

If Only You Had Eyes to See: The Threat of the “Mythologizing Cross” in the Space of Empire

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In a public lecture delivered at Washington Theological Union in 2007, the prominent Girard scholar, Gil Bailie, asserted that the two greatest threats to the contemporary world are Western nihilism and Islamic fundamentalism. In this paper, I will show how the thought of Rene Girard can be used to support the notion that Western nihilism poses a grave threat to the world. However, I will then suggest that Bailie’s assertion fails to consider adequately the threat of imperialism. With this in mind, I will draw upon the insights of Martin Luther King Jr. in order to suggest that it is, in fact, the imperial nature of the United States that poses perhaps the greatest threat to the world today. Having done so, I will conclude by briefly considering Bailie’s claim regarding Islamic fundamentalism and how this claim may serve the aims of US imperial mythology.

In order to see why the thought of Girard can lead one to fear the spread of Western nihilism, one must understand Girard’s idea of the scapegoat mechanism, as well as the uniqueness of Christianity within Girard’s broader theoretical framework.

According to Girardian theory, social distress comes about when mimetic desire gives birth to rivalry. As rivalry multiplies and intensifies within a community, it threatens to rend the fabric of the community. Here the community verges on descending into a Hobbesian war of all against all. However, at this moment, through a process of scapegoating, the war of all against all shifts to a war of all against one.¹ This shift occurs when a person within the community points a finger of blame at another member of the community—usually someone who is already marginalized. The person pointing the finger accuses the marginalized person of being the cause of the distress that everyone in the

¹ Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Meteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford Press, 1987), 24.

community is experiencing. It is here that mimetic desire turns diabolical, for the members of the community quickly begin to imitate the finger pointing of the original accuser. This culminates in the expulsion (often through murder) of the marginalized person from the community.

Ironically, because the community binds itself together once more, in uniting to expel the marginalized person from its midst, and because the act of scapegoating functions as a catharsis, it appears to the community that the scapegoat truly was the cause of distress.² Thus, the community remains in the dark as to its real cause of distress, namely, the disordered desires of the community's members. Moreover, the community covers over its violent acts by de-historicizing its actions and turning these actions into mythologies pertaining to gods and goddesses. It is from this dynamic that what one might call "primitive religion" is born.

According to Girard, Christianity offers a unique insight that militates against the sanctioning of violence that is endemic to primitive religion. By telling the story of the historical life of Jesus of Nazareth, it unveils the violence that is carried out by the community. In the gospel, the one who is scapegoated is pronounced to be an innocent victim. Thus, the disordered desires and violence at the heart of the community that conspire to crucify the "human one" are exposed for all to see.³

As with Saul in the book of Acts, this process of coming to see the truth of reality, allows for the possibility of conversion on the part of the community, a conversion which culminates in concern for and solidarity with the victims of the world. In this way, the Christian narrative functions as a light to the world, a light that leads the faithful away from violence.⁴ It is, therefore, troubling to perceive the encroachment of nihilism in the West, for this nihilism can ultimately lead persons to refuse to see and

² Girard terms this dynamic "double transference." As James G. Williams explains it, "those involved in the collective violence transfer the disorder and the offenses producing it to the victim, but they transfer also their newly found peace to the victim, ascribing to him or her the power that brings it about." James G. Williams, ed. *The Girard Reader* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996), p. 293.

³ Along these lines Girard notes that, "The powers are not put on display because they are defeated, but they are defeated because they are put on display." Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, James G. Williams, trans. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2006), p. 143.

⁴ Girard expounds upon this point in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, see esp., pp. 161-170.

bear the weight of reality as it is revealed by the Christian narrative. This reality is the reality of, what Jon Sobrino would call, “the crucified people” of the world.

Such a possibility is indeed alarming. However, I would suggest that nihilism is not the only threat brought to bear against the light offered by Christianity. Indeed, I would contend that imperialism also threatens to obscure this light, and by extension, imperialism also poses a grave threat to the world.

In order to see why this is the case, one must first consider the nature of imperial culture. It is helpful to think of empire in relation to what Walter Wink terms “the domination system.” Wink asserts that the domination system is any social system characterized by “unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all.”⁵ Empire, as I am using it here, can be understood as the domination system enacted on the transnational level. It is the domination system writ large.

Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, in their study of the book of Revelation, offer a scriptural perspective on the nature of empire that dovetails with Wink's conception of the domination system. According to Howard-Brook and Gwyther, the book of Revelation holds that the vices of economic exploitation, murder, and illusion are intrinsic to empire.⁶ These three vices are interrelated; empire is driven by the desire to accumulate the wealth and economic resources of the world, which, invariably leads to abusive economic practices. Empire then uses murder (often in the form of war or violent social repression) to maintain its abusive economic relations. Finally, empire relies on illusion to blind its citizens to the abusive and murderous reality of imperial nature. Thus, the function of empire runs counter to the function of the Christian narrative. Whereas the Christian narrative unveils both violence and the causes of violence to the world, empire covers over violence and its causes.

⁵ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology For a New Millennium* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998), p. 39.

⁶ Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000) pp. 157-184.

However, it is too simplistic to suggest that imperialism and Christianity have functioned merely as countervailing forces to one another within history. In order to see why this is the case, we can begin by noting that the Christian narrative has never existed in a vacuum. It was formed within specific social, political, and religious contexts, and, as it has been passed down from generation to generation, the Christian message has continually undergone processes of inculturation.

The process of inculturation is both good and necessary. It has allowed the Christian message to be heard, understood, and enacted by a myriad of diverse communities throughout history. However, we must also acknowledge that when the Christian narrative is articulated within a community, it is done so, inevitably, amidst the biases, blindness, and sinfulness of that community. Thus, the light of the Gospel is always at risk of being obfuscated by the systemic sin of the community that would bear witness to the light. Indeed, a feminist reading of scripture suggests that the New Testament itself is not immune to this reality. Such a reading holds that the authors and redactors of the writings of the New Testament subverted the good news of liberation for women within God's reign to the ethos of the patriarchal structures that were standard throughout Christianity's host cultures at that time.⁷ I note this merely as an example. My intention here is not to explore the particulars of such a feminist reading. However, having pointed to the likelihood that the light of the Christian narrative has never existed in history as a perfect light, with the exception of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, I now would like to raise a more specific question: What happens to the Christian narrative when it is appropriated by imperial culture?

Here I would assert that when Christianity is made to serve imperial ideology it becomes a false light. This false light is pointed away from empire and, instead, is aimed at those whom empire would exploit. This has two effects: first, because the light is directed away from empire, it fails to illuminate

⁷ See for example Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1994).

the true nature of imperial culture; thus, the exploitative and murderous aspects of empire are allowed to remain in shadow. This, of course, allows empire to propagate its illusions, filling the epistemological void left by the shadow. Second, because the light that is aimed at those whom empire would exploit is essentially a distortive light (because it is a light that is reflected through the lens of distorted imperial desire), it does not reveal the true nature of the victims of empire – namely, that they are created in the image of God. Instead, this light illuminates – or even manufactures – only the disordered aspects of these victims. As a result, this light demonizes the victims, causing those whose consciousnesses have been formed by empire, to perceive these victims simply as persons that are to be feared and loathed. Thus, for those who operate within the illusion of empire, the victims are transformed into enemies.

Lamentably, there are numerous incidents in history that illustrate the realization of the twofold dynamic that I have just described. To begin to grasp the virulence of the Imperial-Christian narrative, one need only think of the Crusades, the subjugation and extermination of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, or the use of Christianity to legitimate slavery and white supremacy. What this twofold dynamic and these historical examples of that dynamic suggest is that when the Christian narrative is appropriated by the forces of empire, it becomes distinctly unchristian. One may even go so far as to say that the false light of Imperial-Christianity bears a greater resemblance to the light of Lucifer than it does to the light of Christ. Along these lines, one may also assert that, given the manner in which the Imperial-Christian narrative transforms victims into enemies, this narrative resonates with the accusations of Satan more closely than it does the defense mounted by the Paraclete.

The gospel of John provides an important metaphor for the light offered by Imperial-Christianity. In that gospel, we are told that the mob coming to arrest Jesus is comprised of both Roman imperial soldiers and Jewish religious elites. The gospel notes specifically that this mob approaches Jesus bearing “lanterns, torches, and weapons.” Here the author of the gospel is not simply giving an

unnecessarily detailed account of the events leading up to the arrest of Jesus. Instead, by noting that the mob comes bearing lanterns and torches, the author highlights the fact that this mob does not possess the true light, which, of course, the fourth gospel identifies as Christ, the light that reveals the truth of the innocent victim to those who are blind.⁸ Thus, the imperial-religious mob, with the weapons of empire in hand and guided by a false light, comes to arrest and crucify the innocent victim. I would suggest that this vividly describes the reality of Christianity when subjugated to the imperial will.

This, then, provides us with a new hermeneutic with which to appraise the dangers that are present in our contemporary global context. For now we see that it is not merely Western nihilism that threatens the truth offered by the Gospel, but also the possibility that Christianity can be appropriated by the forces of empire in order to serve imperial mythology.

Here, then, in contrast to Bailie's assertion, one can consider the following statement made by Martin Luther King Jr. in his speech entitled "A Time to Break Silence," delivered in 1967, exactly one year before his assassination. In it King states, "...I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government...for the sake of this government, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent."⁹

King tells us that, in the midst of the, so-called Cold War and the atrocity of Vietnam, it is the United States with its "imperial ambitions" that is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. One may extrapolate that because the government of the United States is the world's greatest purveyor of violence, it also constitutes the greatest threat to the world.

⁸ Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 373-374.

⁹ Martin Luther King Jr. "A Time To Break Silence" in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed The World*, James Washington, ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1992), 139.

I wish to affirm King's view. I would also assert that this view is as true today as it was when he made his statement. Over the last 40 years, the US government has mounted extensive illegal bombing campaigns in Laos and Cambodia; it initiated an arms race that has exponentially increased the number of nuclear weapons in the world and it continues to maintain a first-strike policy with its nuclear weapons. Furthermore, in the 1980s, it incited the "dirty war" in El Salvador and sold weapons to both Iran and Iraq during their war. In the 1990s, the US government launched an illegal invasion of Panama which left tens of thousands dead and, then, invaded Iraq destroying the country's infrastructure and imposing sanctions on Iraq that led to the death of at least 1 million children. The US continues to be a leading producer and distributor of small-arms to the Global South—this is noteworthy because the UN has cited small arms as the leading cause of violent death in the world. At present, the US is engaged in two wars in the Middle East, neither of which have an end in sight. Given this brief, and very much incomplete, list of examples of the violence incited by US policy, it is not difficult to argue that King's diagnoses still obtains today.¹⁰

It is important to note that the violence carried out by the US government cannot be adequately explained by suggesting that there are nihilistic forces within the government which move it toward these violent policies. The reason for the inadequacy of such an explanation is that the exploits of the United States have almost always been framed as a struggle between good and evil in which the good is aligned with the US and – quite frequently – Christianity, whereas evil is aligned with the enemies of the US and their godlessness (in the case of Communism) or their diabolical fundamentalism (in the case of Islam). Thus, it is fair to suggest that it is actually Imperial-Christianity that largely serves to legitimize the destructive orientation of US foreign policy. To sight one example, at the height of the nuclear arms

¹⁰ In regards to US foreign policy, see for example William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1995); Tom Wicker, "What Price Panama?," *New York Times*, June 15, 1990; Ramsey Clark, *The Fire This Time: US War Crimes in the Gulf* (New York, NY: International Action Center, 2002); Noam Chomsky, *Failed States: the Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2006); Rachel Stohl and Doug Tuttle, "The Small Arms Trade in Latin America" *The NACLA Report on the Americas*, March/April 2008, accessed at www.cdi.org/pdfs/Small_Arms_Latin_America.pdf.

race, immensely popular Christian evangelical leaders, such as Hal Lindsey and Jerry Falwell, espoused a theology which held that God had ordained a nuclear holocaust which would lead to the destruction of this world and allow for the Second Coming of Christ to occur.¹¹ Thus, for Lindsey and Falwell, the arms race and the earth's destruction were sanctified by God. This, according to Lindsey, was a view that was shared by many within the upper echelon of the Pentagon.¹²

The reality that the Christian-Imperial narrative serves to legitimize such violence should, therefore, lead one to be suspicious of the second part of Bailie's assertion, that Islamic fundamentalism represents one of the two greatest threats to the world today. While Islamic fundamentalism undoubtedly poses a violent threat to the world, Bailie's assertion can, all too easily, be appropriated by the forces of empire within the United States as a means to justify their own schemes of exploitation and domination, while using Islam as a convenient scapegoat.

Thus, rather than pointing an accusatory finger at the violence associated with fundamentalist Islam, the work of persons living within the empire of the United States should be to turn the light of the Gospel toward the imperial violence that is carried out by their own country, violence that is all too often left in the shadows. In taking up this task, one can begin to confront the greatest threat to our contemporary world.

¹¹ Hal Lindsey *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1977).

¹² Lindsey's comment is cited in James Douglass, *The Nonviolent Coming of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).