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The Satanic Nature of Racist "Christianity"

For Todd¹

**Susan Peppers-Bates
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In this paper, Dr. Peppers-Bates ponders the persistence of individual and institutional racism among modern-day Christians by applying the anthropological-psychological lens of the scholar René Girard and his concepts of mimesis and the scapegoating mechanism. The message of the Gospel is incompatible with violence and hatred, yet those who embrace racial stereotyping, even as they call themselves 'Christians', are deaf to it.

In July 2012, the First Baptist Church of Crystal Springs, Mississippi refused to allow their pastor to marry an African-American couple.² Allegedly, white parishioners threatened to fire their minister if he dared wed the black couple in the predominately white church. The Southern Baptist leadership

¹ I dedicate this article to my beloved late husband, Dr. Todd Christopher Bates, a loving father and husband, a superb philosopher, who introduced me to the work of René Girard.

² Emily Wagster Pettus, "Mississippi Governor: It's 'Unfortunate' Church Blocked Black Wedding," *Huffington Post, Power and Politics* (August 2, 2012), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/02/church-blocked-black-wedding_n_1735834.html (accessed December 16, 2012).

has since rebuked the church,³ and it would be all too easy to dismiss the incident as an aberration of aging southern racists. Unfortunately, such a discounting of current racism among American Christians would be a mistake. Tragically, not much has changed since the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. remarked that “[a]t 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing ‘and Christ has no east or west,’ we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation.”⁴ An analysis of sociological data reveals that upwards of 90% of Americans worship in churches that are almost exclusively racially homogenous.⁵ This hyper-segregation in the houses of God began with slave masters whipping slaves who worshiped or tried to read the Bible, carried on through the legal separation in the South and intentional segregation in the North, and prevails in the present day.

In this paper, I offer a Girardian analysis of the ongoing institutional racism in our self-proclaimed Christian nation. For Catholics in particular, I second Bryan N. Massingale’s assessment that “racial justice is not now—and never has

³ Louis Casiano, “Baptist Leader: Decision Not to Wed Black Couple Must Be a Learning Experience,” NBCNEWS.com (July 30, 2012), http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/07/30/13037329-baptist-leader-decision-not-to-wed-black-couple-must-be-a-learning-experience?lite (accessed July 31, 2012).

⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King, “Dr. Martin Luther King’s 1963 WMU Speech Found,” *Archives & Regional History Collections*, <http://www.wmich.edu/~ulib/archives/mlk/q-a.html> (accessed August 15, 2012).

⁵ Michael O. Emerson, “Race, Religion and the Color Line (Or Is That the Color Wall?)” in *Rethinking the Color Line: Readings in Race and Ethnicity* ed. Charles A. Gallagher (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012): 195-203, 196.

been—a passionate matter for most American Catholics.... [s]tanding against racism is not a core component of Catholic corporate identity.”⁶ Indeed, I argue that the majority of white Christians who ignore the huge, disproportionate targeting of people of color in this nation’s post-1982 “war on drugs”⁷ demonstrate their ongoing acceptance of racial scapegoating; a scapegoating that thereby handicaps their spiritual development. I will focus on Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*⁸ and her evidence of overwhelming targeting and incarceration of men of color to support my claim that racism remains the sickness unto death that distorts America’s soul and leaves her Christianity all too often entrapped in what Girard calls the satanic “scapegoating mechanism,” which I will describe in some detail in the pages that follow.⁹

⁶ Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 77.

⁷ The history and politics of the “war on drugs” declared under Ronald Reagan, through the present day, is documented extensively by Michelle Alexander in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2010).

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ As the scapegoat mechanism is, arguably, Girard’s key insight, it is discussed extensively below and throughout his works. See, for example, Yvonne Freccero, trans., René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

I. René Girard and the Scapegoating Mechanism

René Girard (b. 1923), emeritus Professor at Stanford University, made his name and built his career on one sweeping, anthropological-psychological thesis that purports to explain the origin of religion in human society.¹⁰ Girard argues that all ancient societies in general, and human beings as its members, were characterized by mimetic rivalry and violence. “Mimesis” draws its meaning from imitation—all human beings desire and aspire to possess what another human already has: “since the objects we should not desire [inasmuch as our desiring them causes otherwise needless conflict] and nevertheless do desire always belongs to the neighbor, it is clearly the neighbor who renders them desirable.”¹¹ This truth can be seen plainly in a room of toddlers: the minute one picks up a toy which was previously neglected by all, the other children clamor and fight to obtain it. Only somewhat less obvious in the adult realm, social and political climbers most desperately desire what can be had by only a few or one.

Mimetic rivalries, according to Girard, can spread like a contagion across groups, leading to instability and inter-group

¹⁰ For an excellent overview of Girard’s work and in-depth analysis of his main themes, see Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2009). For a brief chapter over-viewing this process, see René Girard, *Sacrifice* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), Ch. 3, 62-95.

¹¹ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 9, henceforth ISS; as cited in Todd Bates, “Baptizing Adorno’s Odysseus,” *The European Legacy*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (August 2010): 599-617, 611 .

violence. In such agitated communities, the unanimous selection of a scapegoat, then killed by the group, can restore the peace. According to Girard, “Sacrifice is the primordial institution of human culture....It must be in this way that specifically human societies commence: they are founded on sacrifices and the institutions that derived from them.”¹²

Girard claims that all “primitive” religions and archaic human societies are grounded upon such founding original murders, re-enacted ritually as needed to keep the peace. Thus, sacrifice can be understood as the salve/safety valve for mimetic rivalries and inter-group tensions:

Communities deliberately reproduce these phenomena in their sacrificial rites, hoping in this way to protect themselves from their own violence by diverting it onto the expendable victims, human or animal, whose deaths will not cause violence or rebound because no one will bother to avenge them.¹³

Ironically, the original victim is first blamed for the community’s original disorder, lynched through unanimous violence, and then credited for the community returning to order. This is what Girard calls a “double transference.”¹⁴ Thus, in primitive religions, the sacrificial victim is divinized and becomes an object of worship. Religious myths and ritual

¹² René Girard, *Sacrifice*, 63.

¹³ Girard, *Sacrifice*, X.

¹⁴ Girard, *ISS*, 72.

use illusion to cover the historical founding murders and thereby take the viewpoint of the perpetrators of violence.

In response to those who might wonder what evidence exists for Girard's grand thesis, Girard insists that his theory of the relationships among the psychology of human desire, violence and religion, possesses scientific and philosophical foundations. "Our theory should be approached, then, as one approaches any scientific hypothesis."¹⁵ In other words, one must consider the explanatory power of the hypothesis to describe religion as a social phenomenon grounded in facts of human psychology, based on direct and indirect empirical observation. Girard argues that:

I want to stress its [his analysis of the scapegoat mechanism and religious phenomena] scientific nature. Even though we no longer have examples of the true sacred, it can nonetheless be observed in surviving, vestigial forms, which, although difficult to discern, allow confirmation of the actual structural processes.¹⁶

If we read Girard as offering a grand theoretical principle that can explain diverse religious and cultural forms of sacrifice, then his hypothesis gains credibility. As Girard scholar Michael Kirwan explains:

¹⁵Patrick Gregory, trans., René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 316.

¹⁶Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer, trans., René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 37. Henceforth *Things*.

...the system deals to some extent with ‘unobservables’, in two senses: first, the anthropological or ethnological evidence which would make good its claims about the origins of primitive societies is difficult to obtain, and secondly, the scapegoating mechanism operates unseen and covers its traces by means of prohibitions, myths, rituals and so on, so that its presence can only be a matter of inferral...Myth is the ‘muteness’ which shrouds in silence the truth about scapegoats and victimhood., In this sense the scapegoat mechanism resembles the idea of the ‘unconscious’ in psychoanalysis or, as mentioned above, the way electrons or evolution are used in scientific discourse.¹⁷

Just as positing electrons or quarks, which we do not see, explains the macro-level behavior of objects that we do see, positing the existence of mimetic rivalries and sacrificial violence at the origin of human culture explains the cross-cultural existence of myths, victimization and ritual that we do see in the world today.

Sacrifice is universal in form, though it varies in detail culturally. Girard may be interpreted as arguing that the shared human focus on sacrifice explains the incredible variety in cultural expressions of religion, without destroying the universality of sacrifice itself:

¹⁷ Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2005), 91-92.

The domains of human activity most liable to generate conflicts—death, sexual relations, property etc.—are those most regulated by sacrifices. All cultural institutions must be interpreted in terms of transformations sacrifices undergo and the evolution that specializes them, little by little, into funerals, marriage, rites of initiation, schools, political powers, etc.¹⁸

Just as the need for sustenance is universal, but the human cuisines invented to satisfy that hunger are incredibly diverse—depending on location, foods and resources available—the sacrificial rituals of most religions are varied, but based on the theme of sacrifice.

Unfortunately, the relief from mimetic rivalry and tension that comes with the founding murder leads human communities to divinize the first victim of the scapegoat mechanism as the bringer of peace. The communal catharsis that comes with bonding together to sacrifice a scapegoat, and the temporary respite from violence that follows, feels like a boon from above.¹⁹ Thus the victim becomes a supernatural, beneficent power whom the community now appeases and honors through ritual re-enactment of his/her sacrifice. Thus “the source of primordial error that characterizes archaic religion: the sacralization of reconciling violence.”²⁰

¹⁸ Girard, *Sacrifice*, 64.

¹⁹ Girard, *Satan*, 65-70.

²⁰ Girard, *Sacrifice*, 65.

The scapegoat mechanism and the myths that enshrine its instantiations are satanic because they are founded on lies, according to Girard.²¹ These myths take the viewpoint of the persecutors and blame the victim for both the community’s suffering and their own murders. Whether the scapegoats are Jews in medieval Europe (blamed in poetry for poisoning wells, the plague, and their own deserved death in retribution²²), or Native Americans (blamed for failing to properly farm and use their land, thus deserving to be despoiled of it, and for instigating “Indian wars” and thus deserving to be killed), persecutors always lie.

II. Scapegoating and Christianity

Girard argues that Christianity is unique among the religions of the world for unmasking the scapegoat mechanism by taking the viewpoint of the victim, here the very Lamb of God:

One finds everywhere in the Bible collective violence similar to that which generates sacrifice, but instead of attributing responsibility for the violence to the victims—who are only conciliators in appearance, by virtue of the transference carried out against them at the expense of the truth—the Bible and the Gospels attribute it to its true perpetrators, the persecutors of

²¹ Girard, *Sacrifice*, 73.

²² See Girard’s analysis of the 14th century poem “Judgment of the King of Navarre,” in René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1986), Ch. 1.

the single victim. Instead of elaborating myths, consequently, the Bible and the Gospels tell the truth....Jesus consents to die in order to reveal the lie of blood sacrifices and to render them henceforth impossible. The Christian notion of redemption must be interpreted on the basis of this reversal.²³

Christ, the supreme innocent victim, reveals the irrationality and absurdity of the scapegoat mechanism. Indeed, according to Girard, the crucifixion, “publicly exhibited and exposed as a lie” the scapegoat mechanism.²⁴ Christ committed no wrong; the mob merely turns on him in an orgy of envy and fear of his difference.

In *The Scapegoat*, Girard talks about the characteristics of those chosen to be scapegoats. Extreme differences—both negative and positive—attract attention and hatred. Thus the lame, the weak, the poor, women and minorities are picked as easy targets, whose lynching will not invite retaliation. But the beautiful, the brilliant, the divine can just as easily become the targets of envious crowds.²⁵ Thus the same mob that sang Hosanna to Christ as he entered Jerusalem later howls “crucify him” to Pilate. Even Herod and Pilate, previously natural enemies, are brought together through hatred of Christ. Girard notes that “Luke...mentions the cathartic effect of his participation in the abuse of the scapegoat: ‘And Herod and Pilate became friends with each

²³ Girard, *Sacrifice*, x-xi. See also Girard, *Satan*, ch. 9.

²⁴ Girard, *ISS*, 138.

²⁵ Girard, *Scapegoat*, 17-23.

other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other’ (Luke 23:12)”²⁶ Persecutors hate without reason, the mob falls prey to a “pure, collective illusion, spectacular but deceiving.”²⁷

We might join to Girard’s argument that scapegoating can relieve the societal pressures of mimesis the point that racism allows whites *as a group* to receive benefits by targeting *non-whites as a group* for persecution. The Catholic Charities USA accordingly defines racism as:

“[A] way of understanding and interpreting skin color differences so that white Americans enjoy a privileged social status with access to advantages and benefits to the detriment, disadvantage, and burden of persons of color. Racism, in all of its forms and permutations, is at its core a defense of racially-based social privilege.”²⁸

Systemic racism occurs when our basic social institutions, such as education, the family, the law, the health care industry, the government, etc., are structured to channel benefits to the dominant group (whites) and away from its chosen victims (African-Americans and other peoples of color). From the institution of slavery, the 1830 Indian

²⁶ Girard, *Sacrifice*, 70.

²⁷ Girard, *Sacrifice*, 72.

²⁸ Catholic Charities USA. “Poverty and Racism: Overlapping Threats to the Common Good,”

<http://develop.wikispaces.com/file/view/Poverty+and+Racism+Overlapping+Threats+to+the+Common+Good.pdf> (accessed September 23, 2012).

Removal act, the Supreme Court's 1896 Plessy V. Ferguson decision, the 1923 Supreme Court U.S. v Bhagat Singh Thind, the Social Security Act of 1935's exclusion of domestic and agricultural workers, the Wagner Act of 1935's exclusions of African-Americans from Unions, the racially uneven fulfillment of the G.I. Bill and Federal House Administration red-lining in the 40's and 50's, through the ongoing residential hyper-segregation and funding of public schools by property taxes (so that poor minorities are guaranteed to get inadequate schools),²⁹ white privilege has been expressed in law and practice from the founding of our nation. Many whites have ignored the African Americans that they take such care to flee with their greater choices in work, housing and education. Others have embraced vigilante justice when racial boundaries appear threatened.

For example: 14-year-old Emmett Till, an African-American teenager, was lynched by a mob of white racists who thought that they were defending pure, southern womanhood and that Till was not sticking to his prescribed place of inferiority and therefore asked for it. Ignorance and illusion are essential to myths and to the scapegoat mechanism. In 1956 *Look* magazine printed William Bradford Huie's exclusive interview with Till's murderers³⁰ One of the

²⁹ Catholic Charities, *Poverty and Racism*, see list on pages 11 -12.

³⁰ William Bradford Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," in *American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till. Special Features*.

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_look_confession.html (accessed 8/15/2012).

murderers, J.W. “Big Milam,” clearly blamed Till for his own lynching:

“Well, what else could we do? He was hopeless. I’m no bully I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers—in their place—I know how to work’em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in place. Niggers ain’t gonna vote where I live. If they did, they’d control the government. They ain’t gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he’s tired o’livin’. I’m likely to kill him. Me and my folks fought for this country, and we got some rights. I stood there in that shed and listened to that nigger throw that poison at me, and I just made up my mind. ‘Chicago boy,’ I said, ‘I’m tired of ‘em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddam [sic] you, I’m going to make an example of you—just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.’”³¹

The Gospels destroy the illusion of the oppressors’ innocence by revealing that the scapegoat was unjustly murdered and that sacrificial myths are “a mendacious justification of collective violence.”³² When parishioners of the First Baptist Church in Crystal Springs demanded that Charles and Te’Andrea Wilson move their wedding, lest they violate the precedent of whites- only weddings, Pastor Stan Weatherford justified his decision to move the ceremony as a compromise

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Girard, *Sacrifice*, 73.

to address “a need within our congregation.”³³ The decision to honor the “need” for white privilege and deny access to the church was only possible in the context of our nation’s history of scapegoating and expelling African-Americans.

In contrast to the Gospels, “this powerlessness to demystify its own scapegoats fully defines archaic religion. Myths always present as truthful the patently absurd accusations to which Oedipus and a thousand mystic heroes are subject.”³⁴ It is as ridiculous to suppose the Jews of France are guilty of causing the plague and poisoning wells (or of controlling a global fiscal cartel and world governments, as modern anti-Semites claim³⁵) as it is to suppose one pacifist, love-preaching Hebrew was about to overthrow Rome and her armies. But slaughtering Jews gave a false sense of control and calmed the superstitious medieval people frightened by what they could not understand. Joining together to call for Christ’s crucifixion temporarily joined together the Hebrews and their Roman masters. Denying African-Americans access to white churches has historically given whites a false sense of superiority.

Yet according to Girard, the scapegoat mechanism began to unravel with the sacrifice of Christ. Through the

³³ Alon Harish, “Mississippi Church Refuses to Marry Black Couple,” *ABC News*, July 28, 2012, <http://news.yahoo.com/mississippi-church-refuses-marry-black-couple-205218322--abc-news-topstories.html> (accessed September 23, 2012).

³⁴ Girard, *Sacrifice*, 73.

³⁵ Sadly, anti-Semitic groups asserting alleged Jewish world dominance conspiracy theories are prolific on the web. See, for example, the website *Jew Watch*, <http://www.Jewwatch.com> (accessed December 21, 2012).

resurrection witness, a small group of women and men escape the mimetic contagion and “rehabilitate the scapegoat:”

The small evangelic minority will not only show men the absolute innocence of Jesus, that exceptional victim, it will show them the relative innocence, the irrelevance, of all history’s scapegoats. This voice, even poorly understood, even deformed, ruins forever the credibility of mythic religions and sets in motion the greatest cultural revolution in history. *Wherever the Gospels take root, sacrifices weaken and die out; archaic religion cannot reemerge* (emphasis added).³⁶

Thus the Gospels name Satan, the father of lies,³⁷ Prince of the human world, the condemner of innocent victims.³⁸ Indeed, the entire Bible calls for defense of the widow, the orphan, the sojourner—the weakest in the ancient world and thus most prone to being made into a scapegoat. As such, says Girard, the Gospels strive to free human beings from enslavement to mythological religious systems.

Christ himself refuses to scapegoat the scapegoaters; he preaches forgiveness, not vengeance. Indeed, Jesus rebukes the disciple that cut off the ear of one of the soldiers sent to arrest him.³⁹ He recognizes the human weakness of mimetic

³⁶ Girard, *Sacrifice*, 76.

³⁷ John 8:44.

³⁸ See Girard, *The Scapegoat*, Ch. 14.

³⁹ Matthew 26:51-54.

rivalry and the almost irresistible lure of unconsciously accepting the violence of the scapegoat mechanism to relieve the tension such rivalry brings:

The crucifixion is unique in its theological aspect, but terribly banal from an anthropological point of view. The essential phrase here is that of Jesus during the crucifixion: 'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.' In Acts, Peter makes plain in his discourse to the crowd at Jerusalem that we are to take these words literally. He explains to these men that neither they nor their leaders—who are even more culpable—need despair at the extent of their crime. There is no question here of effacing the guilt of the murderers but of affirming it as a consequence of a properly universal ignorance. The fact that the victim is the only Son of God does not make the murderers more culpable than other men. Not to see this is to miss the essence of the Christian revelation.⁴⁰

Christ calls for an end to victims. He criticizes the sacrificial mechanism as illusory because while purporting to stop violence, it encourages and sanctifies violence.⁴¹

The master's tools will not bring down the master's house; just as re-naming missiles peace-keepers does not bring us safety, the scapegoat mechanism's temporary release of a small amount of violence does not get rid of

⁴⁰ Girard, *Sacrifice*, 83.

⁴¹ See Girard, *Sacrifice*, 5-6 and 93.

violence. James Alison offers the following Girardian analysis of Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross:

All sacrificial systems are substitutionary; but what we have with Jesus is an exact inversion of the sacrificial system: he goes backwards and occupies the space so as to make it clear that this is simply *murder*. And it *needn’t be*. That is what we begin to get in St. John’s Gospel: a realization that what Jesus was doing was actually *revealing* the mendacious principle of the world. The way human structure is maintained is by people killing each other, convincing ourselves of our right and duty to do it, and therefore building ourselves up over and against our victims. What Jesus understands himself doing in St. John’s Gospel is revealing the way in which the mechanism works. And by revealing it, he deprives it of all power by making it clear that it is a lie: “Your father was a liar and a murderer from the beginning.” That is how the “prince”—or *principle*—of this world works.⁴²

In other words, Satan, the “prince” of this world embraces the deceitful scapegoating mechanism as do the lying persecutors who follow this “principle” in blaming the innocents they sacrifice for the community’s violence. When they make sacred the victim because of the peace that follows his/her murder, they make violence itself holy. In contrast, Christ came to end the divinization of sacrificial

⁴² James Alison, “God’s Self-Substitution and Sacrificial Inversion,” in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 166-179, 173, emphasis in original.

violence, not to endorse it. Christ calls for an end to scapegoating—he is the advocate for victims.

III. *Girard and Racist Christianity*

Yet if Girard's interpretation is correct, and Christianity eschews violence and takes the side of victims, how did Christians embark on the Crusades? How did we embrace slavery, segregation and Jim Crow in a nation founded to be a city on a hill? Why do we still read of the burning of black churches and the spectacle of white churches refusing to accept or to marry black parishioners?

I suggest we may follow the Gospel admonition here, that we know them [racist Christians] by their fruits.⁴³ Such actions suggest, in Girard's words, that the Gospel has not taken root in the soil of many white Christian homes and churches. Thus rather than suggesting that Christ's message is compatible with violence and hate, we should consider: (1) how to best understand His message, and (2) then consider whether a person or group seems to be successfully applying it. I think that Girard builds a successful case for the non-violent anti-sacrificial message of the Gospel, a message embraced by Martin Luther King, Jr. and others who fought for Civil Rights for all in the United States. How, then, can we understand American Christian racists?

I contend that the only possible way to understand how Christians could read the New Testament and yet fail to love their neighbor is to examine them through the lens of

⁴³ Matthew 7:20.

Girard’s sacrificial scapegoating mechanism. Divinization of the victim disappears when society marginalizes and persecutes those marked as “Other,” but racists clearly continue to divinize violence (instead of the victim) as a means of diffusing community tension.⁴⁴ First, political elites inflame fear of those who are different along racial lines; then, they encourage mimetic rivalries by suggesting that “undeserving” blacks and minorities are threats and leeches on the system.⁴⁵ Class rivalry can be defused if poor whites can be tricked into embracing skin privilege and demonizing poor people of color, through direct violence or support of state violence (incarceration, denial of social benefits and support, etc.), instead of joining with them in solidarity to work for their joint interests.

Yet, as Girard notes, scapegoating must be done in ignorance: racist Christians think they are justified in failing to love their neighbor of color, because, as lesser humans, or at least as lazier humans, they must somehow fail to merit the appellation “neighbor.” In other words, racist Christians ignorantly and irrationally turn their dark skinned neighbors

⁴⁴ As Girard explains this: “Religious phenomena are essentially characterized by the double transference, the aggressive transference followed by the reconciliatory transference. The reconciliatory transference sacralizes the victim and is the one most fragile, most easily lost, since to all evidence it does not occur until the mechanism has completely ‘played itself out.’ We remain capable, in other words, of hating our victims; we are no longer capable of worshiping them.” *Things*, 37.

⁴⁵ Here one might consider Bush’s infamous Willie Horton ads; Reagan’s racially coded “welfare queens” and “thugs,” and Romney’s references to the “47%” for Obama who take no responsibility for themselves.

into “the Other,” guilty of causing civil disruption and therefore deserving of abuse. Believing in the lies, the illusion of the victims’ guilt is central to buying in to the scapegoat mechanism: “[t]o have a scapegoat is not to know that one has one. As soon as the scapegoat is revealed and named as such, it loses its power.”⁴⁶ The Gospels tell the truth, according to Girard, because they reveal that the scapegoats are innocent and the persecutors unjustly attack them.

African-Americans have been persecuted and scapegoated from the days when their enslavement began on these shores in the 1600’s. To justify the abuse and mistreatment of other human beings, the European Christians who sought these shores for the sake of their own freedom resorted to dehumanizing their darker-skinned brethren. They invented racial ideology where little existed before (in the early days white indentured servants and black indentured servants were friends, lovers, partners in rebellion and escape).⁴⁷ Laws granting privileges to poor whites, theologies of polygenesis arguing Africans were created separately by God, and pseudo-scientific theories of Africans’ lesser evolution all formed a theory of dehumanization that justified slavery, rape, family destruction, and torture of African slaves.⁴⁸ The persecutors lied and blamed the victims for their own subjugation, in satanic scapegoat fashion. They

⁴⁶ Girard, *Sacrifice*, 72. See also Girard, *Things* 32-34.

⁴⁷ See Howard Zinn, “Drawing the Color Line,” in *Rethinking the Color Line: Readings in Race and Ethnicity*, ed. Charles A. Gallagher (New York: McGraw-Hill 2012), 9-17.

⁴⁸ See Alexander, 22-25.

also blamed Africans for tension and violence in their communities.

From colonial times through the 21st century, racists have argued that blacks had to be controlled, as they were naturally violent and over-sexed (thus African women “seduced” slave masters into raping them) and a threat to the community. Lynching and torture of African-Americans, sometimes called “nigger-barbecues,”⁴⁹ have been photographically documented as family outings up through the 1940’s. On average, one person a week was lynched between 1882 and 1968, especially blacks seen as challenging their inferior status:

The violence inflicted...was often selective, educated and successful blacks, those in positions of leadership, those determined to improve themselves, those who owned farms and stores, those suspected of having saved their earnings, those who had just made a crop—that is, black men and women perceived by whites as having stepped out of their place, *trying to be white (emphasis added)*.⁵⁰

Racist lynchings have occurred as late as the 1981 KKK member murder of Michael Donald⁵¹ and two white supremacists’ dragging murder of James Byrd, Jr in 1998.⁵²

⁴⁹ Patricia J. Williams, “Without Sanctuary,” *The Nation* 270 , no. 6 (Feb. 14 2000): 9.

⁵⁰ Historian Leon Litwack, as cited in Williams, 9.

⁵¹ For the account of Henry F. Hays and James Knowles’ lynching of Donald, see *Lynching in America: A History in Documents*, ed. Christopher Waldrep (New York: New York University Press 2006): 267-68.

I contend that the scapegoating of African Americans as a violent, promiscuous, and dim-witted race who pose a threat to “good” people continues to infect all levels of society, including our churches. It would make sense, to someone holding this world view, not to want to taint their church by allowing black people to worship or to marry in them. In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander offers many different studies and sources of data to document that police officers, prosecutors, judges and juries racially profile, arrest, disproportionately incarcerate and execute African American and Hispanic males. Simply put, in the American justice system white lives are more valuable than black or brown ones. One study she discusses, the famous Baldus study, found the following:

...that defendants charged with killing white victims received the death penalty eleven times more often than defendants charged with killing black victims ... even after accounting for thirty-five nonracial variables, the researchers found that defendants charged with killing white victims were 4.3 times more likely to receive a death sentence than defendants charged with killing blacks. Black defendants, like McCleskey, who killed white victims, had the highest chance of being sentenced to death in Georgia.⁵³

⁵² For the account of Lawrence Brewer and John King’s lynching of James Byrd, Jr., see “The Lynching of James Byrd,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_James_Byrd,_Jr. (accessed August 18, 2012).

⁵³ Alexander, 110. David C. Baldus was the Joseph B. Tye law professor from 1969-2011. His 1983 study of racial discrimination in death penalty sentence in Georgia in the 1970s, co-authored with Charles A. Pulaski and George Woodworth, analyzed over 2000 murder cases and was used by

Alexander builds a compelling case that the “war on drugs,” declared by President Ronald Reagan in 1982, had little to do with drugs and everything to do with exerting social control over African Americans while using allegedly race-neutral means. Instead of turning to drug treatment and prevention, America poured money into demonizing drug addicts. Even though data has consistently showed drug use and dealing rates as about equal across racial groups,⁵⁴ the government and media focused almost exclusively on racially-coded stories about “crack babies” and gang members, introducing harsh civil and legal penalties for crack use in particular (versus pricier cocaine, more affiliated with affluent whites).⁵⁵ The 1988 Anti-Abuse Act, for example, allowed housing authorities to evict tenants for participating in any form of drug related activity on or near public housing, eliminated student loans for anyone convicted of a drug offense (including first-time offenses), introduced mandatory minimums in sentencing for drug offenses, and imposed the death penalty for some drug offenses.⁵⁶

In fact the war on drugs has turned the U.S. into a racialized prison nation. Alexander writes:

the defense in *McCleskey v. Kemp* (1987). See “David C. Baldus,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_C._Baldus (accessed December 22, 2012).

⁵⁴ Alexander, 7. In fact, studies suggest white youth are MORE likely to participate in drug crimes than youth of color.

⁵⁵ Alexander 53.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

The impact of the drug war has been astounding. In less than thirty years, the U.S. penal populations exploded from around 300,000 to more than 2 million, with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase. The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, dwarfing the rates of nearly every developed country, even surpassing those in highly repressive regimes like Russia, China, and Iran....the racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature. No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. *The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid.* In Washington, D.C., our nation's capital, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison. Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America (emphasis added).⁵⁷

The result is a world in which crime rates in the United States are below international norms⁵⁸, yet the United States is still responsible for one quarter of the world's prison population—most of it brown.

Such a situation is only possible with conscious and unconscious bias on the part of the police who profile and arrest, the attorneys who prosecute, judges who sentence, legislatures who draft laws, and white Americans who are

⁵⁷ Alexander, 6-7.

⁵⁸ 6 to 10 times greater than other industrialized nations, in fact. Alexander 8.

indifferent. Far too many Americans, Christians included, accept the empirically incorrect stereotype that African American men are “statistically more likely to do you harm than a white man”—which was the rationalization offered by Richard Land, former head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, for George Zimmerman’s murder of an unarmed African American teenager, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin.⁵⁹ Other Americans clearly share Land’s assessment, having donated over two million dollars to Zimmerman’s defense fund. Unfortunately, if deadly force is acceptable when one feels threatened, and the reasonable racist sees all young black and Hispanic males as threatening, then it is open season on males of color. Indeed, it should have come as no surprise that a recent Associated Press poll discovered that a slight majority of Americans express prejudicial attitudes towards blacks (on measures testing conscious and unconscious bias).⁶⁰ And if you consider the disproportionate arrest and punishment of men of color in this country, you can see that the huge scapegoat mechanism is devouring them.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Associated Press, “Baptist Leader Criticizes Trayvon Martin Support,” Associated Press, *FoxNews.com* (April 14, 2012), <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/04/14/baptist-leader-criticizes-trayvon-martin-support/> (accessed August 15 2012).

⁶⁰ Jennifer Agiesta and Sonya Ross, “AP Poll: Majority Harbor Prejudice Against Blacks,” Yahoo News (October 27, 2012), <http://news.yahoo.com/ap-poll-majority-harbor-prejudice-against-blacks-073551680--election.html> (accessed October 30 2012).

⁶¹ A judge in North Carolina just changed the sentences of 3 inmates on death row to life without parole, because in accordance with the state’s Racial Justice Act, he found “powerful evidence” of racial bias in their

Consequently good, faithful, church-going folk can refuse to marry blacks in their churches, or even to sit beside them. They can attend the Robert E. Lee Episcopal Church in Lexington, Virginia without pausing to consider whether it is appropriate to bestow an honor usually saved for Saints, Evangelists, and God on a man who led Southern armies and defended the right to own human beings as chattel. They can defend their right to fly Confederate flags on and near churches, symbols understood at the time, and by hate groups in the present, to represent a way of life founded on racial hierarchy. And they can ignore the mass incarceration and persecution and subsequent disenfranchisement of millions of citizens of color in this democratic nation. By buying into a sacrificial interpretation of Christianity, such white Christians see Satanic evil reflected in dark faces, instead of seeing their neighbor. They stand with the persecutors.

Unfortunately for them, Christ stands with the victims.⁶²

trials. This might seem like a hopeful sign; however, the judge noted that “the injustice abundantly proven in each case was common throughout North Carolina during the past two decades.” See “Intentional Bias in North Carolina,” *The Opinion Pages, New York Times*, (Wednesday, December 26, 2012)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/26/opinion/intentional-bias-in-north-carolina.html> (accessed December 26, 2012).

One wonders how many prisoners’ racially biased sentences in North Carolina and other states did not get mitigated by such judicial review.

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