

Cracking the Prison Cultural Code

Victim Offender Groups as Non-sacrificial Communities of Redemption

By James S. Ward

Introduction: The Mission of the Church and “Reconciliation”

The Church hangs on by a thread in a world awash in the separation, grief and pain that are the effects of Sin. It’s mission is always under reconsideration given the context and circumstances in which it finds itself. The expression of “the Mission of the Church” in the “Catechism: An Outline of the Faith” of the American Episcopal Church in its most recent edition of the Book of Common Prayer (1979) shows the influence of the civil rights struggle of the 1950’s and 1960’s. Inevitably such a formulaic statement reflects the recent past understanding of the church’s experience of mission. It also characterizes an historic era more than it does the proactive, determination of the church as an institution or a project of human intention or design. If the 1979 Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer were to be rewritten in 2010, the statement of the mission of the church would likely be framed in different terms.

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. (BCP-1979 page 855)

The phrase “restore all people to unity” would likely today be replaced by the word “reconcile.” This is due in part to the way in which the past half century has featured the post-colonial, post-genocidal, and post-racism project, as a phenomenon of the age itself. The church’s self-understanding is always posterior. Thus doctrine or at least its socio-linguistic expression is

always in development as a function of the corrosive effect of the gospel itself on Christian tradition and primitive religion.

Likewise, the term “restored” would likely be dropped for similar theologically developmental reasons. The notion of restoration of a mythological edenic age or even of a unity of faith in a global community as complex as the one we have come to appreciate is no longer tenable in the way it was only a few decades ago, because to imagine such “uniformity” has progressively been exposed as depending on coercive violence. So theological reflection on the lived experience of populations and individuals over the past fifty years has reframed our understanding of the church and of its mission in ways that have brought the notion of reconciliation to the fore.

This is, again, not because the church has opted at the outset to promote reconciliation but because of the ways in which reconciliation has “broken out” in world events. This attention to reconciliation can clearly be seen in the area of prison ministry and especially the field of victim offender dialogue and the theory of Restorative Justice that has been over the past three decades a growing alternative to the “traditional” approach of punishment in correctional institutions. The concept has also been shaped by the South African “Truth and Reconciliation” commissions and their like in a number of war torn countries around the world and by the ongoing post-colonial negotiation around reparations and cultural equality in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. While these efforts are not church based or led and usually seek to avoid explicitly Christian language, they are, insofar as they pursue reconciliation, what I will call “anonymous” expressions of the church and its mission.

My concern in this paper will be to trace the outlines of a theology of reconciliation in its particular ecclesiological dimensions as these come out in the transformational case example of crime and punishment and especially of restorative justice. My thesis is that “Circles of Support and Accountability” (*COSAs*) as they are lived out in the Insight Prison Project’s Victim Offender Education Groups constitute a “model” of being Church that can inform the traditional or institutional church as it goes through its own painful re-formation and that these also can claim the title “anonymous church” (with credit to both Dietrich Bonhoeffer– “religionless Christianity”–and Karl Rahner– “anonymous Christian”) helping it recover its counter-cultural identity and anti-imperial mission.

My first move will be to sketch a socio-theological cartoon of American society as it is revealed by the lens of the prison system. By cartoon I do not mean anything comic but the kind of quick study a painter makes on her canvas as a guide to be painted over at another time. More a suggestion than an outline and less, these comments will offer an impressionistic glimpse of the American justice system in the light of Girardian theory. Next I will attempt to describe how “popular Christianity” and the church generally aids and abets this particular vision of reality that is hegemonic in its essential dynamic, creating a *detante* that has continued to relegate the church to the familiar role of guarantor of the imperial consensus. In contradiction I will make the case that *COSAs* (for an introduction to circles see Kay Pranis, *The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking*, 2005, and for the theory of restorative justice see http://www.unafei.or.jp/english/pdf/PDF_rms/no63/ch13.pdf), by recovering incarcerated criminals

otherwise caught up in the systemic oppression of American Justice so that they can function independently of gangs and even of the church, step into the church's role as sign and expression of the anti-imperial reign of God. I will conclude by reconstructing the categories of ecclesiology, with help from James Alison, in order to use them to stretch the canvass of reconciliation represented by these actual examples of restorative justice.

To begin I should locate my own epistemological perspective. I am a married, white male Episcopalian whose understanding of the church is rooted in the Episcopal parish of the second half of the twentieth and turn of the twenty-first century on the West Coast of the United States. An ordained priest I have been vicar or rector of two congregations and have served as associate rector in two others, all in the Diocese of California (SF-Bay Area). I have lived and led through the transition from one Prayer Book to another, the deployment of permanent deacons, the ordination of women, and the open acceptance and ordination of partnered gay people. My spirituality has been affected by the charismatic renewal, the cursillo movement, and the Benedictine Experience. I have been committed for twenty-five years to the Episcopal expression of the catechumenate and have sought to manifest it in two parishes. Twenty-plus years ago I was introduced to the work of Rene Girard by reading James Williams and Robert Hamerton-Kelly before I ever found a book by Girard. His theoretical construct helped me to reflect on my experience of hearing a number of adults who reported horrific stories of child abuse in their own backgrounds. I serve as the spiritual director of Kairos San Quentin Advisory Council, a renewal ministry with prisoners inside prison modeled on cursillo. I serve as Rector of a mid-size Episcopal parish in Tiburon-Belvedere, Marin County, an affluent suburb of San

Francisco. I have completed a five day intensive training for *Victim Offender Education Groups* inside San Quentin run by the Insight Prison Project located in San Rafael, California. I was introduced to this work by a longtime friend who was prepared for baptism in my parish in Oakland twenty-five years ago, has been on victim panels in San Quentin for five years, and for three years has served as a facilitator for *VOEG* in San Quentin.

The American Criminal Justice System: Sacrificial Guarantor of the Cultural Consensus

“A hegemonic culture subtly and effectively encourages people to identify themselves with the habits, sensibilities, and worldviews supportive of the status quo and the class interests that dominate it. It is a culture successful in persuading people to “consent” to their oppression and exploitation. A hegemonic culture survives and thrives as long as it convinces people to adopt its preferred formative modality, its favored socialization process. It begins to crumble when people start to opt for a transformative modality, a socialization process that opposes the dominant one. The latter constitutes a counter-hegemonic culture, the deeply embedded oppositional elements within a society. It is these elements the hegemonic culture seeks to contain and control.” (Howard Clark Kee quoted in Steven Charleston, “The Anglican Theological Review”)

The capstone of the American approach to crime and punishment is capital punishment. Even though an increasing number of states have banned it, capital punishment remains the ultimate Sacred of the execution of justice, and thus illustrates Girard’s theory of sacred violence. It functions like sacrifice in any primitive religion, ritually (hence secretly) repeating the founding violence in order to restore the peace that violence is supposed to have originally (miraculously) accomplished. In the United States that generative violence is the representation of the conquest of the Land at the defeat of its native inhabitants. Though a direct, explicit connection is never made conscious, the truth is inadvertently revealed by such things as the names of prisons like Tehachapi or California Men’s Colony. Capital punishment was always the means of ritually

asserting power over the native peoples and calming fears at their presence and settler guilt at confiscating their land and resources by enacting the symbolic immolation of the native body.

That vigilante lynchings in which the display and dissemination throughout the colonies of dismembered body parts as trophies also became the chosen form of terror in the oppression of African slaves brought to the “New” world, only underscores the power of this ritual means of identifying these victims as members of an expendable class, notwithstanding the use of these communal rituals to maintain the level of fascination and fear among the settlers and Europeans at home or abroad. The project and process of education and civilization of Native peoples as well as of African slaves inscribed the pattern for incarceration and corrections as parallel and justified discrimination and the mythology of racism. It cannot be coincidental that the only ethnic group whose levels of incarceration (out of all proportion with the general population) even approach those of African American men in the US are those of Native peoples.

So powerful in the American psyche is this primitive rite of communal violence and so effective was it at uniting the American imagination and common identity, the American form of sacred violence colonized the church as well. With only a few exceptions it became the common identity of religious white settlers in the South and the West (“praise the Lord and pass the ammunition”) in the face of a threatening otherness. As in all such forms of the violent sacred the “otherness” of the victims was alternatively appropriated as nobility and mystical benevolence.

Mythological heroes like Squanto and Hiawatha, or real examples like Osceola, Sequoyah, Crazy

Horse, and Sitting Bull, enabled settler guilt to be dissipated by a kind of totemic fascination with the noble savage.

Prisons are holdovers, symbolic locations where the ritual domination of the bodies of men and women of color can continue to fuel our sense of security and fear of the “other” that makes the prison industrial complex the true institutional establishment of civil religion. Its assumptions go unexamined. It’s demands are met without question or resistance, as if to do otherwise would call into question the entire foundation upon which the American enterprise is built. And it is capital punishment, whether in its actual fact or in its preparation, that is the fire that drives the sacramentality and ethical definition of the cultural and religious consensus.

San Quentin is the oldest of the state prisons in California. While Quentin is not a common Catholic Saint (287AD), the story I have heard is that there was a catechumen (meaning ie. a “good Indian”) given the Christian name Quentin at the mission who was caught up in a rebellion and executed as an example to otherwise docile natives. This little piece of apocryphal narrative is important in that it illustrates the ambivalence of the significance of the scapegoat. At once a dangerous threat who has been domesticated by being given a kind of saintliness. All catechumens were regarded as saints even if they were not baptized before their death. They were given Christian burial.

The Sacred Space of San Quentin State Prison on a beautiful piece of land overlooking the San Francisco Bay is demarcated by the inner sanctum, the execution chamber, death house and

death row. From the Catholic Chapel looking South can be sometimes seen a lone basketball and a backboard rising above the roofline of the SHU (segregated housing unit) or Adjustment Center, the “hole” as it is normally identified by prisoners, where a death row resident is given his one hour per day of exercise alone with a basket and ball. Progressive seclusion defines the architectural space surrounding death row. The fact that the SHU and “Holy of Holies” beyond are visible from the entrance to both the Catholic and Protestant chapels suggests the way in which the church has become the servant of a more dominant sacred system. To be reminded of “hell” on ones way out of “heaven” is to become co-opted by the internalized control of the sacrificial sacred.

The primary means of this control is dehumanization and the internalization of social stigma and shame in the lived experience of prisoners. Every detail of their incarceration is designed to remind them that they are being punished. Their survival is dependent on an acceptance and internalization not only that they are guilty of a crime but that they are flawed, dysfunctional, broken and bad people, who deserve the violent treatment the system applies to them. To resist is to end up in the “hole,” to be reminded that the system owns them and determines their lives.

This sets up a master/slave dynamic where the guards assume roles as enforcers of the reality of the society and its judgment on the bodies of the prisoners. The ubiquitous use of shackles in any transport beyond the walls of the prison makes clear in public the danger and control of the bodies of prisoners.

This system of mimetic identity formation and control simply continues, in a more intensive and symbolically clear form, the social reality of the streets. “Drug dealing and gangs provide more than a livelihood to otherwise poorly educated and difficult-to-employ young men. They also provide an alternative society in which their courage, toughness, and entrepreneurship are valued. More importantly, they are a way out of the shame of being poor, jobless, and unable to support a family.” (Philippe Bourgois, In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio (Cambridge University Press, 2002))

It is this very sense of shame that a growing number of psychiatrists maintain is at the root of violent behavior. (see Robert Karen, "Shame," *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1992.) “During the 1980s, James Gilligan . . . was in charge of mental health services in the Massachusetts prisons, where he conducted thousands of therapeutic consultations with homicidal inmates. He soon came to realize that they were especially likely to harm or kill someone when they felt insulted or humiliated. What these men seemed to fear most were feelings of weakness and shame—the shame of being seen as inadequate or contemptible—and they struck back violently against anyone who set off those feelings, whether it was a sarcastic, unfaithful girlfriend or a rival drug dealer attempting to impinge on their turf.”

Honor shame societies are characterized by social structures of stratification and difference that reinforce shame based control and thus inevitably provoke shame triggered violence.

“. . . Ruth Benedict who classified cultures as being preoccupied predominantly with, on the one hand, notions of honor and shame or, on the other, notions of pride and guilt . . . Guilt, the sense that you have done something wrong and should feel bad about it whether others know it or not, tends to lead to private

turmoil. But shame implies awareness of the contempt of others, and therefore has potentially greater implications for relationships. Pride, like guilt, is an internal feeling of accomplishment, whereas a sense of honor, like shame, depends on the attitudes of others toward oneself.” Helen Epstein, “America’s Prisons: Is There Hope?” *The New York Review of Books* (56,10 June 11, 2009)

Structures of social contempt that hold sway in a culture are matter-of-factly assumed as Divinely given or Democratically determined for the sake of justice, safety, and security.

Insofar as the claim is made that we are safer and more secure because of this system, the whole structure functions as a religion. It has its own ritual, its own mythology, and its own laws. We become as a society more assured of our own innocence as we are of some one’s or class of people’s guilt. As William Cavanaugh says about torture, “It has to do with fostering a certain kind of collective imagination.” In a review of Cavanaugh’s Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ, Walter Brueggeman writes in Theology Today (Oct. 2000) “The imagination of the state has a tremendous power to discipline bodies, to habituate them and script them into a drama of its own making Torture is rather both the production of that threat and the response to it, and thus the ritual site at which the state produces the reality in which its pretensions to omnipotence consist.” As the “Innocence Project” is demonstrating, it is the near randomness of the choice of victims for incarceration from an already marginalized group that fuels the system of fear that spreads virally in the typically screened populations. Yet, at the same time, the sense of terror, insecurity and isolation in the wake of reports of heinous crime is increased among the dominant class as well as by the harsh dehumanizing treatment of prisoners. Hence “tough on crime” legislation is a means of alluding to the calming effect of an execution to gain the same reduction of anxiety in the larger population. Even the knowledge that some

people were falsely arrested and convicted means that no one can feel entirely secure. The prison system ensures in our national collective imagination that there are enemies that deserve such treatment. Witness the recent popularity of television programs that feature prison life—usually at its worst. The expendable, depravity of prisoners must be internalized, inscribed in our imaginations as it is on their bodies.

Mark Taylor (*The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*, 2001) draws a connection between the recent growth of prisons and a “Theatrics of Terror” in the context of which executions, he says, “create spectacles in a theatrics of terror.” “The extensive use of the death penalty is a ritual enactment of the State’s alleged right to take life, its right to hold power of life and death over its citizenry. Its major function is to register terror deep in the citizen unconscious.” Taylor, consistent with Girard, sees this terror and its theatrics as having the function of obfuscating the bifurcation of the population, the increasing disparity of levels of income and the systematic stigmatization of the poor and of racial minorities. In Rene Girard’s terms this is a ritualized sacrificial system that promises to pacify the roiling social crisis. Taylor on the other hand calls for a mimetic “theatrics of counter-terror.”

While it can be said that the Gospel, that is the message of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, has “caused a new light to dawn” in the world, a light that overcomes our blindness to our own participation in the sin and violence of the world, it must also be asserted that part of that dawning has involved the deconstruction of religious structures and languages insofar as these have become enmeshed with the imperial powers that perpetrate that violence and ensure that its

sacrificial dominance will continue to be exercised in the world. For this reason, at least, our language and meta-narrative claims must become so humble that someone offended or harmed in any way, or from a community that has been so harmed, must not be triggered by any explicitation of the gospel in the traditional language of faith. The theological task *par excellence* is to so clearly and naturally point to (or to a sign of) the “redemption” in a language that is authentic to hearers and speakers that it is not identifiable as “Christian” except by another theologian. The spiritual discipline demanded here goes beyond translation. It must entail the willingness to truly let go of one’s own categories, frameworks, and structures of faith and identity in order to discover a natural goodness, creativity, and redemption that has its own unique socio-linguistic integrity. This is the incarnational work identified in the tradition as *kenosis*, a self-emptying that is sometimes described in the transformative “work” of circles of support and accountability as “trusting the process,” that is, believing that whatever is needed will be supplied to complete the work.

When groups of people do the redemptive work of the church, however anonymously, they inhabit the space of the church and become signs of the kingdom of God as the church is. And because they are focused on that mission rather than on the orthodox categorization of that work in theological terms, they become more “catholic” than they could if they used the language of the church which has become so exclusive, and so narrowly defined as to relate to membership, identity and belonging as a Christian.

Cracking Open My Own Prison Code

I had heard of Victim Offender Education Groups from a friend who had become a facilitator but I knew very little about them when I was impressed by the testimony of an inmate at San Quentin who was suddenly to be released after serving 24 years of a 15 years-to-life sentence for murder. I was at one of the monthly Kairos reunions that bring together in the Catholic chapel for a couple of hours in the evening once a month about 40 inmates with 40 or so men from outside who come in to provide a follow-up experience of support after a Kairos weekend. That night there was an unfamiliar excitement as men were saying the P__ was to be released in a day or two and would be there to talk at the end of the meeting. When P__ arrived it was clear that he was transported with an amazing sense of gratitude—to the other men in the prison who had supported his transformation, to us who were there that night, and to one whose name he mentioned several times before it became clear that it was the name of the man he had murdered. He now could hardly contain his need to honor him, to give thanks for his life, to confess his callous murder of him and to ask us to remember him and his family in our prayers. It was clear that he was ashamed of his action in taking that man's life, in fact he seemed to embrace his responsibility and remorse for that act as the thing that had saved his life, that was now enabling his release. This countercultural testimony made a profound impression on me.

Several months later I was a part of a Victim Offender Education Group (VOEG) facilitator training event and was able again to meet this young man and have the privilege of hearing his "Crime Impact Statement," along with those of two other men recently released after serving long sentences for murder. This time I was struck by how, even though in most cases they had not

known their victims before the crime, they now seemed to know them as full and complete human beings with families and careers, with hopes and dreams, and that they knew them as such because they had done the painstaking work of owning their responsibility for taking those lives so suddenly and senselessly from them and from their families and communities.

We also heard, as part of that training, the stories told by three crime victims of the devastation of their lives and families caused by that violence. Often most poignant was the inability of the justice system, even after years of public political attention focused on the needs and rights of “victims of violent crime,” to do anything other than re-victimize them by the very adversarial nature of the law itself. It was often not until they had had the opportunity as part of a panel visiting a VOEG to actually confront men who could hear their stories of victimage as perpetrators that for some they were able to begin to find healing. They became able to tell their stories with a kind of validation that could only come from having them heard and received as opportunities for perpetrators of similar crimes to express remorse, sometimes even to ask forgiveness. It is by means of the gift and mystery of “surrogacy” that this proximate reconciliation takes place. The episode at the cross in John’s Gospel (“Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.”) is almost certainly a recounting of this kind of transaction among the followers of Jesus in the early church.

My own “impact statement,” offered with all of the others in our training event as participants in an analogous process, was a great occasion for catharsis and insight into a now forty year old turning-my-back on a young woman whose life I had harmed irreparably by my callous sense of youthful male entitlement. It became arduously clear how difficult it is to be honest about one’s

own shameful actions and intentions and about the damage that long repressed experiences have done, and how liberating it is to have them exhumed—resurrected—in the fierce but gentle embrace of a fastidiously honest, open and loving community.

Reconstructing the “Anonymous Church”

“The system of powers Satan has engendered is a concrete phenomenon, material and simultaneously spiritual, religious in a very special sense, efficacious and illusory at the same time. It is religion as illusion, which protects humans from violence and chaos by means of sacrificial rituals. Although this system is grounded in an illusion, its action in the world is real to the extent that idolatry, or false transcendence, commands obedience.” R. Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, 2001

So now I want to turn to the way in which such circles of support and accountability (*COSA*) in the methodology of restorative justice imitate the church, its mission as sign and expression of the reign of God. Rene Girard has claimed that the death of Jesus was no different from that of any number of criminals executed by the Pax Romana or any other collective form of justice, for that matter. It is the “memory,” the *anamnesis* made possible in the Resurrection and kept alive in the Eucharist, that undoes the violence and enmity between human beings. By identifying with His victimization and keeping in mind our own guilt and complicity, the power of the internalized shame and dehumanization built up in our souls can be undone, dissipated and lifted.

The experience of *COSAs* accomplishes this same undoing in reverse. By the offender telling his own truthful story of his crime and its impact on so many others, his own and his victim’s family, friends, coworkers, neighbors of the community in which the crime was committed, etc., and by

hearing and identifying with victims of crimes like his who come to tell their own stories, there is an undoing of the self-justification and mythology that normally keeps us from encountering our own guilt and responsibility. As a result, through an arduous journey of truth-telling and hearing in community, victims and offenders can meet each other as different but alike, givers and receivers of the liberating power of unconditional love. As one said, “We’re different. But we belong to each other.”

If, as Girard implies, though now forgiven, we were all “present” at the cross and all have tortured and killed Christ, then we are also complicit in each other’s harm and victimization, and we must be ruthlessly honest and truthful in recounting our own life and how in living it we have been harmed and harmed others, as well. While we made God our victim, through our own violence against him, God made us his friends, though we tried to remain his enemy. The experience of transformation that comes through sharing stories of deep truth about ourselves and our actions in a spirit of courageous openness and compassion defines a dependable reception of grace. That is, the victim offender panels where there is the presence of a compassionate honesty and a spirit of courageous self-disclosure define a sacramental space, a space where among relative strangers permission for not only the expression of compassion, confession and forgiveness is graciously granted but where it becomes a normal experience to enter into the remorse, shame, and grief of another human being with love, and understanding, and there to discover hope.

“Love means an interior and spiritual identification with one’s brother, so that he is not regarded as an “object” to “which” one “does good.” The fact is that good done to

another as to an object is of little or no spiritual value. Love takes one's neighbor as one's other self, and loves him with all the immense humility and discretion and reserve and reverence without which no one can presume to enter into the sanctuary of another's subjectivity. From such love all authoritarian brutality, all exploitation, domineering and condescension must necessarily be absent. The saints of the desert were enemies of every subtle or gross expedient by which the "spiritual man" contrives to bully those he thinks inferior to himself, thus gratifying his own ego. They had renounced everything that savoured of punishment and revenge, however hidden it might be."

Thomas Merton The Wisdom of the Desert

Asked why she participates again and again in victim panels with a different group of offenders, one victim has said, "Something magical happens. I don't want to know what it is. I just want to be in it." Such agnosticism as hers enables us to come together across current cultural boundaries (neither Jew nor Greek) to enact and experience the "paschal mystery" with its layered imperial and colonial traditions of language, philosophy, and symbol. Such antinomian anonymity also keeps such activities from threatening the powers that be. By reaching deeply for the personal and the remembered experiences of victims and offenders, restorative justice short-circuits the prison politics "as usual," finding a tentative existence in the innards of the soft underbelly of the beast. William T. Cavanaugh reminds us of the distinctive humility of the church's political mission: "Christian 'politics' cannot be the pursuit of influence over the powers, but rather a question of what kind of community disciplines we need to produce people of peace capable of speaking truth to power." (<http://www.jesusradicals.com/theology/william-cavanaugh/>)

"To recognize Christ in our sisters and brothers" . . . across the boundaries . . . "of the contemporary scene, is to begin to break the idolatry of the State, and to make visible the Body of Christ in the world." (Sacrifice, Law and the Catholic Faith: is secularity really the enemy?)

The Tablet Lecture, 2006: <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/page/jamesalison>) The subversion of the

“false transcendence” of violence and sacrificial religion of the Prison Code is no different from recognizing Christ in others who may have been our enemies. James Alison continues in language curiously appropriate to the “anonymity” I am attributing to the process of restorative justice.

“The Church, which, with regard to its varying organizational structures, is as much part of the secular as is the civil, political, imperial, or democratic realm in which it lives, would, at its best, be the regime and discipline of signs, made alive by God: signs pointing towards and actually being, God's bringing about of his Kingdom by reconciling all humans together; signs which are aimed at summoning forth certain shapes of human desire, interpretation, and living together, rather than coercing people into sacred structures.” Alison here acknowledges the embedded-ness of the “regime and discipline of signs” in the coercive sacred structures, the institutions of religious and public life, like leaven in the flour, a kind of “fifth column” within the penitentiary where real penance and reconciliation is pursued by God despite and in the face of the brutal dehumanization of the prison and the prison code. Only insofar as such life-signs can be nourished can it be said that prisons “rehabilitate.”

Indeed, it is not so uncommon to hear prisoners on this path say how grateful they are to God for putting them in prison. If the crucifixion of Jesus is not fundamentally different from that of others, then even heinous crimes like murder can become occasions of atonement, when murderers come to recognize in their disillusionment, their own *felix culpa*. It is a process analogous to the awakening to the “intelligence of the victim” to which Alison points. “However,

this sacrifice was curiously subverted: instead of it being us offering something to God, it was God offering himself to us. What God was doing was in fact showing us what we do when we sacrifice: ultimately we kill another human being as a way of keeping ourselves feeling safe, secure and good - dressing up a murder as something holy.” In VOEG groups offenders courageously peel away layers of their own justification and denial. However compelling their needs for control and safety may seem, they commit to each other a ruthless search for the truth about themselves that promises to set them free.

Ironically enough, it is normally “lifers,” notoriously the most violent and often hardened of the prison population, who without hope for release, are able to give time and attention to the forensic work on their own internal crime scene examination with enough focus and presence as to notice themselves as among the dead. And segregated as they normally are they come to discover others among the dead who have an unfamiliar glow of life about them, as if illumined by sunlight streaming through cracks in the walls. “So in every culture, the linguistic bullet marks of the Happening as it unfolds in the midst of that culture will be different, but the dynamic of the Happening will be the same, and we will know it by comparing the normative pattern of bullet holes seen in our New Testament barn with the pattern of bullet holes as they emerge in the cultures concerned.” So James Alison, in an apt metaphor, suggests the congruity of prison cultural deconstruction with the collapse of Christian religious culture, with its linguistic fetishes and sacred reification of what can only be experienced as something “happening,” a process, the ongoing daily “work” of honesty, love and authenticity, as it unfolds in the prison population.

Men in the *VOEG* groups often describe their motivation as to “get out of prison before they’re released.” The only reason they can dare to hope for such liberation is that they have heard of it from others, tasted it for themselves, come to recognize it as the only thing that can keep them, should they ever be released, from being returned to prison or worse. But the prison system, like every cultural system, sustains itself by violence, “by death and its fear.” I heard the story of a seasoned inmate who was given a newly incarcerated cell mate, who proceeded to act out in the eyes of the guards. When old timer returned from work he found all of his belongings strewn around his cell, his personal legal papers over-turned on his bunk and his family pictures torn up. When he asked an officer why, he was told that it was his job to keep his new cellmate in line. The common life and disciplines of these *VOEG* groups create in prison a disconnect in the chain of custody, the chain of violence, normally experienced in “slow motion” but always threatening to “break-out.” They subvert the culture of control in the prison system as prisoners can no longer be run by violence and death, by fear of the “hole” or of retributive “justice” whether it comes from the guards or the gangs. Alison appears almost to be looking on when he says, “This is when they [people] start to be able to witness to the freedom that comes when one is no longer run by death and its fear, when one is able to make plans for people's long-term good lasting beyond one's own lifespan, and when one is not afraid to stand up against sacred consensus in order to make truth available.”

Without the sponsorship of the established (“Constantinian”) Chapel programs, restorative justice programs like *VOEG* are even more vulnerable to political and cultural spasms of fear.

While they currently enjoy a certain amount of favor as an effective model of rehabilitation and personal transformation, they can easily fall prey to the exigencies of custody and political misunderstandings. But the real problem is that they can appear so foolish, so naive, to those “hardened” voters outside who have long since lost hope for human change and transformation: “they don’t call them ‘cons’ for nothing.” The truth is more amazing than most of us are willing to allow. As James Alison says, not of the prison expression so much as of the miracle of gospel transformation wherever, “It involves instead our becoming aware of how much we have been loved by someone who is our victim. Because of that we can become good as we are loved in our most vulnerable places, rather than by forcing ourselves to cover up our vulnerability and be good so as to be loved.” Such unearned love from the victim rarely takes the form of support of a felon’s appeal for parole from the victim’s family. But when it does, through such ministries of forgiveness and reconciliation as I have briefly framed here, it is a powerful witness and source of accountability. No more effective advocate, both to the offender in continuing his work of humility, truth-telling, love, and reconciliation with the entire cosmic realm of his victims, and to the system that has at its penal pinnacle the sacrificial worship of death. But the fact that their victims are kept alive and honored in the offenders’ life and good works, means that the love of Christ has tangible expression in their most vulnerable places.

We are quite extraordinarily lucky to find ourselves on the inside of the Happening. The Catholic Faith enables us to navigate the wrath which is produced as sacred structures and boundaries collapse from within and a new creation emerges. How we make available to others the uniqueness of this strangely un-religious gift without falling into the trap of allowing that uniqueness to seem like merely another rival form of exclusivity is one of the great challenges of living and preaching the faith in our time. James Alison (Tablet Lecture 2006)

As the community of this “new creation,” the church is that fellowship of a new humanity that has already died but lives beyond the pull and domination of death in all its forms. Yet it is sometimes the church itself, having formed a safe space in which to witness and nurture this resurrection life, that can become a “sacred structure” that produces the wrath that sin and death wield in order to impose their hegemony. Yet out of the ruins caused by the cross, in which earthquake the whole edifice of punishment held together by the idolatrous worship of execution has already crumbled, will emerge the new creation signs of which are the relationships of compassion and accountability fostered by victim offender education groups for restorative justice. At least so it seems in Alison’s hopeful vision of the eschatological future. In such a vision there will be no need for anonymity (perhaps) since there will be no rivalry, no exclusivity, no alienation of the other.