From Goats to Gays: Dismantling Collective Practices of Scapegoating

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Abstract: This work seeks to explore the contemporary and historical phenomena of scapegoating, as it is rooted in the scapegoat ritual of Leviticus XVI and operative in Christian faith communities and the Catholic Church today. I propose that in addition to exhibiting the Hebrew scapegoat ritual’s core components of selection, degradation, and alienation of the victim, the scapegoating practices employed by many Christians throughout the Common Era serve as a continuation of this ancestral tradition, displaying the same degree of calculated orchestration, need for cyclical repetition, and shared goal of revitalization and renewal for the community. Utilizing a historical-critical methodology, in conversation with social theory, I begin with investigation into the origin and purpose of ritual scapegoating, as it arises from Genesis 37. Briefly exploring the European witch hunts of the Early Modern period and the African American lynching era of the late 19th to early 20th centuries, a structural and psychological pattern is identified that underlies the anti-Jewish genocide of the Holocaust, Islamophobia of the post-9/11 War on Terror, and homophobia surrounding the present-day sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. A call for honest and critical self-reflection is issued to the Catholic populace, particularly clergy, challenging them to examine and check their own participation in systems that victimize others for the sake of individual catharsis and institutional stability.

Keywords: scapegoat, sexual abuse crisis, Catholicism, homophobia, sacrificial violence, ritual
As Christians, we believe that the sacrificial suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus signified Christ’s victory over evil, securing Atonement for all of humankind. Why then, have so many of us spent the past 2000 years victimizing others for the sake of salvation and social solidarity? Some Christians claim to hurt people for their own good, undertaking a righteous persecution in the “spirit of love…with the desire to correct, [and] to recall the wandering from error.”\(^1\) Others take it upon themselves to identify and purge the defective from society. They persecute those whom they deem corrupt beyond repair, citing demonic possession, subhuman nature, and moral depravity as cause for exile and extermination. They present their victims as a scourge against humanity that must be removed to ensure our survival and protect our moral chastity.\(^2\) Such theological justifications serve as a thin veneer for the will to power and the sanctification of violence.

From the earliest days of animal sacrifice in the Old Testament to the common era practice of castigating the “sinner,” we appear to have maintained a highly ritualistic and social practice of scapegoating. Projecting our shared and often repressed guilt, envy, and frustrations onto racialized, sexualized, or in some way “othered” individuals, we transform human beings into repositories of our own sin, which we then expel from society to purify the ranks. We celebrate our resulting cleanliness and enjoy the sense of temporary catharsis and social stability that each ritual brings.

While many theologians have heralded Jesus as the “final scapegoat,” whose Passion and resurrection revealed Truth, hope, and the power of God’s love to redeem a people blinded and shackled by their own lies and misuse of institutional power, we must stop and question whether the Lamb of God has truly taken away the sin of the world (John 1:29) and opened our eyes to the violence we impart on our victims.\(^3\) Why has it been equally if not more important for the Church and its leaders to preserve the appearances of power and holiness, than to embody the gospel of love, humility, compassion, and honesty? Why have we allowed, and in many cases, contributed to the continued partnership of Caiaphas and Pilate, whose religious prestige and political authority are maintained at the expense of the innocent victims they crucify?\(^4\) A journey through our shared history as scapegoaters can help provide answers to such questions and open doors to open dialogue, community healing, and much needed reform within the Catholic Church.

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\(^2\) For a review of how the medieval Catholic Church painted Eve (and thus all women) out to be defective creations of God, prone to witchcraft and sexual insatiability, see the discussion of *Malleus Maleficarum* in Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds., *Eve & Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 241-248.


In the following pages, I argue that the practice of scapegoating, as rooted in the scapegoat ritual of Leviticus XVI, has endured throughout the history of Western Christianity and continues to thrive in American Catholicism today. In addition to exhibiting the Hebrew ritual’s core components of selection, degradation, and alienation of the victim, our practice, as a continuation and evolution of the ancestral tradition, displays the same level of calculated orchestration, need for cyclical repetition, and shared goal of community revitalization and renewal. Utilizing a historical-critical methodology, in conversation with social theory, I will demonstrate how the Biblical origin and ritual of scapegoating betrays a desire to mollify social crises through the transfer of blame and sacrifice of victims. Briefly exploring the European witch-hunts of the Early Modern period and the African American lynching era of the late 19th to early 20th centuries, I will highlight the structural and psychological pattern underlying both ritual and social scapegoating. This then puts us in the position to see such a pattern at work in the anti-Jewish genocide of the Holocaust, Islamophobia of the post-9/11 War on Terror, and the current homophobia surrounding the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church.

I will close with a salutary recommendation for honest and critical self-reflection amongst Catholics, particularly clerics. Religious leadership and educators have played a large role in influencing the masses and condoning social practices that demonize and reject the “other.” We the laity, must learn to recognize and challenge this behavior amongst ourselves and our central Church. It is vital that we come together as a community to form and demand more socially responsible leadership – individuals who endeavor to dismantle our collective practices of scapegoating rather than fostering and propelling them.

Biblical Roots

Some scholars understand the Hebrew scapegoat ritual to be a novel invention of the Israelites, reflecting their narrative history and tendency toward moral rumination. In the Biblical tradition, instructions for the ritual first appear in Leviticus XVI, but its anecdotal significance actually lies in Genesis 37-45. In the Genesis story, Joseph’s envious brothers sell him into slavery and make it seem as though he was killed by a wild animal. They slaughter a goat and dip his cloak into its blood to mask their evil deed and set the stage for this lie. They present the cloak to their father, Jacob, who assumes Joseph has been torn to pieces by a nonexistent beast. Years later, Joseph reencounters his brothers, who confess their treachery and are wholly forgiven. Joseph’s act of forgiveness serves as a precedent for God’s act of forgiveness

5 Critics of scapegoat theory caution against haphazardly lifting and reappropriating the Levitical practice from its original context of ritual atonement. It would be inappropriate and irresponsible to take a carefully calculated, deliberate, and organized ritual and incorrectly associate it with instances of spontaneous and irrational mass violence across the backdrop of secular history. This form of “parallomania,” whereby elements of one religious system are cherry-picked and generically applied to unrelated situations to make universal assertions about human nature and behavior is not the purpose or methodology employed in the investigation at hand. For cautions, see McLean, “On the Revision of Scapegoat Terminology”; 169; Ted Peters, “Religious Sacrifice, Social Scapegoating, and Self-Justification,” in Mimetic Theory and World Religions, ed. Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 367-84.

during the annual scapegoat ritual of Yom Kippur. During this event, which is described in Leviticus XVI, all individual trespasses and the collective sins of the community are absolved.7

In the scapegoat ritual, just as Joseph’s brothers, the first sons of Israel, transferred their crimes onto the goat and were forgiven their offenses, every subsequent child of Israel is atoned after repenting and unloading his or her transgressions onto the scapegoat in the ritual. The sacrificial goat is selected at random by the drawing of lots. The creature that begins with an innocent and pure identity becomes an unwilling victim as it is transformed through taking on the sin and evil of others. The tainted and corrupted being must then be discharged and led away from the community out into the wilderness. There, it will perish of natural causes or be pushed off a cliff to ensure its demise.8

Because individual sin and communal frustrations re-accumulate over time, the ritual must be repeated annually. This built in system functions to stave off evil, neutralize social unrest, and purify the community. Atonement is a time where neighborly grudges can be forgotten, debts can be forgiven, and new social alliances can be formed in celebration and in gratitude. As a result, the eradication of the scapegoat is embedded in the collective conscience as an event imbued with sacred, generative power, reinforcing the desire to perform such ritual in order to maintain a lasting peace.9

Social Theory

The late philosophical anthropologists and theologian, René Girard, believed that the social and psychological drive behind scapegoating, including the type that led to the crucifixion of Christ, lies in a human need to release built up tension at the individual and group level. This tension, he theorized, stems from mimetic desire, a process by which we borrow from and mirror the desires of others, imitating and competing with them to take or supersede their model of existence. The object of desire needn’t just be a limited resource, such as land or power; rather, it can also be a social role, moral status, or perceived identity that we then covet and vie for. The mere existence of the other, modeling the pursuit or embodiment of the desired object, becomes a threat that prevents us from procuring what we want. Throughout our mimetic rivalry, we internalize feelings of inferiority, jealousy, anger, and greed until we reach a boiling point. This triggers the scapegoat mechanism, whereby we diffuse our outrage through an act of violence.10

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7 Reference to the scapegoat tradition can be found in numerous other works of Hebrew scripture, including the Mishnah, book of Jubilees, and the Qumran Temple Scroll. It is also noted in a variety of Christian sources such as the Epistle of Barnabas and the writings of Tertullian, Justin Martyr, and Clement of Alexandria. For additional Jewish and Christian textual sources referencing scapegoat ritual, see endnotes 3 and 4 of Bradley McLean, “On the Revision of Scapegoat Terminology,” Numen 37, Fasc. 2 (1990): 172.

8 Ibid., 173.

9 See René Girard, The Girard Reader, ed. James G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 69-93 for a discussion of “double transference” and how both sin and peacemaking power are ascribed to the sacrificial victim.

Roger De Verteuil, a scholar of depth psychology and cultural anthropology, presents a vivid depiction of the society or religious organization that has succumbed to the scapegoat mechanism:

A society has the right and duty to defend itself against its enemies from within and without; crime is rightfully exposed and punished by the law; all evil must be expiated sometime, somewhere... [these practices] uphold the dignity, the divine element we might say, in human life, in justice, and in virtue. It is only when the same reactions go beyond the necessity of self-defense, or justice, or righteousness, when they no longer discriminate between enemies and neutrals, or between guilt and innocence, that institutions (while still preserving the same structures) can be said to have lost sight of their own ideals and fallen under the spell of the primitive scapegoat archetype.11

Such communities and organizations, according to De Verteuil, are characterized by a strong sense of self-justification and public declarations of righteousness. They derive their conviction from structures of moral and civil justice that they themselves impose, manipulate, and uphold as law. They then fail to see how they’ve transitioned from using these structures to protect the good, to weaponizing them in order to persecute the innocent. In most cases, the chosen victim or group of victims, come from a specific pool of “others,” who have already been set aside on the basis of social status, accused criminality, or perceived weakness and outsider standing. The sacrifice of one or more of these victims allows society as a whole to release aggression and band together for what it sees as the common good.

**Historical Cases**

Between approximately 1450 and 1750 CE, an estimated 40,000-100,000+ women were accused, convicted, and executed as “witches” and “servants of the Devil.”12 Many victims were sacrificed to soothe the displaced social frustrations over weather, bad crops, and illness. With the Protestant Reformation and theological development of diabology and demonology, the need to protect community well-being and purity only increased. People sought psychological and emotional relief from rising tensions and fear surrounding sinful human nature and rumored occultism.13 Satan, who made pacts with witches and worked through “evildoers,” needed to be snuffed out. This could only be done by locating the vessel of evil (i.e., the witch) and killing her.

Just as the Hebrews chose a specific animal for their sacrifice, Christians chose a specific stereotype for theirs. The witch generally came from amongst the powerless and marginalized – the women, the widows, the poor, and the expendables of society. Once responsibility for all of the plagues, malignancies, misbehavior, and sins of the community were shifted onto her, she was tortured and forced to own and confess the crimes she hadn’t committed. The stains of murder, adultery, and even sexual impotence were projected onto her, with Christians testifying that she controlled their behavior through possession and spells. Spiritually and metaphorically she was transformed into the fictional beast that killed Joseph, and her eradication was the only way to restore peace, safety, and Godliness to the people.

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Many European witch-hunts were well planned out and documented. Leaders and Church inquisitors even drafted procedural manuals, such as the *Malleus Maleficarum*, for the selection, testing, and disposing of those whom they convicted, in an almost ritualistic fashion. Purges happened in waves throughout a 300 year heyday, serving as a form of sacramalized and redemptive violence that entire communities could take part in, as a “holy duty for God” (John 16:2). Contemplative theologian Richard Rohr notes that these cyclical patterns are a key characteristic of the scapegoating mechanism:

> 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.

Each time society found itself disintegrating into a state of disorderly chaos and internal division, it rallied around the scapegoat, whose ritual sacrifice ushered in a period of unity and restoration. All against one was healthier for community stability than all against all; and, because the collective killing had the desired effect of centralizing and redirecting inter-societal violence to those of limited value, it was remembered as necessary and just, resulting in clean consciences that failed to remember there ever having been a victim.

James H. Cone, a black liberation theologian, believes that this clean conscience is part of the reason many white Christians don’t recall or acknowledge the lynching of African-Americans as a part of the Christian legacy in America. This was neither the first nor the last time that mass persecution and murder of the innocents was conducted in the name of God. One cannot help but see the parallels between the European churchmen and governing officials presiding over the ritualized burning of witches at the stake and the Christian ministers and governors of the United States who mobilized white mobs and blessed lynching rituals from the late 1800’s to middle 1900’s. Whenever jobs in communities became scarce, the economy was down, or white women entertained sexual relationships with black men, the solution was to transfer greed, guilt, and lechery onto the African-American. He was reduced to a state of moral inferiority and corruption that justified and necessitated expulsion from the community.

Periodic lynching in this time had a twofold effect of peace-building for communities. On the one hand, scapegoats served as a human receptacle for the grievances of white men, and on the other, the ritual scared blacks into submission, quelling unrest that threatened the authority and righteousness of the white Christian majority. Like the Yom Kippur sacrifices and witch trials that preceded them, lynchings were ceremonious events to look forward to, often heavily

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15 Stirling and Burton, “Scandals, Scapegoats, and the Cross”: 127.
16 Rohr, “Jesus Reveals the Lie of Scapegoating.”
17 See Alex Alvarez, “Making Enemies: The Uses and Abuses of Tainted Identities,” *Crosscurrents* 65, No. 3 (2015), for a discussion of the political and historical tensions of Nazi Germany that led to scapegoating of the Jews.
20 Consider for example, the genocide of indigenous ‘savages’ across the Americas from the 16th-20th centuries.
publicized and commemorated to draw community participation and veneration.\(^{21}\) Also, like the goats of the scapegoat ritual that were drawn by lots, the only requirement for a lynching candidate was bad luck, such as being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It did not matter which black was hung, so long as the ritual took place. Like the Hebrew scapegoat, the lynching victim was berated, stoned, and whipped on his way to death. After stripping, taunting, humiliating, and demoralizing the victim, the body was abandoned, alone to rot outside of the community like the Hebrew scapegoat in the wilderness.\(^{22}\)

We may want to believe that these highly systematized, religiously sanctioned forms of persecution and ritualized violence are behind us, but it was only eight decades ago that Nazi Germany demonstrated the same degree of organization and zeal in their comprehensive roundup, internment, and extermination of Jewish scapegoats during the Holocaust. Even today, we see the cycle continuing, with the ebb and flow of anti-Jewish and anti-black hate crimes in America. Many Christians still look to acts of violence, such as the Tree of Life massacre, and the wide-scale elimination or deportation of racial and religious minorities as a necessary step in bringing about salvation and world order. As Blaise Pascal, the 17th century Catholic theologian sadly but astutely points out, “People never do evil so completely and so cheerfully as when they do it with a religious conviction.”\(^{23}\) We need only look to the Crusades and victims of Manifest Destiny to see how much pride Christians have taken in their commitment to locating, assigning, and eliminating impurity from the masses.

**Contemporary Reflections**

How is it that after Jesus returned from death to reveal the treacherous lie of sacrificial violence and offer a path to true redemption, we’ve continued to blindly cling to our hollow, counterproductive practice of scapegoating? We clutch the Gospel in one hand while tightening the noose around our victims’ necks with the other. Christ’s resurrection proved both his innocence as a victim and the inefficacy of scapegoating as a means to producing sustained communal peace; and yet many Christians have never stopped scapegoating. René Girard would argue that there are emotional and cultural functions of the Hebrew scapegoating tradition that we still benefit from today, such as social unification, the ability to shift blame, and the opportunity to release pain, fear, and hardship during times of duress. When reviewing the American response to 9/11, with rampant Islamophobia and the War on Terror’s return to “eliminate the evildoers” rhetoric of the European witch-hunts, it is not difficult to see these functions in play.\(^{24}\)

\(^{21}\) Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 17, notes that upwards of 20,000 people would show up to publicized lynchings. Postcards, photographs, and body parts of the victims were sold at these events, so that guests could show all of their friends back home what a great time they had.

\(^{22}\) In the Hebrew Scapegoat ritual, the goat chosen to carry the sin of the community was led away from society with people berating, stoning, and whipping it.


\(^{24}\) Michael Welch, *Scapegoats of September 11th: Hate Crimes & State Crimes in the War on Terror* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 42-44.
Racism, classism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia – as Christians we continue to engage in these practices of “othering” the neighbor, scapegoating the stranger, and casting out the sinner. In our socio-religious debates we hear, “Muslim immigration must be stopped because it will lead to terrorist attacks on the country,” “Mexicans must be deported because they’re taking our jobs and bringing gang violence to our streets,” “The righteousness of the church has been compromised by Pope Francis and the heretical liberals,” “We’ll never be saved or have a moral society if we don’t get rid of these Muslims, Mexicans, and liberals.”

Even amongst our own Catholic leadership, when confronted with the complex reality of pedophilia and the sexual abuse crisis, we see priests and bishops eager to distance themselves from the taint of sin. They pawn the epidemic off as “a gay problem,” and in their struggle to reclaim a sense of validity, the appearance of holiness, or the respect, trust, and authority that they fear they’ve lost in the community, they sell innocent scapegoats to the crowd. Playing on deeply rooted, unfounded fears and prejudices against the LGBTQ+ community, they attempt to redirect vitriol and transfer culpability onto the persecuted stereotype. In them I hear John 11:50, with Caiaphas proclaiming anew, “It is better for you to have one small group persecuted for the people than to have the whole Catholic Church destroyed.”

Blaming the gays will not solve the sexual abuse crisis. One does not need to be a psychologist, sex therapist, or theologian to see that there is something much larger and much more pervasive than same-sex attraction at hand when we have priests abusing young girls, demanding sexual service from nuns, and aborting their own offspring. The sexual abuse of children, subordinates, celibates, and non-consenting adults is unethical and unhealthy for reasons that have nothing to do with homosexual or heterosexual inclination. Rather than shifting the blame onto others, the Church needs to take a good, hard look at itself in the mirror, and recognize its own corruption and culpability. The inordinate distribution of power embedded in clericalism, along with a flawed understanding and inadequate approach to teaching human sexuality and sexual ethics during religious formation have likely contributed to the problem. Perhaps these are areas where we might utilize our pain to begin the process of reforming our Church and seminaries. There are plenty of women, minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and scapegoated victims who are eager contribute fresh ideas.

Richard Rohr has stated that as the final scapegoat, “Jesus replaced the myth of redemptive violence with the truth of redemptive suffering. He showed us how to hold the pain and let it transform us, rather than pass it on to the others around us.” In this time of confusion and pain, our leaders must stop passing the blame and start working on the transformation. Christ did not come to teach us how to lash out and tear down others; he came to build love out of brokenness. It is time to build. Let’s do it together.

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26 Rohr, “Jesus Reveals the Lie of Scapegoating.”
Bibliography


