

Cracking the Prison Cultural Code: Victim/Offender Groups as Non-Sacrificial Communities of Redemption

Drawing on thirty-five years of reflection as pastor of a congregation, and over a decade of prison work, and informed by twenty years as a student of Rene Girard, in this paper I will explore in light of mimetic theory the cultural formation of offenders and victims in restorative justice circles of support and accountability (Victim/Offender Education Groups) within the walls of San Quentin State Prison. My thesis is that these represent the undoing of the systemic mimetic violence internalized by prisoners, victims, and guards alike as part of the larger social construction of the dominant American cultural reality. Among markers of this dynamic of deconstruction is the fact that as a result of this process violent criminals characteristically honor the name and memory of their victims as an inspiration for their own continued transformational work of restorative accountability. In addition, by giving victims an opportunity to be heard in the presence of perpetrators of similar crimes their “epistemological privilege” breaks the conspiracy of silent “entombment” necessary to the generation of culture and mythology. Specifically, I will seek to demonstrate how restorative justice strategies can become for both offenders and victims a means of transforming their own often repressed (legally quashed) stories of violent crime into occasions of grace, compassion, liberation, and mutual reconciliation. In doing so I will suggest that such communal strategies for redemption are tantamount to the missionary life of a “religionless” church that undoes the violent cultural formation served by the dominant prison Christianity and regenerated by the “scapegoating mechanism” *par excellence*, capital punishment. And because restorative justice humanizes both perpetrators and victims and brings them into mutual relation with one another, it exposes capital punishment as the capstone of a pagan sacrificial system that will fall of its own apocalyptic weight.