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The Politics of Scapegoating

MASTER THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in European Thought and Culture

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Politics of Scapegoating

by

Ciarán Gilligan

in European Thought and Culture

University of California, Irvine, 2021

Associate Professor Kai Evers, Chair

In a 2004 correspondence to then Roman Catholic Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, German philosopher and sociologist Juergen Habermas considered the prevailing “doubt about whether the democratic constitutional state can renew from its own resources the normative presuppositions of its existence” without turning to “ethical (and religious) traditions of a local nature.” Though Habermas defended his longstanding intellectual commitments to liberal democracy as the best praxis of governance and civil society, he admitted to the existence of certain intrinsic motivational and emotional deficits that prevent citizens in liberal democracies from properly adhering to their “collectively binding (moral) ideals.”

I examined the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the United States Capitol and the general rise of alt-right nationalism as a consequence of just this type of failure to adhere to the moral and

normative core of liberal democracy. Using the Christian anthropologist Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire and scapegoating and his unique understanding of the "Biblical" origins of our modern moral condition, I analyzed the perennial mechanisms of violence at work in this specific attack on American democracy as well those latent in the prevailing strands of illiberalism that enabled it. I assert that Girard's magnum opus, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, as well as the shorter summation of his work, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, lay the groundwork for an onto-anthropology of modern morality which centers on rejecting scapegoating and identifying with the "real victim." I contend that Girard's articulation of the modern dilemma of victimhood succeeds in offering a theoretical basis for what Habermas refers to—in an uncharacteristically vague way—as the "pre-discursive" or "pre-rational" grounding from which the emotional and motivational attachments to liberal democracy flow.

Thus, I found that Girard's more capacious anthropological/hermeneutic perspective should be integrated into Habermas' critical defense of liberal democracy as Girard's position is better equipped to interpret the basic mechanisms which lie behind the contemporary political pathologies that plague liberal democracy as Habermas sees it-- specifically those that gave rise to the January 6th revolt. My examination revealed that Girard's onto-anthropological understanding of modern morality can function as the motivational, pre-discursive basis for renewing our emotional commitments to liberal democracy's collectively binding ideals without conflicting with Habermas' desire to keep the legitimacy of these ideals grounded in reason.

1. PROBLEMS ABOUND

On January 6, 2021, members of the US Congress held a joint session to ratify the results of the 2020 election: democratic candidate Joseph R. Biden was to replace Republican candidate and current president Donald J. Trump. Largely considered a “rubber stamp” formality marking the peaceful transition of power within government, the ratification process generally draws little attention. However, in the political climate of 2021, the ratification of electoral votes proved to be a consequential event amidst the incumbent Trump’s continued denial of the election results. Indeed, this led many to question how he would react to his vice president officiating the ratification process and whether it would finally encourage Trump to acknowledge his loss and leave office peacefully. What the world witnessed that day exceeded many people’s worst expectations. In a fiery speech given near Capitol Hill while the ratification process was underway, President Trump again denied the results of the election. However, this time he also publicly implied that his Vice President and other members of Congress were committing treason by proceeding with the ratification process. His hour-long tirade stirred thousands of his loyal supporters whom he implored to “fight like hell” and march to the capitol to “make your voices heard.” The accusations Trump leveled against Pence, the representatives in congress, and the integrity of the electoral process itself, incited the crowd to form a violent mob and storm the Capitol building. Once there, they intended to kill Vice President Mike Pence (chanting “Hang Mike Pence”)¹ as well as any Democratic members of Congress within their reach.

¹ [1] [Impeachment Trial: Mob Chanting 'Hang Mike Pence' Came Within 60 Feet of VP - YouTube](#)

Inside the Capitol building, members of congress were told to abandon the voting process and rushed out of the chamber to a safe, undisclosed location. While outside, the violent mob erected gallows on the grounds of the Capitol and began using weapons and chemical irritants to beat down the overpowered capitol police force. Before order was restored hours later, five people had died and dozens more had been injured. Follow-up investigations have confirmed that some members of Congress were lucky to have escaped the chamber of Capitol Hill alive—either because they had missed the crowd by several minutes or simply because they had been saved by a brave officer diverting the mob from their path.

This horrific display of violence was not a random event. Thousands of citizens took up arms and were willing to raid the seat of liberal democracy to stop the certification of a free and fair election. For the first time in US history, there was a failure to transition power peacefully, prompting Representative Liz Cheney—in the committee hearing addressing the events of January 6th—to ask a devastating question: "Do we hate our political adversaries more than we love our country and revere our Constitution?" While I do not propose an answer to this question, I believe that it is the right one to ask. It implicitly recognizes that our constitutional order is vulnerable to the excesses of populism that threaten to undermine its normative, liberal core and have already ruined one of its only sacrosanct traditions—the peaceful transition of power. Fully understanding the nature and extent of this threat requires first a working notion of the norms and processes of liberal, constitutional democracy, which I borrow from German philosopher Juergen Habermas. His well-crafted defense of liberal constitutional democracy as the centerpiece of moral, political community will be the guide to understanding the value of our virtuous engagement with this form of government. Unfortunately, the intellectual strength of

Habermas' defense of the *processes* of liberal, constitutional democracy is not sufficient to ensure the requisite attachment to the virtues and normative core of liberal democracy, a sentiment with which he concurs in his later work. I believe that Habermas' defense must be supplemented by a proper understanding of the social pathologies that plague our current political reality and how they trigger "irrational" behaviors like zero-sum politics, escalating mimetic rivalries, scapegoating, and violent mobs. Christian anthropologist Rene Girard is the guide here, as he offers a capacious theory of human desire and violence that informs how pathological mechanisms of mob violence can emerge even in our current political reality and how (Girard's interpretation of) historical Christianity might offer a "hermeneutic key" illuminating the potentially devastating onto-anthropological power of these mechanisms. I intend to show that Girard's perspicacious insights into the unsavory elements of human nature strengthen our attachments to Habermas' intellectually strong defense of liberal constitutional democracy by illuminating liberalism's fragility and finitude with an awareness of humanity's destructive pre-rational, behavioral tendencies. A Habermasian outlook supplemented by Girard's insights ultimately underscores the immense value of liberal democracy and brings us closer to answering the significant question: ***What (if anything) about the current political reality leads communities to forsake their ethical/moral commitments to the values and processes that maintain liberal, constitutional democracy?***

This paper analyzes how Habermas' conception of liberal democracy and its relation to the community's moral formation is well-supplemented by an ostensibly divergent understanding of modern morality as articulated by Rene Girard who contends that modern morality derives its meaning and structure from an anthropological internalization of Christian moral revelation. The

first section of the paper summarizes the significance of Habermas' social theory as a defense of liberal democracy and its institution. I begin by explaining how this defense arises from a theory of reason grounded in communication before reaching the crux of our problem: how this intellectually strong defense of a liberal and rationally governed moral community still faces issues of moral and emotional attachment to its binding normative core, especially when compared with religious forms of moral community. From here, I turn to Girard's ostensibly religious conception of moral community that he articulates as part of his project of reclaiming a Christian essentialism. Grounded in a particular understanding of revelation, Girard offers an absolute, anti-sacrificial interpretation of morality which he believes informs the modern moral condition in a manner that is cognitively and emotionally binding without being contingent upon communication and discourse. The reason I turn to Girard here (instead of other religious conceptions of moral community) is because his interpretation of Christianity and Christian revelation is as original as it is capacious. Girard's theories radically depart from the history of systematic theology and biblical exegesis by building a philosophical apparatus on the hard won anthropological insights found in the Scriptures. Indeed, Girard's articulation of Christian revelation does not require a belief in the transcendent Christian God, nor does Girard contend that secular theories of morality are inherently flawed or are unable to grasp the moral substance of Christianity. In fact, he argues that secular morality cannot help but contend with the Christianity's fundamental anthropological insight: that communities create victims that they blame for their own violence. Over the course of this paper, I will show that Girard's anthropological interpretation of Christianity can offer Habermas' secular theories of morality the emotional volition it requires to sustain an attachment to the binding normative core of liberal, constitutional democracy.

It must be stated upfront that when I use the term Christianity or Christian revelation, I reference Girard's understanding of the term revelation, which has a double and interrelated meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the anthropological trajectory of the Bible's narratives, which move away from sacrificial accounts of God (beginning in the Old Testament) and culminate in the anti-sacrificial revelation par excellence—Jesus' Passion story and resurrection. On the other hand, "revelation" also refers to an ongoing worldly process initiated by the Biblical revelation of Christ's death and resurrection. Within this "progressive" or worldly understanding, communities, institutions, and politics are emptied of the remaining vestiges of Sacralized Violence that previously dominated archaic communities but can no longer legitimize post-Christian society. By drawing this anthropological distinction between Christianity and archaic religions on the point of transcendence and sacrificial violence itself, Girard can articulate a historical and anthropologically grounded understanding of Christian revelation that avoids the metaphysical conundrum faced by many theologians of having to ground the existence of God as a transcendent being.

In Girard's view, the history of Christianity is marked by the progressive deconstruction of the mechanisms of violence and obfuscation characteristic of the mythic. Historical Christianity reverses the meaning structure within the archaic/totemic systems by supplanting it with symbolically familiar sets of rituals, taboos, and narratives that reverse the meaning of the mythic symbols by conveying what these archaic symbols mask: the full and unbridled anthropological truth of human desire. Thus, the (post)-Christian community is characterized as having undergone a total transformation of its moral foundation to one that is concerned with the

wreckage and excess of desire or, in other words, with the victims of desire. This knowledge equips historical Christianity and Post-Christian society with an absolute moral value—to care for victims. Girard recognizes that even secular communities take the concern for victims as the normative basis for critiquing and evaluating the moral progress of humanity writ large.

Although Christianity has managed to expose scapegoating and victimization of many types, it has not eradicated these processes that resurface in forms that tend to weaponize a knowledge of mimetic desire itself. In the section entitled *Victimology and the Weaponization of Scapegoating*, I analyze how these modern forms of scapegoating that weaponize mimetic desire arose from historical Christianity and how they can explain the contemporary political pathologies Habermas is attempting to rectify.

Though I accept the Girardian premise that Christian revelation has given us an absolute moral value, “the concern for the victim,” that shapes the modern moral condition, I take issue with a lacuna that arises in Girard’s critique stemming from the hidden nature of scapegoating as a phenomenon. The unconscious nature of the scapegoat mechanism and the subsequent concealment carried out by myth make Girard’s theory impractical for concrete conflict resolution. In other words, his theory offers no avenues that allow the concerned to definitively ascertain whether the intellectual or normative/discursive methods we use to identify victims and victimizers, mimetic threats, and potentially sacrificial institutions and situations are really fulfilling their promises. Indeed, they could simply be proxies for new, clever methods of scapegoating. With an aim towards making Girard’s insights more practicable, I turn to Habermas’ account of communicative reason and discourse ethics as a form of intersubjective reason and a structure of discursive morality. It is my hope that Habermas’ “social” form of

reason might be able to incorporate an awareness of the dangers of mimetic desire and scapegoating as the liminal irrational phenomena that threaten the constitutive power of intersubjective and or discursive reason. However, I acknowledge that Habermas' conception of community moral formation is also limited by its immanence to discourse itself. I end by demonstrating how accepting and maintaining Girard's vigilant awareness of this unpleasant truth of human nature helps the discursive community understand both its moral and functional scope in two key ways. The first is by offering a pre-discursive moral ground from which an emotional attachment to liberalism can maintain itself without being subjected to the whims of discourse and rationalization. The second is through this awareness's potential to reinforce a substantive moral commitment to the discursive process as an invaluable tool capable of self-reflexively validating norms in line with this absolute value.

2. HABERMAS' RECLAIMING PROJECT

The legacy of Enlightenment liberalism was optimistic about practical reason's capacity to justly resolve the questions of morality that previously fell to the providence of church and faith for answers. However, confidence in the general moral progress guaranteed by Reason was severely shaken in the 20th century following multiple World Wars, the Holocaust, and the creation and use of nuclear weapons. The moral wreckage of the previous century forced scholars within the humanities to reevaluate whether practical reason could be trusted as a basis for moral community. They endeavored to determine whether there were certain limitations to or ways that

reason, as a foundation for community, creates distorted and alienating forms of social integration that are devoid of emotional or moral ties among fellows. This reevaluation of the moral foundations of Western society often took the form of sweeping critiques of both reason and modern practices and institutions such as late capitalism or liberal constitutional democracy—which ground their claims to legitimacy in a certain secular and practical understanding of reason as the most morally rational means of organizing society. Though the influence of these critiques has endured within academia, many—including German philosopher Juergen Habermas—believe they went too far in their attempts to deconstruct reason and delegitimize the institutions grounded in secular, practical reason. Habermas’ life’s work arose as a defense of a particular type of reason, and of liberal institutions more broadly, from a crisis of conscience that doubted if reason remained a morally viable basis for social and political integration. Habermas’ defense of the Enlightenment tradition against these suspicions saw him articulating a new understanding of secular reason as a social phenomenon grounded in his concept of communicative action. Habermas’ project is guided by an attempt to theorize these communicative conditions of political community as constitutive of a (hitherto overlooked) form of social rationality that “is no longer tied to, and limited by, the subjectivistic and individualistic premises of modern philosophy and social theory.” In a period where intellectuals had become increasingly critical if not downright suspicious of Reason, Habermas attempted to draw out the emancipatory possibility of Reason as rational-critical communication which he believes to be the latent foundation of modern liberal institutions.

Habermas recognizes that, within the everyday rational deliberation and debate amongst individuals, there is encoded a distinct form of “social” rationality that allows individuals to

“coordinate their actions in pursuit of individual or joint goals based on a shared understanding that the goals are inherently reasonable or merit-worthy.”² Habermas calls this concept “communicative action.” Unlike other forms of (anti)social rationality like strategic action, where actors are fundamentally interested in achieving their individual goals by engaging with and motivating others, communicative action describes situations in which actors can consensually agree that certain goals warrant cooperative behavior based solely on their merit alone.

Communicative action suggests an anthropological telos of rationally motivated agreement that directs communicative acts. In attempting to understand the nature of this telos, Habermas reconstructs the implied norms and validity conditions of a communicative action (these include theoretical truthfulness, normative rightness, subjective/expressive truthfulness). When actors’ communication occurs under these normative conditions, communicative acts have transparency and authenticity, allowing individuals to both understand each other and create a shared understanding of their cooperative path forward. This duality of understanding achieved in communication is an ideal which Habermas straightforwardly refers to as “the ideal speech act”. Of course, the ideal speech act remains a counterfactual ideal that is never fully realized in real discourse due to the pervasive presence of conflicting values and interests on some level. However, as a counterfactual ideal, it can serve as a normative basis for critically evaluating the communicative process and identifying any distortions or selfish interests clouding communication. Thus, the ideal speech situation can function as the fulcrum of Habermas’ critical social theory. It offers communicative actors a hypothetical point of orientation facilitating a mutual understanding (on the level of ideas) of working notions of social

² Bohman, James. “Jürgen Habermas”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2017.

rationality, political emancipation, and intersubjectively defined moral and ethical life. In his own words, Habermas stated that,

The design of an ideal speech situation is necessarily implied in the structure of potential speech, since all speech, even intentional deception, is oriented toward the idea of truth. This idea can be analyzed with regard to a consensus achieved in unrestrained and universal discourse. Insofar as we master the means for the construction of the ideal speech situation, we can conceive of the ideas of truth, freedom, and justice, which interpenetrate one another—although of course only as ideas³

Habermas argued that constitutional democracy is the most consensual and minimally coercive form of government for fostering this ideal conception of community grounded in the ideal speech situation and in protecting it from modernity's systematic and pathological distortions of discourse that threaten to tear the social fabric. As a political praxis, constitutional democracy institutionalizes the discursive ethics that guide the political contest over a community's normative identity, though in a (weakened) procedural form. It accomplishes this by providing an open arena for rational debate and transparent legislation. Ideally, constitutional democracy simulates this process of discursive ethics by allowing the community to use their political representatives to debate the many validity claims to proposed actions and the norms that underpin them. However, Habermas acknowledged that even within constitutional democracy exists a large degree of built-in normative power on the structural level such as sweeping bureaucracies that rely on "contingent and forced consensus" to maintain an agenda possibly involving "suppressing the general interests" of the community. Further, Habermas observed how other modes of social integration with adverse interests to discourse, such as the interests of the markets, can distort the discursive ethics that underpin liberal constitutional democracy.

³ Habermas, Juergen. *Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence*. 1970. pg. 372

Market interests can accomplish this in a number of ways, both intentionally, by directly using money to influence politicians and legislation, and unintentionally, by privatizing the public sphere (one contemporary example is how internet companies like Facebook have privatized/monetized social communication online or how Google has privatized/monetized the digital dissemination of information).

Habermas' critical recognition of the many threats to communicative action and discourse ethics and his postulation of them as counterfactual, show that he is not the rational utopianist some of his critics make him out to be. Like Girard, Habermas believed that processes of modernization constitute a genuine threat to his open and rationally deliberative notion of community. His purpose in offering these counterfactual ideals is not—like proponents of Marxism or liberation theology—to offer sweeping socio-historical narratives and eschatologically oriented theories of political and social redemption that end in a socialist utopia. Rather, he intended to demonstrate how a micro theory of communication can offer normative standards for post-metaphysical critique enabling actors to name distortions in many discursive realities. By centering his analysis in everyday language and social interaction, Habermas avoids the stronger transcendental elements of Kantian philosophy meaning his theories are more adaptable to the varied and contingent expressions of social behavior and rationality, particularly within the context of modernity. This allows Habermas to branch away from philosophy and engage with other disciplines using dialogue partners to enrich his theories.

By moving away from the overly subjective and instrumental understandings of reason and toward an intersubjective understanding grounded in the norms of communicative action/discourse ethics, Habermas salvages a working concept of reason in a period during which intellectuals had become increasingly critical if not downright suspicious of it. I believe that the importance of this theoretical defense of the emancipatory possibility of social reason i.e., communicative action and of the discursive processes of communication latent within our modern institutions cannot be overstated as it successfully offers a normative standard for evaluating communication via the counterfactual “ideal speech act.” Equipped with this counterfactual ideal, scholars and citizens alike can defend practical reason and the discursive processes of liberal constitutional democracy as the most rational means of achieving the most morally sound, provisional judgment. In so doing, it also allows them to continue to possess a normative standard that orients social criticism toward identifying the irrational distortions of discourse that might derail the pluralistic conception of reason that liberal constitutional democracy seeks to protect.

However, I believe that Habermas’ normative theory takes for granted the moral and emotional commitment citizens must have to the values and outcomes of liberal constitutional democracy. Without these commitments democracy falls prey to illiberal social pathologies that attempt to override its presupposed normative foundation—what Habermas refers to as the “pre-political”—which includes norms like the consent of the governed, the transparency of processes of governing, respect of differing opinions, and the presumed victory of the better (moral) argument. While the failure of liberal citizens to commit to the legitimacy claims of liberal

democracy has haunted Habermas from the beginning of his career,⁴ I believe that the events of this century, specifically the rise of a new alt-right authoritarianism, raise more concerning questions about the West's sufficient moral virtue or emotional attachment to the moral foundation of constitutional democracy.

I observe significant blind spots arising for Habermas from the rigidity with which his micro-theory of communicative action, and particularly its reliance on discourse ethics, keeps his entire conception of community immanent to discursive processes. In portraying humanity as anthropologically communicative and rational beings, he cannot fully account for instances of destructive, tangible violence which, to him, indicate a lack of proper socialization into communicative and rational processes. While the well-developed post-conventional morality Habermas views as the heritage of the Enlightenment might be correlated with an overall decrease in instances of widespread violence (so far), its presence alone does not explain our continually prodigious capacity for violence—as witnessed in the previous century when liberal constitutional democracies fell prey to some of the worst examples of scapegoating, sacrificial violence, and pathological political rivalries in human history. To give him credit, Habermas attempted to understand constitutional democracy's vulnerability to contemporary political pathologies as recently as 2004 in his correspondence with then-Cardinal Ratzinger entitled *Dialectics of Secularization*. In this dialogue, Habermas takes, as his point of departure, “the doubt about whether the democratic constitutional state can renew from its own resources the normative presuppositions of its existence” and whether this renewal must draw from “ethical

⁴ Habermas, Juergen. *Legitimation Crisis*. 1975. Beacon Press.

(and religious) traditions of a local nature” to ultimately and paradoxically sustain a “state committed to neutrality in terms of world view”⁵

In attempting to diagnose that which underlies some of the asymmetries between Western communities and their political formations, Habermas pinpointed a deficit of the “motivation” needed to sustain political virtue in a liberal, pluralist democracy. A deficit of motivation regarding virtuous political engagement is particularly dangerous for citizens within liberal democracies for they alone are responsible to freely “make active use of their rights... with an orientation towards the common good”⁶. If the ethical and moral ideals of Western, liberal constitutional democracies are not enough to motivate their communities to maintain an emotional attachment to the normative/moral foundation of their political community, then the relationship between these ideals and normative practices deserves a thorough analysis to uncover the source of this deficit, which must be identified before it can be remedied or supplemented.⁷

Habermas acknowledges that our lack of affective attachment to liberal constitutional democracy might be influenced by the uncharismatic nature of the strictly rational morality underpinning the theories of justice that modern political formations claim as the source of their legitimacy. If citizens cannot emotionally identify with the rational morality that underpins their political

⁵ Habermas, Juergen. *Dialectics of Secularization*. 2007. pg. 21.

⁶ Habermas, Juergen. *Dialectics of Secularization*. 2007. pg. 30.

⁷ We do not have the space or time here to address the vast philosophic analysis into the ethical foundations of Modernity (and the West’s various forms of political community) needed to fully clarify this relationship. We must, then, acknowledge its relevance to our sketch of a modern political reality that *we argue* must maintain it’s finitude with an awareness of certain pre-rational behavioral tendencies.

freedom, they may neglect the power that same political freedom affords them on a global scale. This creates a tragic paradox where violations of human rights and other injustices that beg for transnational solidarity cannot determine charitable moral protocols derived from the theories of justice that rationally demonstrate the illegitimacy and unjustness of these violations in the first place. As Habermas explains, “The decision to engage in action based on solidarity when faced with threats which can be averted only by collective action calls for more than insights into good reasons”⁸ In other words, a strictly rational morality’s inability to motivate citizens and the body politic to collective action on a global scale is not a function of modern citizens’ inability to comprehend injustices or conceive of ways to remedy them. This leads us to the assumption that there is a lack of motivational potential within strict rational morality itself as a basis for collective action. Ironically, this lack is demonstrated when compared to the church and other local religious communities’ near vocational charity, which they perform under moral and faith-based premises that the secular state and rational morality deems illegitimate.

Habermas recognizes the problem of Enlightened morality’s insufficient motivation to act on its premises vis-a-vis the prior, yet still present moral tradition of Christianity by conceding that “strict rational morality... unavoidably loses its grasp on the images, preserved by religion, of the moral whole—or the Kingdom of God on earth—as collectively binding ideals.” According to him, in so doing, “practical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation...to keep awake in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity”. Although Habermas acknowledged the need for collectively binding ideals in the face of a “modernization spinning

⁸ Habermas, Juergen. *An Awareness of What is Missing*. 2010. pg. 19

out of control,” he cannot give content to the nature of these ideals or as to how they could be “legitimately” binding. For him, the only legitimate means of compelling action is the open and unfulfilled process of communicative action/discourse ethics, which are inherently contentless, requiring rational deliberation to come to the best *provisional* moral judgment under the circumstances. Thus, Habermas is left with a vague idea of the potential benefits of religion as filling a gap in the normative consciousness of secular citizens living in liberal democracy...something that will motivate a sense of willingness and openness to participate in the causes that require collective moral action and solidarity.

Habermas has been tentative about the conclusions he draws from his observations of the motivational potential of religiously grounded moral systems, recognizing the risk that accepting them and their premises can pose to the legitimacy of secular theories of justice. As an ardent moral rationalist of the Kantian persuasion, he has described the choice to ground secular theories of justice in practical reason as a strength as “neither belief in God as the creator of the world nor belief in God as the redeemer is necessary...to recognize that (the moral law) is categorically binding.”⁹ Thus, Habermas operates under the assumption that secular communities could reap the motivational benefits of religious and cultural traditions without sacrificing the universal legitimacy of these theories’ grounding in practical reason. By drawing on the powerful symbols and narratives of religion and sifting through the dogma to find relevant moral insights, Habermas believes that secular theories of justice infuse themselves with the motivational

⁹ Habermas, Jurgen. *The Boundary Between Faith and Knowledge*. pg. 212

potential of religion thereby strengthening citizens' emotional attachments to their communities without sacrificing the rational basis for discursive forms of morality.

This of course begs the difficult question of whether or not the motivational success of religious traditions is contingent on its grounding in normative and moral protocols clustered around absolute imperatives, prohibitions, and values of a revealed nature. Habermas avoids addressing this question entirely in his gesture towards establishing a dialogical relationship with a **non-threatening** form of Christianity that “avoid[s] dogmatism and the coercion of peoples conscience”¹⁰ and yet offer its symbolic elements, tradition, and ritual practices as a wellspring for rich sources of meaning and legitimate, morally grounded **but ultimately rational** communitarian practices. At face value, this looks like an attractive compromise, but it is worth noting that Habermas is not addressing the self-image of the Christian moral tradition (i.e., the one grounded in revelation and divine salvation), but rather a pruned Kantian conception of *religion (Christianity) within the limits of reason alone*. Seeking to operationalize Christianity purely as a symbolico-affective supplement to rational morality minimizes some of those barriers to assimilation, including the significance of revelation and tradition as well as Christianity's own political means of legitimacy in the ecclesiastical institution of the Church. Beyond overlooking these established differences, some of which I address later in this paper, I argue that Habermas' attempt to operationalize Christianity as a supplement to rational morality fails to recognize a more innate aspect of the religion—an aspect that might help to remedy some of the pathological processes that demoralize communities and societies, preventing them from

¹⁰ Habermas, Jürgen. *Dialectics of Secularization* 2007. pg. 43

establishing the solidarity that Habermas is seeking to borrow from religious sources. I believe he has most neglected the ethos or spirit of Christianity's moral outlook as an onto-anthropology of humans—specifically, one that conveys something profound about their “fallen state” and, by extension, their relations with the broader world and their fellows. By clinging instead to the presuppositions of his rational, discursive understanding of morality, Habermas overlooks Christianity's unique perspective as a moral framework which can through a kind of revelatory hermeneutics independent of rational discursivity, meaningfully analyze the processes of zero-sum political rivalry, the breakdown of norms, and mimetic mob violence that reproduce the political pathologies that Habermas realizes require a healthy communal solidarity to remedy.

While I do embrace Habermas' rational-discursive framework as an articulation and justification of the normative core of liberal constitutional democracy, I also believe that it must be supplemented by a knowledge of mechanisms that can rationally explain social pathologies like mimetic mob violence, zero-sum rivalry, and the ostensible (willful) neglect of norm as these threaten to alienate citizens from faith in and virtuous engagement with the values and outcomes of liberal constitutional democracy (as Habermas sees it). In his current framework, such phenomena can only be analyzed as failures to achieve a certain level of moral socialization and/or as irrational aberrations vis-a-vis Modernity's commitment to forms of social integration predicated on universal rationality and discursive norms. Admittedly, his discursive theory can identify and describe the distortions that allow social pathologies to remain viral; however, the discursive argument against the rationality of this phenomena alone does not grasp the anthropological potency of these pathologies, nor does it give sufficient reason for how liberalism can maintain itself in relation to their devastating potential. While the intersubjective

basis for critique in communicative action might be able to abstractly understand the danger these social pathologies pose, Habermas' recapitulation of the Enlightenment's political vision as a strategic retreat away from essential questions of human nature and into formal reason i.e., "philosophically" derived rules, laws, and discourse formations as a means of resolving the rifts/ competing absolutes that emerge over such questions—ultimately prevents him from taking anything other than a formal stance vis-a-vis the question of human violence in the pre/extra discursive sense. Unfortunately, violence persists in forms that flummox formal attempts at circumscription by law and state sovereignty. As witnessed on January 6, these forms of violence can **directly** threaten the procedures of liberal constitutional democracy and thus require forms of analysis that rationally describe the supposedly "irrational" behaviors threatening to destroy the discursive process.

I argue that the strictly rational, discursive morality espoused by Habermas would particularly benefit by opening itself to a dialogical relationship with a unique theory of Christian morality articulated by Christian anthropologist Rene Girard. Girard's theory offers a powerful onto-anthropological explanation of the illiberal, pathological behaviors that plague modern politics. If equipped with a self-understanding of its analytical limitations, the rational, discursive process could better orient itself towards its own practical capability of limiting violence, especially the kind of self-destructive, pre/post-discursive violence threatening to destroy the liberal constitutional order. Conversely, with its emphasis on discourse's capacity to determine the best provisional moral judgment, Habermas' theory of communicative reason could bring Girard's insights into these pathological behaviors into the discursive fold. This is necessary if Girard's ideas are to hold practical and ethical weight since Girard himself has struggled to articulate a

reasoned moral program that prevents the kind of mimetic violence, victimization, and corrosive rivalries he readily interprets in texts and events. For Girard, these pathological behaviors are not aberrations or regressions into a pre-enlightened state. Instead, they are resurfaced expressions of the perennially problematic elements of human nature intrinsic to our fallen state. As a Christian philosopher, Girard argues that revelation (to him) is synonymous with the Gospels cognitive “deconstruction of the mythic Sacred.” However, this deconstructive process exceeds its textuality in offering communities an eschatologically strong system for moral formation intimately linked to the Biblical exposure of and opposition to the problematic elements of human nature, specifically the elements of mimetic desire, mimetic violence, scapegoating, and the sacralization of violence (terms which we explain elsewhere in the paper).

3. GIRARD ON REVELATION AND HISTORICAL CHRISTIANITY

One of Girard’s greatest intellectual insights was his identification of the mechanism by which a community’s internal violence can be curtailed or avoided through sacrifice. He dubbed this “the scapegoat mechanism,” and it is the point at which a community’s violence becomes morally justified in its convergence on a victim. In his analysis, the community fails to see that they themselves are responsible for their own turmoil. And consequently, they end up creating victims who they sacrifice with a clear conscience, ensuring that they remain ignorant to the *real* cause of their violence and again begin the cycle of dangerous zero-sum rivalries that led to the scapegoat mechanism in the first place. Without the critical understanding of their own tendency to scapegoat, the community continues to rely on a false, sacrificial morality to resolve scandals and crises. If the community and individuals are to grapple with their own potential for violence,

Girard believes that turning to the Bible offers them the best source for understanding these mechanisms. According to him, it contains the original knowledge of them,¹¹ which it conveys, rather ironically, by using the very archetypal structure and symbols that effectively hide the sacrificial violence and scapegoating in the mythic stories produced by archaic religions. As Girard claimed,

There are only two ways of relating the sequence of a mimetic contagion and its violent resolution. The true and the false:

We don't detect the mimetic snowballing because we participate in it without realizing it. In this case we are condemned to a lie we can never rectify, for we believe sincerely in the guilt of our scapegoats. This is what myths do.

2. We detect the mimetic snowballing in which we do not participate, and then we describe it as it actually is. We restore the scapegoats unjustly condemned. Only the Bible and Gospels are capable of this.¹²

Girard grounded his argument for the truth of Christian moral revelation in the Bible's "perspicacious" understanding of the arbitrarily violent nature of the scapegoat mechanism—which it has exposed as resolutely immoral. By interpreting Christian revelation as the revelation of the immoral anthropological mechanisms of mimetic desire and scapegoating, Girard demonstrated the eschatological value of Christianity as a break from the circular violence of archaic religious and cultural systems that evolve from these primordial mechanisms. For Girard, this anthropological reading means he need not reconcile his understanding of the nature of

¹¹ Etymologically, the word scapegoat traces back to the Hebrew *āzāzēl* (Hebrew: עזאזל), which refers to a goat onto whom the sins of the community are transferred before it is driven out. The ritual sacrifice of the Goat is a weakened version of the human sacrifice, which Old Testament Israelites no longer practice. Abraham's aborted sacrifice of his son, marking the textual turning point, and yet was still performed in many archaic religions during the same period. The term *āzāzēl* (Hebrew: עזאזל), occurs in [Leviticus 16:8](#)

ונתן אהרן על שני השעירים גרלות גורל אחד ליהוה וגורל אחד לעזאזל

And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats: one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for Azazel.

¹² Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. pg. 283

revelation with a long and thorny tradition of systematic theology. In fact, this radical departure from the theological tradition is crucial to his understanding of the enduring significance of Christianity for Christians and non-Christians alike, as he believes, similarly to Habermas, that Christianity's moral and eschatological value can and must be proven upfront through empirical claims and rational argumentations. However, for Girard, the importance of this is part of his larger project of reclaiming a Christian essentialism by demonstrating the enduring relevance of the religion in Modernity and its exceptionalism compared to all other religions and not, necessarily, to encourage the appropriation of his moral insights by proponents of secular liberalism (although he does not take issue with projects that attempt such an appropriation).

Girard employed the empirical methods and rational argumentation as part of a three-part framework or schema intending to recapture the moral essence of Christianity as an anti-sacrificial revelation that radically departs from the archaic-mythic religions that he considers grounded in "Sacred Violence." The first step in Girard's schema consists of a series of anthropological claims concerning human desire that comprise his famous "theory of mimetic desire." As he sees it, desire is not a linear, subjective phenomenon between a subject and an object as we tend to experience it psychologically as the desiring subject. Rather, desire is a triangular and mimetic phenomenon that is experienced intersubjectively—a technical way of saying we **unconsciously** model our desire based on what another person, group, or "people in general" desire and not off an object's inherent value or our idiosyncrasies as subjects. However, problems abound in situations where the object of desire cannot be shared by the multiplying number of mimetic subjects who are all imitating each other's desire. In these predicaments, mimetic desire spurs escalating, rivalrous competition to possess the object, and the subjects

themselves become obsessed with the “prestige” of the competition as each attempt to outmaneuver the next in the same fashion (leading, ironically, to further symmetries). If not mediated/curtailed by some third party or system, (legal, religious, cultural, etc.) escalating mimetic competition can turn violent and the violence itself becomes reciprocal, escalating, and contagious. In such cases, the community faces the age-old existential crisis of **vengeance**, a common theme of many great myths and plays which Girard analyzes. However, there is an equally archaic solution for the entrenched cyclical violence of vengeance that threatens the social fabric: the scapegoat mechanism. Scapegoating works to resolve the widespread communal violence by unconsciously producing a guilty victim/scapegoat in moments of existential tension. Onto the scapegoat goes the collective violence of the community, which is transferred in an act of public expulsion or sacrifice. The role religion plays in this is in sacralizing the communities’ violence, by creating a mythic narrative that justifies it and by offering a priestly caste that mediates the sacrificial event and conveys its *partial* meaning to the community. This is exemplified in the widespread practice of human sacrifice in archaic societies.¹³ Archaic religions also engendered social taboos that structured the violent potentiality of desire. These were later replaced by more explicit divine laws like the Ten Commandments, which used direct moral prohibitions to prevent the violent zero-sum competition of mimetic subjects. For instance, the 10th commandment states that “*one shall not covet **anything** belonging to thy neighbor,*” emphasizing that the object of mimetic desire can be anything. Epistemologically then, religion functions for Girard as a complex modality of knowledge about humanity’s propensity for violence. However, only Christianity has full knowledge of both

¹³ Human Sacrifice was present in most major archaic societies including--- Ancient Egyptians, Phoenicians, Ancient Greeks, Romans, Mesopotamians, Celts, Germanic People, Slavic, Ancient Chinese, Tibetan, Ancient Indian, Mayan, Aztec, Incan, West African tribes and more...

mimetic desire and scapegoating, archaic religions have only partial insights contingent on the sacrificial events from which they evolved.

Thus, the second step in Girard's schema offers textual proof of Christian moral revelation's complete knowledge of these mechanisms, which he accomplished by undertaking a vast comparative ethnographic study reading biblical (hi)stories alongside structurally similar mythic texts. By accepting the structural similarities between biblical and mythic stories that ethnographers and anthropologists—particularly the structuralists—had used to discredit the uniqueness of the bible, Girard was able to identify the essential difference **in moral interpretation**. Indeed, it is this difference that holds the “hermeneutic key” to Christian revelation, namely that “God sides with victims” in the Bible. In contrast, in the mythic analogs, the Gods smile upon the community that drives out the morally ambiguous mythic hero, the *pharmakos*. As Girard explained, “the structural similarity (between mythic stories and biblical stories) is the basis of a radical difference from the standpoint of the narrative's identification with the victim.”¹⁴ For example, the stories of Oedipus and Joseph have a series of striking similarities: both “commence with the childhood of two heroes” who are cast out by their families based on a vision. For Oedipus, this is the prophecy foretelling that he marries his mother and kills his father that leads to his abandonment in the mountains as a baby, while Joseph's vision leads his jealous brothers to sell him into slavery. Oedipus and Joseph then become adopted by royalty in foreign lands, Oedipus in Thebes and Joseph in Egypt, after they each solve problems for the benefit of the community. The significant difference between the

¹⁴ Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. pg.109

two is not cosmetic but rather comes down to the narrative's moral interpretation of the events. In the Oedipus myth, the narration takes for granted that Oedipus is guilty of parricide and incest, meaning his banishment from the community is ultimately justified. However, in the Joseph story, the narration explicitly clarifies that Joseph is not guilty of the accusation leveled by the Pharaoh's wife (his surrogate mother), who unjustly accuses him of attempting to rape her after he denies her sexual advances. The Bible's narration is thus explicitly anti-mythological, showing that the accusations of parricide and incest (or the sublimated desire for each as it exists in modern-day Freudianism) are mere obsessions typical of the crowd that wishes to make their victims.¹⁵

By adopting much of the language, symbolism, and narrative structure of myth, Christianity disguises itself as a religion of the transcendent sacred before reversing its meaning. Pierpallo Antonello captures Girard's interpretation of Christianity vis-à-vis the Archaic Sacred with the metaphor of the "Trojan horse" that has gained entrance into the onto-anthropological substructure of cultural creation, before proceeding to reverse the functional meaning of myth by unmasking the violent mechanisms "on which the walls of the citadel of *the Sacred* had been erected."¹⁶ In revealing the violence that underpins the archaic-sacred, "the gospels make all forms of mythologizing impossible."¹⁷ Girard's final step consists of exhaustive "scientific" argumentation against sacrificial interpretations of the Bible and against modern theorists and philosophers who attempt to cast Christianity as simply another version of the great monomyth.

¹⁵ Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. Chapter 9

¹⁶ Rene Girard. "Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue." 2010. pg.8

¹⁷ Rene, Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. 1978. pg. 174

His arguments and interpretations here are intended to preserve Christianity's unique capacity to reveal the community's responsibility in creating victims and the community's moral culpability in (re)establishing solidarity by expelling or sacrificing them. The moral transvaluation Girard believes Christianity has accomplished is ongoing. It is the progressive moral force par excellence that will "reveal itself to be the only means of furthering all that is good and true in the anti-Christian endeavors of modern times'."¹⁸ Indeed, Christianity is the condition of possibility for cognizing the perspectives of victims and minority groups to the communities that had only known how to scapegoat them.

Girard's anthropological account of Christianity departed from the theological tradition by treating the Bible as a historical text that exists in dynamic relation with the myths of archaic religions. By portraying Christianity as the radical break from the circular history of sacrificial violence performed by archaic religions since time immemorial, Girard gave Christianity a real historicity not dependent on the transcendent arguments for God's intervention in the world. Rather, Girard's "theological" argument—if it can be called theological at all—takes Jesus Christ to be the "supra-transcendent" Man who unmask the human origins of the transcendent arguments predicated on sacralized violence. Christ's death and resurrection thereby initiate a new, linear history that ties Christianity to Modernity as both progress by eradicating violence and sacrifice from the world. This revolutionary interpretation does not require metaphysical or divine necessity to describe the content of revelation because it views "the gospels as a theory of humankind before they are a theory of god" Girard goes as far as to say that his

¹⁸ Rene, Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. 1978. pg. 177

“research is only indirectly theological... [and that he] pursued it as long as possible without postulating the reality of the Christian God.”¹⁹ Beginning with an anthropological account of humanity allowed him to critique the “Medieval and Modern theories of redemption that look in the direction of God for the causes of the crucifixion” because “... they don’t seriously look in the direction where the answer must lie; sinful humanity, human relations, and mimetic contagion.”²⁰ Further, by placing this anthropological account within a history of religions with their false notions of the sacred, Girard avoided the metaphysical conundrum of grounding the existence of God as a transcendent being while explaining the human origins of transcendent arguments in sacralized violence.

The elimination of the transcendent elements of Christianity within Girard’s interpretation lends elements of contingency and ambivalence to his understanding of Christian moral eschatology as combative of sacred violence throughout history. Although shown to be illegitimate, Girard acknowledged that systems of Sacred Violence did serve an important function in communities by using the mechanisms of scapegoating and ritualized sacrificial practices to control more widespread communal violence. Thus, when the Gospels, particularly in the Passion story, “...reveal, (or) brings out into the open, the arbitrariness and radical injustice of persecution”²¹ by exposing the mechanisms of Sacred Violence at work, they simultaneously strip humanity of its means of controlling violence. Several instances in the Passion story vividly demonstrate the exposure and deconstruction of these mechanisms at work, such as when the high priest of the

¹⁹ Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. pg.183

²⁰ Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. pg.150

²¹ Vattimo & Girard. *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue* 2006. pg. 7

Pharisees, Caiaphas, suggests to the other Jewish leaders “that it is better for you that one man die (Jesus) for the people than that the whole nation perish.”²² This demonstrated the high religious leader’s awareness of the reconciliatory power of the scapegoat mechanism. Another instance in which the Bible “perspicaciously” demonstrates the power of mimetic violence and the collective transference characteristic of the scapegoat mechanism occurs when Christ’s own disciple, Peter, swept in the bloodthirsty mob preparing to execute Christ, denies knowing him three times.²³ In so doing, Peter distinguishes himself from the scapegoat of the crowd by becoming part of the scapegoating crowd himself—the only way to do so in the paroxysm effected by the mob. By showing sacrificial violence for what it is and by exposing and deconstructing its mechanisms, the Gospels strip humanity of the legitimacy of “the Sacred” as a justification for their entire system of controlling violence through the immolation of victims. While this does not eradicate scapegoating and the Sacralization of violence from the world, it demystifies the mechanisms as they functioned in archaic forms of religious society. Indeed, the Bible accomplishes this to such a profound degree that societies now struggle to legitimate themselves through myth alone. This “is why we have fewer and fewer myths all the time, and more and more texts bearing on persecution”²⁴

²² (John 11:49)

²³ *Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. Peter followed at a distance and when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight...*

Luke 22:5-57. Girard describes Peter as being “possessed by the crowd” that is persecuting Jesus. Rene Girard on the Denial of Peter. Interview by Rev. Dr. Steven E. Berry.

²⁴ Girard, Rene. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* 1978. pg. 109

Consequently, post-Christian societies face a serious conundrum. They cannot return to sacrificial (i.e., religious in the archaic sense) means of controlling rampant mimetic and widespread communal violence it has the potential to produce. Because of Christianity, such violence can now only be perceived as an illegitimate and arbitrarily violent basis for society. Furthermore, post-Christian societies are no longer fully able to understand revelation as it exists in the Bible (or as it existed for Girard), always returning to variations of sacrificial misinterpretations. Thus, the dialectical progress initiated by Christianity's anti-sacrificial revelation ultimately unfolds beyond the bounds of nominal Christianity. This creates an ironic situation in which, the deconstruction of the archaic-mythic, ends up deconstructing the sacrificial misinterpretation of Christianity itself through processes of secularization. Girard referred to this modern process as "the rationalist expulsion of the religious." These processes continue that same work of demystifying/deconstructing the immoral sacrificial elements and dogma present in archaic understandings of religion, including the sacrificial misinterpretations of Christianity itself. Since Girard sees "the religious" as undergirding all of culture and politics, this accelerating dialogical process of emptying the centerpiece of archaic civilization, or religions based on Sacrificial Violence, is a tall order that fundamentally destabilizes societies. This dialogical destabilizing process in which the vestiges of archaic life are emptied of their transcendental significance is what Girard understands to be the primary characteristic of Modernity.

4. VICTIMOLOGY AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF SCAPEGOATING

Without the transcendent failsafe, modern societies must manage an existence within a dynamic tension. On the one hand, there are the deconstructive elements originating in historical Christianity, which have largely become unmoored from nominal Christianity as it exists today and are present in the major process of secularization (capitalism, liberalism, constitutional democracy, etc.). On the other hand, modern societies continue to be afflicted by the ever-resurfacing onto-anthropological tendency toward sacrificial violence, which finds new “rational” ways of justifying itself. While the diffusion of Christianity into cultures across the world has had some success in weakening the most explicit and violent sacrificial forms,²⁵ it has not cured humanity of the unsavory tendency to use violence “homeopathically” in the face of burgeoning mimetic chaos and disorder. For Girard, this remains a deeply rooted aspect of our onto-anthropological conditions as social, mimetic beings. Thus, if scapegoating is to resurface, it must do so covertly or find ways to justify itself. One of the ways this happens is when scapegoaters weaponize the knowledge of this concept to either play the victim as a means to justify their own scapegoating or they use their knowledge to assume the role of the morally righteous liberator whose defense of the “real victim” disguises their accusations and victimization which remain violent in aim. The starkest examples of this behavior have been observed in populist leaders/movements who play the victim²⁶ to justify their own scapegoating behavior. Returning to the January 6th example shows we see how Trump’s claims that he had won the 2020 election cast him as a victim of liberal media and the democratic parties that engaged in a widespread conspiracy to falsify the results of the election. However, these claims

²⁵ Nietzsche recognized how Christianity’s transvaluation of morals weakens the sacrificial expulsion of the objectively weak by internalizing and redirecting those sacrificial tendencies to the objectively strong.

²⁶ One may consider Hitler and the Nazi party, who claimed the status of Europe’s scapegoat following WW2, yet they simultaneously carried out the largest scapegoating atrocity in modern memory by systematically annihilating Europe’s Jewish population.

were outlandish in nature, much like the claims that the Jews had betrayed Germany and caused the loss of the First World War. Trump's claims of a stolen election pointed to no factual incidents that could support the theory of a widespread conspiracy to falsify the results. Despite this, his insistence on being the victim of a conspiracy and advocate of his loyal followers, as well his accusations against "the left" and "the fake news media," proved morally powerful enough to trigger a sense of righteousness in his supporters that—in their eyes—justified the insurrection.

These contemporary examples of scapegoating's ability to mask its own violence demonstrates that the knowledge of scapegoating initiated by historical Christianity has permeated deep into Western culture and morality. It also proves (to the chagrin of some Christians perhaps) that this knowledge alone does not motivate us to give up scapegoating entirely or to deconstruct how it appears in ourselves. In fact, partial awareness of scapegoating can make it more diabolically clever. We can become emboldened by our partial awareness of this mechanism to "rationally justify" its appearance in our behavior justifying our behavior with claims that we are simply "scapegoating the scapegoater," "fighting for social justice," or "dismantling the real oppressors." Like those who stormed the Capitol, we experience a feeling of real indignance when we convince ourselves that we have been victimized and scapegoated ourselves or that we are fighting for those who have been. Indeed, this can extend to the point that we no longer are able to see our own ruse in which we have cast ourselves as the victim as a means to undercut our mimetic competitors. Roel Kaptein explained well both the irony and treachery of our modern Girardian situation:

When we see other people scapegoating and blaming others, we despise it. However, in despising and loathing it we actually prove that we are not free of it ourselves. Instead, we show that we know all about it. Nevertheless, we continue to scapegoat and blame others, over and over again, without ever acknowledging what we are doing. Even while we are doing it, we remain absolutely certain that we ourselves are not scapegoating. We are sure that we are simply right! Given this situation, everything which is in this encliridion, indeed even everything which we learn from the gospels can be used to play the game of scapegoating, the game of culture, better. We can become even cleverer hypocrites thinking ourselves superior.²⁷ (Goodhart, Sandoor. *The Self and Other People*)

Paradoxically, these clever manifestations of scapegoating demonstrate the unparalleled and enduring moral impact that Girard's conception of Christian revelation continues to have on modern society. Today, scapegoating can only be justified if it is one degree removed from its primal manifestation, namely by weaponizing an awareness of scapegoating for its own sacrificial ends. Thus, Christianity/Modernity must have positively contributed to the reduction in the prevalence of its more archaic manifestations by making them morally untenable. However, intellectuals and critics often draw an opposing conclusion bemoaning the loss of the transcendent. Critics on the left claim, if anything, the post-Christian West is valueless and nihilistic and that our naïve faith has been transferred onto processes of secularization, while right leaning intellectuals are perturbed by what they perceive to be the moral relativism that follows a loss of faith and ostensibly threatens to degrade the West's cultural institutions. For all this consternation, however, both somehow overlook the fact that our intense preoccupation with understanding the morality or immorality of contemporary cultural institutions and modern secular outlooks is sufficient evidence of the fact that modern communities retain a deeper moral

²⁷ Goodhart, Sandoor. "The Self and Other People: Reading Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation with Rene Girard and Emmanuel Levinas". *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry*, Fall 2011.

orientation. Girard referred to this as an “absolute moral value” that he recognized in “the modern concern for victims.”

Certain strains of modern intellectualism have attempted to abandon or “overcome” the concern for the victim by returning to a more vital, sacrificial outlook, such as Nietzsche. Despite this, Girard asserts that “no one has achieved success in making it ‘outdated’...because it’s the only thing in our world that is not the creation of current fashion.”²⁸ And while this “modern concern for victims” continually reinvents itself in secular attitudes/forms like secular humanism or social justice, Girard’s lifelong project of reclaiming a Christian essentialism convincingly demonstrates its origins in Christianity (a claim even Nietzsche and post-Nietzschean’s do not refute). Unpacking this phrase “the modern concern for victims” again demonstrates the paradoxical nature of Christian revelation that Girard saw as a contingent or “modern” event that revealed an eternal moral truth about humankind. This refers, of course, to the modern recognition of sacrificial violence as violence and consequently the counter urge towards restoring victims unjustly condemned. However, in making the claim that our concern for liberating victims constitutes an absolute value, Girard did not so much highlight what constitutes a victim definitionally as he did offer a historical narrative recounting the origins of our modern moral phenomenology, explaining why we cannot help but see a world filled with victims and oppressors. Girard specified that the term “concern” or “care” for victims is meant to

²⁸ Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. pg. 173

be interpreted in this existentialist sense of “designating a permanent, unchangeable dimension of human existence.”²⁹

The concern for victims so thoroughly dominates the moral self-understanding that Christians and secular thinkers alike evaluate the morality of our societal norms and even the progress of humanity writ large based on how many victims have been liberated socially, economically, or politically. As Girard claimed,

Our society is the most preoccupied with victims of any that ever was. Even if it is insincere, a big show, the phenomenon has no precedent... (although) We can detect in the recent past the beginnings of this contemporary attitude, but everyday new records are broken. (Girard, *I See Satan...* 161)³⁰

What Girard pointed to here is how this “modern concern for victims” progressively exposes oppressive scapegoating. Furthermore, it shows how we must continually revise our moral understanding in light of siding with “the real victim” whenever political conflict emerges. A contemporary example of this is how the discourse around abortion is often distilled to the concept of the “weighing of victims.” One must choose between the unborn baby, sacrificed to the sensual desire and self-fulfillment of the mother, or the woman, whose self-determination (and possibly health) is intentionally sacrificed by anti-abortionists in the interests of religious or political beliefs to which she might not subscribe. Regardless of one’s opinion on the political issue, the moral judgement cast on the act of abortion must be justified based on one’s choice of the “real victim.”

²⁹ Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. pg. 171

³⁰ Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. pg. 161

The problem, of course, is that Girard offered no description or rational framework for understanding what exactly constitutes a real victim and how to identify them. He just claimed that the role of moral judgment within modern communities aligns with this fundamentally Christian conviction of siding with the “real victim” while simultaneously abstaining from the countervailing, protean danger of reverting to the mimetic and sacrificial modalities. However, he offered no roadmap, norms, or definitions, beyond a thorough reading of the Gospels, which could explain how those of us living in modern communities can ensure sound moral judgments. That said, he did clarify that avoiding slippages into sacrificial modalities remains a challenge in modern communities. Since the most blatant manifestations of sacrificial violence remain taboo (as it must not blatantly contradict the absolute value of our “concern for victims”), they can only remain operative in the weakened/covert manner in which the very knowledge of scapegoating is weaponized in order to justify its accusations and sacrifices. To reiterate, scapegoating can only (perhaps partially) be justified if one is scapegoating the scapegoater or if one is the victim of scapegoating themselves. However, such a justification does nothing to prevent the mimetic escalation of mutual accusation or the tension bound to occur when the political adversary perceives the hypocrisy of the scapegoating accusation made against them. After all, their competitor is performing the same action.³¹ We witness this seemingly endless cycle of accusation and blame in our modern political reality where the left possesses its victims (racial

³¹ Luke 6:41 And why do you look at the splinter that is in your brother's eye and not notice the beam that is in thy own eye? How can you say, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' while you yourself fail to see the beam in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the beam out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye....

and sexual minorities), who it weaponizes to scapegoat the right, which has their own victims (the law-abiding/hard-working everyman), who it weaponizes to scapegoat the left.

Girard was aware of this escalatory threat and its anthropological resolution in real violence/sacrifice. Indeed, it is the reason for his ambivalent relationship with aspects of modern progressivism that claim to represent the interests of society's victim's writ large. While he wholeheartedly agreed with the moral telos of seeking social justice for society's victims by advocating for their social or political liberation, he also sounded a warning against the cultural climate following World War II, during which he observed the rise of politically and revolutionarily motivated i.e., sacrificial movements. In his view, the goal of these movements was to usurp the Christian concern for victims under the banner of a "caricatural ultra-Christianity that tries to escape from the Judeo-Christian orbit by 'radicalizing' the concern for victims in an anti-Christian way".³² In his understanding, the events of the 20th century made the West's moral absolute (the "Christian" concern for victims) vulnerable to a "radicalized" or "paganized" usurper that "outflanks it from the left." It accomplishes this by challenging Christianity's status as the morally liberating force Girard believed it to be. Critics of Christianity, like the new Atheists, have a considerable amount of historical ammunition for their polemics against the religion, needing only to highlight the long list of atrocities carried out by the Church or by self-defined Christians as evidence of the violent and repressive nature of Christianity. Girard did not offer his interpretation of the catalog of these horrors (beyond the early scapegoating of the Jews), which include the inquisition, the crusades, forced conversion,

³² Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. pg. 179

support of colonization and slavery, and the Catholic Church's pedophilia scandal. The furthest he took this discussion was boiling it down to a fundamental misinterpretation of the anti-sacrificial essence of revelation. Further, Girard expressed suspicion that the content of these critiques is not what is not responsible for their rise in popularity. Thus, instead of addressing the content, he explained why the 20th and 21st centuries have seen a shaken belief in Christianity **as the vehicle** of modernity's moral concern for victims, which has been replaced with the belief that political, social, or revolutionary movements could fill this emancipatory role.

Girard's reasoning here focuses particularly on the catastrophic moral failure of the Holocaust, as it is the most glaring interruption of the general moral progress vis-a-vis the world's victims in the legacy of historical Christianity. Nazism and the Holocaust, as a relatively recent phenomenon, seemingly contradicted Girard's idea that the post-Christian world had managed to rid itself of, at least, the crudest and most primal forms of sacrificial violence. This would have "compell[ed] (Girard) to change his views or to make it the basis of (his) entire interpretation of the Genocide,"³³ but he chose the latter. In his analysis, the Holocaust represented the most explicit and intentional departure from the "concern for victims," and it had the paradoxical effect of both exaggerating "the modern concern for victims" to unprecedented levels while also demoralizing it. On the one hand, the unprecedented horrors of the holocaust were carried out with modern technology. This forced the entire world, including political institutions, which Girard considers worldly and sacrificial in nature, to reckon with the devastating potential of modern moral collapse/reversion into our crudest, most violent, and most sacrificial tendencies.

³³ Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. pg. 171

On the other hand, the magnitude of the horrors that were successfully carried out in favor of Nazism's blatantly sacrificial ideology avenged itself by successfully "demoralizing the concern for victims... (in a way that) turns this (intensified) concern into a kind of hysterical caricature" that baffles the search for the "real victim" among all who cry scapegoat. One effect of the 20th century's exaggeration of our need to uncover victims is that the search for the victim has become partially unmoored from the onto-anthropological sincerity/rationality of its origins in historical Christianity. The search for the "real-victim" has taken on a frenetic life of its own. This is the "hysterical caricature" or "caricatural ultra-Christianity" that Girard spoke of. It occurs when the real concern for revealing victims has become so unmoored from its anthropological/rational origins that it devolves into the manufacturing victims or their appropriation and repurposing for purposes of mimetic desire.

Unfortunately, our culture has had difficulty distinguishing between the sincere and unmoored search for the 'real victim' as it remains traumatized by the moral collapse of the 20th century, which has mired it in a reified victimology (distinct from its onto-anthropological grounding). In this new construct, perceptions of victimization are distorted to the degree that every new populist leader/political opponent becomes the next "Hitler" (and socialist the next Stalin/Mao) and every victimized group faces an existential crisis that must be rectified before they become victims of the next Holocaust. Once reified, victimology becomes blinded to any sincere or logical grounding and ultimately manufactures victims, which consequently makes the genuine concern for victims susceptible to proponents of sacrificial ideologies. In turn, these ideologies group the modern concern for victims into one category. Then, they either troll the insincerity of the enterprise as a whole or speculate about the existence of covert political agendas, propagating

dangerous conspiracy theories that threaten to undermine the discursive norms of politics. Nevertheless, the trolls are indirectly pointing to a real phenomenon: when unmoored from religious/rational sincerity, the concern for victims can easily become operationalized for the purposes of mimetic desire. *This can occur in any context*, a reality the left minimizes to their own peril as the right acutely perceives this and weaponizes the left's insincerity to great political advantage. Moreover, as long as victimology has a stranglehold on the current political, moral, and cultural discourse, the line between the modern social obligation to amplify and console the voices of those who cry scapegoat as a first principle—and our obligation to uphold the premises of our morally rational/sincere conceptions of community, like liberal democracy or religious communities with their focus on charity/service—will remain blurred. While the latter may not promise immediate “justice” for those who do cry scapegoat, it has historically offered real and lasting moral progress achieved without the violent tactics of revolution and moral crusade.

Unmoored from its anthropological and religious foundation, we believe that the obsessive drive to uncover victims and condemn worldly oppressors can ultimately manufacture/repurpose victims when convenient by manipulating our genuine cultural concern for victims and elevating distorted perceptions into accusations of real oppression. Many on the left consider this an inevitable but minor social problem of inauthenticity relative to the more direct attacks on the foundation of liberal democracy carried out by members of the alt-right. However, those who lean right consider the willingness to deconstruct the (classically liberal) premises of moral community or to unmoor them from their religious foundations to be engaging in a similarly devastating attack on moral community. They respond to these perceived attacks using those

same deconstructive tactics (often to far greater political effect) on the causes to which the left is dearly attached.

What I hope to underscore by returning to Girard is that understanding the proper cognitive grounding and anthropological premises as to why the care for victims constitutes the modern moral condition is indispensable to navigating the pernicious terrain of contemporary politics. Having good intentions alone vis-à-vis the world's victims is not enough because it makes us all (left and right) susceptible to what Girard referred to as a "pseudo-nihilism" that keeps us mired in victimology. It is a "**pseudo**" nihilism because it still retains a tacit absolute moral value, our modern concern for victims (and is thus not real nihilism), which has not been made "unfashionable" by the sacrificial ideologies that still remain. Despite this, we still perceive our modern moral condition as nihilistic because we are unable to agree on what or who the "real victim" is. This disagreement should prompt deep moral questions into our premises, intentions, and our own (potentially) unsavory anthropological tendencies. Instead, to our own detriment, we typically double down on our belief in our party, morals, and notions of who the "real victims" are such that those who disagree with us become the "Hitlers" and "Stalins" who push hidden sacrificial agendas.

Girard worried that without (his) onto-anthropological understanding of our tendencies to scapegoat, communities risk willfully conceding our obligation to uphold this sincere absolute value to worldly institutions and powers that sell us paganized and utopianistic agendas that promise to fulfill this for us. Such political agendas are designed to coopt our concern for victims

by prostituting their power, which is masqueraded as the revolutionary power that can fulfill our righteous moral convictions to hold the “real oppressors” accountable and restore the “real scapegoats” who have been unjustly condemned. These promises to rectify injustices and oppression carried out by the community always fail, however, insofar as institutions and political actors turn the community's intersubjective concern for victims into a strategic objective of political action. This, for lack of a better word, sacrifice of our sincere concern for victims is the heart of the pseudo-nihilism that afflicts us as we feel ourselves victims of the political desire to capitalize on what is best about us, our mercy and compassion, by selling us political adversaries as the scapegoats who render our goodwill impotent. Unfortunately, these politicians and institutions can never deliver on their promises of justice for victims, since politics is ultimately advanced through strategic, sacrificial agendas. In other words, political action is advanced by those who capitalize on rivalry, accusation, and, when the time comes, sacrifice. As Girard “shockingly and comprehensibly” stated at a 2012 conference on ‘Catastrophe and Conversion,’ “politics can no longer save us.” These shows of solidarity/justice displayed by our parties and politicians lack the meaning we imbue them if they are only operating as a surrogate to our own scapegoating. Even if we accept that this is what politics has become as part and parcel of a distorted “will to power” outlook, we must simultaneously accept that the shows of justice we subscribe to will ultimately just be fodder for political backlash from our adversaries. After all, all wins are temporary in zero-sum games.

Girard’s characterization of this encroachment of political institutions and actors into the domain of morality shows how modern politics can weaponize our concern for victims for its own sacrificial purposes. Left unchecked, scapegoating can become operationalized for the purposes

of mimetic desire to the extent that everyone casts themselves as a victim, albeit one to whom vengeance is due. This scenario results in a mimetic death spiral that threatens the very existence of the community. January 6th is the perfect example of how escalating mimetic tensions between two ideological factions have reached such an extreme that Donald Trump was able to push a baseless narrative that the Democrats had stolen the election. Since the entrenched resentment and mistrust was continuing to escalate, this otherwise outlandish claim was able to gain enough traction to trigger the archetypal scapegoating mob. This mob served its purpose of intentionally disrupting the peaceful transition of power and nearly overturning the election itself. The power Trump held that day did not originate from the office of the presidency, but rather from his crazed, loyal following who accepted both that Trump was the real victim of a stolen election as well as whatever scapegoat Trump deemed responsible for “stealing” the election. Trump’s power over his followers was his ability to weaponize their resentments and their mimetic rivalries to such a degree that they were willing to murder his own vice president.

5. RECONCILING HABERMAS AND GIRARD

A political reality in which the growing awareness of scapegoating and pity for victims leads to the sacrificial operationalization of these otherwise moral insights constitutes a crisis in need of philosophic and or normative resolution. Unfortunately, the religiously grounded and critical nature of Girard’s project was inherently skeptical of the notion that reason can guarantee a normative basis for making moral judgments that cannot themselves become weaponized for the purposes of sacrifice or mimetic desire. This persistence of the “Satanic,” as the sacrificial accuser, held Girard back from endorsing any philosophic or moral program beyond his

interpretative endorsement of the Bible. The lacuna of skepticism within Girard's moral framework is unavoidable because it is centered around his fundamental understanding of the nature of the scapegoat mechanism. The reason we cannot see our own scapegoating in action is due to the hidden nature of the mechanism itself. Once prompted by the viral power of mimetic contagion, a community's tension begins to converge on one victim, "making unshakeable false witnesses of all members of the entire community." This resolves itself in the victim mechanism that Girard described as automatically precluded from rational observations:

Contrary to all other phenomena, whose fundamental attribute is that of appearing (the word "phenomenon" comes from the Greek *phainesthai*: shine-forth, appear), the victim mechanism of necessity disappears behind the mythic meaning it produces. It is therefore paradoxical, exceptional, and unique as a phenomenon.³⁴

Along with the seductive (false) justification of myth, the unconscious and viral process of mimetic contagion constitutes a significant blind spot for social modalities of reason that hope to come to normatively grounded conclusions justifying moral action. While Girard relied on reason as a tool for justifying his critical and anthropological interpretation of the bible vis-a-vis the "mythic religions," his use of reason to make any moral judgement was limited to indirect endorsements of Biblical moral prescriptions and to interpretations of Christ's story as the archetypal victim who transcends this mechanism. In other words, Girard might have used reason to prove his theory. However, he *did not endorse reason's practical application in justifying norms through which a community might identify and discriminate between transgressions that qualify as scapegoating.* Without clear guidelines for how a critical/

³⁴ Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. 1999. pg. 187

theoretically informed community might create and adapt normative conclusions from their moral concern for victims, Girard's insights into human nature and our current cultural reality remain theoretically interesting but practically useless. This is especially true if one does not subscribe to the notion that faith in Girard's interpretation of Christ offers a form of grace allowing one to navigate the vagaries of the modern political and discursive landscape.

Extracting the practical, moral, and ethical relevance of Girard's scapegoating theory is complicated by the pre-rational nature of mimetic desire and scapegoating. For Girard, the allure of these primal mechanisms at their strongest always overpowers reason or, as previously mentioned, coerce reason into serving as the lawyer who crafts reasonable justifications for scapegoating or retaliation against mimetic competitors. Girard described the predicament of desire thusly: "Desire is always using for its own ends the knowledge it has acquired of itself; it places truth in the service of its own untruth, so to speak, always becoming better equipped to reject everything that surrenders to its embrace."³⁵ Scapegoating and mimetic desire do flaunt reason within Girard's theoretical apparatus, suggesting a certain theoretical incommensurability with the rational, communicative understanding of morality found in Habermas. However, this does not mean that Habermas' communicative understanding of morality (and his defense of liberal, constitutional democracy) would consider Girard's insights into scapegoating and mimetic desire practically useless.

³⁵ Girard, Rene. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. 1978. pg. 304

While Habermas' conception of liberal, constitutional democracy is not immune to scapegoating and escalating mimetic violence, in my view, his ideal of a discursive community predicated on communicative reason could still incorporate a liminal awareness of these pathological mechanisms and their devastating potential as the pre-discursive anthropological reality that liberal constitutional democracy must maintain itself against. Fully acknowledging the power of Girard's anthropologically grounded theory of mimetic desire and its resolution in scapegoating offers a bleak picture of human nature and our prospects as political beings. It makes liberal constitutional democracy, and in turn Habermas' notion of an ideal discursive community, a comparatively attractive model for resolving political issues (non-violently) and integrating the community in a healthy manner. Thus, I believe that borrowing Girard's religiously grounded but realistic understanding of man's fallen state will help secular, liberal communities replenish their normative attachment to a Habermasian conception of liberal constitutional democracy as a reflection of our best effort to cultivate an ideal discursive community grounded in communicative rationality. To merely borrow the affective symbols and narratives of Christianity, as Habermas suggests, is a superficial attempt to reinforce the binding nature of religiously grounded, collective moral ideals. Indeed, this overlooks how and why these rich symbols possess such motivational force. As Girard's interpretation shows, the motivating force behind these symbols and narratives of Christianity originates in their historically grounded, dialectical deconstruction of deeply rooted onto-anthropological mechanisms for controlling human violence. As an advantage for Habermas, Girard clarified that the knowledge of these mechanisms does not rely on the belief in the transcendent Christian God, and even going so far as to praise some of the processes of secularization. Girard took this position about the processes that he viewed as retaining the "ethical kernel" of Christianity insofar as they are concerned with

genuinely removing sacrificial violence from our institutions and culture. Consequently, Girard's uniquely post-metaphysical understanding of Christianity can offer Habermas' perspective the **strong**, anthropologically grounded narrative for maintaining our commitments to liberal democracy without the downside of threatening the de facto legitimacy of secular theories of justice within liberal democracies.

It is worth mentioning, however, that Girard believes his understanding of Christianity in general, and the Bible in particular, continue to offer the best means of living a moral life in the modern world. He found that the anti-sacrificial moral message of Christianity reaches its most dynamic and complex expression in the pre- and extra-discursive rituals, taboos, and archetypal narratives practiced by Christian individuals and communities. For Girard, these practices encode communities with the ultimate normative standard of non-violence that he understands to be the condition of possibility for the ethical, communicative notions of modern secular community for which Habermas advocates. While Habermas is not member to the group of camp of moral philosophers that wishes to abandon the practice of religion or those who believe we can *easily* secularize all its relevant moral content, his longstanding preoccupation with the emancipatory possibility of communication and secular social rationality often places the cart before the horse demonstrating how communicative action and a well-functioning discursive ethics are intrinsically oriented toward cooperative or moral behavior rather than recognizing that the moral commitments of individuals to discourse (instead of violence and force) serve as the precondition of a healthy functioning communicative/discursive community. That said, Habermas is right that the latter can certainly reinforce the former.

Besides the ideal normative standard of unrestrained discourse, Habermas offers no substantive absolute moral standard for his conception of community—such as the one found in Girard’s notion of an anti-sacrificial absolute value that at least defines the modern moral condition. By leaving the substantive moral telos of free and consensual communication itself undefined, or, in other words, by making free and consensual communication the moral telos itself, Habermas believes he outmaneuvers the possibility that the community as a free and self-determining, and thus reasonable, entity might still come to morally dubious conclusions, such as agreeing to commit acts of violence on individuals or groups for the best interest of the whole. Conceptually, this works because having his normative standard exist as an ideal (of consensual and undominated communication) allows him to avoid contradicting his theory when real liberal democracies become mired in social pathologies and violence that prevent them from living up to the standard of their collectively binding ideals. And, while describing the gap between the persistent, pathological political discourse within many liberal, constitutional democracies and his ideal of a discursive community can offer a basis for critiquing the real worsening conditions of discourse in liberal democracies, this does not in itself give a sufficient motivational reason, grounded in a collective moral ideal, for arresting and reversing these pathologies before they reach their ultimate, (il)logical endpoint in physical violence.

The events of January 6th should glaringly demonstrate the pressing need to recognize the saliency of these Girardian mechanisms, how they play out in contemporary politics, and how they threaten liberal constitutional democracy. In the wake of January 6th, many Habermasian explanations pointed to the deterioration of discourse leading up to the insurrection. These included examples of how Trump violated the norms of civil discourse and encouraged his

followers to do the same, how social media and news media peddled divisive content to attract viewers, and how our public education system is not teaching children critical thinking skills or the value of ethics and governance. All of these are valid critiques of the contemporary conditions that bred this specific violent mob on January 6th and yet, in focusing on the conditions themselves, they neglect the ugly, human truth of the violence. That is, since time immemorial, the violent lynch mob has resurfaced as communities' "solution" in times of crisis by directing the accumulation of rivalries and tensions onto a scapegoat. For Girard, the mob is the representation of archaic violence par excellence, forming quickly around emerging scapegoats. In turn, the violence it inflicts on these scapegoats provides it with a sense of bonding and common purpose. Let me conclude with what a Girardian analysis can offer when examining January 6th.

The year leading up to the election was the tensest and most politically fraught in most of our lifetimes. A nationwide pandemic had ravaged the world, further dividing an otherwise polarized country over its failure to collectively commit to a robust public health response. Protests, and in some cases violent ones, erupted all over the country as a response to instances of police brutality against Black Americans, leading to rivalrous counter protests claiming to protect the police and small businesses threatened by looting and violence. All these tensions and rivalries set the stage for one of the most consequential elections in US history, with the competing parties' nominees each weaponizing the fears of their bases by pinning their opponent as the ultimate scapegoat responsible for the chaotic situation the country found itself in. As history has shown, the results of the election did not settle the rivalry. In the footage from that fateful day of January 6th, we saw thousands of Trump supporters directing all their outrage on Mike Pence,

who quickly emerged as the scapegoat of a lynch mob that proceeded to storm the capitol in an attempt to kill him and Democratic congresspeople. The arbitrariness of the victims who emerged that day, including Trump's own VP, the Capitol Police (who Trump supporters were more likely to defend), and the more predictable Democratic scapegoats, show that this was not a calculated decision. Rather, it was an escalating mimetic phenomenon in which the violence directed at the scapegoats was increasingly perceived by the mob as a patriotic rebellion against a fixed election. The mob was so certain they were carrying out justice that they crushed overpowered police officers, branding them traitors and stealing their weapons. Blinded by their sense of righteousness, the mob failed to see that they were guilty of the same crime they falsely accused their scapegoats of committing: attempting to overturn the results of an election.

Read together, Girard's scapegoat theory can offer Habermas' conception of liberal democracy a narrative structure explaining what triggers these seemingly unlikely situations of mob violence and how they ultimately resolve through perennial mechanisms of human violence. I believe that incorporating an understanding of mimetic desire, scapegoating, and the operationalization of mimetic desire for the purpose of scapegoating into the social rationality of communicative ethics will offer communicative actors an additional cognitive tool for understanding the limits of discourse vis-à-vis humanities onto-anthropological tendencies towards sacrifice and expulsion. In my opinion, this will work to strengthen citizens' moral and emotional commitments to the discursive practices of liberal constitutional democracy. Effectively incorporating Girard's seemingly divergent strand of religio-theoretical thought into the rational apparatus of Habermas' communicative rationality is a tall order. Indeed, we have barely scratched the surface of what such a project would entail in terms of revealing and reconciling

the conceptual and theoretical ambiguities that arise from their distinct conceptions of community, secularization, and the “post-metaphysical.” However, I hope this paper shows that a dialogue between the two can offer Habermas’ powerful concept of social reason a better understanding of otherwise “irrational” pathological mechanisms that represent a threat to the pursuit of its ideals. This knowledge equips Habermasian defenders of liberal constitutional democracy with stronger motivations to abate the encroaching escalatory political rivalries, scapegoating, and operationalization of scapegoating. It is crucial that we accomplish this before we relapse into the archaic scenes of violence that, with the addition of modern technology, constitute an existential threat to our communities and survival.

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