Engaging with Tragic Spirituality and Victim Sensibility: On the Cultural Setting of Mission in the West Today

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ABSTRACT

Researchers into contemporary spirituality in Britain raise the question of a possible return of the classical tragic sense of life once displaced by Christianity. Such a sense of life renders faith incredible. This profound mission challenge shows itself especially in "tragic spirituality" and in an exalted "victim sensibility." The intrinsic relation between tragedy and victimhood is here explored. Since the experience of tragic victimhood is personally demanding it is characteristically evaded, in one of two basic ways: either by adopting a dismissive attitude, or by giving in to being overwhelmed and spiritually defeated. Both responses are destructive: the former tends to create or re-victimize victims, while the latter turns into self-destructive resentment and rage which readily creates new victims. Jesus Christ accepted the vocation of the ultimate victim who embraces radical victimhood without evasion and empowers others to do the same. Nevertheless Christians have sometimes either been dismissive of victimhood by appealing superficially to the resurrection, or have made Jesus the mere icon of tragic suffering.

Western culture is now seen to foster vulnerability towards overwhelming by victimhood. This vulnerability is associated with the cultural fostering of depleted, narcissistic personalities. Such overwhelming often shows itself in rage and the search for scapegoats. The relation between overwhelming, the sacrifice of scapegoats and the sacred is now explored with attention to René Girard's writings. His discernment here of a contemporary "twofold Nietzschean heritage" is presented as a vital context for mission today, together with "scapegoating" tendencies in fundamentalist religion. In conclusion, an underlying

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also available online
Mission Studies 21.2
see: www.brill.nl
issue is alternative understandings of “the sacred” and the ensuing relation between sacred and secular, and the need to witness to what true sacredness is. This is to be found in Christ’s self-sacrificial love towards all who dismiss or are overwhelmed by the painful demands of this same love.

KEYWORDS
Spirituality, Victimhood, René Girard, Mission in West

In their research report “Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don’t Go to Church,” David Hay and Kate Hunt make the following observation:

George Steiner suggested in his book The Death of Tragedy (1961) that in the course of European history, the classical Greek sense of life as tragic was overcome by the advent of the fundamental optimism of the Judaeo-Christian belief system. We are wondering whether, forty years on from Steiner’s analysis, after Auschwitz and after the many other atrocities of the 20th century, we see in post-Christian society the return of a tragic sense of life... If at the deepest level there is a conviction that life at depth is pitiless and utterly meaningless, then the optimism of Christianity become incredible. The people we spoke to were well aware of this, and it is an issue that church people need to face much more directly in their dialogue with secular culture. (Hay and Hunt 2000: 38)

This article is written with the belief that this is a vital issue for mission in western culture today. It concerns nothing less than a loss (or rejection) of hope – hope which is offered radically in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The associated incredulity towards the gospel is not only intellectual, of such a kind as has often been shown in modern times towards miracles recounted in the Bible; it concerns despair about personal human life down to its very foundations. This loss of hope is largely suppressed by those affected, and lies behind quite diverse patterns of behavior including addictive habits, restless promiscuity, and escapist habits of consumption.

This mission challenge presents itself most clearly in situations which raise acutely for people the question “Is there hope?” and Christians seek to awaken in these situations, through what they say and do practically, the hope of the gospel. Mission must address both these situations and
the responses people make to them. Among these responses, mission must engage a tragic sense of life.

A tragic sense of life shows itself especially in two ways today. The first is in a certain “tragic spirituality” discernible behind, for example, the increasingly common placing of memorials at the site of road traffic accidents and in the mass outpourings of feeling (often expressed in “religious” ritual) towards high-profile, iconic victims. Famously, the tragic death of the Princess of Wales brought a flood of candles and flowers and impromptu monuments in Britain. More recently, in 2002, such an outpouring followed the murder of two young English schoolgirls: over 15,000 candles were lit by visitors to Soham Parish Church, a similar number of letters were sent and flowers placed in the churchyard, and around 2000 teddy bears given. There have also been candlelight marches in memory of AIDS victims. Underlying such phenomena is discernible a tragic sensibility.

The expression “victim of tragedy” reminds us of a second way in which the tragic sense of life arguably shows itself today. There is a remarkably heightened sensitivity towards victimhood in western culture compared to past and to other cultures. Victimhood is widely the focus of intense feeling both among those who have themselves experienced being victims and those who identify with victims of oppression by other people. Sometimes the sense of victimhood is so much to the fore in a group and its worldview that victimhood plays a “religious” role defining the very identity of the group. For example, the view is held by some today that to be a woman, or to be black-skinned, is to be a victim. Similarly the experience of the holocaust has profoundly affected Jewish self-understanding. It would not be overstating the matter, to say that sometimes “victim” status endows a group tacitly with a “sacred” character in its own eyes or in the eyes of others.

A tragic sense of life informs passionate sentiment towards victims. It also continues secretly to inform crusades against some form of oppression which exalt such liberation as definitive of the sacred, as absolute and overriding any conflicting moral claims. In this connection rights can become sacred, and their violation a “religious” offence. Associated feelings of absolute entitlement are of course further encouraged when the legal profession promotes litigation in order to secure custom (a marketing
practice now made legal, but remaining a cause of moral dis-ease among many people, in Britain today). Absolute rights also profoundly shape, in so-called “compensation syndrome,” the self-understanding of victims who are pursuing litigation; in this way the “religion” of rights may, like any religion, get exploited for personal gain.

Corollaries of such sentiment appear in the “western guilt complex” and in low self-esteem among males where the stereotype is carried – heavy burden – of an irredeemable oppressor. Vicarious acts of apology for ancestral sins, even if accompanied by constructive gestures of reparation, may prove powerless to exorcise this burden. Neurotic guilt is also widely fostered by the ever-spreading threat of litigation: all of us are growing more vulnerable here, in a distant echo of the vulnerability of citizens under the legislative powers of Stalin’s Russia (see Solzhenitsyn 1974, Part One).

The tragic sense of life and the exalted victim sensibility together present twin issues for mission in western culture today. In what follows I shall explore briefly these phenomena and the relation between them. I shall consider how people respond to tragedy and victimhood as these responses appear in the light of Jesus Christ who embraced victimhood in an ultimate way. I shall then go on explore, in Part Two, a range of issues which arise in connection with this: how the victimhood of Christ gets distorted and the gospel betrayed, why our own particular culture is highly sensitised to victimhood, what is the relation between victimhood, identity and the sacred, and how all this relates to the role of the sacrificial victim in traditional religion. Finally we shall consider the nature of the sacred as a key hermeneutical question for mission to western culture today.

The reader may protest: is it not our great mission task to prevent and alleviate tragedy and victimhood today, rather than to analyze it? I affirm wholeheartedly this vocation; indeed, I regard it as a matter of concern how little has been achieved in this regard despite the wealth of contemporary sentiment, rhetoric and posturing about victims. However, mission must also extend to revealing the gospel hope where there remains a context of evil, suffering and limitation, and to breaking the hold these have upon peoples’ souls. It must aspire to free people from the spell of victimhood, as well as from situations of victimhood. This involves analyzing and addressing how people experience victimhood. In the process, as we shall
see below, we shall find further clues to healing the situations which create victims in the first place.

This paper may be seen as exploring aspects of the inculturated gospel to contemporary western culture. As always, this has two inseparable sides. On the one hand it is an exploration of how the gospel speaks within and in terms of the habits of thought, feeling and practice which characterize western culture, speaking from within this culture rather than speaking from within the horizons of a supposed alternative culture whose habits must be learned before the gospel can be understood, and understood only, in these terms. On the other hand it is an exploration of how the gospel speaks to this culture. The gospel is not domesticated by this culture so as merely to echo this culture in all its ambiguity including elements within it which resist openness to the gospel and which ultimately subvert what is God-given in the culture itself. Rather, engaging this culture, the gospel breaks open the culture's horizons to the approach of God in sovereign freedom. In so doing it not only reveals God; it also awakens cultural self-awareness in the light of the gospel, revealing that to which the gospel speaks, and speaks anew, and revealing the terms in which it does so.

**Tragedy, Victimhood and the Relation Between Them**

When Hay and Hunt surmise the return of "the tragic sense of life" they have in mind something more specific than is intended by popular reference to a "tragic event." Following Steiner, they intend that particular sense of life presented in Greek dramatic tragedy and which is perhaps conveyed more today in talk of a tragic person, a tragic tale, or a tragic sight.

The tragic, in this core sense, presents itself to us most truly in the singular event compelling our attention. Let us pay attention to an example. In the mid-1990s the press reported a bizarre tragedy which struck an individual in the United States. Following extensive forest fires, the charred remains were found in the forest of a man wearing a frogman's suit. Helicopters had tackled the fires by scooping huge buckets of water from the sea and dropping them on the fires. By an infinitesimal chance, the man had been scooped up in one of these buckets.

If we allow ourselves to identify with this man, and with his family and friends, what sense will this evoke in us? We shall feel a huge and dismaying dissonance between (1) the precious fact of this man's "being there" as a
A person of unqualified value and (2) an event which has happened as if he did not exist. Our sense is of a world which betrays the reality and worth of this man—a world for which this man is absent and which is therefore itself marked by the absence of what (as we feel with passion) should be there to affirm the precious reality of this man. We also register with passion that he has done nothing whatsoever to cause this misfortune; it has taken hold of him “out of the blue.” Again we feel the absence of a reason or purpose commensurate with his reality which we feel passionately should be there. Here we feel force of the question often asked by victims of tragedy: “why should this happen to me?” This event powerfully violates our sense of what is right and proper to our world, given the precious reality of this man and of all of us who identify with him and who could have been victims of tragedy in his place.

Turning from “the tragic sense of life” to “victim sensibility,” once again our interest lies in something more specific than is intended by popular reference to the victim of, say, a crime or an accident. Such victimhood, again, presents itself most truly in the singular. Let us therefore once again pay attention to an example: let us think of the Balkan woman whose baby was taken from her by soldiers, and then found herself given back, mockingly, the head of her baby to suckle at her breast.

Once again in this case we register the precious reality of the mother and her baby, compellingly to be honored. We also register, with passion, that the woman is innocent of responsibility for what has been done to her and her baby: she is not “to blame” either in a moral sense (which in some other circumstances may prompt us to think of suffering as just rather than unjust) or in a practical sense (which in some other circumstances may prompt us to see the suffering of a victim as a consequence of their own actions).

I do not mean to suggest that victimhood is the same in the case of victims of misfortune and of oppression. Obviously in the latter case victimhood is at the hands of an agent whereas in the former case it is not; and this distinction is vital (despite the complexities which sometimes arise when judging between the two in particular cases) and carries many implications for responsible understanding and action. However this fact should not conceal from us the inner relationship between the sense of victimhood in each case.
In the case of tragic misfortune in which “no-one is to blame,” tragic sensibility involves a sense that someone should have been there and stopped it from happening. More precisely, it involves a sense (possibly unacknowledged) that the world should be the sort of place in which the presence and value of the victim in question is honoured and not violated, just as we would have desired to be there and stop it from happening by our own presence. Such tragic sensibility involves more than grief at this absence; it also involves a sense that the absence of such a person is (oddly) a “choice” by such an (absent) person. That is to say, tragedy is experienced as somehow deliberately inflicted, as a “deliberate” absence constituting an active negation. This seems to be the sense behind the question “why did this happen to me?” Finally, this moral contradiction is raised above all chance and made the world’s “last word,” so to speak; raised to a cosmic scale, it is incorporated into oneself as a contradiction at the center of one’s experience of the world. The possibility is foreclosed, of any more ultimate integration of this within a world marked by personal, loving purpose.

Accordingly victimhood involves fundamentally a sense of being mocked – mocked by the “absent” agent behind blind chance. In the case when a person is the victim of other human beings rather than tragic misfortune, this sense of being mocked comes to the fore: the sense that “someone should have been there and stopped it from happening” is met by the truth that “someone was there, and precisely by their presence caused it to happen.” The outrageousness of this as a possibility is quite overwhelming. The tragic sense remains that someone was not there; the agent of victimisation enacted a contradiction of their responsibility to be there. This reinforces the moral contradiction we feel in tragedy and incorporate into ourselves. Similarly, if in a further development the outrage of this victimhood is presented to another person for acknowledgement and this is denied, this denial reinforces further still the moral contradiction we experience.

A sensitive, articulate testimony to and exploration of the experience of victimhood may be found in Simone Weil’s depiction of the “afflicted” soul (Weil 1951: 63–78). Distinguishing affliction from suffering, she writes that in the former “a kind of horror submerges the soul. During this absence (of God) there is nothing to love.” Affliction is, she says, “anonymous before all things; it deprives its victims of their personality and makes them into
things. It is indifferent; and it is the coldness of this indifference — a metallic coldness — that freezes all those it touches right to the depths of their souls."

We are profoundly tested spiritually by the experience of, or by close engagement with, victimhood. It is for us a particularly intense encounter with the grievous violation, subversion and loss of all that matters most deeply. We experience it as a testing denial of human worth including our own, of all that humans count of worth including ourselves, and of our world as the bearer of such worth.

**Victimhood: Experience and Response**

We respond in differing ways to victims and to the testing experience of victimhood. However the fact that these are ways of responding is not obvious, and needs elucidation; it cannot be recognized from some detached viewpoint, but only in what is itself a response to victimhood — ultimately in the light of Christ. Here discernment is vital; Simone Weil's spirituality and the manner of her ensuing death remind us how much is at stake in recognizing what constitutes an authentic response to victimhood.¹

On the one hand we may turn away from victimhood when it confronts us. We may treat it dismissively, denying the personal, moral and spiritual challenge it presents to us. This challenge is at once to take any responsible action possible to spare or relieve victimhood, and to grieve without despairing where we are powerless to put right what is wrong. Such dismissal of course perpetuates and reinforces the circumstance — the oppression or misfortune — which is the occasion of victimhood. Our denial may find release in laughter, in that dissociated “laughing at” which is so different from “laughing with,” and which finds calculated expression in mockery. I wonder sometimes about Red Nose Day: “If we have to

¹Simone Weil died as a result of her refusal, when ill, to allow herself any resources beyond those available to the poor workers with whom she identified. How shall we evaluate this? Eric Springsted acknowledges “that Weil in her life may have had a tendency to concentrate on perverse versions of sacrifice” (Springsted 1986). One might reflect here upon the difference between Weil’s desire to identify with the affliction of Christ, and (for example) Julian of Norwich’s desire to share in the passion of Christ; or upon the difference between Weil’s insistence upon the place of necessity in God’s providence and George MacDonald’s understanding of divine providence. There are deep spiritual issues here which lie at the heart of the concerns of this paper.
acknowledge victims, let's keep them at a safe distance!": is this what we are saying?

Now it may seem that such dismissal is not so much a response to the experience of victimhood as a matter of blindness to it. And is it not such moral blindness which creates victims in the first place? However this blindness conceals an active refusal to embrace what presents itself to us; it is a self-deceived, evasive response, haunted by what we ourselves secretly count unfaceable victimhood. If such dismissal appears to resist (rather than respond to) the experience of victimhood, by contrast tragic spirituality and victim sensibility appear to embrace the experience of victimhood. And it overwhelms us: we are emotionally devastated by something beyond all facing.

Our emotional defeat can find expression in two ways. On the one hand our feelings can turn inward and get buried in the emotional paralysis of self-pity, either towards ourselves or as we project them on to those whom we see as "pitiful." Alternatively our anguish may distort into passionate rage, and then perhaps into calculated action. A bitter sense of victimhood has led to many an outrageous act. In the United States, individuals outraged at the victimisation of unborn children have performed acts of extreme violence against Abortion Clinic staff, while in Britain individuals outraged at the victimization of animals in research laboratories have sent letter-bombs to those they hold responsible.

How shall we describe such feelings of outrage? Are they of moral indignation? Interestingly it has been said of our culture that as well as being amoral or relativistic in its morality, it is marked by moral perfectionism giving free reign to "moral passions" (Polanyi 1967: 56–60). Our culture is marked both by moral relativism and by moral absolutism – and arguably by a tendency of polarisation between them. At the pole of moral passion lies, among other phenomena, the outrage which is felt by or on behalf of a victim. The moral character of this feeling is unqualified deference before that which, violated and powerless as we behold it, pleads compellingly to be upheld.

But are these passions adequately described as moral? Surely moral feeling is associated with an intention to recognize and integrate, in a single act of judgement, all moral considerations? By contrast, here we see passion overriding any such judgement, and sometimes doing so with
extreme violence. Exaltation of these “moral passions” may distort true
moral life just as seriously as does the tendency of moral relativism.

Once again it may seem that such overwhelming is less a response to the
experience of victimhood than the experience simply of suffering personal
violation. In reality, however, there is a continuing act of submission
involved here; this is a way of experiencing victimhood in terms of defeat,
in which we yield to defining ourselves by our being negated as persons. In an act
of self-contradiction, we become complicit in our own self-loss. And far
from embracing thereby the experience of victimhood, we yield to our self-
dissipation as potential responsible subjects of such experience. This is as
much an evasive response as is any dismissal of victimhood, and is haunted
by our own secret ascription of the last word to the victimizing agent.

Such a picture find a certain correspondence in the place given to
“overwhelming” by two other authors. Alister McFadyen argues that
Christians have associated sin too exclusively with pride (which broadly
matches “dismissal” above), and that this has obscured the sin of complicity
in our “self-loss” in victimhood (McFadyen 2000). David Ford, meanwhile,
writes of our lives as shaped ultimately by “overwhelmings” which are
either of a destructive kind (as above) or in which we are overwhelmed by
God who blesses us (Ford 1997).

Neither dismissal nor the defeat constituted by despair or rage are
authentic, constructive responses to victimhood. They are destructive
evasions. Dismissal wreaks destruction in the victim whose claim is denied
and who is thereby re-victimized; self-pity, resentment and rage wreak
destruction in the person possessed by them, and rage may create new
victims of its own. Meanwhile each evasion involves self-deception, and
is haunted by the other within ourselves. What, then, will be involved in
an authentic response to victimhood? This unfolds as we explore, as the
ultimate encounter with and response to victimhood, the crucifixion of
Jesus of Nazareth.

**Jesus the Victim**

Jesus saw himself (Lk 7:18–23 and parallels) as fulfilling the prophecy of a
coming Messiah who would liberate victims: “then the eyes of the blind will
be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like
deer, and the dumb shout aloud” (Is 35:5–6). Jesus’ acts of liberation and
healing were more than physical in intention, however: they were given as signs of the in-breaking kingdom of God, bringing ultimate victory both over the material agents of victimhood and the power of victimhood personally to intimidate people into dismissal or defeat. And this purpose was accomplished as Jesus fulfilled another pattern within the scriptures: the victimhood suffered by God’s prophets and righteous ones (Lk 11:47–51).

How, then, does Jesus the victim bring this ultimate victory? On the one hand, he confronts dismissal of victimhood by addressing us as the crucified one. Here we are shown the ultimate violation and defeat of all that is meaningful, hopeful and good in human life under God. Here we are shown an outrage deeper and darker than any victimhood we have yet faced: the specter of the ultimate victim, now come to pass. There remains for us no trace of grounds for optimism about ourselves or the solidity of human life and meaning – even the grounds we have so far grasped in Jesus’ resurrection. Our condition is worse than that which we had understood as having been addressed by the resurrection of Jesus. Accordingly the resurrection is now revealed in turn as more than we have understood, showing itself so precisely as we see anew the awesome victimhood of Jesus. In other words, the huge meaningfulness of Jesus' passion cannot be divorced from the spectral meaninglessness intimated by his victimhood: we ask ourselves, overcome with awe, what sacred love is this which gives reign to, and suffers, its own final denial? It is only as we hold on with determination to this paradox that we may speak of Jesus’ passion as having always been part of God’s eternal plan. Otherwise our faith in his resurrection is superficial and ultimately dismissive of his victimhood.

On the other hand, Jesus the victim confronts our own sense of being overwhelmed by victimhood – our self-pity and rage. Here we find, in the first place, our familiar feelings of self-pity and rage awakened and presented with new, unqualified warrant: here what has defeated us finds ultimate expression. However we find these feelings of ours are engaged in a new way. This ultimate victimhood is something shown to us personally by Jesus – Jesus who enters fully and freely into the depths of sorrow and lament, embracing his victimhood without being overcome by despair or rage, and who now invites us to do the same. As Jesus shares in the immeasurable sorrow of his Father over his faithless servants, he becomes
for us a channel of the same graceful forbearance. And he empowers us with the same grace in turn: paradoxically as we are drawn into his own victimhood we find ourselves liberated fully and freely to embrace the grief of injustice and tragedy, and dignified with the power to confer the gift of forgiveness, like him, without reserve.

**Cross and Resurrection**

In this way the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection takes us beyond the dynamics of tension and resolution, pain and relief, loss and recovery which characterise many a sentimental tale. In this story, paradoxically losing and finding are at once more closely intertwined and more radical in their opposition.

Thus it is true that the resurrection of Jesus speaks beyond contradiction of a victory over Satan’s power to paralyze us in denial, despair or rage. But it is a victory already implicit on the cross, and a victory which always speaks to the cross. We cannot finally separate Jesus’ resurrection from his crucifixion, which would be to dismiss victimhood without facing it; we cannot separate his crucifixion from his resurrection, which would be to admit defeat as we are overwhelmed by the scandal of victimhood. And yet cross and resurrection each open us, in their radical opposition, depths we have not fully fathomed — depths in openness to which, by the grace of God, our souls are enlarged as we are drawn further into the mystery of divine forgiveness. Austin Farrar wrote “the act of God always overthrows human expectation: the cross defeats our hope; the resurrection terrifies our despair” (Farrar 1948: 139); and this always remains our situation as cross and resurrection encompass us.

This gospel message or story presents itself today in every way that the gospel of God’s kingdom was presented by Jesus of Nazareth — in teaching and exhortation, in acts of liberation and in the whole witness of self-giving love.

**Christian Betrayal of the Gospel**

The mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection addresses radically our evasion of the grief of victimhood, whether this evasion takes the form of dismissal or defeat. However, the church sometimes distorts this mystery
in such a way that, rather than addressing evasion, it serves tacitly to legitimacy it. How does this happen?

On the one hand the church has been seen sometimes as dismissing tragedy by telling the optimistic story of a happy ending in which peoples' experiences of tragedy are not seriously acknowledged and addressed. It seems that this is how George Steiner views the church's message in The Death of Tragedy. And perhaps there is good reason to see Christian history in this way. Perhaps the church has often proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus in such a way that the death of Jesus does not seriously engage with peoples' experience of victimhood, but effectively dismisses this.

The biblical witness involves no such dismissal. In the New Testament, the victimhood of Christians at the hands of persecutors is readily acknowledged, set within the hope of a glorious future resurrection (e.g., 2 Thess 1:4–5; Heb 12:4–9; 1 Pet 1:6–7). In the Old Testament the voice of lament is repeatedly heard; it includes the cry of the Babylonian exiles grieving the loss of their nation, and the wrestling of Job with God and with his accusers in his determination neither to dismiss his victimhood on the one hand nor to "curse God and die" on the other.

It has been argued that Christian dismissal of tragedy reflects in part the influence of the classical Greek belief in the immortality of the human soul. In the light of this belief the greatest of losses, signified by death, is seen as at root an illusion; the need is dismissed of acknowledging the full force of loss and to place hope and trust in God that he will act finally to save. The influence of this Greek belief upon Christianity since Augustine has been discussed by Geoff Walters (Walters 1997).

On the other hand the church sometimes distorts the gospel in a complementary way to the dismissal of victimhood. In the church's concern to let the cross speak to victimhood today, it may unwittingly allow Jesus to become merely an icon for all victimhood. It may invite us to project on to him all the self-pity and rage of our overwhelming by victimhood, allowing him no freedom actually to speak to our defeat: we may let our defeat dictate how we see Jesus as a victim. The present author has attended Christian devotions on Good Friday in which the figure of Jesus has been used in this way. To light a candle for Jesus on such occasions feels a very different matter from acclaiming Jesus as the light of the world. In another example, one finds Jesus' sacrificial death acclaimed in a way
which, echoing a consumerist culture, invites prospective "customers" to identify vicariously with him as a celebrity — and offering no more real hope than does the culture of "celebrity" in general. Another example is found in Jesus Christ Superstar where Jesus is the petulant victim of his Father in heaven and Judas is the implicit source of hope. From an earlier age, an example might be identified in the kind of excessive sentiment shown in medieval times towards Jesus’ suffering.

Another Christian temptation when personally overwhelmed by victimhood is to make Jesus the icon for the liberation of victims as this is pursued in Marxist practice, through revolution against social structures of oppression. The innocence of victims who revolt (which innocence guarantees a bright future) and the guilt of their oppressors are alike exalted without qualification. Here again the wider frame is lost, in which the line between victim and oppressor runs ultimately through the middle of each person, and personal virtue and social activism belong together under God.

In such ways the church and Christians have sometimes distorted and betrayed Jesus' liberating victory over the spell of victimhood, and become mere accomplices to the evasion from which it liberates us. Given this continuing vulnerability of the gospel, it is desirable that we pay further attention to the cultural and personal dimensions of victim sensibility. Let us consider first how this heightened sensibility is fostered in our own contemporary western culture.

**Western Culture and the Spell of Victimhood**

If, as I have suggested, the rise of tragic spirituality and victim sensibility reflect a tendency of personal overwhelming by the affliction of "victimhood," we might ask why inhabitants of contemporary western culture should be especially vulnerable to such overwhelming. Hay and Hunt provide part of the answer to this when they relate a tragic sense of life to Auschwitz and the many other atrocities of the twentieth century. Also formative, however, is the general context in which people have found themselves confronted with these and other disturbing events. Three features of this context invite note.

First, these events have arisen against the background of confidence in "human progress." This adds to them a distinctive trauma. They have deeply shaken the culture resting upon this self-confidence. Accordingly
members of this culture have widely lacked the personal resources to cope with this trauma: for although faith in progress has its origins in Christian hope inspired by the approach of God's kingdom, it has lacked a realistic appraisal of the human perversity which subverts this progress and any confidence placed in it. The robust resources of Christian hope have therefore been depleted.

Second, ambiguities in the historical reality of "progress" itself have worked against hope. In practice "progress" has involved the increasing rationalization of social life in its various aspects, especially through professionalization and economic rationalization. However this has tended to exclude people as well as to provide new opportunities for formal participation in society. The "iron cage" of rationalization has displaced informal communities of people from their roles as surely as medieval land enclosure displaced peasants from their self-sufficient way of life. Meanwhile, in the process, hope has been transferred to progress through the changes brought about by rationalization, while the hope which was bound up in traditional societies with being affirmed in an established way of life has faded, making displacement profoundly felt. In this way, progress itself has brought new victims and a new sense of alienation.

Third, as the erosion of informal, participatory life in community has created a new personal vulnerability this has opened the way for vicarious substitutes to acquire a dominant role in society. Here "the real" becomes displaced beyond and excludes oneself, and one literally "buys into" it by purchasing goods, or by watching celebrities. Following another strategy, one may "buy into" an identity by associating oneself with the cause of the oppressed in one form or another, which also provides a defence against feelings of guilt. A way of life and a culture take shape in which individual self-preoccupation is nurtured and exploited for profit, while the neediness and lack of hope underlying this is suppressed.

Victimhood, Personal Identity and the Sacred

We may explore further tragic spirituality and victim sensibility by thinking of these as a response to victimhood that constructs in a particular way, personal identity on the one hand and the sacred on the other. An intrinsic connection between personal identity and the sacred lies in the way we are radically shaped by what we worship and by this act of worship.
When we are personally overwhelmed by victimhood, in this moment we abandon the basic orientation of personhood wherein, in a basic stance of trust and hope, we are open to what is real and to what is required of us as responsible participants in the community of those who are similarly open – open ultimately to God. Instead we posit tacitly a “self” towards which and from which our whole life is supposedly oriented in substitute. The world becomes, for us, merely an extension of this sacred “self”; we lose our sense of responsibility to a world beyond us, tacitly claiming for ourselves an inalienable innocence and situation of entitlement. Within this constructed world we can envisage no alternative to this world but the specter of our utter exclusion and alienation. Such self-orientation involves more than selfishness, which presupposes a self to favor at the expense of others; it reflects a loss, disorientation and dissolution of self for which the insatiable “self” of narcissistic self-regard is an illusory substitute. It is a fundamentally negative self-construction at the expense of other people, the world – and ultimately, of God and our true selves. It is such narcissism that is fostered among us in modern society when we experience living from our earliest years in a culture that seriously ignores and excludes us as unique persons (Lasch 1979).

The illusory “self” towards which our life is oriented in narcissism now becomes a tacit, practical form of the sacred. When the truth presses upon us that we are contingent in our existence, ambiguous in our moral standing, and vulnerable to violation by a world which shows a stubborn resistance to our sacred will or well-being, we are overcome either by self-pity as victims, or else by rage which seeks someone to blame – a scapegoat to sacrifice. Thus the sacred, too, gets constructed in a negative way.

It may seem at first glance that the prevalence of narcissism to which I refer above sheds no light upon the contemporary feeling for victims, but only to the sense of being a victim. However, others can become incorporated into our self-preoccupation. Rowan Williams refers to this when warning of the risk of the “exalted sentimentality of identifying with victims.” He writes: “if we simply said that someone else’s loss ‘became’ mine, we should be abolishing the distance between me and the other; recognition in the other would collapse into absorption, and we should be left only with melancholy, in which all pain or tragedy is defined in terms
of my sense of a loss of power or value” (Williams 2000: 129, 130). This is
what we find in the victim sensibility associated with narcissism.

The negative dynamic driving this is apparent when our “moral pas­
son” takes the form more of rage against the violator than constructive
love for the victim.² It is an unforgiving rage, which denies any responsibil­
ity of going beyond itself to permit forgiveness for the agent of oppression
or to “forgive” the God who has allowed a tragedy to happen, in order
that a constructive outcome may reveal itself.

Sacrifice and the Sacred

I have referred to the sacrifice of scapegoats. “Sacrifice” refers originally, of
course, to the sacrificial killing of humans or animals as victims offered to a
deity. Sacrifice was remarkably widespread in ancient religions around the
world, and has attracted much study (see, for example, Carter 2003), but
space allows only the briefest comment here. Typically sacrifice involved
offering an “innocent” life to win the favor of a deity. In such cases the life
sacrificed clearly has the status of a victim. In the case of a scapegoat, guilt
for the violation of sacred norms of purity was projected on to the victim
and sacrifice was held to deflect punishment for this violation.

The formal sacrifice of an innocent victim clearly differs from the
punishment of one who has offended against sacred norms. However,
arguably the latter also involves victimization. The violation of social norms
may rightly be a matter of concern, and may call for punishment; however
the exaltation of any such norms as sacred, and as beyond any measure
of relative moral gravity, imbues their violation with an ultimate weight
of meaning which cannot reasonably be attributed to the intention of the
offender. To punish the offender according to this meaning is therefore
effectively to make them a victim sacrificed to the sacred.

²To move from the limited focus of outrage to constructive love demands of the victim
that they lose their innocence, as Rowan Williams points out: “As claimant or plaintiff,
the oppressed, silenced self is simply a sign of another’s guilt; the morally interesting
business lies in dealing with that. But as an acknowledged ‘civic’ voice, as participant in the
defining of goods, the self emerges into risk” (Williams 2000: 116–117). There appears a
parallel between the narrow focus of such victim sensibility and the wider phenomenon of
resentment described by Max Scheler in Ressentiment and traced briefly by Richard Sennett
While in religion the sacred becomes a matter of explicit belief, we have already seen the sacred as present tacitly in "that which overwhelms us." This overwhelming at once reflects and constitutes in a negative way both the sacred and our narcissistic identity formation. The dynamics of sacrificial victimisation are thus found more widely than in explicit religion. Particularly they occur in social attitudes to those who violate norms which are held implicitly to be sacred. A contemporary example of this is the extreme moralistic stance towards those who die of AIDS in which these deaths are accepted as the "natural" consequence of the violation of moral norms. This response exalts the norms in question to sacred status, such that no punishment is too harsh when they are violated. It is this exaltation which gives the victim of AIDS a "victim" status not so readily attributed to the victim of cancer or of a road accident.

More widely still, such victimization occurs whenever we dismiss suffering by blaming or devaluing the victim in order to protect our "selves." Where suffering disturbs us by presenting itself as something which could happen also to us and make us victims in a quite unfaceable way, we may deny any such possibility to ourselves by drawing a line between ourselves and the one whose suffering raises this possibility. The line we draw may be a moral one: we may say to ourselves "they must have done something which I have not done and which had brought his upon them, so this could not happen to me;" or we may draw a line between our own value and that of the victim, saying to ourselves "their suffering has been allowed where mine would not, because their suffering means decisively less than my own would mean." This enables us to tell ourselves "this couldn't happen to me" or "this hasn't happened to me and therefore I don't deserve it and so it won't happen to me" – thus re-victimizing them and adding personal oppression to tragedy. We see here the way dismissiveness works as part of what sociologists call "normalization," with the effect of victimization. We are also reminded once again of what lies behind the question "why should this happen to me?"

Our creation of or re-victimization of victims through dismissiveness is thus in response tacitly to the unfaceable threat of becoming a victim ourselves. In the same way when we are rather overwhelmed by the victimhood of others, our outrage may drive us to make attacks that create new victims, re-enacting the processes which cause victims in the
first place. Thus, in contemporary western culture, violation of the (tacitly sacred) ideological norms of “political correctness” can provoke extreme reactions. Bruce Wilshire has in mind the operation of such norms when he writes of university culture in the United States: “A presumptive connection between contemporary professionalism and archaic purification ritual runs across the entire face of the university” (Wilshire 1990: 152).

The sacrifice of victims, then, is not simply consequent upon established religious beliefs regarding what is sacred; rather, response to unfaceable victimhood is integral to a certain (negatively constructed) sense of the sacred in the first place. This is affirmed, within a distinctive theoretical framework, by author René Girard. Girard argues that the encounter with victimhood lies at the heart of construction of the sacred in archaic world religions (Girard 1977). Many of the founding myths of religions, he notes, involve the death of a divine victim. Behind this recurrent theme Girard posits a pattern of response by communities to internal conflicts and rivalries that threaten to destroy their existence. In this pattern of response, a single scapegoat is sought and unanimously identified as to blame for this destructive threat, and the community is dramatically re-united in this process and in the ensuing sacrifice. In reality, the person blamed is an irrational choice, and is therefore a victim, but this is not acknowledged by the community making the sacrifice. Afterwards, the miraculous and vital power of this sacrifice to re-unite the community is recognized and is ascribed to the victim as a divine power. The practice of ritual sacrifice is then established as a means of effecting this power. Again the background of this theory, Girard sees Jesus Christ as giving voice to the sacrificial victim and exposing, once and for all, the self-deception involved in scapegoating.

How shall we appraise Girard’s theory? A couple of brief comments must suffice. First, we note that his theory concerns the emergence of the explicitly sacred in religion, which he traces to the acclaimed miraculous power of the victim to renew the community. For our own part, however, we have identified a sense of the sacred already emergent in the apprehension of “that which overwhelms us.” This presents itself in “that which threatens the unfaceable destruction/victimhood of ourselves as a community” provoking us to construct our community tacitly as sacred at the expense of the scapegoat.
This affects, in turn, how – *vis-à-vis* Girard – we understand Christ in relation to victimhood. For our part we would hold that in Christ the meaning of the sacred itself and its relation to the experience of victimhood is transformed. We would say that under the old mythology, our response to victimhood as unfaceable led us to displace it on to an “other” – the scapegoat. Yet in so doing we allowed (although we concealed this from ourselves) the violation of victimhood to remain “the last word” upon human worth in a world ultimately absent of loving affirmation. Not only so; we became active accomplices in such a world by the act of scapegoating. In our narcissistic self-formation we fed upon the “other” – and projected the same self-formation implicitly on to a God who demands sacrifice. In all this, the unfaceable became further entrenched and intensified.

In Christ this pattern is radically transformed. Jesus Christ embraces the victim, and victimhood is faced; it is denied the last word, with its claim for the final absence of God. And through Christ we in turn are also freed from being overwhelmed by victimhood. Our own guilt for the victimhood of Christ, similarly, becomes faceable in the light of Christ – not because it is diminished (on the contrary, it is intensified) but because of the power with which this is addressed by Christ in forgiveness. Here the sacred acquires new, positive definition. In the light of this we now see that by scapegoating we destroy our true life even as we imagine to defend “the sacred.” By contrast the sacred love that is the actual source of our life cannot be destroyed even though we may misguidedly attempt to destroy it, and our recognition of this flows into worship.

**Into the Twenty-First Century**

In his most recent book René Girard describes “the majestic inauguration of the post-Christian era” as a joke, claiming that western culture still deeply informed by the Christian concern for victims. Nevertheless, this authentic concern is resisted in what Girard calls a “twofold Nietzschean heritage” (Girard 2001: Chapter 14).

On the one hand, Girard notes, Nietzsche himself gave his energy precisely to *reversing* the Christian concern for victims. Acclaiming the older sacrificial violence of Dionysian mythology, he portrayed the Christian concern as stemming from “a paltry, miserable resentment. Observing that
the earliest Christians belonged primarily to the lower classes, he accused them of sympathizing with victims so as to satisfy their resentment of the pagan aristocrats. This is the famous ‘slave morality’” (Ibid.: 173). Girard notes Nietzsche’s approval of human sacrifice, and sees his contempt for victims as feeding into Nazism and into the holocaust in particular. Girard does not, however, go on to discuss what politico-economic structures today might be seen as carrying forward Nietzsche’s celebration of power at the expense of victims.

Girard identifies a second and more powerful totalitarianism, however, arising from the reaction to Nazism in which concern for victims was at once accelerated and demoralized, becoming hysterical. A movement now grows which “takes over and ‘radicalizes’ the concern for victims in order to paganize it” (Ibid.: 180). This movement sees in Christianity nothing but violent oppression, and “boasts of bringing to human beings the peace and tolerance that Christianity promised but has failed to deliver” (Ibid.: 181). In practice, however, what it produces is “a return to all sorts of pagan practices: abortion, euthanasia, sexual undifferentiation, Roman circus games galore but without real victims, etc.” (Ibid.).

In both cases, Christ’s victory over mythical, sacrificial violence is opposed and overturned within secular developments. However, there are also religious developments that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, call for consideration in this regard.

J. Bottum notes the frequency with which his U.S. compatriots refer to the violence of 9/11 as “senseless.” He argues that this action makes perfect sense, however, within the mythical world of sacrificial violence described by Girard. The trouble, he says, is that “a people like us – a people who have convinced ourselves that myth never actually works – cannot understand when real myth rises up in the world again in all its violent, sacrificial, monstrous, and satanic glory” (Bottum 2001: 31). He identifies two elements in our blindness: “the often inchoate belief that we can maintain the Christian alternative without explicit Christianity (or even that the latter is a hindrance to maintaining it)” and “forgetting that the Christian alternative is actually an alternative to anything – the violent myths of the founding of a culture might do exactly what they say they do … cultures which genuinely require for their continued existence the blood of sacrificial victims to be mixed with the mortar of their buildings” (Ibid.).
Within this context it is vital that we take seriously the "sense" given to violence by one such as the philosopher Sayyid Qutb who, overwhelmed by the victimhood of Muslims at the hands of Jews and Christians, sees the latter as satanic and calls for sacrificial acts of violence against them in the name of the sacred.

Yet we must be wary at this point. There arises a danger that, in a further convolution, we may identify a culture with that other mythical world filled with violence but overcome by Christ — and make of it a scapegoat. In a deep irony, we shall then have ourselves overturned the gospel.

**Sacred and Secular in the Mission of Christ**

In conclusion, we may see our reflections upon tragic spirituality and victim sensibility as highlighting the missionary task within western culture, of engaging how people encounter and understand practically the sacred.

Modern western society is usually regarded as secular, by contrast with medieval Christendom and other "sacral" societies. The contrast is drawn here between societies in which sacred status gets attributed to certain offices, institutions, beliefs and customs, and modern society in which "nothing is sacred" and the world "disenchanted." When modern western society is seen in these terms, the basic task of mission appears to re-awaken a sense of the sacred.

Our reflections have drawn attention to other aspects of the picture. The religious formulation of the sacred is seen as reflecting personal encounter with that which radically challenges one's world and overwhelms one personally. Such demanding encounters are also found, however, in "secular" society giving rise to tacit, practical forms of the sacred although these may not find explication formally in religion. Among these encounters we have focussed upon the encounter with tragedy and victimhood. Such encounters provoke a crisis to which a positive or negative response may be made, each generating its own sense of the sacred.

In a negative response, the critical encounter is evaded in one of two ways. Either the encounter is displaced away and the challenge it presents is laid upon a scapegoat who is sacrificed in the name of what is thereby constructed as "sacred," or else one is overwhelmed and paralyzed by the encounter. Each response conceals the other within us. Tragic
spirituality and victim sensibility reflect the latter response, and have become widespread in western culture today. In both forms of evasion our identity is constructed in a narcissistic way, at the expense of showing hope or trust before that which would enlarge us through our demanding encounter with it.

A positive response finds ultimate expression in the loving figure of Christ who patiently suffers the radical violation of all human meaning and worth. His love reveals, on the one hand, the sacred now come to light in himself. His love reveals, on the other hand, that the sacred is found in self-sacrificial love towards all who dismiss or are overwhelmed by the demands of this same love. The sacred love of Christ draws them into the fathomless dignity of his own suffering forbearance and forgiveness — that all may finally be transformed and made sacred in under the sovereignty of God.

Christian mission thus both (1) points to the sacred where “nothing is sacred,” and (2) shows the sacred to be not of a negative, ultimately violent, kind, but as we find it in Christ. Attention to tragic spirituality and victim sensibility help us to reflect upon this mission agenda in western culture today.

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Quienes investigan la espiritualidad contemporánea en Gran Bretaña levantan la cuestión de una posible vuelta del clásico sentido trágico de vida que en su tiempo fue desplazado por el cristianismo. Este sentido de vida torna la fe increíble. Este profundo desafío de la misión se evidencia especialmente en una "espiritualidad trágica" y en una "sensibilidad de víctima" exaltada. La relación intrínseca entre tragedia y ser víctima se explora en este artículo. Como la experiencia del ser tragicamente víctima es exigente para la persona, se la evade de manera característica una de dos formas: o al adoptar una actitud desdeñada, o al sucumbir a ser vencido y derrotado espiritualmente. Ambas respuestas son destructivas: la primera tiende a crear víctimas o victimarlas nuevamente, mientras la segunda se torna un resentimiento e ira autodestructivos que fácilmente crea nuevas víctimas. Jesucristo aceptó la vocación de ser la víctima definitiva que abrazó radicalmente su ser víctima sin evadir y empodera a otros a hacer lo mismo. Sin embargo, los cristianos han sido a veces desdeñados frente al ser víctimas al referirse superficialmente a la resurrección, o han hecho de Jesús un simple icono del sufrimiento trágico. La cultura occidental se ve ahora como algo que fomenta la vulnerabilidad hacia el ser vencido por el ser víctima. Esta vulnerabilidad se asocia con el fomento cultural de personalidades reducidas y
narcisistas. Este ser vencido muchas veces se muestra en la ira y en la búsqueda de chivos expiatorios. La relación entre el ser vencido, el sacrificio de los chivos expiatorios y lo sagrado se explora ahora atendiendo los escritos de René Girard. Su discernimiento aquí de una “doble herencia de Nietzsche” se presenta como un contexto vital para la misión actual, junto con las tendencias de hacer chivos expiatorios en la religión fundamentalista. En conclusión, una tarea subyacente es la comprensión alternativa de “lo sagrado” y la resultante relación entre lo sagrado y lo secular, y la necesidad de testimoniar de lo que es lo verdadero sagrado. Esto se debe encontrar en el amor auto-sacrificial de Cristo hacia todos quienes evaden o son vencidos por las exigencias penosas de este mismo amor.

daraus folgenden Beziehung zwischen dem Heiligen und dem Weltlichen, und der Notwendigkeit, vom wahren Heiligen Zeugnis abzulegen. Dieses muss in der selbstauflösenden Liebe Christi zu all denen gefunden werden, die kühl ablehnen oder besiegt werden von den schmerzlichen Anforderungen eben dieser Liebe.

Les chercheurs dans le domaine de la spiritualité contemporaine en Grande Bretagne soulèvent la question d’un retour possible du sens tragique de la vie de l’époque classique, un temps déplacé par le christianisme. Un tel sens de la vie rend la foi non crédible. Ce profond défi à la mission se manifeste particulièrement dans « une spiritualité tragique » et dans une « sensibilité de victime » exaltée. La relation intrinsèque entre la tragédie et l’état de victime est ici explorée. L’expérience d’une mentalité tragique de victime étant personnellement éprouvante, on cherche à y échapper de deux manières : soit en adoptant une attitude de mépris de la réalité, ou en se laissant accabler et vaincre spirituellement. Ces deux réponses sont destructrices : la première tend à créer de nouvelles victimes ou à toucher à nouveau d’anciennes victimes, tandis que la seconde conduit à un ressentiment auto-destructeur et à une rage qui rapidement crée de nouvelles victimes. Jésus Christ a accepté la vocation de victime ultime qui embrasse radicalement l’état de victime sans aucune évasion et rend les autres capables de faire de même. Néanmoins, les Chrétiens ont parfois rejeté cet état de victime en faisant appel à la résurrection d’une façon superficielle, ou ont fait de Jésus une simple icône de la souffrance tragique.
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