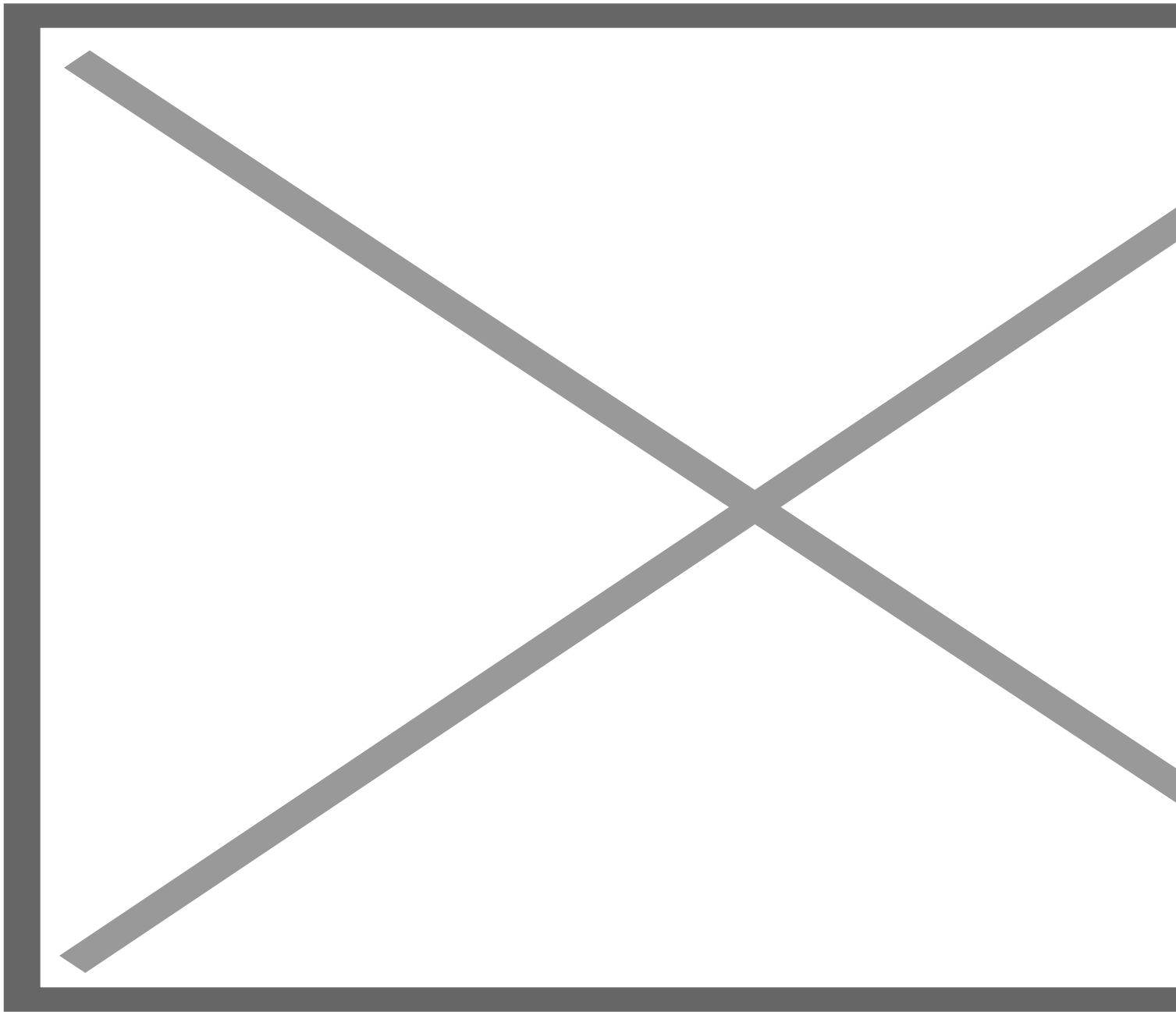


Breaking cycles of violence with *How to Train Your Dragon*

I went to see a family movie. I got a lesson in René Girard's mimetic theory.

by [Michael Woolf](#)
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Mason Thames in *How to Train Your Dragon* (© 2025 Universal Studios)

When *How To Train Your Dragon* hit theaters in June, I thought that I was in for a good family movie. What I did not expect was that the film would speak directly to our world's deep brokenness amidst seemingly endless cycles of violence. I did not expect it to lead me back to René Girard's moving work on mimetic theory and atonement.

Based on the book series by Cressida Cowell and its 2010 animated adaptation, the film takes place in a fictional landscape where Vikings have fought dragons since time immemorial. If you are a man in this universe, you fight dragons—and if that doesn't interest you, then you find yourself on the outside looking in on society. Enter our protagonist, Hiccup, who pioneers a new way of being in community with the dragons his community fears, ushering in a new era of prosperity and cooperation.

Overcoming generations of conflict is no easy matter, and this is where the movie is at its best. Against all odds, Hiccup befriends a dragon he calls Toothless. After one of his interactions with the dragon, Hiccup's love interest, Astrid, accuses him of betraying his village: "They've killed hundreds of us!"

Hiccup does not respond with the hegemonic view. Instead he says, "And we've killed thousands of them." Recognizing the unending cycle of violence that both dragons and Vikings find themselves in constitutes the film's fundamental insight. It is only by moving beyond the simplistic portrayals of victimhood in which we often find ourselves that we can transcend the trauma of the past to a new future.

In the big picture, we live in the most peaceful time of human history. But that appraisal misses the ways that conflict is baked into our present mode of being. A quick look shows a world in crisis: the war in Gaza has been going on for almost two years, the Sudanese Civil War is halfway through its third, and by some accounts the war in Ukraine has been going on for 11. It certainly seems like we could use a robust vision of conflict transformation.

As a theologian, I view it as an empirical fact that human beings have been rather bad at achieving peace through their own efforts alone, and that the only path to a new existence must be grounded in God's redemption. That's why I turned to René Girard's work—in particular his mimetic theory of atonement—to get a sense of just how we could make God's peaceable kingdom a reality.

Girard was a 20th-century philosopher whose work on human desire offered an important intervention in understanding human beings. He argued that human desire was *mimetic*—that is, we desire what others have, and this creates rivalry and violence between human beings. At its foundation, mimesis is imitative, and this imitation takes place not only interpersonally but over generations, as we repeat the cycles of violence and purported resolution of previous generations.

That portrayal of the human condition means that we have to have some place to center our violence and still have functional societies. Enter the scapegoat, a blameless victim that absorbs the violence of the community and allows it to reunite around shared goals. Girard put it like this: "Having been attributed with the diabolical power to create society-wide chaos, a thing it is generally impossible to do singlehandedly, the scapegoat, through his death, has now created peace."

For Girard, Jesus was the scapegoat *par excellence*, but instead of accepting the reality of the scapegoat, the gospel critiques it, revealing that peace cannot be built on victimhood and injustice: "He is an unsuccessful scapegoat whose heroic willingness to die for the truth will ultimately make the entire cycle of satanic violence visible to all people and therefore inoperative." By taking on himself victimhood and revealing its injustice, Christ's sacrifice invites us to dismantle these systems and offers us the only real path out of the human condition and toward peace.

How else are we going to get anywhere in a world littered with victims of senseless violence? This is certainly a theme that *How to Train Your Dragon Wrestles* with, as it shows the ways that Viking society rewards callousness to the pain of the dragons while punishing compassion. Conflicts like the war in Gaza do not remain remote, international affairs. The interfaith groups I participate in have experienced high levels of conflict and broken trust over the past year and a half. There is pressure to pick sides: Do you care about Israel, or Gaza? Who is the real victim? Seeing the immense pain of both sides never presents itself as an option. I know that my advocacy for a ceasefire has strained relationships and has made it harder to work on combating things like Islamophobia and antisemitism together.

But this presents an important question: If Jesus has undone the powers of structural violence, why do they persist? In essence, Jesus offers us a different imitative path than that of the scapegoat, but this path is not a foregone conclusion. In imitating Christ's example of love and mercy, we can find a different way of being in society. The choice is ours, as God does not constrain our will. Like the kingdom of God, which is variously already present and yet to come, Jesus' undoing of the powers of violence both has already happened and, in some sense, depends on us.

In Hiccup's world the cycle of vengeance has reached an apex. Dragon and Viking alike terrorize each other's communities, selecting innocent victims for destruction and uniting their respective groups through acts of terrifying violence. It is only through Hiccup's perception that both groups are victims of each other that true peace becomes possible.

The stakes of this perspective shift are clear. Time and time again we, are reminded with Hiccup that dragons killed his mother. That is, Hiccup himself has a claim to vengeance and victimhood—but he lays aside that logic and instead chooses to embrace a new way of being. This is nothing short of miraculous.

The problem is that these sorts of messages are common in so-called kids' movies but are hardly present in adult society. Children today can open Netflix or any other streaming platform and find a plethora of options with positive messages about conflict transformation. Think about *Zootopia*, with its society based on conflict between predator and prey, or *The Iron Giant*, where compassion, forgiveness, and even sacrifice are at the heart of the story. But just as easily as they can binge Netflix, they can scroll TikTok and view images of hospitals destroyed and starvation in Gaza—stark evidence that the world simply doesn't work that way.

We seem to think that teaching our kids how to look at conflict holistically and to challenge dominant narratives of victim and perpetrator is a good thing, but our broken world shows that it's the adults who need to hear these messages now more than ever.

How can we expect our children to actually implement these messages when our world offers a resounding repudiation of them in daily life, in effect proffering a different set of imitative values? We know that the values in movies like *How To Train Your Dragon* are important for our kids to digest, but it's almost as if we believe that as adults we have to move beyond these core messages. Nothing could be further from the truth.

What humanity needs most is a way out of the endless cycle of violence. I find that way out in Girard's understanding of Christ-as-scapegoat, which reveals that violence can certainly hold a society together, but the costs to one's soul are astronomical. This can be a difficult lesson to swallow, but I learned it while holding hands with a dragon and a young Viking.