Reassessing Anselm on Divine Wrath and Judgment: A Girardian Approach for Mennonite Atonement Theology

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Introduction

This article seeks to build upon recent reassessments of Anselm for Mennonite atonement theology.[1] I hope to address the biblical themes of divine wrath and judgment by way of a Girardian reading of Anselm's *Why God Became Man* (*Cur Deus Homo*).[2] There is a certain irony to my approach. As Tom Yoder Neufeld notes in *Killing Enmity*,[3] those most deeply critical of Anselm are often influenced by the critiques of sacrifice and redemptive violence offered by Girard. The reading developed here, however, employs a Girardian optics of the victim to analyze the prevailing Anabaptist/Mennonite reception of Anselm and his arguments. Analyzing our reading of *Cur Deus Homo* through Girard should heighten our sensitivity to our own desire to strike a path to a new future by deploying a violent hermeneutic when reading Anselm. Allowing Girardian empathy for victims to reach its full measure means giving them a voice. So I will use Girardian techniques of literary analysis to illuminate disavowed trajectories in Anselm, particularly

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[1] See especially Rachel Reesor-Taylor, "Anselm's Cur Deus Homo For a Peace Theology: On the Compatibility of Non-Violence and Sacrificial Atonement" (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2007).

[2] Anselm, "Why God Became Man," in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies, G.R. Evans, and Janet Fairweather (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 260-356. All references to this work are by book and chapter number.

[3] Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 83.

those highlighting problematic tendencies in Girard that Anabaptists and Mennonites nonetheless find attractive.

Girard's "Anti-soteriology" and Critique of Sacrificial Christianity

For René Girard, human desire is mimetic: we pattern our desire upon the desires of others. This leads to rivalry and violence; we each seek to possess our rival's object of desire, which we value because the other values it. Mimetic conflict slowly spreads and escalates until both rivals grasp for a supreme violence. Each rival believes wielding this violence will end the conflict, but it actually threatens to destroy the entire community. At a crisis point, however, a sacrificial victim emerges who appears to both rivals as the *true* cause of the mimetic conflict. Both rivals redirect their violence onto the victim, and the community, formerly fractured by rivalry, is reunified as a sacrificial mob arrayed against the victim. This is how the "scapegoat mechanism" secures peace, according to Girard.

After the sacrifice, the community mythologizes the sacrificial event. Everyone agrees that the victim committed crimes, transgressed divinely-instituted limits, and thereby called divine wrath down upon himself or herself. This serves to justify sacrifice; each community member says, "Our violence is pure, a manifestation of divine violence." Girard summarizes: "the sacred is the sum of human assumptions resulting from collective transferences focused on a reconciliatory victim at the conclusion of a mimetic crisis."[4] He calls the sacrificial economy that manages violence in this way the "primitive sacred."[5]

Girard argues that Jesus took the place of the victim in this sacrificial drama in order to reveal the brokenness of the mythic sacred. Securing true peace through violence is impossible. Jesus reveals the innocence of the victim and the blindness of the persecuting mob, and the Passion reveals it is human violence, not divine, that orders the victim's death. Rather than a mythic soteriology in which the substitution of the sacrificial victim saves the community, Girard offers what commentator Patrick Kirwan calls an

[4] René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1987), 42.

[5] René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), 43.

"anti-soteriology";[6] Girard shows that the Passion and the Gospels enable an escape from the drive to sacrifice and from the blindness that drives us to mythologize. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard asserts that there is "nothing in the Gospels to suggest that the death of Jesus is a sacrifice, whatever definition (expiation, substitution, etc.) we may give for that sacrifice."[7]

Nonetheless, Christianity has often become one more sacrificial religion. In *Things Hidden*, Girard argues that a sacrificial reading of Jesus' death begins in the Epistle to the Hebrews. He goes on to say that it is "most completely formulated [by] the medieval theologians . . . it amounts to the statement that the Father himself insisted upon the sacrifice."[8] He specifically mentions the idea that God "feels the need to revenge his honour."[9] Thus, while not naming Anselm specifically, Girard undoubtedly envisions him as among the architects of medieval Christendom's sacrificial Christianity. For him, Christendom is a culture "based, like all cultures (at least up to a certain point) on the mythological forms engendered by the founding mechanism,"[10] and he suggests it would not have been possible without the sacrificial reading of the crucifixion.

In *The Scapegoat*[11] Girard describes the criteria guiding the jaundiced vision of the sacrificial mob in its moment of crisis. The mob will accuse the victim of having committed order-destroying crimes that brought God's wrath upon the community. The victim will possess characteristics making him or her a favorable target for violence; he will be marked, like Oedipus, with a limp,[12] or she will be a marginal insider, like the foreign-born queen Marie Antoinette, who was alleged to have committed the order-destroying crime of incest.[13] Above all, the sacrifice of the victim cannot elicit a violent response. It must function cathartically, releasing the community from captivity to violence.

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[6] Michael Kirwan, SJ, "Being Saved From Salvation: René Girard and the Victims of Religion," *Communio Viatorum* 52, no. 1 (2010): 30.
[7] Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 180.
[8] Ibid., 182.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 181.
[11] Girard, *The Scapegoat*. See especially Chap. 2.
[12] Ibid., 25.
[13] Ibid., 20.

In his works Girard vacillates between two descriptions of his own role in articulating the scapegoat mechanism. At some moments his articulation of this mechanism is his own epoch-making discovery. He describes it this way most often when attempting to show how mimetic theory outstrips Freud and Freud's psychoanalytic theory;[14] so one might conjecture that this tendency is itself a mimetic phenomenon. At other moments Girard describes himself as simply unfolding what was always already present in Jesus' action of taking the victim's place and in the Gospels' identification of the victim as innocent.[15] Girard seems most tempted to perform a kind of hermeneutical violence upon Anselm and the other unnamed medieval theologians when he wants to claim the scapegoat mechanism as his discovery. He clearly wants to support those seeking to build a culture sensitive to the temptation to make scapegoats. But if demonstrating the exigency of this task tempts him to make scapegoats, surely those of us who take up this task are equally tempted. This suggests we ought to be highly circumspect about our treatment of those in our midst—and our memory of those in our history—who could become our victims.

Anselm as a Stumbling Block for Anabaptists and Mennonites

For many Mennonites, Anselm is at best a marginal insider within the Christian tradition. He was an archbishop, a member of the episcopacy which the Anabaptists rejected. His *remoto Christo* ("without reference to Christ") style of argument could be seen as a hobbling step assisted by a proto-Scholastic logical cane. In arguing that the reward due Christ for his service flows instead to the rest of humankind (II, 19), Anselm appears to split soteriology and ethics in the fashion typical of Constantinian Christendom theology. Most troubling of all, he seems to contend that "Jesus' death was necessary in order to satisfy the offended honor of God"[16] (to use a typical formulation). For many, this demonstrates the extent to which Anselm's God is precisely an instance of Girard's "primitive sacred"; this God demands that human blood be spilled before he will be propitious toward humankind.

[14] Consider especially Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, book III.

[15] Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 163.

[16] J. Denny Weaver, "Narrative Christus Victor: The Answer to Anselmian Atonement Violence," in *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*, ed. John Sanders (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 3.

Girard argues in *Things Hidden* that "this line of reasoning has done more than anything else to discredit Christianity in the eyes of people of goodwill in the modern world."[17] So, Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians charged with creating a culture of peace find themselves asking, would we not be better off excluding Anselm from our canon? Does he not bring divine wrath down upon himself?

Scapegoats can mean well and still become guilty. Girard's go-to example is Oedipus,[18] who only means to save Thebes from the plague and the Sphinx. Many would locate Anselm's error in the hubris of *Cur Deus Homo*, arguing that Anselm overreaches in trying to "delete the devil"[19] from the soteriological picture and removing reference to Christ in his specificity with the *remoto Christo* style of argument. Indeed, these are precisely the points at which Anselm appears to depart from a biblical theological style and from a narrative approach to metaphysics. For Mennonites suspicious of such "methodologism,"[20] this is his order-destroying crime. That the style of argument in *Cur Deus Homo* seems to suggest it offers the *final* or the *normative* treatment of the issue only makes it more worrying for those who, like Mark Baker,[21] want to highlight the diversity within scriptural atonement imagery.

Taking Anselm off the Altar

The Girardian impulse can, however, drive us to rehabilitate our memory of Anselm, and to wonder "whether the actual text of *Cur Deus Homo* has not been lost to view, behind the welter of adverse judgments brought to bear on it."[22] Reference to the actual text quickly reveals how provisional and contextually adapted are its formulations. Indeed, Anselm states (in I: 18)

[17] Girard, *Things Hidden*, 182.

[18] A representative and brief example of Girard's usage of Oedipus is found in *The Scapegoat*, 25-29.

[19] Weaver, "Narrative Christus Victor," 7.

[20] John Howard Yoder, "Walk and Word: The Alternatives to Methodologism," in *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey C. Murphy, and Mark Nation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 77-90.

[21] Mark D. Baker, "Go and Do Likewise," in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 187-90.

[22] D. Bentley Hart, "A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*," *Pro Ecclesia* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 340.

that his argument is "not to be accepted as having any validity beyond the fact that it seems for the moment to be [valid]." He even stipulates that his work is offered in response to "your questioning." He demonstrates much greater awareness[23] of the origins of the logical premises with which he operates than is typically assumed. For this reason, those who claim he is arguing on a "strictly logical" basis for an audience of "logical persons" misread him[24] as badly as those who claim he is illegitimately relying upon medieval political concepts and juridical norms acceptable only to medieval Normans.[25]

To better understand Anselm's contextually adapted mode of argument, we should take another cue from a Girardian hermeneutic: we should remove the victim from the sacrificial altar and restore him to membership in the community—even *or especially* if this reveals our own tendencies to violence. To this end I suggest we read *Cur Deus Homo* as contributing to an effort in which we can make common cause with Anselm, namely missiology. All missional theology carefully considers its audience and involves incarnational witness. Anselm identifies his audience: he writes for his Christian students like Boso. But he also writes for those whom they encountered, especially the *infideles* (commonly translated as "unbelievers" —see I: 3, 4, 6, 8), and *paganos* (commonly translated as "pagans"—see II: 22). There are good reasons to believe, however, that by *infideles* Anselm specifically means Jews[26]—those who do not believe in Jesus as Messiah—and that the *paganos* were Muslims[27] whose tents surrounded Anselm when he was exiled in Capua in 1098, the year of this work's publication.[28] Indeed,

[23] David Brown summarizes Karl Barth's claim on this awareness: "Anselm's premises were all in any case implicitly derived from revelation." David Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 283. Brown is referring to Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, trans. Ian W. Robertson (London: SCM Press, 1960), 55-57.

[24] Despite her status as one of the best contemporary Anselm scholars, G.R. Evans helps to perpetuate an anachronistic reading that views Anselm's choice of methodology through the lens of Scholasticism when she describes Anselm as having "chosen the hardest route so as to gain the proof which will convince the largest number of people." G.R. Evans, *Anselm* (London: Continuum, 2001), 72.

[25] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 192.

[26] Evans, *Anselm*, 71.

[27] This is Brown's estimation as well. See Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 283.

[28] Eadmer, *History of Recent Events in England*, trans. Geoffrey Bosanquet (Philadelphia:

at the very conclusion of *Cur Deus Homo*, Boso states explicitly that it is Jews and pagans that Anselm's argument should "satisfy" (II: 22). When this context is kept in mind, the danger of attempting to summarize Anselm's work in, say, thirteen logical points[29] becomes apparent.

Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* is a rhetorical performance designed to win over those who believe that the divine-human relation admits of a quasi-legal and quasi-economic construal, and that "atonement is possible without an incarnation"[30]—as Jews and Muslims do. Anselm thus writes with biblical and Abrahamic concepts in mind—sin, grace, expiation, and redemption—and with biblical and Abrahamic images of God in mind, because he knows he holds these categories and images in common with his interlocutors.

In Girardian fashion, then, we should attend to the mimetic effects Anselm intends his text to generate. In I: 1 he says he adopts the dialogical style because it aids understanding. But it also aids the work's missiological purpose: "Anselm presumes a rapprochement between believers and unbelievers predicated on the desire for understanding."[31] In the dialogue, Boso becomes a *mimetic model* for Anselm's students and for his interlocutors. Anselm hopes that, by imitating Boso, his students would fulfill their desire to strengthen their faith with understanding. He also hopes that the "unbelievers" and "pagans" will pattern their desire after Boso's. For Boso has become, like them, one requiring demonstration. Anselm hopes that when these others observe (following the dialogue in Book I)[32] that Boso has not become unreasonable when he recognizes the need for the God-

Dufour, 1965), 101. See also F.B.A. Asiedu, "Anselm and the Unbelievers: Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Cur Deus Homo," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 530-48.

[29] R.W. Southern, *St. Anselm: Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 206.

[30] Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 283.

[31] Asiedu, "Anselm and the Unbelievers: Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Cur Deus Homo," 536.

[32] There are two key divisions in the logical structure of Anselm's text. At I: 11 Anselm adopts the *remoto Christo* style in its most rigorous form for the rhetorical purpose I have outlined. With the beginning of the second book (II: 1) he again refers to the fittingness of the atonement presented in scripture, though in veiled terms. His belief that the second part of Book I should convince those who do not believe in Jesus as messiah that an incarnation is necessary for atonement is the key to the logic underpinning the shift in Book II toward more open discussion of Christ in his specificity.

man even apart from scripture, they might also pattern their desire upon his. They might then come to see (following the dialogue in Book II) that Jesus' coming and fulfilling righteousness is also "fitting" in an aesthetic sense.

Far from being a matter of mere pedagogical convenience, then, the dialogical style of *Cur Deus Homo* is crucial to its witness. While we may say that the "incarnational" aspect of its witness is undercut by the fact that Boso can only be a character in the dialogue, he actually was a student of Anselm's, someone with whom "unbelievers" and "pagans" could have conversed. In Girardian terms we may say that by writing this text as a dialogue, Anselm avails himself of a positive mimetic effect.[33] In *Cur Deus Homo*, Boso becomes marginal to the Christians for a missional purpose—so that these others could be drawn into fellowship with those saved by Christ.

A Missiological Objection

It may be objected that Anselm approaches missiology wrongly. The objection contends that Judaism and Islam may not adequately address the question of atonement—which Anselm identifies in I: 25: "how God saves mankind, when he does not forgive a person for his sin if the person in question does not give back what he owes on account of that sin." Instead of claiming that Christian doctrine has an answer to this question, the objection continues, Anselm should have pointed out that it is not a Christian question to begin with! The Christian God is a God of grace, not legalism. Anselm concedes too much to his legally-oriented and sacrificially-minded interlocutors, and distorts the Gospel as a result. His missiological purpose may make his use of legal and sacrificial frameworks understandable, but his articulation of the atonement remains problematic.

To answer the objection, I return to the themes of wrath and judgment in Anselm. By tracing his logic to its origin in scripture we can see how he redefines law and sacrifice as he explains the operation of grace.

In the New Testament as in the Old, divine wrath is poured out upon those who sin. Anselm's apparent innovation is to claim that God's wrath is poured out because sin revokes God's honor (I: 12). A true or total revocation

[33] On the concept of positive mimesis, see Rebecca Adams and René Girard, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion & Literature* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 25-27.

of it is impossible, however, since "nothing can be added to, or subtracted from the honour of God, *in so far as it relates to God himself*" (I: 15). The sinner rather "dishonours God, *with regard to himself*,[34] since he is . . . disturbing . . . the order and beauty of the universe" (I: 15). The distinction is between the inward, inviolable honor of God and an outward honor owing to God in virtue of God's simultaneously just and gracious ordering of the universe. These two kinds of honor map quite perfectly onto the biblical language of "glory" found, for example, in Psalm 8:1: God's inward glory is set inviolably "above the heavens" and God's outward glory is displayed for all creatures as "majestic . . . in all the earth."

By sinning, the sinner disturbs the directness with which the created order testifies to God's glory. Anselm uses a series of metaphors in explaining the "unfittingness" of sin. All of them trade on the asymmetry between divine justice in creating and maintaining order, and human injustice in disturbing it, an asymmetry that features prominently in God's responses to Job out of the whirlwind (Job 38:2ff). God gives the gift of a capacity for blessed happiness. But when the sinner[35] seizes it for himself, God revokes it and thereby points both to the fact that the gift was given and to the way it may be properly enjoyed (I: 14). Anselm argues that God created human beings such that they find fulfillment in contributing to the beautiful order of creation through obedience. When they are disobedient and fail to find their place in this order, they thus find themselves unfulfilled—even "subjected to torment" (I: 14) by God in and by their disobedience.

That disobedience elicits wrath is not evidence of a God who is vindictive or who demands retribution in maintaining a heavenly sacrificial economy. On the contrary, wrath "regulates" sin (I: 14) for the benefit of humankind. If God's wrath did not do so, God's character would be like that of the capricious pagan gods who are unconcerned with human righteousness, punishing or pardoning on a whim. If God's wrath did not regulate sin, this would strip human beings of a moral resource for reorientation to their true

[34] Emphases added.

[35] The proximity of the reference to Job may suggest I am insinuating that God allowed him to suffer because of unrighteousness on Job's part. It is not my intent to be a latter-day version of one of Job's friends! It bears mentioning, however, that by suffering the revocation of his blessed happiness, Job demonstrates how far this blessedness consists in loving God for God's own sake, and Job's righteousness testifies to God's glory.

fulfillment. The experience of alienation from God functions as evidence that one has opted out of God's good order.

Justice, conceived abstractly does not *require* God's creative act, nor does it require God's command to obey. But both are given as gifts of divine grace. And to these gifts a third must be added, namely Christ's obedience, which reveals the path to salvation for humankind. That this is an order of grace and gift rather than of law and economy becomes clear when we read separately the parable from II: 16 and the (openly scripturally-dependent) description of Christ's service from II: 18. The king from II: 16 is so pleased by the hero's act that he enacts a law which pardons *everyone*, living or dead, past or present, in view of that act. What human law is like this? One could claim that, humanly considered, such a king would look ridiculous and indulgent of his people. Despite the obvious limitations of the metaphor, it underscores the kenotic nature of the Trinitarian acts of incarnation and atonement.[36] Likewise, as we see in II: 18, it is humanly impossible to reckon one infinity against another. The impossibility of this "calculation" thus forestalls the formulation of a mechanistic economy of salvation rather than enabling it. Indeed, in inventing the concept that commentators have called "supererogatory service," wherein the infinite worth of the God-man's service paradoxically exceeds the infinite debt into which humankind has fallen through sin, Anselm shows how divine grace cannot be reduced to a human calculation.

Rather than offering explanatory theories "acceptable [only] to the medieval mind"[37] in Book II, Anselm is grappling *a posteriori* with the actuality of the atonement: God, the author of necessity, saw this course as fitting for the salvation of humankind. *Cur Deus Homo* manages to describe how Christ's sinlessness gives his work the quality of being *beyond* any that could be performed by any other human being, even as Christ nonetheless remains exemplary in performing it. In pursuing righteousness even unto death Christ shows that obedience involves loving God for God's own sake—which is true for all members of his race. This allows Christ's life to be ethically informative even as, beyond this, it can be described as uniquely

[36] On the kenotic dimension of these Trinitarian acts, see especially Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: The Action*, vol. 4., trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).

[37] Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 182.

offered *for* or *on behalf of* humankind. It is this quality that allows Christ's sacrifice of obedience to be a sacrifice "once, for all" (Hebrews 9:27), and this is fitting if that sacrifice is to resist historicization and to remain the unassailable model for all who would be his disciples.

Empty Cross: Empty Altar

In a 1993 interview Girard was asked to reconsider his treatment of the book of Hebrews in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. In that interview he offers the following:

> I say at the end of *Things Hidden* . . . that the changes in the meaning of the word 'sacrifice' contain a whole history, religious history, of mankind. So when we say 'sacrifice' today inside a church . . . we mean something which has nothing to do with primitive religion. . . . So I scapegoated Hebrews, and I scapegoated the word 'sacrifice'—I assumed it should have some kind of constant meaning, which is contrary to the mainstream of my own thinking.[38]

Girard admits that his impulse to make a scapegoat of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and to expel the very term "sacrifice" from the Christian lexicon arose within the context of what could be called missiological pressures. But this does not mean we should simply discard *Things Hidden*. Rather it shows we should repent of the messiness that inevitably arises when we, in a similar fashion, find ourselves speaking languages "mixed together helter-skelter,"[39] and we should work patiently to name the distortions we discover. It is when we become too convinced we have transcended scapegoating that we end up making scapegoats. This also means that as a point of theological method, we should offer the same generosity that we offer Girard to our marginal insider Anselm, and to those who continue to use his atonement language of satisfaction.

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[38] Adams and Girard, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," 29.
[39] Yoder, "Walk and Word: The Alternatives to Methodologism," 81.