

ARLETTE ZINCK

Love Knows No Bounds:

A Christian Response to the Omar Khadr Story

Chester Ronning Centre Current Briefings – 1

October 2, 2013

CAMROSE, ALBERTA
THE CHESTER RONNING CENTRE
FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE

Copyright © Arlette Zinck 2013

Published by permission

The publication of this paper
has been funded by
the Friends of the Chester Ronning Centre
through the Annual Fund

DESIGNED BY NICHOLAS WICKENDEN

PRINTED IN CANADA BY

McCALLUM PRINTING GROUP INC., EDMONTON

Love Knows No Bounds:

A Christian Response to the Omar Khadr Story

*Love knows no bounds,
So pick me up off the filthy ground
Justify my human course and
Bring me home.*

SONG WRITER & KING'S GRADUATE JUSTINE VANDERGRIFT
FROM HER SONG ABOUT OMAR KHADR

What are the bounds of love? When can we give up on, wash our hands of, write off another human being? In a world inclined to fear and concerned about the bottom line, these questions are pressing. In what follows I will offer a reading of the Omar Khadr story in the light of insights about the nature of human violence offered by French theorist René Girard. I will begin with an account of how the community at The King's University College in Edmonton became engaged with Omar Khadr's story. I will then outline Girard's theory of the scapegoat and draw attention to the connections that I believe link Girard's theory to Omar Khadr's narrative. Finally, I will suggest how a Christian approach to Omar Khadr's circumstances has the potential to transcend opposing political energies and build within Canadian civil society the preconditions for an authentic and lasting experience of peace.

For students and faculty at The King's University College the rather abstract questions about the nature and limits of love that

open this essay became concrete in September of 2008. The occasion was the university's semi-annual Interdisciplinary Studies Conference where the theme of "Invisible Dignity" brought stories of the world's lost, forgotten and disenfranchised to the College's doorstep. Each term the campus suspends regular classes for two days in order to invite students into a conference-style exploration of a theme or topic. The idea is to show students how the disciplinary learning they are doing in their individual courses can lend insight to the great issues of the day, and to demonstrate how the integration of faith and learning that goes on in our classrooms year round can provide a fresh perspective on an old problem. In the fall of 2008 conference speakers examined the many ways in which our inherent human dignity may be obscured by poverty and injustice. Child prostitutes in South Asia, starving nations on the African continent, the inner city poor, and the Khadr case: these were among the many stories told to the King's student body. Stories from half way across the world engaged, but the one that spoke to the students' hearts was the tale from home, the one about their peer, the Canadian youth Omar Khadr.

Illegal and immoral: these are the words used by Dennis Edney, Omar Khadr's *pro bono* Canadian attorney, to describe both the United States and Canadian Governments' handling of the Khadr case. In his plenary address to the approximately 600 newly voting age Canadians gathered in the University's auditorium, Mr Edney told students that Canadian and international legal authorities as well as world-wide human rights organizations and church groups have also consistently used these words to denounce what has happened and is happening to Omar Khadr. For a full hour Mr Edney held his audience spellbound with a story of the law, its transgression, and the

human being trapped in the midst of events. He spoke about the rule of law, about provisions made in international statutes for children, especially in circumstances of war, and about how all of these laws were being ignored. He spoke about the horrors of Guantanamo Bay, the allegations of torture and death that have haunted this US prison outside of the reach of US law. He spoke about Omar. He told the story of interrogations carried out on his fifteen-year-old client by a man later tried and convicted for torturing another detainee to death. He spoke of a profoundly wounded teen with a fist-sized bullet hole in his chest who was nicknamed “buckshot” by guards because of the many shrapnel wounds in his body, and made to carry heavy pails of water until his wounds wept. He talked about sleep deprivation and the petty cruelties of cold temperatures. He told the students how, despite all of this, and in the context of years of conversations, he had never heard Omar Khadr speak an ill word about anyone.

THE CASE OF OMAR KHADR

Omar Khadr is the Canadian youth who has been detained first at Bagram, and subsequently at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba since he was picked up on a battlefield near Khost, Afghanistan in July of 2002. After three years of detainment without charge, he was eventually accused of having thrown a grenade that led to the death of Sergeant First Class Christopher Speer. Charges were laid in November of 2005, but the US Supreme Court’s ruling on the *Hamdam v. Rumsfeld* case invalidated the military commissions in which Omar would be tried. In 2006, US President George W. Bush changed the law, and in February of 2007 Omar Khadr was charged a second time. In June of that same year charges against Omar were dismissed, but in September charges

were reinstated.¹ In August of 2009, and despite having been twice ordered by the Canadian Federal Court to bring Omar back from Guantanamo, the Canadian Government appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court of Canada. In February of 2010 the Supreme Court scolded the government for its earlier participation in the breach of Omar Khadr's charter rights (an infraction committed under the Liberal regime when the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and Canadian foreign affairs officials aided in an interrogation of Omar in Guantanamo), insisted that the government make restitution for this breach, but stopped short of ordering the government to repatriate. When faced with the certainty of conviction in what many have described as a kangaroo court, Omar Khadr followed his lawyers' advice and accepted a plea deal in October of 2010 in the military tribunal. The deal stipulated that Omar would serve eight additional years (he was granted no credit for the eight he had already served) but that he would be eligible for transfer back to Canada after one year of punitive solitary confinement in Guantanamo Bay. That year was up in October of 2011, but he continued to sit in Guantanamo for an additional ten months until he was finally returned to Millhaven Institution, a maximum-security prison in Bath, Ontario, on September 29th, 2012. On May 28th of 2013 he was moved to The Edmonton Institution, another maximum-security prison, where he continues to serve his sentence. By its own account, the Canadian Government returned Omar Khadr to Canada reluctantly and as a concession to pressure from the United States. In a news conference held upon Omar Khadr's return to the nation of his birth, Public Safety Minister Victor Toews denounced him as "a known

1 See "Omar Khadr: A Timeline" in *Omar Khadr: Oh Canada*, ed. Janice Williamson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).

supporter of the al-Qaida terrorist network and a convicted terrorist”. Ignoring all of the complexities and contradictory circumstances of a case concerning a person designated by the United Nations as a child soldier, a young man deemed to be non-radicalized and a good candidate for a successful reintegration by the high-ranking US military official who spoke on Omar Khadr’s behalf at his trial,² Toews continued to follow the hard right line of the Harper government as he stressed “the serious nature of the crimes” that the then fifteen year old Canadian had committed.³ Most recently, Mr. Toews’ successor, Steven Blaney, has continued with similar rhetoric in his response to a *Habeas* Petition that contests Omar Khadr’s incarceration at a maximum-security prison. In a highly unusual move, Prime Minister Harper also interjected his own inflammatory language into the debate on the very day that the *Habeas* Petition was in court, a move that surprised many. In doing so, he sent a direct message to the court by calling for a vigorous defence against any “effort to lessen” Omar’s punishment. The *Habeas* petition is not about “lessen[ing]” punishment. Rather, it addressed an error in the administration of Omar’s sentence.⁴

2 Alex Neve, “The View From Guantanamo Bay: Reflections on Omar Khadr’s Journey Through Military Injustice”, CIPSHRREC Working Paper (University of Ottawa Centre for International Policy Studies, November 2010), 11.

3 See the Canadian Press story online: <<http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/09/29/omar-khadr-has-been-returned-to-canada-vic-toews-confirms/>> (last accessed July 2nd, 2013).

4 See “Canada must defend attempt to lessen Omar Khadr’s punishment: Stephen Harper” by the Canadian Press, September 23, 2013, online here: <<http://www.vancouversun.com/news/national/Omar+Khadr+appears+court+lawyers+challenge+adult+prison/8948137/story.html>> (last accessed September 30th, 2013).

THE KING'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE RESPONDS

Mr Edney is one of the few people who have come to know Omar Khadr well during his eleven years of incarceration. He is among a small group of people who are able to speak about the person in the centre of the controversy, and he has done so repeatedly, for years now, in a number of public forums. When he told this story to The King's community, many students and faculty were deeply moved by what they had heard and desired to respond. Mr Edney's speech touched off an odyssey of student learning. Immediately following the conference, faculty encouraged students to research the issue fully, to hear as many other stories about Omar as they could, and to gather information from as many other positions and vantage points as they were able. Students read the House of Commons proceedings, they interviewed their MPs, researched back issues of media reports, and watched television documentaries produced about the case. Once they had done all of this, the students returned invigorated by what they had learned and desiring to communicate this understanding to others. In November of 2008 students replicated their Interdisciplinary Studies Conference for the city of Edmonton. Approximately 700 Edmontonians came out to listen and learn. One year later, in November of 2009, students from The King's community collaborated with Amnesty International and youth from both the Al Rashid Mosque and the University of Alberta to stage an outdoor rally in the lead up to the Supreme Court of Canada's hearing on the case before it went to trial at the Military Commissions in Guantanamo Bay. Two hundred and fifty people stood outside on a cold afternoon to signal their support for Omar's repatriation. Meanwhile, a smaller group of students, moved by the call from the biblical passage in Matthew chapter twenty-five to "visit the prisoner", began a correspondence with Omar by way of Mr Edney. Most recently, a small

group of faculty, many but not all of whom teach at The King's, volunteered to devise a tailored curriculum for Omar's use during what was intended to be his final year of confinement at the Guantanamo Bay Prison.⁵ This education project continued throughout his final twenty-two months in Guantanamo and is ongoing.

Initially, I was somewhat surprised by the students' reactions to Omar Khadr's story. Surely they had heard parts of the narrative before. The issue had been in the news for some time, but there was something about hearing the personal side of the issue, about the human being in the middle of it, that ignited particular interest. This, in brief, is how I became personally involved in this case and with the human being at the centre of it. At the outset my point of engagement was as teacher and administrator to King's students. My duty, as I saw it, was to direct our students to a deeper study of this issue and, once they had learned all they could, to support them in the action they felt necessary. There could be no question about diverting their interests to a less politically controversial cause. This was the story that came to us. Omar was the neighbour whose circumstances had inflamed these students' sense of injustice, and we were witnesses to his story.

We recognized fully that Omar was not the only one to suffer pain. At the time, Omar was accused of throwing a grenade that killed a soldier, among other charges. He has, of course, since been convicted of these charges. No matter how tainted the court proceedings at Guantanamo Bay, the loss of a soldier's life remains a lamentable cost of war and a concern worthy of prayer, no matter who is or is not responsible for it. The soldier's wife

5 This volunteer education program was instituted at the request of the US military's Department of Defense.

and his young children animated students' prayers as well. War is full of horrors, especially where children are concerned. In times of conflict it can be difficult to remember the truth that our soldiers know too well, that people die, some quite horribly, on both sides of the line of fire. At the end of every battle there are families from each camp gathered around a photograph of a son or daughter who died for what they thought was right.⁶ It was clear to all that a simple-minded, emotionally driven response to the complexities of the battle would only create more pain. We prayed for members of the soldier's family, and we trusted those close to them would embody the care that our prayers might engender. After all, love is both a noun and a verb. In order for any of us to feel its effects, someone has to do something. For students at The King's, Omar's story had been brought to our attention, and there could be little debate about what our Christian faith asked of us. The biblical account of the Good Samaritan set the example. Our only choices were to stop to help, or to walk on by. We stopped. Almost five years later my role in this issue has grown and changed. My students' willingness to persist and learn has inspired me to follow their example. This case and Omar himself have caused me to think deeply about what a Christian response to violence might look like, and to engage the scholarly part of my academic identity—I am an associate professor of English Literature—to search out answers for the pressing questions. In what follows, I will share with you a meditation on the stories we tell about violence, and what these stories tell us about ourselves.

6 For this thought and refinements throughout this essay I am indebted to Major (ret'd) the Reverend Matthew Oliver, CD, who graciously reviewed this paper during its draft stages. His insights as both a soldier and a priest have been invaluable.

RENÉ GIRARD AND THE BIBLICAL STORY OF JOSEPH

Christian literary scholar René Girard argues that the story of Joseph, which is included in the Hebrew Torah, the Christian Old Testament and the Qur'an, is the paradigmatic moment at which the human story of revenge is overturned. In this narrative, unbridled violence, and scapegoating as a crude limiter of that violence, are challenged by an alternative model of resolution: forgiveness.⁷ When Joseph forgives both his Egyptian captors and his own family for the wrongs they have done to him, he sets a course that changes human history. For Girard, the Scriptures offer not just a theological or literary response to the question of conflict, but a deeply challenging intellectual response to the reigning orthodoxies about the sources of human violence. The Christian gospels uncover the truth about scapegoating. They point out that the broken human tendency to redirect violent energies between rival groups toward a singular individual, to require, as Caiaphas demands, one man to "die for the people" (John 11:50), is a depraved procedure founded upon a lie. The Gospels reveal that God is consistently loving and does not require sacrifice, and they insist that human beings confront the deeply personal sources of violence in their own competitive cycles of desire. Girard's specific identification of the Joseph story as the moment in which the principle of forgiveness as an alternative to revenge is spelled out in cultural mythology offers, I believe, several fascinating insights for an interpretation of the contemporary story of Canadian Omar Khadr, insights which have the potential to create a bridge across the three monotheistic traditions within the Abrahamic house.

7 Girard's reading of the Joseph story is found here: René Girard, "The Uniqueness of the Bible" in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 103-120.

JOSEPH AND OMAR

At seventeen, Joseph, son of Jacob and protagonist of chapters thirty-seven through fifty of the Genesis narrative, is put in life-threatening circumstances by his family. Eventually, however, he is rescued and sold as a slave to the ruler of the dominant state power of the day, the mighty nation of Egypt. While enslaved, Joseph is falsely accused and thrown in jail where he serves many years before his release at age thirty. At the age of fifteen Omar Khadr was also placed in life-threatening circumstances by his family. Omar's father, Ahmed Said Khadr, had immigrated to Canada as a young adult. He and his wife settled near his wife's parents in Scarborough, Ontario and began to build a family. Omar was the fourth child (one older brother died as a baby) of seven. In the years before Omar's birth, his father became involved in fundraising for schools and hospitals in Afghanistan. Throughout Omar's early childhood his family shuttled back and forth between his grandparents' home in Scarborough and Peshawar, Pakistan. It is alleged that at some point Ahmed Khadr's fundraising began to benefit Osama bin Laden and other militant forces. Early in July of 2002 Omar's father placed him in the care of family friends, one of whom later became an al Qaeda spokesperson. The friend planned to travel from Pakistan into Afghanistan and thought that Omar's ability to speak four languages, including Pashto, would be helpful. On July 27th, 2002, in a village outside of the Afghani town of Khost, Omar found himself in the midst of a firefight with US forces. At the end of the fight, Omar, who was severely wounded with a bullet wound through his back and blinded by shrapnel in one eye, was treated by US medics and taken into custody.⁸ He was

8 See Michelle Shephard, *Guantanamo's Child: The Untold Story of Omar Khadr* (Toronto: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2008), 24-25; 82-83; x-xi. ►

accused by his captors and thrown in jail where he has served hard time for eleven years so far.

For those familiar with these two stories, the first, most obvious objection to the comparison of Joseph and Omar is the matter of guilt. Joseph, according to the Genesis account and the version of the story told in Qur'an, is totally innocent. He is exonerated for crimes of which he is accused. Omar, by contrast, pleaded guilty to a range of charges levied against him in his military commission trial.⁹ Innocence, guilt; night, day: the surface similarities in these two stories appear to melt under the stark contrast apparent in this vital difference. As Girard's literary and anthropological analysis reveals, however, this conclusion is premature. A full appreciation of the significance of Joseph's story and its paradigm-setting power comes as a result of Girard's analysis of the context of this biblical narrative and the vast departure it represents from

► Omar's father, Ahmed Said Khadr, died in the aerial bombing of a safe house in Angorada, Pakistan on October 3rd, 2003. Ibid., 85.

9 There are many strong reasons to contest this designation of guilt. Omar's convictions under the Guantanamo Military Commissions are now being appealed. Canada, as a signatory to the UN protocol for child soldiers, is obliged to regard all participants in armed conflict under the age of 18 as victims of war, rather than perpetrators of it. In order to charge Omar Khadr with murder, the United States of America had to invent a new category of crime, since one does not charge enemy soldiers with murder. The title of "illegal enemy combatant"—the label applied retrospectively to Omar—is a much-contested term. The structural injustices of the Guantanamo proceedings that are designed to ensure convictions add an additional layer of complication to the case. A CBC documentary first aired in October of 2008 provides a helpful introduction to the full range of arguments that complicate the notion of Omar's guilt. See *The US Versus Omar Khadr*, CBC doczone, <<http://www.cbc.ca/documentaries/doczone/2008/omarkadr/>>.

similar myths told by surrounding cultures. Girard argues that what is deeply remarkable about the Joseph story is that “the authors of Genesis have recast a pre-existent mythology, adapting it in the spirit of their special concerns. This involves inverting the relationship between the victim and the persecuting community.”¹⁰ Out of his panoramic study of world mythologies and rituals, Girard is able to identify a recurrent theme. He argues that the root cause of human violence is not scarcity of resources nor any of the other common excuses offered, but rather the natural human tendency that leads one human being, or community of people, to imitate another.¹¹ He calls this tendency “mimetic desire”. Once this process of imitation has erased the boundaries or markers of difference, the miming twins become rivals and begin to compete with one another. Girard goes on to argue that at some critical point in history, humans learned that a scapegoat could offer an alternative to the genocidal violence that would otherwise devastate warring factions. By uniting warring factions in the destruction of one common foe, the scapegoat could divert deadly energies and save many lives. Girard sees in the Joseph stories the marks of an earlier cultural mythology that the biblical authors deliberately overturned. The rivalry between Joseph and his brothers, and the goat’s blood that is used to convince Joseph’s father, Jacob, of his son’s purported death are all, according to Girard, lingering elements of much older plot devices:

10 René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), 151.

11 Girard’s theory of mimetic desire has been of particular interest to those who work in corrections and among the imprisoned. For a brief introduction to Girard’s theory, see the five-part mini-series entitled “The Scapegoat. René Girard’s Anthropology of Violence and Religion” by David Cayley. The series is available on podcast from CBC radio’s program “Ideas”.

From the mythological perspective, the eleven brothers would appear first of all as the passive objects of the violence inflicted by the malevolent hero after he had been victimized and died. Joseph would thus be at first a cause of disorder, and a remnant of this can be surmised from the dreams that he recounts, dreams of domination that excite the jealousy of his eleven brothers. The original myths would no doubt have sanctioned the charge of hubris. The kid that provided the blood in which Joseph's tunic was dipped in order to prove to his father that he was really dead would have played a directly sacrificial role in the pre-biblical account.¹²

The biblical narrative, Girard argues, works to “rehabilitate the victim at the expense of his brothers”.¹³ Unlike other cultural mythologies that seek to exonerate the perpetrators of the cultural violence by somehow justifying their actions, the Bible sets out to do just the opposite. In the founding story of Rome, for example, the murder of Remus by his brother Romulus is not held against the city because the murder is justified by Remus's actions.¹⁴ By contrast, the biblical story calls its readers to account. It forces a self-interrogation of its readers. It unmaskes the effective but ultimately immoral act of scapegoating that seeks, and often secures, relative peace at the expense of a human life.

The intriguing element revealed by this comparison of the Joseph story and the Omar story is the marked contrast that appears between the Bible's efforts to narrate an account that complicates or mitigates the prevailing cultural impulse to blame

12 Girard, *Reader*, 151-52.

13 *Ibid.*, 152.

14 *Ibid.*, 153.

Joseph, and the efforts by both the American and Canadian Governments to set aside the mitigating analysis of the law, Geneva conventions for war, and human rights concerns in order to *ensure* that Omar Khadr is blamed. A sweeping array of voices—the judiciary (both American and Canadian courts), the church,¹⁵ and world-wide human rights organizations—have concluded that the rule of law was the answer to Omar Khadr’s dilemma, rather than extrajudicial processes designed to ensure conviction. Canadian and US Governments’ insistence upon sub-standard legal treatment has overruled the plurality of voices that called for no more than the ordinary standards of justice to be applied to Omar’s case.

It is ironic that the legal institutions in both Canada and the United States that have spoken out against their government’s actions toward Omar Khadr were themselves influenced and shaped by Christian voices in earlier hours of their history. For example, the *habeas corpus* laws that should have prevented Omar’s lengthy period of incarceration before any charges were laid against him arise out of a common source in British law, and, specifically, from the atrocities suffered by early Protestant believers who challenged the state church. The irony grows richer still when one observes that many of these early British

15 The Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops issued a statement dated 24 March 2010, available online: <<http://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/media-room/archives/public-statements/2010/2764-letter-from-archbishop-brendan-m-obrien-chairman-of-the-ccb-human-rights-committee-to-the-honourable-rob-nicholson-minister-of-justice-concerning-the-situation-of-mr-omar-khadr>>. In June of that same year the United Church of Canada followed suit with a public call for Omar Khadr’s repatriation, online: <<http://www.united-church.ca/communications/news/general/100630>>.

Puritans moved to North America to found a more distinctly Christian society. In the late 1590s court bodies like the Star Chamber used violent means to “protect” society from people whom the government of the day deemed to be their enemies. In the wake of what were most often considered gross abuses of state power, laws were put in place to limit that power, to make the government accountable to its people, and to ensure that the laws of the land designed to protect individual citizens were strengthened. All of these laws were set aside in Omar Khadr’s case. His trial under the Guantanamo Military commissions system is regarded by many world legal experts as a modern day version of the Star Chamber. Thirteen Western nations had citizens detained in Guantanamo Bay at one point or another. Twelve western governments asked for, and were granted, the return of their adult citizens. By contrast, Canada insisted that its citizen, a minor at the time of his capture, undergo what Prime Minister Stephen Harper called “due process” at Guantanamo Bay. In the eyes of many national and international legal authorities Harper’s decision made Omar Khadr a scapegoat in a trial whose outcome was scripted as if it were a piece of political theatre. It is also important to note that this opinion about the Guantanamo Bay commissions is not restricted to those of a “liberal” or “anti-US military” political persuasion. Guantanamo’s former chief prosecutor, Col. Morris Davis, is critical of the military commissions he once defended. Commenting to *The Toronto Star* in a recent news article regarding Omar Khadr’s case, Davis criticized the sub-standard processes of justice operative in Guantanamo Bay and the Canadian Government’s complicity with them:

The United States and Canada like to believe we’re shining examples of what rights and justice are all

about. . . . Treating Omar Khadr like some political hot potato that neither government wants to get stuck holding takes some of the shine off the credibility of what we claim we represent. . . . And it's not a bunch of bleeding hearts saying our governments need to do better in this case. I spent 25 years in the U.S. armed forces and Senator Romeo Dallaire was a Canadian lieutenant-general who took on and testified against war criminals.¹⁶

Not only did the Canadian Government insist on the sub-standard Guantanamo court processes for one of its own citizens, but it also did its best to stall on the terms of a plea agreement negotiated with its consent. Colonel Davis's remarks were made in July of 2012, nine full months after Omar was eligible for transfer home to Canada, but two months before that transfer finally took place.

THE ISSUE OF SCAPEGOATING

René Girard's analysis shows how the temptation to promote structural injustice as an answer to violence, to use scapegoating as a means to stem the threat of all out war, is ultimately self-destructive. Girard avers that the notion that a scapegoat can provide meaningful relief from conflict is a lie, a clever diversion tactic that has failed repeatedly in human history, and he makes his case using examples from the Bible. In stories like the Joseph narrative, Girard contends that the scriptures unmask

16 Moe Davis, as quoted in Michelle Shephard's article "Omar Khadr: Delayed transfer from Guantanamo Bay to Canada goes to court" in the *Toronto Star*, July 13, 2012, online: <<http://www.thestar.com/news/world/article/1226450—omar-khadr-delayed-transfer-from-guantanamo-bay-to-canada-goes-to-court>> (last accessed July 20th, 2012).

our human tendency to mitigate wholesale violence by scapegoating. The idea that it is “better that one man die for the people” is debunked in favour of a radical plan of forgiveness and grace. Christ’s self-sacrifice on the cross becomes the ultimate moment of revelation as the victimizing energies that fuel the scapegoating of the Son of God are subverted by Christ’s offering of himself to his accusers. Although the mechanism of scapegoating is first revealed in narratives like the Genesis account of Joseph, Girard demonstrates through a series of readings that the entire Bible builds on this radical notion that forgiveness and grace are viable alternatives to the self-annihilating energies generated by competing desires. For example, following a careful reading of the story of the Gerasene demonic (Matt. 12:22–37; Mark 3:20–34) Girard concludes:

The good news is that scapegoats can no longer save men, the persecutors’ accounts of their persecutions are no longer valid, and truth shines into dark places. God is not violent, the true God has nothing to do with violence, and he speaks to us not through distant intermediaries but directly. The Son he sends us is one with him. The Kingdom of God is at hand.¹⁷

The lies that underpin the mythic understanding of scapegoating have been unmasked by biblical narrative, rendering the mechanism ineffective. The biblical call is to move the scrutinizing energies, that lead to war, inside the individual self. Peace begins at home, in every sense of the term. If we are to enjoy peace, we must cultivate it in our own hearts. The challenge is to remove the log in one’s own eye before making any attempt at the mote in the other’s. Otherwise, we miss seeing things.

17 René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U.P.), 189.

WHAT WE MISS

For many, Omar Khadr's Islamic faith removes him from any Christian concern. All very well to argue that Christians must behave with justice towards brothers and sisters in the faith, but to extend these privileges to the infidel, to those who do not share our faith and our values, is to invite destruction. These voices repackage a line that is argued repeatedly among secularists as a critique against all religions, including Christianity. Religion itself is inherently violent. If only we could rid ourselves of faith and proceed exclusively on the basis of pure reason we might all be saved. Books by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, titles like *The End of Faith*, argue that the solution to human violence rests in the enlightenment dream of a world purged of religion, animated by pure reason. Girard and many others reject these claims. They argue that the human animal is inherently religious. Not all of us practise in organized religious institutions, but all of us posit answers to the questions religions attempt to answer. American Christian theologian William Cavanaugh confronts what he labels "the myth of religious violence" directly. He asserts that religion is inextricable from culture: "What I challenge as incoherent", argues Cavanaugh, "is the argument that there is something called religion—a genus of which Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on are species—which is necessarily more inclined toward violence than are ideologies and institutions that are identified as secular."¹⁸ Ergo, attempts to extricate religion from culture, or to identify an exclusively religious origin for violence, are doomed to fail. What this blaming of religion for violence might accomplish, however, is a demonization of the other which invites an escalation of violence, and the masking of our complicity in the

18 William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2009), 5.

origins of conflict. In the conclusion of his study, Cavanaugh offers an exposé of all we might miss if we replace the deeply Christian practice of self-scrutiny for the root causes of conflict with an outwardly directed intent to blame and scapegoat. The implications of his reading touch the edges of Omar Khadr's case. "Religious beliefs do not lurk essentially unchanged underneath historical circumstances, waiting to unleash their destructive power on history", argues Cavanaugh. "And yet much Western commentary on contemporary Muslim militancy sees it as the intrusion of deep, archaic religious impulses into the modern world."¹⁹ What we miss when we take this view are the many valuable lessons about our own actions that might grant us a deeper understanding about how to fix existing tensions and to prevent future conflicts. Modern Muslim militancy is, according to Cavanaugh's reading,

. . . the result of a distinctly modern encounter with colonial power. Afghanistan became the crucible of Muslim militancy first as the result of resistance to Soviet occupation. Furthermore, that resistance was largely orchestrated by the United States. The creation and support of the *mujahideen* was the largest covert operation in CIA history. . . . The United States did not merely fund the *mujahideen*, but played a key role in training them both tactically and ideologically. The launching of a jihad against the Soviet Union was a key part of U.S. strategy under CIA chief William Casey. He hoped to unite a billion Muslims against the Soviet Union and Marxism worldwide by borrowing from Islamic theology.²⁰

19 Cavanaugh, 229.

20 Ibid.

The point here is not to assign blame, but to see and learn from the truth. The circumstances of any conflict, and especially those involving the tangled circumstances in the Middle East, are complex. A profoundly Christian approach to these issues requires of each of us a willingness to hear more than one story about how these conflicts arise, and to move away from the demonizing arguments about “the other” that foreclose on, rather than encourage, a search for the reconciling energies that might quell nascent unrest. The point is to encourage within ourselves the practice of the golden rule: do unto others what you would have them do unto you. If Christians hope to make space in public discourse for their own beliefs, they must think carefully before they endorse simple arguments about religious violence in other faith communities. Cavanaugh concludes:

The myth of religious violence is false, and it has had a significant negative influence. The myth should be retired from respectable discourse. To do so would offer some important benefits . . . eliminating the myth of religious violence would rid the West of one significant obstacle to understanding the non-Western, especially Muslim, world. Stereotypical images of “religious fanatics” wired for violence by their deepest beliefs have helped to poison Western dealings with the Muslim world.²¹

Of course violence has been directed toward the West both from within and from without. Omar Khadr is implicated in such violence. But where Western legal systems are prepared to examine mitigating circumstances in crimes committed by their own citizens, and especially by children, Omar’s Islamic identity

²¹ Cavanaugh, 227.

blocks these considerations. Canada is a signatory to the United Nations protocol regarding child soldiers, yet it will not ensure that one of its own citizens is allowed the ordinary provisions of the law, let alone the extra leeway granted for children in conflict. The myths that we tell about the inherent violence implied in other people's religions (never our own, of course) stand in the way of the practices of empathy and compassion that, Girard argues, save us from wholesale destruction. We flinch because we are afraid, and we have lost our ability to deal with our fear.

THE FEAR OF GOD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Fear is a natural human response, but left ungoverned it produces a form of suffering. The Christian tradition has a lot to say about how to fear well, and how to fear the right things, but much of this wisdom has been forgotten. In this age of the global village when the troubles of the world land in our living room each evening, it takes personal discipline to assess our fearful reactions and to separate those that deserve our attention from those that do not. In his book entitled *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, theologian Scott Bader-Saye argues that ungoverned fear can produce a set of anti-virtues with devastating consequences.

It is not wrong to fear, but excessive or disordered fear can tempt us to vices such as cowardice, sloth, rage, and violence. It can also inhibit virtuous actions such as hospitality, peacemaking and generosity. . . . While fear itself may not be evil, disordered fear can certainly create the opportunity and (apparent) justification for great evil.²²

22 Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 26.

Picking up on analysis produced in the context of the Second World War by ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr, Bader-Saye argues that long before we can ask “what is right” or “what is good”, we need to know “what is going on”. A truthful and wide ranging inquiry into the facts of a given situation is required before we act. If we are to be truly protected from unnecessary violence, governments must be held to a high standard of truth-telling and willing to lead their electorates towards an intelligent and charitable reading of events. The temptation is to capitulate to the politics of fear. Often it works in the short run, but history teaches that the cost of this capitulation is high over the longer horizon. For those who seek to follow Christ, the fear that one might transgress against God’s laws exerts a saving counter-pressure to the fears that animate daily life. Fear of God provides an external and absolute point of reference, a higher call that overwhelms lesser fears and moves us beyond apathy and out of paralysis. Cycles of violence are endless and a victory for any side short-lived. By contrast, a response wherein one conquers his or her own fears and responds with empathy rather than violence is transformative, not merely for the one who otherwise would be the sacrificial scapegoat, but for the entire community.

In his extended commentary on Genesis, reformer Martin Luther singles out the story of Joseph as a model for a faithful response to fearful events, wherein Joseph’s fear of disappointing God allows him to keep the faith in circumstances that might otherwise have caused him to despair or to seek revenge. “Let us remember this example carefully”, says Luther of Joseph’s story, “in order that we may learn what a great thing and how pleasing it is to the Lord to keep the faith, to fear and revere [God’s] commandments, and not to withdraw from [God] but to persevere in true godliness of heart.”²³

23 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 38–44*, ed. J.J. Pelikan and Walter Hanson, in *Luther’s Works*, ed. J.J. Pelikan et al., vol. 7 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965), 180.

The paradigm-breaking power of Joseph's ability to forgive rather than retaliate, as it is understood by Girard, is attributable retrospectively in Luther's analysis to Joseph's ability to fear displeasing God more than he feared what people might do to him. In the absence of this counter pressure, the human heart that gives into fear is likely to contract. Bader-Saye contends that

... fear draws us in on ourselves so that we "extend" ourselves to "fewer things." This, in turn, becomes a hindrance to Christian discipleship, which calls us not to contract but to expand, not to limit ourselves to a few things but to open ourselves charitably and generously to many things, not to attack that which threatens us but to love even the enemy.²⁴

THE MANY FACES OF MERCY: JUSTICE AND THE SOLDIER'S FAMILY

Loving the enemy is tough at the best of times, but never more so than for the family of a fallen soldier. In the context of war, "the enemy" is not a figural but a literal designation. Soldiers serve out of obedience to state powers, and the violence that erupts on the battlefield is not motivated by the petty concerns of the individual. It follows that if we are going to support our soldiers, we must do so by holding our governments accountable, but we must recognize and value the soldier's sacrifice. In moments of deep loss and stress, we support each other by helping one another to see the better way.

Support does not, however, mean indulging the impulse to revenge. In North America soldiers are told that they offer their lives to protect the state laws and practices that we recognize, at

²⁴ Bader-Saye, 28.

least in moments of cool reflection, keep the rest of us safe. If we are sending our young men and women half way across the world to die in the pursuit of an impartial judicial system, schools for children, and second chances for the citizens of foreign nations, the least we can do is ensure that the same values are guarded here at home. It could be argued, in fact, that our loved ones' sacrifices are actively dishonoured if we do not defend these same values at home. Revenge is cold comfort to those who grieve, and devastating to civic peace. Peace depends upon our willingness to redeem where we can redeem, and to reconcile wherever possible. Girard's analysis underscores the point that violence begets violence, and the instant gratification of a quick, violent "fix" is short-lived and ultimately a direct contradiction to the ideals that motivate the best of our military objectives. "The spirit of reciprocal accusation" is, according to Girard, "otherwise known as Satan himself".²⁵

In many instances, however, unequivocal support for our troops is confused with unequivocal support for the governments that direct their actions. The politics of fear are enticing because they often work. Governments who use such tactics often associate themselves with strong institutions, especially their militaries. Many will actively cultivate a form of state idolatry to distract the electorate from the moral issues implied in the politics of fear, but when our military ceases to protect the laws and ideals upon which the free nation is built in order to secure a short-term win for the sake of national pride, the very foundations of freedom and peace are eroded. When we fight for the nation state or political gain we submit to a form of idolatry that, history has demonstrated repeatedly, leads to predictably disastrous outcomes. In an article that assesses Girard's theories of violence along with those of French philosopher Simone Weil,

25 Girard, *Scapegoat*, 189.

Marie Cabaud Meaney shows how idolatry and the use of a national army to promote such idolatry, led to the horrors of the Second World War:

Germany . . . instead of instant gratification opted for idolatry, another way of avoiding that challenge of the moral law. An absolute value is attributed to a social entity, a nation, or an ideology to which everything else must be sacrificed. The pseudo-religion turns its adherents into fanatics. Hence an area is set apart in which morality has no place, where it is acceptable to kill the innocent because of their ethnic background, religious or political convictions, or for other reasons—for the idea or idol demands it. Thus, a kind of anaesthesia affects the moral conscience, making it possible to kill randomly without pangs of conscience within certain parameters and hence introducing barbarism.²⁶

Girard's analysis allows idolatry to be unmasked and set apart from authentic Christian practice. The Christian scriptures call for an alternative response to grief: those who care for the bereaved are enjoined to “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). Hollow words and sentimentality can do little to repair the loss of a loved one. Instead, the instruction is to care for those who grieve. Generous support, financial aid, and whatever other comforts may be supplied are all required. Those for whom the grieving family is neighbour bear the greatest burden for their care—the instruction is to “love thy neighbour as thyself”—and all who care about peace should also hold these families in their prayers. But there is, I believe,

26 Marie Cabaud Meaney, “Simone Weil and René Girard: Violence and the Sacred”, in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84/3, 575.

a further obligation that is missed entirely by those who turn their compassion for the bereaved into an invitation for revenge against the one deemed responsible for the loss. All who attempt to assuage loss with injustice are culpable. Those of us who are not marked by loss bear a responsibility to those who suffer to uphold them in the practices of the law, both of God and of civil society, especially when they are most difficult to follow. A Christian response to suffering forbids the infliction of retaliatory suffering. Revenge is no comfort for those who grieve. The command is to break the cycle of violence, to love the enemy.

CONCLUSION

The Girardian analysis allows us to uncover death-dealing patterns of behaviour and all that a Christian response might offer to the conversation. For those charged with political responsibilities, the analysis yields a profound challenge to move beyond “left” and “right” politics toward a Christian alternative wherein the paradigm-altering good news of the New Testament is allowed to govern. Rather than demonizing rhetoric that bends in preference to either the desires of the crowd or the wishes of institutional power, Girard’s analysis points toward a multivocal conversation where the full revelation of the gospel is allowed to operate as a self-scrutinizing test of motives and intentions. Wherever politics or theories of interpretation are allowed to fracture the good news, hell results:

Different schools of political thought no less than competing schools of criticism are based on partial and biased adaptations of the Gospel revelation. Our world is full of Christian heresies, i.e., divisions and portions. If the revelation is to be used as a weapon of divisive

power in mimetic rivalry it must first be divided. As long as it remains intact it will be a force for peace, and only if it is fragmented can it be used in the services of war. Broken into pieces it provides the opposing doubles with weapons that are vastly superior to what would be available in its absence.²⁷

In other words, the Christian religion itself does not incite violence, but those who abuse it by abstracting passages, fracturing and isolating passages to support political arguments find a broken scripture tremendously beneficial to their cause. It falls to the rest of the Christian community to insist upon a full and complete reading of scripture—a literary reading rather than a literal one. This habit of insisting upon the full and complete reading, of attending to the multiple stories that are told, must then be transported to the civic arena.

Although it is not part of Girard's analysis, it should come as some consolation to westerners paralysed by fear of the Muslim "other" that the paradigmatic story of Joseph and the marked departure from scapegoating that this narrative represents is also an important story within the Qur'an. The story of Joseph is told in chapter twelve of the Qur'an, and it plays an important role in the Muslim mindset. It is a shared narrative in the Abrahamic tradition, and it provides evidence that the self-scrutinizing, violence-limiting religious impulses that begat Western civilization also animate the Middle East. It is a point in common, a place for a conversation about shared values to begin.

For those following the Khadr case, the comparison with the Joseph story also signals another form of consolation. Joseph's story ends well. In his refusal of revenge, and in his offer of forgiveness to

27 Girard, *Scapegoat*, 116.

both his Egyptian captors and his own family, Joseph paves the way for a peace and prosperity shared by all. By his own account, and by the account of those who know Omar Khadr well—psychologists, lawyers, soldiers, and Canadian government workers—Omar, like Joseph, is also prepared to forgive and move forward. Having served his time, he deserves his chance. The common good rests in his opportunity to have that chance.

Girard's argument is a cool, dispassionate and deeply intellectually satisfying response to the question of human violence. If his argument holds, there are only two choices: to live by our own deepest values and trust, or to prepare for all out battle which, in a world of asymmetric warfare and counter insurgency, can only end poorly. The most basic survey of human history will soon prove that there has always been a loathed "other" to animate our worst fears and to fuel the demonizing energies that cast our gazes outwards to the suspicious other rather than inwards to the certain source of all violence: our own hearts. If we are to apply the lessons of Scripture to the narratives of pain in our own civic lives we will need to do as the students at King's learned to do: listen to the stories—the plural form is important here because there is always more than one—and then act. Let our own scripture shaped deep convictions about all that is just and good guide us. As Girard avers, "There is only one transcendence in the Gospels, the transcendence of divine love that triumphs over all manifestations of violence."²⁸ In other words, love knows no bounds.

²⁸ Girard, *Scapegoat*, 194.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Bader-Saye, Scott. *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007.
- Cavanaugh, William T. *The Myth of Religious Violence*. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2009.
- Girard, René. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. New York: Orbis Books, 2002.
- . *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996.
- . *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U.P., 1986.
- Luther, Martin. *Lectures on Genesis 38–44*, ed. J.J. Pelikan and Walter Hanson, in *Luther's Works*, ed. J.J. Pelikan et al., vol. 7. Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965.
- Meaney, Marie Cabaud. "Simone Weil and René Girard: Violence and the Sacred", in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 3.
- Shephard, Michelle. *Guantanamo's Child: The Untold Story of Omar Khadr*. Toronto: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2008.
- Williamson, Janice, ed. *Omar Khadr: Oh Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill–Queen's U.P., 2012.

— ARLETTE ZINCK

Department of English, The King's University College
9125 - 50th Street, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6B 2H3
e-mail <arlette.zinck@kingsu.ca>

A graduate of Mount St Vincent University in Halifax, NS, and the University of Alberta (PhD 1993), Dr Zinck, an Associate Professor of English at The King's University College, Edmonton, is widely known for her research on the writings of John Bunyan. Through the circumstances she narrates in this paper, she first met Omar Khadr by way of correspondence in 2008, and in person in 2010.

THE CHESTER RONNING CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF
RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE

University of Alberta, Augustana Campus
4901 - 46th Avenue
Camrose, AB, Canada
T4V 2R3

<www.augustana.ca/ronning>

Director: David J. Goa
Telephone 1 780 679 1104
E-mail <david.goa@augustana.ca>



CHESTER ALVIN RONNING, OC, CC (1894-1984)
in whose memory the Centre is named
Principal of Camrose Lutheran College, 1927-42
subsequently served Canada
as one of her most eminent diplomats

He and his family made their home
in Camrose