimetic movements of terrorist groups. The churches, in general, share in the same temporal roots as those groups. They have been places where people go to find order rather than freedom, places where people seek solace rather than the courage to undertake difficult and risky tasks.

The churches have sought, nevertheless, to distance themselves sharply from terrorism, thus giving rise to strong misgivings among those who detect a sense of betrayal or who consider the church's stance to be frankly hypocritical. On one point the churches agree: they are against violence. There is here a serious danger of playing the final trick of religion. Every violent political event since 1969 has been met with church-based condemnation. However, when churches tried to deny the direct tie of nation and denomination, they found themselves identifying their own people as the victims of violence but never as the perpetrators. The perpetrators are always 'outside'

the church. This stance largely crystallized into the superficial notion that the churches are not engaged in violence but are, rather, the pastors to its victims. In this sense, they are not different from other institutions in society: they are clear about the evil of the few and about the goodness of the many.

There are two basic reasons for the failure of the churches' attempt to provide a general transcendence against violence. First, they are unable to agree on who the real victims are. Second, their own inter-church rivalries enable them to speak against the violence of outsiders but prevent them from developing relationships which contrast to any degree with those of the general mimetic rivalries of the outside. The failure stems not so much from any deliberate insincerity as from the widespread suspicion that the churches are nonetheless hypocritical.

The churches, therefore, remain part of the religious system but they do not constitute that system in its entirety. Indeed, it is clear that many of those disillusioned with the churches have become more rather than less religious in a Girardian, that is sacrificial, sense. The problem is that the churches have been unable to find a gospel which frees them from the religious system. From the point of view of the scapegoat, the church and the political system have often been difficult to separate. In attempting to drive out the British, Protestants automatically felt victimized; in attempting to drive out the Catholics, they alienated themselves from their connection with Ireland. In the eyes of the victims, the opponent's churches were always on the side of the perpetrators of violence. The churches, in turn, have always seen themselves on the side of the victims.

The Christianity of Ireland has thus often encouraged everyone to see themselves as victims. We are always crucified with Christ, never crucifying Him. Although such imagery is officially repudiated by the churches, the reality which it represents is undeniable: Protestants wrote their defiance of the rule of Rome in blood in 1912; the slaughter of Ulstermen at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 is still the most potent memory of the willingness to shed blood for British nationality; Patrick Pearse, the most mystical of the Irish Nationalists of 1916, was obsessed with those who had shed blood for Ireland and convinced of the cleansing power of sacrifice; the IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands was glorified after his death in 1981, as a Christ figure ("Greater love has no man than he lay down his life for his friends") (see O'Malley 123-50; *Andersonstown News*, May and June 1981). In each case, the imagery of sacrificial Christianity was used to justify further (defensive) slaughter.

Wheels within wheels: some results of the mimetic crisis

The result of the failure of transcendence is a series of clearly visible existential double binds: we long to sacrifice-we cannot sacrifice; we demand the law-we reject the law; we desire resolution-we fear the resolution; we despise being the scapegoats of the Western world-we attain a greater fullness of being as the scapegoats of the Western world; Protestants are Irish-Protestants do not wish to be Irish; Catholics want a united Ireland-Catholics reject a united Ireland.

These double binds invoke a complex web of fascinations, many of whose stages clearly and simultaneously reveal the process of being both scapegoater and scapegoat. On the one hand, we are drawn towards the violence and defined by it. On the other hand, we flee from violence, afraid of the possibility that we will be its next victim. We are at times also transfixed, like Lot's wife, unable to stay or to leave, both pulled and pushed at the same time. In many ways, violence itself now constitutes the common identity of Northern Ireland.

In the midst of insecurity, the search for scapegoats has become a permanent part of public life. However, this search has not resulted in security but in the multiplication and deepening of model-obstacle relationships. The first and most superficial among them is the rivalry, whether British or Irish, with the opponent's culture. Unionists scapegoat Irishness and the Irish people, whom they cannot expel from their midst. Ulster Protestantism is internally ordered by the resulting rivalry and may indeed have no internal coherence without it. Similarly, Republican violence is fixated on Britain and Britishness. It defines everything in opposition to the great Satan, the devil-god of Britain. In both cases the solution to the problem is articulated as the expulsion or destruction of the enemy, in Girardian terms the expulsion of the scapegoat, the ambivalent devil-god.

The second type of model-obstacle is the hidden rivalry with one's own culture. The escalation of violence has resulted in the rapid erosion of cultural differences which used to protect some people from violence rather than others. Northern Ireland is an example of the failure of cultural order: British culture did not protect Ulster Protestants against Irish incursion; Irish culture left Catholics unprotected in hostile territory. Nationalisms rival, consequently, to reestablish the failed order. The phenomenon is analogous to moralizing movements in Western culture which seek to revive the memory of sacrificial order at times when the resolution of internal crises seems impossible. In Northern Ireland as elsewhere, violence increases as cultural order recedes, and scapegoats offer themselves in an attempt to reestablish the sacred order. Thus we see that in seeking ways to provoke a 'final' mimetic crisis and produce a

new order, our nationalisms have also become increasingly religious (see Kaptein 1992, 18-20).

A third kind of model-obstacle is evoked by the relationship between the conscious search for peace and the apparent enormity of the task itself. The repeated failure of political attempts to find solutions leaves most people in Northern Ireland acutely aware of the depression associated with defeat. At the same time, that failure provokes their further fascination with violence. If the dynamics of the experience of despair are plainly evident, however, the dynamics of the increasing fascination with violence remain largely hidden. There is still little awareness of the implicit principle that the greater the obstacle, the more attractive it becomes.

While British policy has maintained a degree of order and prosperity for many people, violence and fear have deepened the deterioration of many aspects of cultural order. This is most obvious in the rapid multiplication of those who were deemed 'legitimate targets' for murder within the conflict. Terrorism inverted the concept of legitimacy central to the claims of the democratic state invoking a reversal in the definition of the nature of 'good' and 'bad' violence. Although terrorists were always covert, they made conspicuous distinctions between 'legitimate and illegitimate targets'. In Northern Ireland, police, uniformed officers, and servants of the crown were deemed 'legitimate targets' of the IRA. The Protestant (counter-)terrorist Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) latterly abolished even these distinctions, declaring all Catholics to be 'legitimate' targets.

The ongoing cultural movements of Western Europe have combined with violence in Northern Ireland to produce increasing atomization particularly visible among the middle classes. The fascination with violence in this regard has had paradoxical effects. On the one hand, the society is structured around and fascinated by the threatened apocalypse. On the other, its members withdraw from anything that might entail the risk of becoming the scapegoat. A pattern thus emerges of people withdrawing into private life in pursuit of their own private interests. Furthermore, generous compensation from the state for the economic cost of terrorism has meant that the financial consequences for the middle classes have been minimal. Many of us, in fact, are able to enjoy the excitement of violence without monetary cost. Indeed, the increased investment in the Northern Ireland's economy has allowed the majority to experience the years of political violence as a period of prosperity. Those who have suffered are concentrated in poor urban and rural settings and are effectively forgotten.

Culture is built on secrets and hypocrisy which function to ensure its continuance. In order to prevent social crises areas of tension which touch on foundations of relationship are often avoided or designated as taboos. At best, such foundations integral to the relationships of members of the community to one another are so embedded that they are not consciously recognized. They are viewed simply as taboos. As long they function to restrain disorder and ensure the continuance of culture, they are passively respected.

This is evident in the relationships in Northern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics which are traditionally governed by the implicit rule of not talking about politics or church-related matters. These relationships are characterized by 'secrets.' While this practice enables people to relate across religious boundaries by keeping the wider social crisis outside personal relationships, it also means that personal relationships do not alter the underlying relations of the society. Even personal friendships, in other words, are ineffective as means of reducing overall social tension. There is no mechanism in culture to resolve this dilemma. Only the experience of real human meeting can unveil the 'secret' and allow a new beginning.

As elsewhere, middle-class life in Northern Ireland involves the attempt to avoid the possibility of being victimized. For this reason, rivalry over politics is generally subordinated in everyday life to personal relations. Although pleasant relations are certainly possible, they are premised on the denial or non-acknowledgement of the open secret of rivalry between groups. The curious outcome is that the politics of rivalry are continued in middle-class areas, but without consequence for the middle class. Those with financial resources simply move away from the violence. This has had the double effect of freeing the middle classes of any sense of responsibility for the violence and of deepening the sense of desperation among those (poorer people) who are left in its midst.

Finding ways out

Until the cease-fire, cultural mechanisms for resolving conflict were not notably successful. The failure to find a common transcendence of authority resulted in a mimetic conflict which has been contained by aspects of transcendent order, but only fitfully. Each potential transcendence—nation, state, church, democracy, God—has served as a powerful weapon with which to establish supremacy over the rival other. The result, as we have seen, is a series of double-binds, a proliferation of model-obstacles, and an increasing fascination with violence. The attempt to fight violence with violence,

furthermore, has not halted the escalation of conflict; it has led to ever more violence.

There are at least two possibilities for finding ways to move beyond conflict. The first, which operates within the structures of political life, is to put an end to the mimetic rivalry between the potential transcendent orders of Britain and Ireland. The cease-fire in place at the time of writing this study is a beginning in this direction. This will probably require an ever closer association between the governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. As the political agents primarily responsible for the peoples of Northern Ireland, the 'parental partners, the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, will necessarily have to engage in a new relationship with one another with crucial effects on all of us living in Northern Ireland. The closer ties between Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland will almost certainly be resisted in Northern Ireland, for it will awaken each group's fear that once again they are about to be victimized. There will be some so fearful, in fact, that there is the risk that terrorism will escalate in the short term.

For this reason, the transcendence of the rule of law and the norms of liberal democracy will be central to the new relationship between Britain and Ireland. There is already some evidence that the common commitment to the norms of liberal democracy provides possibilities for both countries to find new ways to interrelate. It is clear that ongoing rivalry between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland only destabilizes relations in Northern Ireland. Change, then, will involve a new relationship between the two states with regard not only to the question of Northern Ireland and its role as scapegoat in that dynamic, but also to the entirety of the relations between Britain and Ireland. As long as Britain and Ireland pretend that the problem is an exclusively internal problem of Northern Ireland, they will keep Northern Ireland enslaved in the rivalry of their own relationship.

The churches, too, have possibilities. As important institutions in society, they continue to carry the gospel throughout Northern Ireland. Unlike secular society, they also know about repentance and forgiveness and about the possibilities such practices open. Increasingly, however, the churches find themselves in the position of defending their interests against rampant secularism and this makes the temptation to become ever more religious (in the sacrificial sense) very strong. Many churches still desperately fight to ensure that they are not blamed for the conflict, thus deepening the numerous double binds that paralyze social relations.

The other possibilities are about finding freedom in the sense of the gospel, a freedom in the midst of conflict which allows us to move beyond the

present limits of cultural practices. Ultimately, this entails stopping fighting against being made the scapegoat and finding instead alternative ways of relating to one another—acknowledging each other as both scapegoats and scapegoaters, as human beings. In this sense, the reality that the gospel continues to be an influence in the daily life of many Catholics and Protestants still gives real and daily possibilities. It has led some to seek new forms of community in which, at times, new relationships have been made and old patterns left behind.

In our own work, we have found the Girardian model to be very helpful in this regard. It serves as a constant reminder to us of our own participation in the rivalry and in the scapegoating of the system. It also allows us to consciously grasp the distinction between the ruinous feelings of guilt which are ultimately related to the system of rivalry, and real guilt which is the knowledge of our responsibility for, and roles in, the crisis.

In experiences of this kind, where we are given the gift to start again from a new point of understanding, the myth of all against one *can* be avoided. In this regard, group work has offered some important and interesting possibilities of moving forward towards freedom from conflict. We have found many opportunities to introduce the models of mimesis and scapegoating to university groups, trade unionists, police, social workers, doctors, and varied other community gatherings. The opportunities presented through such group work often appear small, but rivalry with the concept of success itself is a trap which we have learned to try to avoid.

There are many instances in which group work has enabled a new basis for relationships. Two examples will suffice here. The first show that group work can establish a safe space where people can come into mimesis with a new freedom where real differences which change our relations with one another can emerge. A Catholic woman from a Gaelic-speaking family told her Protestant listeners how her family patterns broke with the traditional lines of Irish history. Her brothers had gone to a Protestant school where, because they were Gaelic Catholics, they were banned from a number of cultural events reserved for non-British people. Each year, however, the cultural groups needed someone to give a speech in Irish and her brothers were the only ones in the village who could do this. In telling her story to the group, the woman freed numerous people to the possibility of relating how their own histories also differed from the dominant myths of the society. As a result, the group encounter opened the possibility of meaningful interaction among people of different cultural backgrounds. It opened a space that was free of the mimetic fascination with conflict. Two years later, several members of the group met

again and shared the experience of how that woman's story helped them to lose their fascination with violence and to find numerous practical possibilities for working together.

A second example illustrates the possibilities for finding new patterns of relationships even among those deeply steeped in historic rivalries. After difficult group work in which young people who lived in a particularly tense region of Northern Ireland were telling one another of their experiences at the hands of the other—rival—faction, news came that a friend of some of the Protestants in the group had been killed by the IRA. At the end of the group encounter, one of the young Catholics whose family had long suffered at the hands of the security forces, turned to the Protestants and said, "I never believed that Protestants really grieved about their dead. Can you still accept me after what was done in my name?" In that moment, the mimetic relationship with the past was broken, at least partially, for everyone in the room.

These are only examples. They illustrate, however, that there are still many real possibilities of finding freedom in the midst of the mimetic power of our fascination with conflict.

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