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# Finding What Is Good in Jewish-Christian Relations

James G. Williams

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# Finding What Is Good in Jewish-Christian Relations

## **Cover Page Footnote**

James G. Williams is Professor Emeritus of Religion at Syracuse University. This talk was delivered in April, 2003, at ``Pathways to Peace in the Abrahamic Faiths," a conference sponsored by the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University.

JAMES G. WILLIAMS

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*Finding What Is Good  
in Jewish-Christian Relations*

He has told you, O human beings, what is good. And what  
does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to  
love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?  
(Micah 6:8)

*Introduction*

My title indicates that what links us, Jews and Christians, has to do with the great words from the book of the prophet Micah. But to understand them in context and most deeply, I think I should begin with the human predicament. In one sense, this is to address the question, "Why have we failed?" But in understanding why we have failed, we find also the positive teaching, the *deep* teaching, of Judaism and Christianity. If we attain to this understanding, we find a *prophetic* mode, a prophetic way of viewing our human condition. But the prophetic way of which I am speaking does not revolve around prophecy and fulfillment, but an *anthropological* connection between the Jewish scriptures and the New Testament.

I would like to say, by the way, that I recognize and acknowledge the importance of dialogue between and among Muslims, Christians, and Jews, but including Islam also in this paper seemed too great a task. However, much of what I have to say about our

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human predicament and a common theological ground should be relevant also to our Muslim brothers and sisters.

I will begin with our predicament, our common human condition. I will move from there to the common biblical tradition, as the second part of the paper, and I will speak finally of the need for repentance and conversion.

### *I. Our Predicament*

Over and over again we find humans in conflict and rivalry. Why this is the case I will address further on. Conflict and rivalry may and often do lead to chaos and violence. To avoid this state, or to find a remedy after violence occurs, our human tendency is to find someone to blame. Don't we see and experience this in every walk of life? We want to be able to name someone who is responsible for what has gone wrong. We must not only believe our accusation, but also that it justifies attacking the victim.

The process of blaming in order to rid the social body of its pollution is deeply rooted in human cultures, and I would say also in the human self. The great sacred stories of the world typically point to acts of violence as the solution to human social and political problems, including the principal problem of violence. In other words, they tell of violence done in order to "end violence." This has been treated at length and with great insight in the works of René Girard and the theologians and critics he has influenced.<sup>1</sup>

There is a mass of evidence from all over the world that our human ancestors practiced two kinds of ritual, whose purpose was to reconcile members of the community to one another and to their deity or deities. One kind of ritual revolved around sacrificing a victim at a sacred site, usually on an altar of some sort. Our ancestors probably offered humans first, and then later animals were substituted (there is an allusion to this in Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22). In my own studies and related reading, I have seen evidence for human sacrifice in Mesopotamia and Europe — and also in ancient Israel.<sup>2</sup> The key passage in Israelite law is Exodus 22:28: "You shall give me the firstborn of your sons." Many interpreters argue that this command does not mean literally to slay and offer the firstborn son as

## WHAT IS GOOD IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS 85

a sacrificial victim. But I have no doubt that children, the firstborn and perhaps others, were offered as sacrifices in ancient Israel (2 Kings 16:3; 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31; 32:35; see also 2 Kings 3:27, where the king of Moab offers the sacrifice, but this is not condemned by the Israelite narrator).

This ritual practice is rooted in experiences of violence and the discovery of a way of avoiding the blaming process that could and often does spread to infect the entire community, so that there is "war of all against all." The second type of ritual has the same origin. It may be called "scapegoating," a term based on the ritual described in Leviticus 16, where it involves intentionally transferring the sins of the people onto a he-goat and driving him into the wilderness. But many communities did not select only animals for their scapegoat rituals. Human beings were also chosen. Particularly striking and well documented, for example, are the rituals in ancient Greece in which one or more persons were selected, set aside for a period, beaten, and driven out of the city, often to their death.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, we now use the term "scapegoating" in a sense that seems at first different from ancient ritual practices. Two or three people take out their hostility on one person, who is a substitute for the real object of their anger. Or perhaps there is tension in the group (there is usually a some latent tension in any group) because of rivalry or potential rivalry, so the participants gain a measure of agreement and harmony by joining together against someone or something. The hostility may be expressed only verbally, or it could involve getting "rough" or violent with the person attacked. In ordinary speech in English, scapegoating sometimes refers to excluding or persecuting an individual or a minority group. It may even include execution or lengthy imprisonment. Although they are far apart in time and cultural context, a close examination shows that the modern experience of "scapegoating" serves much the same function as the ancient one: a group or crowd relieves tension or "lets off steam," which would otherwise burst them apart, by turning against someone or some group that is perceived as "bad." In fact, they become "bad" because the dominant group in a given situation needs an object of anger and the scapegoat is a good object because he or she or they are vulnerable.

The vulnerability of the victim is a key point. Sacrificial and scapegoating rituals function to relieve the stress of conflict and

violence on the social body. Those selected for sacrifice and for scapegoating are very vulnerable: they are weak and lack means of defending themselves (children, women in most societies, foreigners, people with handicaps).<sup>4</sup> Or sometimes they are apparently so strong and prominent that they are vulnerable "at the top" of the social body. Moses, for example, comes under attack a number of times according to Exodus and Numbers.<sup>5</sup> We know that in various cultures kings were ritually slain by their own people.<sup>6</sup>

Sacrifice and scapegoating relieve the stress of escalating rivalries on the social body and thus their object is to restore social balance and peace. This is not necessarily a conscious object; it probably is not in most instances, and certainly not in ancient traditional societies.

How did this whole process get started? Are we just naturally aggressive and violent? Well, yes and no. No, in the sense that we are not absolutely predetermined by our very natures to be violent. But yes in the sense that something happened in the origins of humanity at various times and places that entered into our cultural heritage and — I believe — has probably entered into our genetic inheritance.<sup>7</sup> Again, I am trying to describe a predicament. Here and elsewhere for illumination I look to the work of Girard and others who have tried to think through to the origins of what we are and have become. What happened apparently was that at various times and places, the hominids in the process of becoming human discovered that peace and order came about, temporarily at least, when the whole group fell upon one of its members. Girard calls this the "single victim mechanism" (*mécanisme victimaire*).<sup>8</sup> A few vulnerable people, or a small subgroup, could also be the object of the attack.

But why does it have to work out this way? Why is conflict and violence inevitable in human relations? As the biblical tradition tells us, we are creatures of *desire*. And this desire is aroused when we see what the other person has. We imitate one another, especially significant models in our lives. And significant models are not only authority figures, but may be peers, with whom we may quickly fall into rivalry.

Desire is not an instinct. It is not something programmed into us, so it doesn't work like instincts in other creatures. It is rather a potential that must become activated for an infant to become human, and it becomes actual for the infant as he or she imitates parents and also other children. We have all noticed the kind of situation where

## WHAT IS GOOD IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS 87

two toddlers are playing independently, each one with a toy. Then if one of them sees another toy nearby and moves to get it, the other toddler suddenly wants it too. Why is this? Is it because there is some inherent value in the third toy? Or isn't it rather that desire arouses desire because we learn to desire by imitating models?

The desire that comes into being through following models is not bad; it is good in and of itself. To desire what models desire is necessary if the child is to be able to learn and love and deal with the world. But this imitative or mimetic desire can and does lead to conflict and violence. How is this? If our desire to be like a model is strong enough. If we identify with that person closely enough, we will want to have what the model has or to be what the model is. If this is carried far enough and if there are no safeguards restraining and directing desire (one of the functions of religion and culture), then we become rivals of our models. Or we compete with one another to become better imitators of the same model, and we imitate our rivals even as we compete with them. This opens up the possibility of conflict at all levels of human interaction, from personal relations to social and political relations.

Let's return to the blaming process that is at the origin of sacrifice and scapegoating. I'll try to spell this out a little more. Any thesis about remote origins has necessarily to be a hypothesis. In this case, Girard's mimetic theory presents a model which can be applied to different human situations, and we can then ask ourselves, "Does it make sense of this or that situation, or not? Does it illumine human interactions?" Please note, by the way, that the model is not simply a hypothesis about the origin of violence. It is above all a model shedding light on human relations here and now. That is why it is so relevant to the theme of this conference.

The hypothetical aspect of the mimetic model proposes the following. As our pre-human ancestors developed a greater and greater brain capacity with a greater and greater ability to imitate others and an accompanying loss of animal instincts, they often found themselves in confusion and trouble because of fear and panic. When frightened or threatened, whatever the cause, they imitated each other's reactions of fear. Sometimes this imitation was in the form of a reaction of striking out at someone in response to a blow (you hit me, I hit you). But at some point various ancestors happened to converge upon someone

among them — someone weak or marginal, perhaps an outsider — and killed or expelled this person. They experienced immediate relief from the stress of conflict and violence. This kind of experience, as it repeated itself, began to enter into the human genetic and cultural heritage, especially through ritual procedures. Thus the origin of sacrifice and scapegoating.

I should stress that much if not most of this process in which mimetic desire leads to conflict and spontaneous scapegoating, or to ritual sacrifice and scapegoating, is not conscious. We are more aware of it now, largely because of the influence of the biblical heritage as it has worked in our culture. But when we are not analyzing situations but actually engaged in them, we typically find ourselves caught up in the mimetic cycle of rivalry. There is a sense in which we can't help ourselves. The Christian doctrine of original sin and the Jewish principle of the *yetser ha-ra*, the evil imagination, speak to this. There is a common human predicament.<sup>9</sup>

## *II. The Common Biblical Tradition*

What I propose is to see the Jewish scriptures and the New Testament in terms of an *anthropological continuity*. I will explain this in a moment. But first, I would comment that I wish neither to deny the distinctiveness of the two traditions nor to reduce them to some common denominator. I would like rather to sketch out where we might agree and form a basis not only for enlightening common inquiry but also for common work in the world, both scholarly and charitable.

By "anthropological" I mean an understanding of human nature and what it is involved in the human condition. By human nature I don't intend to impose a fixed form or mold on human beings, the kind of concept criticized by Jean-Paul Sartre. I mean rather the fundamental, essential feature of mimetic desire, which is the defining human capability as it expands into human relations and human culture. The Bible exposes this over and over again, as I will briefly show further on. This human capability leads people into loving relationships and cooperation, but it also, and inevitably, leads to rivalry, conflict, and violence.

Now there is a characteristic biblical way of responding to the



## WHAT IS GOOD IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS 89

human condition of mimetic desire, conflict, and violence. I call it "prophetic." At a deep level a current moves through the Bible that I am calling prophecy and prophetic inspiration. Prophetic inspiration arises out of the vision of God and world that understands the human condition in terms of *desire* and its outcomes. Anthropologically — in terms of an understanding of human being — the Jewish scriptures and the Christian Testament are about desire, which may take the form of human union and community, but also it ineluctably takes the form of rivalry, conflict, scapegoating, and violence.

Those representing this prophetic outlook, this sort of insight, are not all prophets, nor are all the texts prophetic in the strict sense. But since so many *are* prophets, and so many prophetic texts are involved, and since a distinctive understanding of God's concern for victims of persecution is highlighted, I will use this term. I am not trying to make a theological case for the understanding of God, which is valid in its own right, but presenting it as part of the anthropological understanding. This anthropological understanding is a thread running through the scriptures, from Cain and Abel to Jesus of Nazareth. It doesn't encompass all the texts, of course. We can't find the distinctiveness of the biblical tradition by counting texts — violent vs. anti-violent, sacrificial vs. anti-sacrificial, exposure of mimetic desire vs. blindness to it. The Bible is, as it were, a "text in travail," giving birth to a new understanding of human existence. As Israel emerges out of the nations, so this new vision gradually emerges out of the tradition of revelation. We find this vision by looking at what is a distinctive, sustained vision of *anthropos*, of *adam*, of human being. As far as I know, this distinctive element is found sporadically in other ancient cultures and religions, but not in the same sustained way informing a history, an ongoing story of what it means both to be human and to have a specific identity.

*Cain and Abel*

Cain desires the favor of God and when the Lord accepts Abel's offering but not his, he is extremely depressed ("his face fell," Genesis 4:5). He is depressed because rivalry with his brother is already present. He murders Abel his brother and tries to deflect the Lord's question, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain replies, "I don't know. Am I my brother's guardian?" (Genesis 4:9). These two

questions strike at the heart of what we are about here: Where is my brother (with whom I am in rivalry)? Am I the guardian of my brother?

The story of Cain and Abel is a *founding* tale, leading to the founding of the first city by Cain. In this way, we are told, civilization begins. Rome also had such a founding myth, the conflict between Romulus and Remus. Romulus killed Remus because he transgressed the boundaries of the new city to be. But the Roman sources do not condemn Romulus, they just report the deed without moral comment. The biblical narrative is different: the murderer is condemned, yet he is protected from the revenge of other men by a sign God places on him.

### *Abraham*

Abraham, like the other patriarchs in the book of Genesis, is pictured as a human being whose motives and deeds are ambiguous, to say the least. But two episodes stand out in terms of our subject here. One is Abraham's intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah because his nephew Lot and his family have settled in Sodom. "Far be it from you to do such a thing," he says to the Lord, "to make the innocent die with the guilty, so that the innocent and the guilty would be treated alike! Shall not the judge of all the earth do justice?" (Genesis 18:25). Here Abraham is the model of the mediator who even holds the model of the true God up to God. The scriptural tradition, the text in travail, is giving birth to the idea of the true God.

The other episode that stands out is Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. It is very important in the Jewish and Christian traditions. It is an account full of richness and ambiguity. I would simply stress that though it is not an explicit condemnation of child sacrifice, it certainly must reflect a struggle with the problem. The story of Abraham is moved forward by yearning to fulfill the divine promise, yet it turns out that it can be accomplished without violating the life of Abraham's son.

### *Joseph*

The Joseph story is a beautiful account of desire and the

## WHAT IS GOOD IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS 91

avoidance of retaliation. The combination of father Jacob's doting on Joseph and the brothers' jealousy has consequences leading to Joseph's exile in Egypt and finally the deliverance of Israel, Jacob, and his family, from famine and starvation. One of the most moving moments of the Bible is the scene where Joseph, who the brothers believe is a great Egyptian lord, says to them in Hebrew, "I am Joseph your brother, whom you once sold into Egypt" (Genesis 45:4). He goes on to reassure and comfort them, relating that God's providence brought this about "for the sake of saving lives" (45:5).

*The Prophets*

In the great prophets in the golden era of prophecy, from about 750 to 550 B.C.E., we see a thread of opposition to the institution of sacrifice, the ritual offering of victims to God. I think we clearly find this in Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah (Amos 5:24-25; Hosea 6:6; Isaiah 1:10-17; Micah 6:7-8; Jeremiah 7:21-23). It has been argued that they opposed sacrifice only when it was a mere external act performed by people who had no regard for their conduct and the stipulations of the covenant. My own view is that this opposition goes much deeper than that. Why would Amos and Jeremiah, for example, deny that the Lord had even commanded the offering of sacrifice?

However that may be, I think the prophets intuited the connection of sacrifice and bloodshed. We see this in Hosea 6, where the divine lament "I desire steadfast love [*chesed*] and not sacrifice" is juxtaposed to God's judgment (Hosea: 6:5) directed against those who have transgressed the covenant and are implicated in murder, robbery, and idolatry (Hosea: 6:8-10). Likewise the Lord, in Isaiah's oracle, tells the worshippers, "Your hands are full of blood!" (Isaiah: 1:15).

This connection of sacrifice to bloodshed really comes out in the reversion to child sacrifice that evidently occurred during the crisis of the Babylonian siege and deportations to Babylonia. (Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5, 32:35; Ezekiel 16:15-21, 20:25-31, 23:36-39.)<sup>10</sup> It seems that both in individual lives and society and culture the human tendency is to revert to earlier behavior in times of crisis. In any event, the animal victim is clearly a substitute for the human victim, and when people feel desperate their desire is overwhelming to do what was believed to be effective when everything began for the individual or the tradition.

“Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Micah 6:7). No, says Micah, you shall not. As he proclaims in a quotation that serves as the epigraph of this paper:

You have been told, O humans, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness [*chesed*] and to walk humbly with your God?

*Other Witnesses*

There are many other witnesses to the anthropological connection and prophetic mode of which I speak. There is Job, who appears to be persecuted by God through the Satan, but who is really persecuted by his friends and refuses to accept that his sufferings are the judgment of God upon him. Through his reflection on his calamities he even offers insight into the function of the scapegoat:

Upright people are amazed at this [that is, my suffering], and the innocent aroused against the wicked [that is, because everyone's attention is directed to me, the scapegoat]. And the righteous hold to their way, and those with clean hands increase in strength [because they have a scapegoat, and so aren't in dangerous rivalry with one another]. (Job: 17:8-9)

There are the Psalms, which so often give voice to the single victim who is being persecuted in some way. There is Jesus of Nazareth, who welcomes all, sinners, tax collectors, whomever, to eat at his table; who expels the demons from the Gerasene demoniac, the scapegoat of his community who so internalized the conflicts and rivalries laid upon him by the community that he continually struck himself with stones (Mark 5:5). Jesus quotes the word of the Lord from Hosea, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matthew 12:7), and he says while suffering and dying on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). And there is Paul, who according to the Acts of the Apostles was converted to Christ on the way to Damascus when he heard a voice saying: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He said, “Who are you, sir?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:4-5). Conversion for Paul is thus to side with the

## WHAT IS GOOD IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS 93

Innocent Victim. This has come to mean, for Christians who understand the deep meaning of this, that to be "in Christ" is to side with the innocent victim.<sup>11</sup>

### *III. Repentance and Conversion*

The hard thing about our common human predicament is that we are typically blind to it not only in committing obviously evil or sinful deeds, but also in our deeds and attitudes in which we believe we are thinking and acting with the best and noblest intentions. Ordinarily we are not conscious of mimetic desire while it is happening, nor are we aware of our own scapegoating inclinations and our subjection to a scapegoat mechanism. The world, in the sense of our everyday relations and language, is built upon rivalry and mimetic desire. Everybody at every level, from the individual to the nation state, wants to be number one or to participate in a social body that is number one.

It is difficult to avoid being entrapped in this mimetic scapegoating cycle because we always either presuppose it unknowingly or we fall back on it as if it were absolutely necessary. It is very difficult for me, for example, if I hear someone attack Christianity, or perhaps just voice a criticism of what I have said in the context of inquiry and discussion, not to become defensive and counter the other's assertion and argument. I am most likely then to imitate the other's attack or criticism by attacking or criticizing in return, and the whole cycle begins again. Of course, culture and religion have developed usually to allow such rivalry but also to keep it within safe bounds. In some cultures the very hint of rivalry is avoided in most situations, so much so that anthropologists and other investigators have concluded these cultures were nonviolent. My own sense of what happens is that some peoples have extensive rules and taboos whose aim is to ensure peace and tranquility in their society, and this is precisely because the culture is so sensitive to the problem of violence. This sensitivity probably stems from violent origins.

I have described our human condition as subject to mimetic desire and rivalry. In this common human predicament, what we *all* need, every one of us, is continual repentance and conversion. The Christian tradition has from the New Testament a Greek word that covers both: *metanoia*. The Jewish tradition speaks of *teshuvah*, return

or repentance. For us to come together as brothers and sisters in our common humanity, we have to be open to *metanoia* of our hearts and minds, to *teshuvah* or turning back toward the path of grace and love and justice, and of course we cannot really conceive of a basis for such turning and returning without faith in a creator God who will enable us to engage in acts of restoring his creation, especially the restoration of the image of God in each human being and in mankind as a whole. Here we get into the area of a common theological ground. But if modern Western thought, especially since Feuerbach, has tended to postulate that humans create God in *their own* ideal image, biblical and biblically based thought postulates that God has created humans in *his* image. And this image of God in our fellow human beings is what we are to emulate.

The experience of *metanoia* or *teshuvah* will bring various blessings. In our teaching and communications and all our relationships, we will ask how we may try to understand and appreciate those who seem foreign, alien to our past experiences and beliefs. We will seek to live by a model of non-retaliation to the extent possible. We will come together, as we have in this conference, in all ways possible. Doing this at the local level, in our towns and cities and communities, is especially important. And nothing is more significant or effective than praying for one another. Like many others, I have found that it is hard to remain hostile or defensive toward one for whom I pray. So we will pray for ourselves and others, so that we may forgive and be forgiven of the injury we do to the image of God. Again, the image of God is what we are to imitate.

Let me tell you something I recently heard from a deacon in the Catholic Church. He was speaking to a group about human sin and the divine grace that breaks through it. One thing he emphasized was the image of God in which all humans are created. He said when he became a deacon, he learned that he should not only respect all human beings, but he should actually bow down before each person because each of us bears God's image. He decided that would be difficult and misunderstood, so he would bless each person he met. He soon found that this not only embarrassed most people but was also very time consuming if, for example, he was walking down the street or passing through a room. So he resolved at least to nod and smile to each person he encountered as a sign of deep respect for the

## WHAT IS GOOD IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS 95

bearer of God's image. We need, like him, to find some mode of bowing before the image of God in each and every person, no matter what the religious background. In spite of sin and structures of estrangement, the image of God is still there.

This repentance, this *teshuvah* or *metanoia*, will lead us to acknowledge our common human predicament of being under the power of mimesis and the scapegoat mechanism even as we seek to surmount it. This could lead us into uncomfortable, risky situations, because we would be acting as agents of change, as mediators. Recently I had the privilege of hearing the story of John Mkhize, a member of the Zulu people from South Africa who currently resides in Edmond, Oklahoma. He received the Martin Luther King, Jr. Peace Award in 1992. He worked as a mediator between the African National Congress of Nelson Mandela and the Inkatha Freedom Party. He said that as a mediator he had to work clandestinely: people supporting either party were shooting at each other, but both sides might shoot at him! He eventually won the trust of both sides and became an agent of reconciliation. Now he intends to go back in the near future and start a peace center mediating between whites and the African tribes, of which there are eleven in South Africa. He relates how difficult it has been to see white Europeans as his brothers and sisters under God because of the long-standing oppression his people experienced. In school and other settings he was not even allowed to use his Zulu name, Thulani, but had to go by John, and even now it is difficult emotionally for him to use and acknowledge his Zulu name because he so deeply internalized it as bad. But still, there he was, a devout Catholic Christian, standing before us witnessing to the love of God and having us repeat with him, "God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good." A powerful model of mediating love in action. I tell you, a model like that of John Mkhize is powerful: it may provoke opposition, but it will also melt prejudice and change hearts and minds.

In conclusion, we may lament with those of old who mourned the devastation of Jerusalem, but let us turn this lament toward the desire for peace and the affirmation of common humanity under God: "Return us to you, O Lord, and we shall (indeed) return. Renew our days as of old" (Lamentations 5:21). Renew our days as when we were created in the image of God. Cain repented, you know. At least there is a rabbinic tale to that effect in *Leviticus Rabbah*. It goes as follows:

“And Cain went out” (Genesis 4:16). On his way Cain met Adam, who said to him, “What has happened as regards the judgment passed upon you?” Cain replied, “I repented, and I am pardoned.” When Adam heard that, he smote his face and said, “Is the power of repentance as great as that? I did not know it was so.”<sup>m12</sup>

### *Addendum*

Is this position compatible with the traditional Christian and Roman Catholic doctrine?

I am a Roman Catholic Christian, having converted from the United Methodist Church in 1993. I was, in fact, an ordained minister. An approach whose thinking is informed by René Girard's mimetic theory is not a dominant one yet, but more and more people are paying attention to it as a way not only of understanding the human condition, but also of finding a new way to articulate the Christian message. This is particularly the case in Europe, especially in Denmark, France, and Italy. Interest is also growing in the United States. Human being as desiring being; humans born with a desire for communion with God, which is their potential to become fully human; sin as diversion and perversion of this desire through pride and envy (sometimes stated as the work of the Devil, which Girard essentially demythologizes); the need for repentance and conversion through the saving mediator or model: all of these basic components of Christian theology are very compatible with the mimetic theory, which, after all, stems from the influence of the Bible itself.

I don't claim to be a representative of all Christianity and I am certainly not speaking officially for the Roman Catholic Church. But I believe that the basic support of my thesis is there in the leading edge of the Catholic Church and other churches concerned with interreligious and intercultural relations.

Concerning the prophets, René Girard, who is a devout Roman Catholic, has said the following:

The Jewish prophets had already proceeded in the same way as the Gospels. To combat the blindness of the crowds and to



## WHAT IS GOOD IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

97

defend themselves against the hatred directed against their pessimistic insight and discernment, they resorted to examples of incomprehension and persecution of which earlier prophets were the victims. Traditional Christianity draws liberally from these texts whose sensitivity to collective injustice is extremely strong, whereas in philosophical texts it is very weak and in mythical texts it is null. Seeing as ``prophetic" the interrelation of all the texts that denounce persecutory illusions is based on a profound intuition of the continuity between the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding mimetic desire, the starting point in the anthropology of this paper, the Catholic Catechism says: ``Yet certain temporal consequences of sin remain in the baptized, such as suffering illness, death, and such frailties inherent in life as weaknesses of character, and so on, as well as an inclination to sin that Tradition calls *concupiscence*, or metaphorically, 'the tinder for sin' (*fomes peccati*)."<sup>14</sup> The Catechism states that ``Etymologically 'concupiscence' can refer to any intense form of human desire."<sup>15</sup> In American English it is largely associated with sexual appetite or desire, but its etymological sense is not that restricted. It means to reach eagerly for objects of desire. We are concupiscent beings. The Catechism does not, of course, explicate that concupiscence works by means of mimesis, which Girard's model of interpretation highlights.

Also relevant to this conference, though probably well known to the participants, is the position taken in *Nostra Aetate*, (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*):

Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be achieved, especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the church reprove, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or any harassment of them on the basis of their race, color, condition in life or religion. Accordingly, following the footsteps of the holy apostles Peter

and Paul, the sacred council earnestly begs the Christian faithful to "conduct themselves well among the Gentiles" (1 Peter 2:12) and if possible, as far as depends on them, to be a peace with all people (see Romans 12:18) and in that way to be true daughters and sons of the Father who is in heaven (see Matthew 5:45).<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Girard's most recent book in English is *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, tr. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). For excerpts from Girard's works dealing with religion and Christianity and a bibliography through 1995, see *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1996). The most accessible book in English that draws upon Girard's thought is Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled* (NY: Crossroad, 1995). *Violence Renounced*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000) addresses biblical studies and peacemaking and has a good bibliography of Girard's own works, the writings of Girardians, and other relevant books and articles.

<sup>2</sup>See James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1995), pp. 117-21 and 131-32, and Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993), part 1.

<sup>3</sup>See Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, pp. 83, 269 nn. 23-24.

<sup>4</sup>See Girard on Oedipus in chapter 3 of *The Scapegoat*, tr. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup>See Freud's attempt to exploit this in his socio-psychoanalytic hypothesis regarding Jewish origins in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939; rpt. New York: Random House, 1967). See my critique of Freud in Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup>See Simon Simonse, *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King in the Southeastern Sudan* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

<sup>7</sup>Raymund Schwager deals with this issue very acutely in *Erbsuende und Heilsdrama: Im Kontext von Evolution, Gentechnologie und Apokalyptik* (Thaur: Druck- und Verlagshaus Thaur, 1997). I am in the process of translating this book into English, to be published by Gracewing.

<sup>8</sup>Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, p. 35.

## WHAT IS GOOD IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS 99

<sup>9</sup>Some of the material in Part I is taken from my foreword to Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, pp. ix-xxiii, and my article, "Serpent and the Son of Man," *The Bible Today* 39 (January 2001), 22-26.

<sup>10</sup>See Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, and Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, pp. 181-84.

<sup>11</sup>It would be interesting if someone would examine rabbinic literature on the themes of human desire, scapegoating, and siding with the innocent victim. I suspect that much common ground with the New Testament texts would be uncovered.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted from C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (1938; rpt. New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 316.

<sup>13</sup>*I See Satan Fall*, p. 129.

<sup>14</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1995), No. 1264, 353-54.

<sup>15</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2515, 663.

<sup>16</sup>*Vatican Council II*, gen. ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), No. 4, 573.

<sup>17</sup>*Vatican Council II*, 574.