

SUSAN CONNELLY. The World is Full of Scapegoats - John Menadue - Pearls and Irritations

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Compromised politicians, muted religions, a distracted and increasingly partisan media and a malleable crowd combine in another tragedy. Scapegoating it is, but thanks to the Gospel it is not destined for seamless success.

Think of Oedipus. This tortuous myth has all the elements of scapegoating: a society in crisis from an inexplicable plague leading to social unrest; a convenient scapegoat appearing in the person of one weakened by his foreign background and disfigurement; a series of misadventures giving credence to accusations of patricide and incest; a crowd united in condemnation. And the final proof of guilt? The victim himself joins in the scapegoating and puts out his own eyes. Guilty on all counts.

The philosopher René Girard draws fascinating parallels between the Oedipus stories and those of Joseph in the Jewish scriptures. There is a family crisis fuelled by jealousy of a favoured brother who flaunts his coloured coat and his incessantly boastful dreams. His brothers sell him to passing traders, and in the court of the Pharaoh he rises to prominence despite accusations of seduction by the chief steward's wife and various stints in the dungeon on other trumped-up charges. When his brothers arrive in Egypt for food, he finally reveals himself and steps forward to embrace them. Not guilty, on all counts.

It's not the details of the stories that matter so much. It's the intuition concerning the status of the victim in the texts that are key. The imagination behind Oedipus differs fundamentally from that which produced the Joseph story. Oedipus's culture was immersed in scapegoating as the normal way of dealing with crises, whereas in the Jewish milieu there were stirrings of questioning against this practice. The Jewish scriptures retain much scapegoating and many myths, but there is an observable, if intermittent, progression away from the tried-and-true process of scapegoating to solve social ills, e.g. in the book of Job, some of the Psalms, and parts of Isaiah.

We can now grasp what is going on in the stories, the myths. Spinning yarns about Oedipus and other victimised characters over millennia always concealed the true role of the powerful. All blame was shifted to the vulnerable one who "lacked a champion" in Girard's words. The sacrifice of this victim to the gods brought a divine aura to a vicious process, and the deed of murder or expulsion, seen as just and right, brought a measure of unity and harmony to many a riven society.

Witch hunts come to mind. The diabolical Nazi experiment was modern scapegoating at its zenith. Australia has scapegoated asylum seekers who arrived by boat, so that innocent people are detained for years without redress, without media attention, without hope. A new myth is being spun all the time – that "national security" requires ever more stringent laws, ever more oversight of people's communication, ever more suspicion. The story of a certain unnamed

person is a classic example. He was recently arrested, tried, and jailed for 15 months in Australia *in secret*.

There are fundamental differences between ancient scapegoating and the modern versions, however. The Nazi atrocities and Australia's scapegoating of boat people have been carried out by Christians, a fact which not only underlines that we Christians are often the means of concealing the very revelation we are presumed to promote, but also points to the endemic nature of violence.

Despite this, Girard points to the intellectual breakthrough achieved by the Gospel accounts of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He sees these accounts as the final flowering of the gradual Jewish understanding of the innocence of the victim. The Gospels state without adornment the guilt of the political and religious leaders. They depict the thick-headedness, self-importance and ultimate cowardice of the disciples. The fickleness of the crowd, so easily charmed into the status of mob, is clear. There is no embellishment, no omission of the facts, no sweeping under the carpet, no exoneration of the powerful.

The Gospel accounts are raw in their depiction of humanity using its age-old remedy to solve a crisis: scapegoating. Jesus died as a result of human violence, murdered because of political fears of uprising, religious jealousy, the giddiness of the crowd, and betrayal by his own.

As a scapegoating event it was a colossal failure, but because of it, humanity has begun to see scapegoating for what it is: a violent lie. Victimising a scapegoat no longer serves to bring societies to lasting peace and harmony because people now see through it. We can see that scapegoating is violence committed on a weaker entity in the interests of a dominant group. No matter how cleverly presented the reports, the interviews, the documentation, it can be recognised for the lie that it is.

The world is full of scapegoats. We have many here in Australia, among whom are Bernard Collaery, lawyer for "Witness K", a spy involved in the deceit practised on Timor-Leste. Revelations of the mendacity and greed of successive governments in relation to the Timorese people have been coming to light for years, resulting in even more lowering of people's faith in governments— a crisis. The crisis may surge, as Collaery's new book *Oil Under Troubled Water* unearths some of the depths to which governments have stooped to swindle the Timorese. But not only the Timorese have been duped: the book reveals the handing over of prodigious amounts of Australian wealth to powerful foreign-owned companies.

What is the default response in such a crisis? Blame a scapegoat. In this case, a man who honours his conscience and is inclined to the truth is found to be ripe for victimisation. Condemnation, secrecy, procedural delay and the spinning of myths to cover flagrant abuse of power is his lot. Is he destined for jail? Who knows? Perhaps the powers that be will be satisfied with attempting to crush him, personally and professionally.

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