Violence undone: James Alison on Jesus as forgiving victim

Cover Story in the September 5, 2006 issue

James Alison has lectured and taught throughout the U.S., the United Kingdom and Latin America. His books, which include The Joy of Being Wrong, Fragments Catholic and Gay *and* Raising Abel, *are strikingly original in presenting central Christian claims as well as deeply engaged with the Catholic theological tradition. His book* Undergoing God *will be published this fall. The Century talked to him about sin and violence, and God's way of overcoming them through the "nonrivalrous" life and death of Jesus.*

Your first book was an examination of original sin—not, for most people, a topic connected with joy. But the title of the book is *The Joy of Being Wrong*. What joy is associated with original sin?

It's the joy of not having to get things right. The doctrine means that we are all in a mess, no one more or less than anyone else, and we can trust the One who is getting us out of the mess, who starts from where we are. If it were not for the doctrine of original sin, which follows from the resurrection—just as a parting glance at who we used to be follows from seeing ourselves as we are coming to be—we would be left with a religion requiring us to "get it right," and that is no joy at all.

How does original sin follow from the resurrection?

In the resurrection of Jesus we learn definitively that being human is not a "being toward death." Humans are brought into being for something much more than that, and biological finitude is merely one of the contours proper to this sort of created being—which is to say, one of the contours making it possible for this sort of created being to share in a life and a glory quite beyond our making. In the light of the resurrection we can look back and see how up to then the whole pattern of living had been cast in terms of death and its associated fears.

How does original sin characteristically manifest itself?

It manifests itself as a grasping on to security and identity by depending on death—that of others and oneself—to give one's life meaning. This can take the form of rushing "heroically" toward death, fleeing from it or brandishing it. There are almost an infinite number of ways of seeking fake security. Typically but mistakenly, we regard this grasping as intrinsic to being human ("it's human nature"), rather than as a sad distortion of that being.

You've thought a good deal about the place of violence in social and religious life and have made use of the work of René Girard on the formative power of violence. Could you state briefly how Girard's work has been helpful to you as a theologian?

First, Girard has made alive the work of the cross—how Jesus gave himself up to a typical human lynching so as to undo the world of violence and sacrifice forever. Second, Girard, through his understanding of the mimetic nature of desire, has made it possible to glimpse the nonrivalrous nature of God, and thus to understand the life of grace as one entirely without "ifs and buts." Third, Girard has given me back the Bible as something I can read. His elucidations of scripture are utterly luminous and fecund. Finally, he has made available an understanding of all the major themes of theology—an understanding that is resolutely anthropological (without reducing everything to anthropology). That is, his theological themes always make sense at the level of human relations.

How does Christ's death undo the world of violence?

Imagine the power, serenity and spaciousness of someone who, because he is not driven by fear of death, is able to undergo an absolutely typical lynch death at human hands and to do so deliberately—and by doing so show that rather than death being definitive and powerful, it is no more than a frightening mirage. This completely calls the bluff of the lynch death, enabling humans to be less driven by fear and the need to do such things. It is difficult to get a clearer image of someone showing both the immensity of his power and the completely nonrivalrous nature of that power.

Is scapegoating (or "mobbing," as sociologists call it) a persistent feature of social life?

Of course, scapegoating and mobbing are present in all societies. Any of us can think of incidents from the playgrounds or the office, as well as larger-scale incidents

like riots and lynching. My concern is with the structure of scapegoating that is less visible and arises in the way we define ourselves by contrast with others, who then become “evil” and as such are necessary for our self-understanding and our security. It is this structure, which often underlies our “goodness” and our “order,” which over time becomes more violent and destructive than “quick-flash mobbing,” terrible though that is. And worst of all, we become incapable of being self-critical in regard to our complicity. It is easy to look at mobbing and think: how primitive those people are. It is much more difficult to catch oneself being complicit in exactly the same forms of violence disguised in the values of “religion” or “family” or “civilization.”

For Girard, desire is an important category—he’s interested in what people desire and how they come to desire what they desire. Apparently you see desire also as a very traditional theological category. How does thinking about desire help us think about the Christian life?

Girard’s insight is that we learn to desire through the desire of others, by observing what they desire. This means that our self is something which is very malleable and comes into being from what other people give us over time, starting from our infancy. From this insight we can learn about the transformation of desire—which is what we mean by conversion—from something which is both imitative and acquisitive (over against the other) to something which is imitative but nurturing of the other.

It is one thing to discover the value of something because someone else has it, and then, in order to acquire it for oneself and become the only person to have it, to deprive the other person of it by stealing it. It is another thing to learn the value of something because someone else has it, and then to become the sort of person who makes it possible for more and more people to have that thing by spreading the news of its value, perhaps, or even reproducing it in ways that make it more accessible to others.

In other words, through the transformation of desire we learn how loving our neighbors is in fact the only real way to love ourselves. The centrality for the Christian faith of being possessed by the Spirit that is Holy—the completely nonrivalrous desire from God, which is to say Another who doesn’t displace us but makes us alive—becomes much clearer with this understanding.

Girard is famous for exposing the way a “scapegoating mechanism” works in culture and religion—something he thinks Christianity was the first to expose. Yet when Christians talk about Jesus’ death they often use some form of scapegoat language: Jesus died for our sins, for example, or Jesus bore our sins. In other words, he really was a scapegoat—and this was a good thing. Can Christians escape invoking the scapegoat mechanism?

That Jesus died for our sins, or bore our sins, is the exact truth. And it is made comprehensible precisely because the one who was considered guilty was shown to be entirely innocent.

Our difficulty with the language is that it is much easier for us to imagine Jesus being offered to the Father as a sacrifice, or indeed the Father getting Jesus to offer himself as a sacrifice to the Father, than to imagine the exact reverse: Jesus being empowered by the Father to stand in the place of a typical sacrificial victim of ours—God sacrificing himself to us. The idea of someone doing something generous for us which undoes our complicity in lies and violence while itself being a completely nonviolent act takes a lot of getting used to. At its best, liturgy gives us the space to do this.

What evidence do you find in scripture for this view?

Once you see it, it’s everywhere. How about “They hated me without cause” or “The stone the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone.” The entire passion narrative is an account of a traditional lynching with its meaning turned inside out: it’s a lynching from the perspective of the innocent one.

In a sense, Girard offers new insight into the centrality of a properly hermeneutical reading of scripture by answering the question of who our Rabbi is, the One who enables us to read the scriptures at all: he is a forgiving victim, both dead and living, and the texts of the Hebrew scriptures supply provisional stories of how he was coming into the world.

A passage I particularly like is John 10, in which Jesus proclaims that he is the door of the sheep. First he tells his listeners that a good shepherd is one who watches over his sheep and leads them to and from pasture; they hear his voice and follow him. The pastoral imagery was perfectly familiar to his listeners, and in effect they answer, “Yes, of course, and your point is . . . ?” He doesn’t immediately go on to say “I am the good shepherd,” which is the expected metaphor, but instead, “I am

the gate of the sheep." And he is standing near the temple, the entrance to the slaughter yards.

Suddenly Jesus' image acquires a significant new vibrancy: the pasture which he leads his sheep to and from, going in before them and coming out again, is not the usual pasture, but a "pasture" with a one-way entrance: the gate to the abbattoir. Other sacrificers take the sheep without entering through the gate; robbers and thieves, they are not prepared to carry out the sacrificial lynching themselves, but pick off sheep for sacrifice from a safe distance. When they hear the wrath of the lynch mob coming close, they run away. But the Good Shepherd is happy to go through the gate, occupying the space of the sacrificial lynching for his sheep, who thereafter know that it is not a trap; they will always be able to hear his voice and follow him in and out. This seems to me a wonderful Johannine insight into the meaning of Jesus' death.

You suggested after 9/11 that people who were quite rightly aghast at the violence were "sucked in" to an effort to find meaning in the event. What did you mean by that? What was the danger?

The danger of "wars and rumors of wars" of whatever sort is that they give us cheap meaning to hold onto, a quick shot of identity, a false sense of belonging, of togetherness, of virtue, of innocence and so on. That cheap meaning is always derived by positioning oneself over against some "other" considered to be wicked. Cheap meaning makes life apparently exciting in the short term; it seems to give a purpose, but in fact it is a mirage, an illusion. There is nothing that can ultimately substitute for the long, slow, patient task of being brought into being as a human.

The really difficult task when faced with an emergent "sacred" such as began to appear in the wake of 9/11 is to refuse to be fascinated and instead to tend to the wounded, to search for and apprehend nihilist criminals, yet not to aggrandize them and their purely negative accomplishments in a way that gives succour to others who might imitate them. Only someone who is grounded in slow, quiet, gentle creation can resist the fascination of nihilism.

You once commented, in response to the complaint that the Mass is boring, "It's supposed to be boring, or at least seriously underwhelming." What are you saying about worship and what worship should convey?

Actually, this is a continuation of your previous question. At the center of a typical act of creation of the sacred there is a sacrifice, a murder, and those of us around it get excited—we derive from it meaning, scandal, satisfaction, *Schadenfreude* and so on. The Mass is exactly the reverse of this. It is about our learning to be approached by our Victim, who is forgiving us, moving toward us, nudging us out of our excitements and false identities into the quiet, gentle bliss of recognizing ourselves as loved and of loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Group excitement is the reverse of discovering yourself appreciated, just as fascination is the reverse of contemplation. To discover this requires a process of discipline, learning and training over time, which is what the liturgy (the “work of the people”) is about. Divine liturgy allows us to be conveyed by the holy One to the heavenly places, and “sacred excitement” is its exact opposite: it allows us to be taken out of ourselves in an anaesthetizing of our moral sense, which is exciting but dangerous.

One of your books is titled *On Being Liked*. What does it mean to say that God not only loves us, but likes us? Why do we need to hear that?

The word love, alas, is so abused. In my book I wanted to remind people that sometimes being told that we are loved really means: “My love for you is so strong that I wish I could suppress all the bits about you that don’t measure up to my standards. In fact, if you become someone else, then I might actually like you and enjoy you as well.” If someone views us in that way, though saying he or she loves us, we sense that that person is lying or pulling a fast one and is being controlling.

We pick up very quickly when we are being liked; we relax and are happy to be who we are in the eyes of the other. And curiously, as we relax, we find that we are much more than we thought we were, and become much more, starting from where we are, and with no sense of being bullied or made to fit into schemes which really have nothing to do with us.

I thought it worthwhile trying to tease this out, especially as a resource for gay Christians, who so often are told by other believers that “because we love you so much, you must become someone utterly different.” As it happens, not a few straight people have told me that they could completely identify with what I was talking about.

Jesus reveals to us the innocence of the victim, and in some respects modern society has learned this lesson well, for we are inclined to establish our own innocence by presenting ourselves as victims. Is this a problem?

Absolutely. We are all aware of the value of victimhood as a way of getting a free ride. It is a terrible dead end, one to which I am as prone as anyone else. It is part of the refusal to allow ourselves to be created, which involves growing in self-critical capacity. We prefer to remain stuck at the level of a convenient identity which removes us from the possibility of criticism. It is farcical to hear anthems of victimhood being spouted by corporate swindlers who despoil shareholders of their pensions, or by indicted politicians who cloak themselves in the imagery of martyrs for the Christian faith.

But this ruse, while omnipresent, is also increasingly easy to detect. Learning to detect the forms of self-flattery which grant us immunity from accountability is a vital part of ethical and spiritual growth, as is learning to detect where our cynicism about the victim language of others is justified and where, half-muffled and scarcely articulate, there are real victims on whose behalf we must extend ourselves.