

Title: Redeeming Religion from Violence: The Good News of “Creating One New Humanity Out of Two”

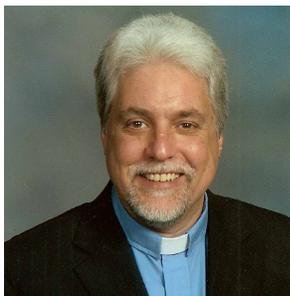
Synopsis

Politics and economics are the modern, secular religion — propped up by “good ol’ time religion” in conservative quarters. So if we find ourselves frustrated by bad politics, entrenched in tribalism, the way to better politics requires understanding the religious foundations of all human culture. The way to better politics will require a religious conversion of sorts — the sort known as “spirituality” in this secular age of well-founded allergy to religion.

So in this post-Christendom context, followers of Jesus are called to a radical change in messaging: God did not send Jesus as Messiah in order to start a new religion called “Christianity,” by which humanity is saved. Rather, the key to saving humanity is to *save all religion from violence*. From the perspective of theological anthropology, the original key to our species’ survival was the evolution of religion as an ordering principle against intra-community violence. In short, religion saves us from “bad” violence by imposing “good” violence. It provides the ultimate Us vs. Them structuring of our societies that keeps humanity trapped in violent tribalism. Eventually we and our religion need saving from the “good” violence, too. Jesus on Good Friday took all of our violence upon himself and on Easter launched God’s New Creation (Rom. 8:18-23). It all begins with God in Christ ‘creating one new humanity in place of the two’ (Eph. 2:15) — that is, redeeming the Us-Them structuring of religion. God sent Jesus not to start a new religion but to give us a new way of being human for which there is no longer Us and Them, only Us — ‘no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female’ (Gal. 3:28).

This study will feature the anthropology of René Girard as a way to understand the Christian message in fresh ways — a complement to renewal of mission in the church. It will include Bible Study and time for small group conversational learning.

Presenter



Retired in 2015 after 30 years of parish ministry in ELCA congregations, Paul Nuechterlein is able to devote more time to his passion for renewing the Christian message of peace and justice, in ways that complement a renewal of the church’s mission. His lens for this renewal is the theological anthropology of René Girard’s (called “Mimetic Theory”). A student of Girard’s work for 25+ years, Paul has built and maintains the website “Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary” (girardianlectionary.net), which receives an average of 1,200+ visits each day from people across denominations and around the world.

“I’m convinced that the seminal work of René Girard is the single most promising and productive contemporary resource capable of stimulating fresh readings of the Bible, constructive critical thought about Christian theology and practice, and incisive inducement to productive activism.

Paul Nuechterlein has helped me more than anyone else to read the Scriptures in light of Girard’s groundbreaking work. I’d encourage anyone and everyone to seize an opportunity to learn with Paul.”

~ **Brian D. McLaren**, Christian author and teacher

Outline for Presentations

1. **Session 1:** “The Cruciform Anthropology of René Girard: A Wholistic Theory of Human Violence and Its Redemption” — an overview of Girard’s life, work, and the three main pillars of his theory:
 - a. *Mimetic Violence*: how human beings are hard wired to desire mimetically and historically evolved into becoming entrapped into the sinful pattern of mimetic desire → mimetic rivalry → mimetic conflict → mimetic violence (apocalyptic “bad” violence).
 - b. *Sacred Violence*: the “good” culturally sanctioned violence used to contain the “bad” mimetic violence.
 - i. It is the Sin of our origins (“original sin”) that the Cross specifically reveals — “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”
 - ii. From the beginnings of *Homo sapiens*, the key to avoiding implosion from intra-community violence, was a scapegoating violence that transforms all-against-all violence into all-against-one violence, which evolved into a religious, sacred violence and was institutionalized into ritual blood sacrifice across all human cultures.
 - iii. The evolution of sacred violence has continued to structure human culture in the “rule of law” at the center of Empire — a fundamental “tribalism” of Us vs. Them structured into cultures through things like racism, sexism, militarism, and economics of unjust inequality.
 - c. *Redeeming Religion from Violence*: the cross and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah is the pivotal historical event that reveals, begins to undo, and redeems the violence at the heart of human religion and culture.
 - i. God in the cross of Jesus the Messiah submits to the epitome of imperial sacred violence and then begins to render it impotent through the vindication of the resurrection and the sending of the Spirit of Truth.
 - ii. These insights of a cruciform anthropology provides a *fresh reading of Scripture* as a millennia-long covenantal process of desacralizing divine violence — coming to the pivotal insight, “that God is light and in God there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5b).
 - iii. We continue to live in the Apocalypse: the revelation of supposed divine, sacred violence as human violence — a long, slow process of *secularization* (desacralizing violence).
2. **Session 2:** “The End of Christendom as the Opportunity to Renewed Reformation” — this time getting right two crucial aspects that were missed over the last five centuries:
 - a. First point: *That the Christian revelation shows us that God is completely nonviolent.*
 - i. Nonviolent atonement: The meaning of the cross cannot include a wrathful God who exacts lethal punishment — that Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory is a falling back into the gods who command blood sacrifice.
 - ii. The importance of the nonviolence of God as a theme in recent theology.
 - iii. Bible study on the “wrath of God” in Paul’s Letter to the Romans.
 - b. Second Point: *That Jesus the Messiah was sent into the world not to begin a new religion but to establish a new Way of being truly human, offering redemption for all religions.*
 - i. What is salvation? The church’s answer during Christendom has been to convert people to the Christian religion in order to save them from hell for heaven.
 - ii. Louis Martyn’s Anchor Bible Commentary on *Galatians*: the main theme is that Paul views the cross as a revelation on religion and violence; and the resurrection as the launching of new creation. This is a quite different answer to, “What is salvation?” — a theme especially made prominent in the work of N. T. Wright.
 - iii. The Christendom view of salvation actually deepens the sin of tribalism, making the vision of afterlife an ultimate sorting into Us and Them, and justifying violence in this life against those who don’t convert to the Christian religion. Brief Bible study on Ephesians 2.
 - iv. A Girardian reading of “hell” as the reality of human violence, not divine punishment.
3. **Session 3:** “Jesus’s New Way of Being Human includes Politics and Economic Justice”
 - a. Behind bad politics and bad economics is bad theology. Girard’s Mimetic Theory helps us to understand how gods of tribalism prop up tribalistic politics and economics.
 - b. Bible Study on Matthew 25:31-46: reading it as a judgment on the economic justice (or lack thereof) of real nations in history, not as judgment on individuals in the afterlife on the basis of their charity in this life.