

The Spiritual Life in the Twenty-first Century: Solidarity with the Victims of Violence

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My starting point is that Christianity can reveal new, peaceful possibilities inherent in violent situations. These new interpretations do not, of course, emerge of themselves, rather Christians, individually and collectively, incarnate these new possibilities in their lives. Thus, new forms of living faith are created.

This gives us a way to think about being “spiritual” or “religious” in the twenty-first century¹⁾. My reflections here are not explicitly interreligious. I concentrate instead on my own tradition but I am deliberately trying to do this in a way that invites analogous reflections from those of other traditions.

In another essay I once wrote the following: “The crucifixion of Christ reveals what sin, at its deepest core, is.” All sin, even our most personal, is inextricably bound up with the victim, indeed the victim of mob violence. Thus, our Christian faith puts the problem of violence and our participation in it at the center of our problems, personal and communal. In this essay I would like to ground this claim more deeply, and show that the victim is the center and the measure of religious²⁾ life.

1) This text was first delivered in German at the 10. Symposium „Zusammenleben der Religionen - Eine interreligiös-interkulturelle Aufgabe der globalisierten Welt,“ held in Berlin, October 9, 2004. A different version was also presented in English at the annual meeting of the 51st Annual Convention of the College Theology Society, Spring Hill College, Mobile, AL, June 2-5, 2005. I thank people in both places for their helpful comments and criticisms.

2) I am using religious life here to indicate a life lived as a member of faith community. “Religious life” in Catholic circles refers to the life of those in religious orders,

I realize that the question of a spiritual or religious life in the modern world could be understood, and therefore answered, in several different ways. So I want to make clear that I understand the question about religious life to be itself a religious question, and so I propose to give it a religious, rather than say, a sociological answer. I would like to present this position as a kind of meditation on a famous story of the Good Samaritan, where two of those who pass by are “scandalized” by a bloody body in a way that can be scandalous to the reader. Clearly this story is about solidarity with a victim, and so it presents itself as very germane to the position I wish to explore. The parable also has some surprising twists that can help us to understand the implications of trying to live a religious life based upon the relationship with a victim.

The parable of the Good Samaritan has a context, so that, unlike some other parables in the Gospel, it does not simply begin with, “Jesus told them a parable.” An “expert in the Law” tests Jesus by asking him the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus turns the question back on him and asks, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” The expert replies with the two great commandments of love. Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus tells him that he has answered correctly, now he needs to do that and he will live. But the expert is not satisfied and wants to “justify himself,” and so he asks, “And who is my neighbor?” The parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus’ answer to that question.

I think it might be good here to pause and take a more careful look at the surrounding text. Up to the parable Luke is following Mark fairly closely. In the Markan version (ch. 12) we have a teacher of the law who asks directly: “Of all the commandments which is the most important?” In this version Jesus himself provides the answer, which the expert of the Law gives in Luke. In Mark’s Gospel the teacher approves of Jesus’ response and repeats it almost verbatim, but then adds that this two-fold

usually with the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and is thus too narrow for my purposes. A “spiritual life” is too abstract for what I intend.

love is “more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Before this no one had said anything about offerings or sacrifices. It seems to come out of nowhere. At the same time it is a radical critique of religion. Mark tells us that Jesus saw that the man had answered wisely and so he says to him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” Given the centrality of the Kingdom of God to Jesus’ life and message we are being told that what this man says is of singular importance. The relative importance of love versus sacrifice is central to Jesus’ message. Luke omits all mention of sacrifice and instead puts in the parable. Can we read the story of the Good Samaritan as a gloss on the insight that love is greater than ritual and sacrifice? I believe that we can.

Let us read the story:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

There are several things that we should notice. So often in the West this story is interpreted to mean that we should not turn our backs on those in trouble. Germany and some states in America even have a law, sometimes referred to as “the Good Samaritan Law,” that makes it a crime to pass by the scene of an accident without rendering some aid. I do not believe that we need religion or great religious texts to teach us to be kind to one another. The story has a deeper intent. First, we must acknowledge what is

so often passed over in silence: the brutal violence of the story. The victim here did not simply fall down and hurt himself. He is set upon by more than one person; he is stripped naked; he is beaten and he is left for dead. The event that is the occasion for the drama is a violent one. The victim of the story is a victim of violence.

Just as the answer by the teacher in the Markan version (love is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices) contains a critique of Temple worship, so, it seems, does this story. The two passerbys are, not coincidentally, a Priest and a Levite, or, in our language, two priests. Both of these men behave in the same way. They see the man who had been beaten and they pass by on the other side of the road. They actually move away from the man. Why? Are they simply hard-hearted brutes? I do not believe that is what the story is trying to tell us. The Greek word used to describe the man who was beaten suggest that he appeared to be dead. What these two priests saw beside the road was a corpse. For a priest to come into contact with a corpse, would render him impure, unable to offer sacrifice. Being good priests, leading good religious lives, they did what their religion instructed them. They avoided contact with a corpse.

At this point enters the Samaritan, the outsider. He sees the man and takes pity on him. "He went to him" is how the Gospel so beautifully puts it. This is the critical phrase. The Samaritan went in the opposite direction of the priests. He bandaged up the man's wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. Why this detail? I would like to suggest that it is there to dramatize the statement made in Mark: love is greater than any burnt offerings or sacrifice. Oil and wine were often offered to God as part of a pleasing sacrifice. The very things used in sacrifice are now being applied to the broken body of the victim of violence. It suggests more than the fact that love is more important than sacrifice. It suggests that the very energies that motivate sacrifice are now to be redirected and used for the victim. Again we have reverberations of Mark's version in Luke's.

At the end of the story Jesus poses the question, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the Law replies, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus then says, "Go and do likewise."

In a very real sense, though, the story is not over. The story opened with the question from the expert on the Law, "Who is my neighbor?" The story is meant to be a reply to that question and the fact that Jesus formulates a completely different question at the end should not blind us to that fact. I believe that Luke wants us to go back and look at the story again for the answer to the original question. We know who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers. What we need continually to ask and to find out is, "Who is my neighbor?" According to the logic of the story "my neighbor" would be the one who comes to me when I am stripped, beaten, and left for dead.

In the tradition of the Church Fathers, the Christian faith would understand the human condition to be analogous to the position of the man lying beside the road. We are virtually dead and lying face down in a ditch. We are corpses. Again, in the tradition of the Church Fathers this reading allows to identify Jesus with the figure of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is the one who comes to us and is merciful towards us. The final statement by Jesus, "Go and do likewise," is either an unbearable command, (if the two priests failed, why should we think that we would do any better) or it is a revelation that the mercy that Jesus shows to us will bear fruit in our being merciful to others. Interpreting this story in this way allows us to understand that first Jesus comes to us in our condition and shows us mercy, then we ourselves are enabled by this encounter to be merciful to others.

There is a lot that commends this particular reading of the parable. It changes it from being a kind of moralistic story that leaves us with the feeling that I should be more considerate to those in need, into a parable that reveals how God works in our lives so that we might work in the lives of others. Not everyone comes across the victim of violence in their actual experience and yet the parable cannot be directed only at those people. It has a universal meaning, and the universal meaning is about our salvation. The problem with this interpretation is that, unlike the usual interpretation that at least leaves us with a disturbed conscience, my interpretation can

lead the reader to wait for God to *really* show some mercy. There is no need for me to change until I am sure that I have had that experience. If each one of us is the man lying beside the road, then each of us can wait for our good Samaritan to come.

The corrective to this is to remember that whatever figurative interpretation we might give the story in order to let it speak to us, we always have to go back to the literal level. According to the literal level of the story, the true victim, the paradigm of the victim is the victim of group violence, actual violence. I believe that the figurative reading is not just legitimate but even necessary, but it is only valid so long as it stays grounded in the literal meaning, and according to the literal meaning, the real victim of real violence is to be the literal object of our “mercy” right now. There should be no doubt about where our priorities lie – with the victim of violence.

Still one can ask, if this interpretation is saying “help the victims” of violence versus the usual interpretation of “help those in trouble,” is that really an advance? It is if we let the story continue to speak to us. I believe that the story opens up deeper layers and therefore deeper questions.

The first question is about what shocks or offends us.

It is seemingly easy for us to read this story and to be upset by, to be scandalized at, the callousness of the priests and, by the same token, to be supportive of the kindness shown by the Samaritan. Even when we understand that the priests’ motivation might have been religious, and in that sense “good,” we can still be offended that anyone would let their religion stand in the way of helping those in need. This offense may not be directed at the characters in the story, but rather at the Evangelist or even Jesus, who are clearly misrepresenting Judaism, a religion in which the aid to someone in distress always overrides the Law. At the same time, we are edified by those who do not let this happen. We can speculate that at least some of those who first heard this story were probably either scandalized or edified in a directly opposite way. They may very well have been edified by the priests who remained faithful to the divine code and shocked by anyone who could so easily override it. Perhaps the story was more

“realistic” in the sense that the audience could say, “Well, he is only a Samaritan, of course he doesn’t know any better.” Or, with even less charity, “What do you expect from a Samaritan?”

It is possible that all these forms of scandal, against the priests, against the Samaritan, against the Evangelist and even against Jesus or Christianity are misplaced. The way the story offends us is a lesson in where our personal demons lie. So, perhaps it is a good thing that we no longer believe in ritual purity and impurity, but I think that the interpretation by which we know who the good guys are and who the bad guys are and we also know that we are on the good guys’ side weakens the story’s import. It reinforces our naïve belief that for us, not only is there no longer any pure or impure, but neither is there any in-group and out-group. It reinforces our blindness to the subtle ways in which we have structured our world into an order that gives recognition to some and withholds it from others. If it is harder to be anti-Semitic today in Germany or to be racist today in America, than it was in the earlier part of the twentieth century, we should applaud that fact. But we should also not let this fact blind us to the reality that the more obvious forces of bigotry have often been replaced with more hidden ones that remain damaging and yet are essential for our identity as it is presently constructed. I think it safe to say that we should never allow our interpretation of the Jewish Christian Scriptures, or any authentic religious life, to become such that it simply endorses our present style of life. We do exclude people. Based on our own criteria, we are constantly making judgments about who is in and who is out, who is OK and who is not. At least in the first Century Judea this type of exclusion was more straightforward. They publicly acknowledged that some were considered impure.

The second question that needs to be posed as we begin the twenty-first century is whether we can be scandalized at all? Are we willing to let ourselves be scandalized in a way that challenges us? I say this because if being scandalized means letting ourselves be challenged and questioned by the victim, by the one whom we expelled or are about to expel, then living with and learning from scandal turn out to be the central issue of

our religious lives.

I am aware that to speak in favor of scandal is not to “conform to the present age.” The problem of scandal may seem to have an easy answer, but one which I think merely panders to some of our lowest tendencies. We don’t need scandal. Just accept everybody. Live and let live. Why do there have to be any problems? But I think that the significance of the obstacle that scandal represents to our accepted way of thinking is that our accepted way of thinking is not without its problems. Scandal is an essential aspect of religious consciousness. It is not simply negative. Not to be scandalized can mean that we have reached the heights of holiness, but it can more easily mean that we have become so inured in the world that we have rendered ourselves incapable of scandal. The victim who offends us also helps us to recognize the fact that the “normal” way we do things is fundamentally flawed.

Groups, and the individuals that comprise them, build identity either by uniting against a common enemy or by picking out one member or subgroup and scapegoating them. Naturally, the people against whom *we* unite, *really* have done something wrong. They *really* are dangerous, and we would love them as brothers and sisters, if only they would give us a chance. So is it always.

The attempt not build one’s identity on this basis is praiseworthy but dangerous. It is not enough to make the firm decision that I will not participate in the group’s persecution of an outside group or the scapegoating of someone in the group. All too easily, we can begin to scapegoat the scapegoaters.

This is what the Good Samaritan parable points out to us. If the priests have failed in their true religious duty by passing the victim by, so too have we failed when we condemn the priest. And yet if we do not condemn the priest, then are we not in danger of condoning truly reprehensible behavior.

I would like to make all this concrete, and I can only do that by making a confession. So now my reader is my confessor. I was riding in a car with a friend. We had been experiencing some tensions of late and though we

had tried to work some of them out, they were still very present. There was a kind of mutual anger between us, each half blaming the other for the problem. I could feel the tension as I sat in the car and I am sure that he could too. So, I began to run down and criticize a mutual acquaintance whom we both disliked. As soon as I started, he agreed and joined in. The tension between us evaporated and the rest of the ride was quite pleasant. I sacrificed the absent person's reputation in order to create a workable relationship.

This kind of behavior, common as it is, is not innocent. Jesus tells us that it is on the same road that ends in murder. I think this is one way in which we scandalize another, by getting them to join us in mocking or condemning a third party. We then live from the unity that this mini-scandal produces. Much of our society is run along these lines. As I said before, the simple decision not to do it is insufficient. One must retain one's ability to be scandalized without giving in to it.

Only now, with this background, can I show the connection between my definition of religious life in the present as consisting in our relationship to the victim of violence and religious life in its usual understanding as a set of rituals and dogmas.

Clearly, according to the position I have outlined here, the immediate criterion for whether anything is essentially religious would be the degree to which it brings us into solidarity with the victim. And just as clearly the reading that I gave to the Good Samaritan story indicates that traditional religion, the burnt offerings and sacrifices, the priesthood, that is, the rituals and worship, are not merely less important than the love of God and the love of neighbor, but can even form a block to the most essential expression of that love, showing mercy to the victim.

But this block that religion builds is the obstacle of scandal. The priests are scandalized by the presence of a corpse, we are scandalized at the behavior of the priests, or we are scandalized at the parable for making the priests look bad. Any one of these scandals, these obstacles, can become a bridge to the deeper reality of the victim. I believe that the purpose of the dogmas and the rituals of our faith are to keep us capable of experiencing

and living with scandal.

Precisely here our attitude toward dogma has something to say to us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We are no longer scandalized by a particular dogma. We are not going to fight over the consubstantial nature of the Son with the Father. In the present, dogma itself seems slightly offensive. No one is to be dogmatic. We can hear people saying something along the lines of, 'the Protestant and Catholic Churches should just give up whatever minor differences over dogma they may have and emphasize that they believe the same thing, whatever that might be.' The various religions should forget their own doctrines and instead concentrate on the values that unite them with all other religions and with all people of good will. This sounds promising and I do not mean to disparage it, but it overlooks the role that scandal plays in our salvation. Even if it is not Christian scandal, the idea that rational thought is inadequate for dealing with the mystery of life is a commonplace among religions. The idea that our normal way of operating is enmeshed in illusion is a commonplace in all the great religions. One way that our normal way of operating gets exposed for what it truly is, is through the scandal of dogma and ritual.

Now one could certainly say with complete justification that dogmas themselves are rational attempts to understand certain mysteries of the faith. I would not disagree with this, but I would point out that when the Church defines such things as the Trinity as being a mystery *in senso strictum* this means that it is beyond rational comprehension. It is worthwhile to attempt to understand the revelation of this mystery as best we can, but it seems to me that the dogma functions here in a negative way, telling us when we have gone wrong. And the ultimate reason for that is that our misunderstanding will rob the mystery of its mystery and thereby of its scandal. The scandal of dogma protects the scandal of faith.

I can say something similar about the rituals of the Catholic Church, especially its primary rituals the sacraments. The sacraments are the very stuff of religious scandal. The scandalous nature of the proclaiming this piece of bread to be the flesh of Christ and this cup of wine to be his blood should not be pushed aside due to familiarity. The sense of scandal in the

sacraments is to open our eyes to the mystery of reality. It can be a scandal to realize that everyday things are bearers of the Godhead. God is no longer safely up in heaven. The ordinary struggle of ordinary human beings are suffused with grace and marred by sin. That grace emerges in this violent world, like a man moved by pity at the sight of someone lying on the edge of the road, like salvation through a man on the Cross.

The work of parables, dogma, and sacraments is the work of Christ himself. It is to be the gateway to salvation, but a gateway that can only be approached via the road of the constantly annulled possibility of scandal. Thus, if we do not suffer the temptation to be scandalized, if we are not tempted to throw the Bible across the room because of its offense, then we are probably missing something.

For it is only when the parable, the dogma, and the ritual are somehow blocks to our understanding that they can be bridges to deeper understanding. This is so because the natural man is heading toward death and only sees life as being the opposite of death, when in fact true life is such a thing that it does not stand over against death but encompasses it, includes it, transforms it, transfigures it.

We can now return to our story. A final question confronts us. How does one get the vision of the Samaritan without condemning the vision of the priests? How does one become the kind of person whose religious sensibilities move them toward the victim rather than turning them away? Again, I turn to the story for the answer.

Please recall again the overall context of the story. It is the question "Which of the commandments is the greatest?" Although the answer is love of God and love of neighbor, after the answer is given, love of God seems to drop out of sight. The rest of the story is about determining who my neighbor is, and how to be a neighbor. This has even led some commentators to simply identify love of God with love of neighbor. This misses the significance of the fact that part of the answer to the question of *the* greatest commandment is two commandments.

Luke does have something to tell us about love of God if we continue

reading.³⁾ The parable ends and we return to Luke's account of Jesus' ascent to Jerusalem, but there are several clues to help the reader join the parable of the Good Samaritan with the story of Martha and Mary. First, of course, is the juxtaposition in the text itself. A juxtaposition that is often hidden by the subtitles and paragraph breaks that modern editions insert. Beyond that we notice that the first story opens with the words "A man was going down." There is nothing unusual here, but the next section also opens with the words "a certain woman by the name of Martha." This is an odd construction and seems to be there to make it grammatically parallel with the opening of the Good Samaritan story. The parallel is strengthened and not diminished by the fact that the first story features a man as its main character and the second story a woman. Luke often alternates between a man and woman in stories that parallel each other. Zecharias and the announcement of the birth of John and Mary and the announcement of the birth of Jesus being only the most obvious example.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the story of Martha and Mary fills in what is lacking in the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus has gone to the home of Martha and Mary. Martha is serving him. Martha is scandalized by the fact that the Lord could let her sister, Mary, sit and seemingly do nothing, while Martha alone is left to do all the work. She scolds Jesus and tells him to tell her sister to help her. But Mary has chosen, in the midst of all the things that need to be done, to sit at the feet of Jesus. According to Jesus this is the "good" part and it shall not be taken from her. Now sitting at the feet of Jesus was a kind of shorthand for contemplative prayer in the early Church. If we read these two stories together, then, we get a fuller picture. We are to have mercy on the victim, but the vision that will allow this kind of behavior can only come from sitting at the feet of Jesus. Otherwise we run the risk, like Martha, even in our service, of being busy with many things, but missing that which is most important.

3) This insight comes to me from Gil Bailie in his audio recordings of lectures he gave on the Gospel of Luke.

Our gazing upon the victim, the lamb of God, Jesus Christ, trains the eyes of our souls to see the world as backlit by the light of the Cross and Resurrection. It teaches us that there is no inside and outside, no acceptable or unacceptable person. It breaks down all duality, even the duality between love of God and love of neighbor because this contemplation allows the most fundamental distinction, that is the distinction between the persecutor and the victim to stand (I know that I partake in persecution), but I only truly know this because I have been forgiven and am one with the victim.

Abstract

In order to give a religious answer to the question, 'What is religious life?' in the twenty-first century I propose to give a meditation on the famous story of the Good Samaritan. Clearly this story concerns itself solidarity with a victim, and so it presents itself as very germane to the position I wish to explore. At the same time it has some surprising twists that can help us to understand the implications of trying to live a religious life based upon the relationship with a victim.