

magazines of the riderless horse drawing the coffin of JFK, the world leaders attending, and the heartrending photo of three-year-old JFK Jr. (“John-John”) saluting his father’s coffin.

Any similarities between Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and JFK’s visit to Dallas end with their burial and what happened next.

Jesus’ body was also taken to his burial in a tomb, but without the pageantry, acclaim and worldwide media focus accorded JFK.

You can visit the John F. Kennedy Eternal Flame at his gravesite at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. His grave reminds us, as all graves do, of our own mortality. We’re reminded that death has the last word. JFK’s grave reminds us that graves are occupied—filled with the dead bones of those who once lived.

The burial of Jesus was not the end of his story—his tomb is empty.

He entered Jerusalem giving himself over, in self-sacrifice, to receive the hatred of humanity. Irony of all ironies, he is and was Creator of all who hate, reject and crucify him. He willingly accepted hatred and absorbed it so that he might love all of us, the whole world, and in so doing, forgive all of us.

Jesus delivered us all from death—on his Cross, he gave us forgiveness and gave us the hope of our own resurrection, which will happen because our risen Lord lives! ☐

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THE LAST SCAPEGOAT

BRAD JERSAK



Definition: “*Scapegoat*” (noun): *a person blamed for something bad that someone else has done or for some failure that occurs.*

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT & THE SCAPEGOAT RITUAL

The *Day of Atonement* (Yom Kippur), described in Leviticus, is considered the holiest day of the year for the Jewish faith.

Today, post-temple Jews (with no temple, priest, or sacrifices) observe the day as the culmination of a ten-day period of fasting and repentance (which begins on Rosh Hashanah). Jewish tradition says on that day each year, God opens the Book of Life to examine the words, actions, and thoughts of those whose names are written there. If the good deeds outweigh their sins, their name remains in the divine ledger for another year. A unique element of *Yom Kippur* today is that the book of Jonah is always read in remembrance of God’s forgiveness and mercy.

In ancient Israel, the Day of Atonement was much different. It focused on the High Priest’s annual entry into the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifices for the sins of the nation. It featured offerings of a bull and a ram, followed by an intriguing ritual involving kid goats, one of which our English translations call “*the scapegoat*.”

Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the



SCAPEGOATING TODAY

Fast-forward to the present, when ‘scapegoating,’ used as a verb, became common for blaming a third party (an individual or a group) for some person’s own faults or some group’s errors and their consequences. For example, when *Hurricane Katrina* hit New Orleans, the levy broke, and the flood waters destroyed property and people, there was a rush to lay the blame on someone. Some of the wackier religious voices were quick to *scapegoat* the gay people in New Orleans—as if *Katrina* were God’s destroying angel, punishing a whole city because of a small sliver of the population—which the delusional preachers compared to the days of Sodom and Gomorrah.

While I still hear the term used in some circles, a popular expression has overtaken it for now: “*throwing someone under the bus.*” One dictionary explains, “To *throw someone under the bus* is to criticize, blame, or punish them, especially in order to avoid blame or gain an advantage. People so thrown are typically in a vulnerable position.” That’s an excellent way to describe *scapegoating*.

GIRARD’S ‘MIMETIC THEORY’

It was my great privilege to have a brief but rich acquaintance with the great French literary critic and social scientist René Girard. He became famous for a breakthrough he called “*mimetic theory*” (“we mimic each other’s desires”) and the “*scapegoating mechanism.*” It’s complex, but here is my elevator pitch:

Girard first noticed how often in literature (especially in Shakespeare) close friends or siblings become rivals who

compete for the same property or duel for the same lover. They want what the other wants simply because the other wants it. That is, their desires came, not from within, but from each other.

This is why famous, beautiful people model items in advertisements. I didn’t even know I desired a particular brand until I saw that Brad Pitt was wearing it. *He must want it, so now I need it!*

This is why two toddlers in a room full of 50 toys begin to fixate on and even fight over a single toy. I didn’t know I wanted the red ball until little Sarah wanted it. *She wants it, so now I need it!*

This is why roommates in college end up fighting for the very same girl or guy, even though there are 1000s of potential mates on campus. *He has the hots for her; somehow now I do too!* Our desires mimic those of others—hence, *mimetic desire*.

Now, we can already see how *mimetic desire* grows into *mimetic rivalry*, which then grows into ‘mimetic violence.’ And mimetic violence has a way of escalating between brothers to families to tribes, to nations until they reach a state of mutually assured destruction (as in the cold war).

Girard realized that if his mimetic theory were correct, it would only appear in literature because it’s already a human phenomenon. He began to study how mimetic rivalry and mimetic violence are portrayed in the mythologies and holy books across cultures and religions. And sure enough... all the way back to Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Saul and David,... it was everywhere! He could see how

scapegoat. Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the *scapegoat* shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a *scapegoat* (Leviticus 16:6-10).

When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the *live goat*. He is to lay both hands on the head of the *live goat* and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. **The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness** (Leviticus 16:20-22).

these brothers became clans and tribes that became warring nations (Judea and Israel, the Jews and the Edomites, and so on).

THE 'SCAPEGOAT MECHANISM'

But something else happened—so random that it almost seemed like a miracle. As mimetic violence rose to a fevered pitch and all-out violence, sometimes the mimetic rivals would stumble upon a third party—whether an individual or a group—that they

Girard believed that eventually, many communities chose to veer away from randomly lynching oddballs and developed a regular ritual that replaced the human *scapegoat* with a representative animal. And behold, the sacrificial system was born! A way to diffuse the sin of mimetic violence every year by laying the sins of the community on an animal that could be slaughtered, burned, or exiled... and hopefully peace would return for a season.

became *the last scapegoat* and exposed the *scapegoating mechanism* as a fraud! How so? First, note that bitter rivals, Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate, conspired to *scapegoat* and crucify Jesus to temporarily diffuse a potentially violent situation (peace for decades... then utter destruction). Second, note that the *scapegoat mechanism* only works if the *scapegoat* stays dead! But in light of the resurrection, the whole process is exposed as evil. From that point on, the jig is up—*scapegoating* is universally recognized as a lie and a crime against humanity (even as we continue). And third, without the *scapegoating mechanism*, we don't have a magical path to pseudo-peace. The only way to avert mutually assured destruction is to follow Jesus' Way of peace.

Through Girard's epic discovery, we might now see how and why Jesus is *the last scapegoat*. ***Jesus' sacrificial death is not an appeasement offering to an angry god or demon, but an act of the one who, by love, takes away the sins of the world and saves us from sacrifice. Once and for all.***

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ... But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (Hebrews 10:1,12-14). □

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SCAPEGOATING
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—RENEÉ GIRARD



could mutually agree was the 'real problem.' They were frequently different and vulnerable in some way—perhaps they had albino skin or had Down's Syndrome or were unusual in their appearance or behavior.

When the mimetic rivals got rid of that person—perhaps they exiled them or threw them off a cliff—it was as if the *scapegoat* removed the sins from the camp and now everyone could be at peace. Granted, it was a pseudo-peace, a wicked fraud... but because the *scapegoating mechanism* diffused the violence and the *scapegoat's* sacrifice brought reconciliation, ironically, the *scapegoat* (now dead) seemed sacred and somewhat godlike.

CHRIST: THE LAST SCAPEGOAT

Are you ready for a plot twist? Although Girard recognized this pattern across the literature, the mythology, and the religious texts of the world, he was in for a shock when he read the story of Jesus. So surprised that he became a life-long follower of Jesus!

As he read the Gospels, he saw how the Cross exposed the injustice of *scapegoating* and the failure of every sacrificial system to bring true peace. He saw Jesus challenging the rivalries between Jewish sects, their enemies, and their oppressors. He preached a gospel of mercy, of forgiveness, of the end of sacrifice.

And then he did something that changed everything: he