

Redemptive Suffering, Not the Myth of Redemptive Violence

By Richard Rohr

Leviticus 16 describes the ingenious ritual from which our word “scapegoating” originated. On the Day of Atonement, a priest laid hands on an “escaping” goat, placing all the sins of the Jewish people from the previous year onto the animal. Then the goat was beaten with reeds and thorns and driven out into the desert. And the people went home rejoicing, just as European Christians did after burning a supposed heretic at the stake, or white Americans did after the lynching of black men. Whenever the “sinner” is excluded, our ego is delighted and feels relieved and safe. It sort of works, but only for a while. Usually the illusion only deepens and becomes catatonic, blind, and repetitive—because of course, scapegoating did not really work to eliminate the evil in the first place.

Jesus became the scapegoat to reveal the universal lie of scapegoating.

Note that John the Baptist said, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin [singular] of the world” (John 1:29). It seems “the sin of the world” is ignorant hatred, fear, and legitimated violence.

The Gospel is a highly subversive document. It painstakingly illustrates how the systems of both church and state (Caiaphas and Pilate) conspired to condemn Jesus. Throughout most of history, church and state have both sought plausible scapegoats to carry their own shame and guilt.

Jesus became the sinned-against one to reveal the hidden nature of scapegoating and so that we would see how wrong people in authority can be—even religious important people (see John 16:8-11 and Romans 8:3).

The scapegoat mechanism largely operates in the unconscious; people do not know what they are doing. Scapegoaters do not know they are scapegoating, but they think they are doing a “holy duty for God” (John 16:2). You see why inner work, shadow work, and honest self-knowledge are all essential to any healthy religion.

In worshiping Jesus as the scapegoat, Christians should have learned to stop scapegoating. We too could be utterly wrong about choosing victims, just as high priest and king, Jerusalem and Rome—the highest levels of authority—were utterly wrong about Jesus. Power itself is not a good guide, yet for many, if not most people, authority soothes their anxiety and relieves their own responsibility to form a mature conscience.

Millions of soldiers have given their only lives by believing the lies of Genghis Khan, Napoleon, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Hitler, to name a few. The vast majority of violence in history has been sacralized violence. Members of ISIS probably believe they are doing God’s will. The Ku Klux Klan uses the cross as their symbol!

They say, “with God on our side, our violence becomes necessary and even “redemptive violence.”

But there is no such thing as redemptive violence. Violence doesn’t save; it only destroys in both short and long term. Jesus replaced the myth of redemptive violence with the truth of redemptive suffering. He showed us on the cross how to hold the pain and let it transform us, rather than pass it on to the others around us.

For Father Richard, the cycle of violence mirrors the cycle of evil:

Brazilian archbishop Hélder Câmara (1909–1999) was a brilliant nonviolent activist who offered a model for understanding how structural injustice leads to greater violence. He wrote: “If violence is met by violence, the world will fall into a *spiral of violence*” (emphasis mine). [1] I overlay Dom Hélder’s teaching with traditional Catholic moral teaching which saw the three primary sources of evil as the world, the flesh, and the devil—in that order. When evil and institutionalized violence (“structural sin”) go unrecognized at the first level, the second and third levels of violence and evil are inevitable. If we don’t nip evil in the bud at the level where it is legitimated and disguised, we will have little power to fight it at the individual level.

By “world” we don’t mean creation or nature, but “the system”: how groups, cultures, institutions, and nations organize to protect themselves and maintain their power. This is the most hidden and denied level of evil and violence. We cannot see it because we’re all inside of it, and it is in our ego’s self-interest to protect this corporate deception.

Historically, organized religion has put most of its concern at the middle level of the spiral of violence, or what we called “the flesh.” Flesh in this context is individual sin, the personal mistakes that we make. Individual evil is certainly real, but the very word “flesh” has made us preoccupied with sexual sins, which Jesus rarely mentioned. *When we punish or shame individuals for their sins, we are usually treating symptoms rather than the root problem or cause: the illusion of separation from God and others.*

At the top of the spiral of violence sits “the devil.” This personification of evil is hard to describe because it’s so well disguised and even idealized. If “the world” is hidden structural violence, primarily through oppression and injustice, then “the devil” is *sanctified, romanticized, and legitimated violence*—violence deemed culturally necessary to control the other two levels: the angry flesh and the world run amuck. Any institution thought of as “too big to fail” or somehow above criticism has a strong possibility of diabolical misuse. Think of the military industrial complex, the penal system, the worldwide banking system, multinational corporations subject to no law, tax codes benefiting the wealthy, the healthcare and pharmaceutical establishments, the worldwide war economy led by my own country, or even organized religion. We need and admire these institutions all too much. Paul called this level of violence “powers, principalities, thrones, and dominions” (Ephesians 6:12).

If we do not recognize the roots of violence at the first structural level (“the world”), we will waste time focusing exclusively on the second and individual level (“the flesh”), and we will seldom see those real evils which disguise themselves as angels of light (“the devil”). Remember, Lucifer means “Light Bearer.”

As Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) taught, *Evil only succeeds by disguising itself as good.* [2]

References:

[1] Hélder Câmara, *Spiral of Violence* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1971), 55.

[2] Aquinas describes the devil’s deception through evil “that has a semblance of good” in his meditation on the Lord’s Prayer. See *The Three Greatest Prayers: Commentaries on the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Apostles’ Creed*, based on trans. by Laurence Shapcote (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1990), 152.