

FEATURES

Violence interrupted

A video course on Jesus as forgiving victim

Feb 11, 2014 by Sharon G. Thomson

The old saw “No more laughter, no more fun, Bible study has begun” certainly does not apply to James Alison’s introduction to scripture and Christianity. Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice is witty, earthy and accessible. The course of study is presented in videos (available online at forgivingvictim.com) which show Alison speaking to a small group, accompanied by a series of four books (published by Doers, sponsored by the Raven Foundation).



Alison is a highly regarded, if eclectic, Catholic theologian. Well versed in sacramental and liturgical theology, he presents his own highly original reading of scripture and tradition as entirely orthodox. An openly gay theologian, he has also developed a theology of sexuality. He is best known, however, for developing René Girard’s concepts of mimetic desire and scapegoating and for applying them to biblical narratives. The Girardian interpretive lens is central to the course, as the title indicates: Jesus is the “forgiving victim.”

Though informal and colloquial in style, Alison makes no attempt to simplify or play down the complexity of faith. He opens biblical passages to multilayered readings, providing historical, cultural and anthropological background. His main theme is that the perpetuation of violence, particularly through the creation of scapegoats to justify human sacrifice, must end. This is the theme of scripture as well, he thinks. His aim in the course, he says, is “to restore to the Christian life the wonder and transformative power of discovering not some new biblical fact or church doctrine, but that you are loved far more than you know.”

In Girardian terms, humans become who they are by imitating someone else. Who we are is given to us through the regard of that other. Our motivations and desires are formed in relation to the desires of someone else. This understanding undermines the radically individualistic notion of self taken for granted in the West. Alison gives priority to the other who is there long before we arrive on the scene and to the prior culture and world already in motion, which we learn to depend on.

According to Girard, as adapted by Alison, we come into a world where rivalry is the norm and people take revenge upon one another. From the beginning we learn to blame others for whatever is undermining our personal or group morale. We make those others scapegoats, sacrificing them in order to restore our identity and group harmony.

We can recognize the scapegoating dynamic in a range of behaviors, from schoolyard bullying to international conflicts. Most pointedly, we witnessed it in the response by the United States to the 9/11 attacks. The United States identified Iraq and Afghanistan as the enemy and retaliated by waging war. This response rallied American morale, helping to unite a nation.

Alison proposes that in order to get out of the scapegoat cycle we need someone to interrupt it from the outside. He calls this someone “Another Other.” God is Another Other. Into our vengeful world comes this completely benevolent Other, who is not in rivalry with anything and transforms everything from within, including altering human motives and desires.

The most profound communication from this benevolent Other comes through Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord. To be a Christian is to have our stories interpreted by this Presence in our midst and to find ourselves loved even in the midst of what we do.

Alison’s understanding of atonement is that “someone without rancor was prepared to occupy the place of victim and shame, and nonbeing, patiently and gently, out of love for us, long before we sensed how much we depended on such a thing.” As we find ourselves loved, we learn not to project our violence onto God or others. Instead, we assume responsibility for what we are inclined to do. In this way we become freed from violent behavior and open to new ways of living together.

Alison’s Jesus, the forgiving victim, seeks to create trust in a God who is not vindictive, a God who desires nothing but life. Forgiveness is the way out of vengeance and self-delusion. Where our identities have been formed through oppositional

relations, they can be undone by Jesus' reversal of this dynamic, and they can continue to be undone by Jesus' followers.

Alison's work reminds me of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. In the face of horrific violence and abuse, Tutu insists that there is "no future without forgiveness." I don't know if he would call himself a forgiving victim, but his generous spirit in response to violence represents what Alison calls "a change of psychic direction."

Alison's account of the dynamics of rivalry and of the desire for revenge is powerful. But one needs to be cautious about implying that forgiveness is the preferred response of those who have suffered abuse. It has been well documented that when the recipients of domestic violence "forgive" their abusers, it often simply permits the perpetrator to continue violent assaults. One must be wise and discerning in practicing forgiveness. Johann Baptist Metz reminds us that forgiveness should never be required of victims. If forgiveness is offered, it must be on the terms of those who have been on the receiving end of injustice.

Alison does not suggest that forgiveness is required, but he does propose that through the generous offering of Jesus we can learn alternatives to rivalry and break the cycle of sacrificial violence. Still, as someone who once led a Japanese-American church, I would be cautious about some aspects of Alison's program. Many of those Japanese-American Christians would have understood the dynamics of scapegoating but would have been puzzled by the idea of being forgiving victims. In speaking to them, I might substitute the phrase "nonretaliating victim."

It would be helpful for a leader to become familiar with some of Girard's basic theory, particularly regarding mimetic desire, before attempting to utilize Alison's resources. I would also augment these materials with additional perspectives on current sources of violence.

In an emerging church setting composed of young adults, I would use the videos extensively to encourage discussion. In a more traditional setting, I would have participants read short sections of the books, focused on a selected biblical text, and use snippets of the videos to reinforce the readings and give the participants a sense of the author.

Alison's use of Girard offers a helpful tool for addressing troubling biblical texts and contemporary conflicts, and his approach may help some people recognize their complicity in scapegoating activities. Yet analysis alone does not necessarily move communities toward action. Alison's program could be strengthened by a robust social analysis of distorted power and how it can be reordered. Combining his emphasis on motivation and interpersonal awareness with a study of oppressive social structures and people's resistance to them could broaden and deepen an understanding of violence and its possible remedies. Were Alison to cultivate this prophetic edge, he might reach more communities that are poised for social engagement.

Alison's approach to the Christian faith will appeal to those seeking an authentic faith, to doubters who are looking for fresh views, and to those who have survived harmful theologies and church practices. By positioning the cross on an axis of shame, he speaks powerfully to those who have been shamed and excluded. He offers solace, healing and the glimpse of a different future.

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