

Kierkegaard: Copernicus of the Spirit

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<![endif]>[Author's note: In this talk I refer to the idea that people in the Middle Ages believed the earth was flat, and I build an analogy around that idea. I have since become aware that this view of how people in the Middle Ages thought is incorrect. They understood that the earth is spherical. My historical understanding on this topic has been greatly improved by a small book by Jeffrey Burton Russell called *Inventing the Flat Earth*. If I were to rewrite this talk today, I would obviously express myself differently, though the gist of the argument regarding Kierkegaard and the task of understanding violence would be the same.]

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." Isaiah 9:2

In the Middle Ages, virtually all people, from the least to the most educated, believed that the earth was flat. School children now know that it is round. This major change in the structure of human thought was brought about to a large extent through the efforts of the early modern astronomers Nicolaus Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, and Galileo Galilei. They can fittingly be described as light bringers. In an age when people lived in the dark, they brought true enlightenment and insight.

Copernicus, who lived from 1473 to 1543, was able to imagine that the planets are actually spheres revolving around the Sun, even as they rotate around their own axes. He realized that this scenario effectively accounts for the various appearances offered by phenomena in the heavens and on the earth. The seasons, for example, could now be understood by combining the idea that the earth's axis is tilted with a yearly transit around the Sun, placing the Northern hemisphere closer to the Sun in the Summer. Around 1510, when these concepts were coming into focus in Copernicus' mind, they were radical and bizarre. A heliocentric perception of the cosmos was such a

major upheaval for customary thought that Copernicus was most likely wise to delay the publication of the full version of his theory until 1543, the year in which he died.

Kepler, who lived from 1571 to 1630, developed Copernicus' insights further by discovering certain laws of planetary motion that explained even more precisely the data provided by astronomical observations. He realized that the orbits of the planets were not perfect circles but ellipses and he was able to specify certain mathematical relationships involved in arcs, areas, and orbits. Kepler's added insights revealed a dynamic universe in which the Sun is actively moving the planets around in their orbits.

Galileo, who lived from 1564 to 1642, is perhaps the best known of these three astronomers, because of the Inquisition's dramatic proceedings against him. He continued to refine and develop the insights of his predecessors regarding inertia, parabolic trajectories, and other basic laws of motion. He was a major force in transforming the study of nature from a qualitative, philosophical enterprise into a quantitative, mathematical, and experimental process. He used a homemade telescope to confirm and develop Copernicus' view of the solar system by noticing that there were moons orbiting Jupiter. It was this activity in particular that got him into hot water with the Inquisition. Defenders of the traditional Ptolemaic worldview rightly saw the developing heliocentric astronomy as a fundamental threat to their belief system. Galileo was tried and convicted of heresy in 1642. He was allowed to "recant" his views and live out the rest of his life under house arrest. He has become a symbol of the honest seeker after truth who is persecuted by fearful and small-minded authorities. In an expression of popular culture such as the song "Galileo" by the Indigo Girls, the singers "call on the resting soul of galileo king of night vision king of insight." In 1992 he was officially pardoned by the Vatican.

To describe the intellectual situation before these astronomers as "darkness" is a metaphor with substantial weight. Those who think that they understand the world correctly when they are actually misconstruing it in fundamental ways are truly in the dark. They cannot see the world in which they are living clearly, just as a blindfolded person cannot see a piñata. They are living in a fog—a veil of illusions generated by their

own minds. They have naively accepted their own perceptions of the world as correct interpretations of the nature of things. The light that shines upon them reveals their anthropocentrism and its inadequacy as a basis for thought. What is needed for a clear perception of reality is a way of seeing that is not trapped by naïve egocentricity—one that allows for a higher, transcendent point of view.

The irony of this situation is clear to us now. When the Inquisition placed Galileo on trial, the Inquisitors thought that they were defending the Christian tradition against the appearance of new and heretical ideas that presaged a departure from faith and the advent of secularism. In hindsight, we can see that it was Copernicus and Galileo who were truly opening the door that leads into a higher, theocentric way of perceiving reality, as opposed to the naïve view which was truly anthropocentric and thus secular.

The central idea that I hope to communicate here is that we are today walking in a kind of darkness that is analogous to the darkness of the Middle Ages. I am speaking of violence. Violence itself, as the reality of human evil, is a form of moral and spiritual darkness, and it is doubly compounded by the intellectual darkness apparent in the fact that we do not understand why we are violent. We human beings not only do evil things, but we are also ignorant about why we do them. This is the case with all of us, from the least to the most educated, though there are certain exceptions to this generalization.

Recall some event of violence that was the lead story on the evening television news within the last ten years. Almost inevitably, a reporter will be speaking with a school principal, or a mayor, or a pastor, or a grieving person, and they will say something like: "We don't understand why senseless acts of violence like this happen." They are speaking quite truly when they say that. Or think of an article in a major news magazine discussing such an event and perhaps even going beyond mere reportage to attempt some sort of explanation or consideration of what this event teaches us about "human propensities for evil." If you have ever read such an article and found it unsatisfying and unenlightening you know what I am talking about. And if we rise above the level of journalism to consider the writings of psychologists, philosophers, historians, and so forth, who have reflected on these questions, we are likely to find more self-

confidence, but also a bewildering variety of explanations of violence that point in many different directions. This variety, which is helpfully charted in a book such as *Explaining Hitler* by Ron Rosenbaum, reveals another dimension of the intellectual darkness that envelops us. If even those brilliant minds who have reflected on human violence for years cannot progress beyond the scenario of the blind men and their elephant, then the true dimensions of the problem begin to loom even larger.

It is my view that our modern age is not entirely lacking in authors who are similar to Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo. Just as these light bringers performed their service in revealing the shape of the outer world, we also have light bringers in the task of understanding our inner world, our spirit and its malformations. In this context I will consider Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Karl Barth (1886-1968), and René Girard (1923-).

Kierkegaard was widely read in the twentieth century, but it is far from clear that he was widely understood. In most cases, his interpreters and critics laid over his writings a heavy layer of their own biases, preoccupations, and jargon. This resulted in a phenomenon which I refer to as Kierkegaard Graffiti. Just as the vandal who spray paints a building hastily in the dark and then runs away has no real appreciation for the architecture of the building he is defacing, so also did Kierkegaard's deep and complex authorship become the victim of misconstrual and slander by people who did not expend the time and effort required for developing a clear understanding of his central concerns. Just one example of this graffiti is the phrase "the leap of faith" which is considered by many authors of encyclopedia articles to be the perfect summary of "Kierkegaard's philosophy." It turns out that he never used that phrase anywhere in his writings.

A more accurate summary of Kierkegaard would proceed along these lines. Kierkegaard understood the world as the sphere of the creative activity of God. He took very seriously the fundamental biblical theme that God creates the universe through speech. Everything that exists does so because God is speaking it into existence. The human soul is that unique place in all of nature where the voice of God can be heard and responded to consciously. The animals, vegetables, and minerals are simply given from

God's hand without self-consciousness; but human beings are able to be aware of their divine source. We are not only spoken into existence, but we also have the ability to be hearers of that speech. This is our transcendent nobility as human beings, but it is also our peril.

Just as we are superior to the lower animals because we can respond to our Creator consciously, so also can we sink below them into the abyss of sin. The psychology of the animals is set, determined. But our psychology is rooted in freedom. Another way of putting this is to say that we do not simply exist; we are coming into existence. Our character is not set in stone; our character is shaped by our experiences, our fears and anxieties, our relationships with other people and with our Creator. We have the ability to shape our own character (and to be shaped) through our response to the voice of creation that is speaking us.

The fact that we are not determined means that we can experience an emotion that is unique to us: angst. Angst arises out of the ambiguity of our future. There are various possibilities open to us if we choose to allow our self to develop in this direction or that direction. The most basic choice which presents itself to us at all times concerns our response to the divine call of creation. We can respond positively to this call and allow ourselves to be drawn forward into the fullness of selfhood that God intends for us, or we can attempt to deafen ourselves to God's voice and seize control of our selfhood. This is precisely what Adam and Eve did, and what we all do as their children. They sought to "become as God," to usurp the place of God as the shaper of their future. In the same way, human beings down through the centuries have tried to manage and contain their angst by turning away from God in an attempt to avoid the pain of personal growth. We find it easier to reinforce the status quo of our souls and our societies than to allow the continuing process of creation to make, unmake, and remake us.

When we start down this path of deafening ourselves to the voice of God, we quickly develop a psychological inertia. Our commitment to avoiding the pain of growth is so strong that we organize our character and our societies around that commitment. When we cut ourselves off from the fullness of what the future could hold for us, we

inevitably become stunted and misshapen as persons. Instead of living creatively in the tensions of existence before God, such as freedom and necessity, the eternal and the temporal, we careen in one direction or the other, seeking then to fortify ourselves within one of those poles of existence. What we are seeking to evade above all else is the possibility that we could actually become ourselves before God. Instead of moving in faith into the fullness of life that God calls us to, we choose to follow the pathway that Kierkegaard calls "the sickness unto death."

When God comes to us in the person of Christ, what do we do? We could allow him to heal us of our sickness and lead us back into the process of creation. But we don't do that. We are enraged by the voice that judges our smallness and choice of mediocrity. We must silence this voice in order to protect ourselves from its disturbing call. We stop up our ears and rush upon Jesus to kill him. Kierkegaard is pointing us in the direction we must look if we seek to understand the violence which erupts from the depths of human soul. Violence is not "senseless"; it has a purpose. It seeks to fend off the possibility that always lies before us—the possibility that we could become the mature, loving human beings that God wants us to be.

In the preceding paragraphs I have drawn on themes found in Kierkegaard's books *The Concept of Anxiety*, *The Sickness unto Death*, and *Works of Love* along with thoughts expressed elsewhere in his writings. I will return to Kierkegaard again later, but I turn now to the other two authors I am comparing with Kepler and Galileo.

Karl Barth's theological vision arose out of his reflections on the killing fields of World War I. He was appalled by how easily the progressive Protestant culture in which he had been educated became a culture of death and destruction on a huge scale. Many of his favorite professors, who had spoken eloquently about the advance of Christian civilization and the gradual development of the kingdom of God on earth, had suddenly become militaristic warmongers. He realized that "something was rotten in Denmark." The problem was the vague, nominal, cultural Christianity which Kierkegaard had attacked so vehemently at the end of his life. Barth's commentary on Romans picked up where Kierkegaard's attack left off, blasting and exposing the illusion of a triumphantly

advancing Christian world in Europe. Barth was avidly reading Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard at this time, and the influence of the Danish thinker upon Barth continued to be strong throughout his career.

When Naziism came to the forefront in Germany in the 1930s, Barth was well prepared to theologically analyze and denounce it in the Barmen Declaration and other writings. He realized that the illusion of Christendom had been dissolved, leaving in its wake a revival of neopaganism that was animated by a hatred of the divine revelation that had been communicated through the experience of the Jewish people, Jesus Christ, and the apostles.

At the heart of Barth's mature thought as a theologian we find a clear echo of the central theme in Kierkegaard: God's speech which brings us into being. The structure of the *Church Dogmatics* is built on the foundation of "The Doctrine of the Word of God." God has spoken the creating word in bringing the universe into existence; God spoke the redeeming word through the prophets and the apostles; and God continues to speak to human beings today. Barth is careful to not allow the word of God to be understood as a frozen entity contained in the scriptures. God is living and speaking in the present moment in time. Reading the Bible opens up our hearing so that we can be awake to that living speech in our time and place.

Barth understands God as "the One who loves in freedom." God's love for us is not bound within any structure of metaphysical necessity. God's love for us is always greater than our ability to understand it or rebel against it. God's grace precedes us and comes after us. God's patience waits for us to end our self-imposed choice of flight and death. In the final analysis, evil in the universe can be nothing other than that which is opposed to God's grace; as such, it does not have a divine origin or a coherent and necessary place in God's providential ordering of life.

Barth was always a very politically oriented theologian. Toward the end of his life, he reflected on the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come." In this context, he spoke of the root cause of human hatred and violence. When people act toward human beings more as wolves than as neighbors, it is

due to a colossal ignorance of God, as God's nature is revealed through Christ. Ignorance of God works itself out in an ignorance of one's fellow human beings that expresses itself in caprice, hatred, rancor, and duplicity. If human beings truly knew God, then their relations with others would express faithfulness, love, and peace, just as God has reached out to us with precisely those attributes. When we see the neighbor as a creature of God, then we will live not against but with and for one another.

René Girard is another light bringer in our world. I am comparing him to Galileo because he has made a great impact on the scholarly world through his writings and lectures. He has almost single-handedly turned the attention of thousands of scholars and thinkers to the task of reflecting on violence and the roots of human culture. He is a wide-ranging polymath who brings together in remarkable ways the study of modern European literature, ancient Greek tragedy, social science, and biblical studies. His comments on scapegoating, human sacrifice, lynch mobs, and related phenomena have been so thought-provoking that a huge literature of response has already come into existence, and many scholarly conferences discussing his ideas have been held around the globe.

Girard begins with the concept of mimetic desire. We human beings have a natural tendency to look to others as models of success. We think that by imitating others we deem to be successful, we will come to share in their greater fullness of being. We want to have what they have so that we can be as important as they are. This basic driving force in human affairs, mimetic desire, can be seen in the psychology of small children, in advertising, in romantic relationships, in fashion, in economics, and on and on. But if I am copying the desires of others, wanting to possess what they possess, then by definition I will create a rivalry with those others for the possession of those things. And if those others are creating a rivalry with me, then we have the recipe for a war of all against all for possession of the idols of our desire.

How does human society prevent itself from degenerating into a chaos of violence driven by envy? "It is expedient that one should die for the sake of the many." The idea of channeling a society's violence toward a scapegoat is the solution to the problem,

according to Girard. Killing a scapegoat, or attacking a minority group within society, provides an outlet valve for the build up of hatreds, resentments, and violent impulses that are generated by mimetic desire. Killing the scapegoat is a cathartic event that creates a new sense of social unanimity that did not exist before. Sacrifice becomes salvific for the society, and it becomes the cornerstone of both religion and culture.

But this cultural answer to the problem of possible social collapse is false because the problem should not exist in the first place. In other words, deceit becomes the one thing needful for society as it must not become aware of the injustice involved in its destruction of arbitrary scapegoats. Society must lie to itself about its foundation, because the mimetic desire at the root of the social system is itself a falling away from God; Girard calls it an "ontological sickness."

This is the point at which Girard's vision of human culture leads beyond the narrowness of secular social science to a broader theological anthropology. Girard clearly states that we can only articulate this understanding of human culture because our eyes have been opened up by the Bible. It is the cumulative effect of divine revelation in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that has exposed the ontological sickness of mimetic desire and the scapegoating mechanism. The high point of revelation is the Gospels' depiction of the crucifixion of Christ, which tears the mask off of culture's insistence that it is in the right when it executes people. The Gospels expose this lie by clearly showing that Christ is innocent and that those who are killing him are in the wrong. In that revelation God triumphs and Satan is defeated. Girard understands Satan to be that principle in human psychology and culture that cries out for bloodshed, for violence, for revenge, for destruction.

Girard speaks primarily about a crowd attacking a scapegoat. In the news recently, we have heard about teenage boys walking into their high schools and turning them into shooting galleries, or Timothy McVeigh blowing up a federal building, or terrorists attacking buildings in New York City. In situations like this, an individual or small group of individuals is attacking a large crowd rather than the other way around. Girard's theory is not as helpful in understanding situations like this as it is in

understanding the psychology of the lynch mob. This is the case because Girard's forte is social psychology, not individual psychology. I suggest that here Kierkegaard can take our understanding to a deeper and more fundamental level.

Aristotle said that "all action intends a good." In other words, whenever human beings act, they *think* (in some ambiguous sense of the word *think*) that they are doing something good. The Nazis thought they were making the world a better place by killing off as many Jews as possible. President Truman thought he was ending World War II sooner by dropping atomic bombs on two Japanese cities. Timothy McVeigh thought he was striking a dramatic blow against a tyrannical federal government. In other words, human action is always either directly ethical in the eyes of the actors, or it is a kind of "teleological suspension of the ethical" which amounts to the same thing. McVeigh could admit that killing innocent people is not in itself a good thing, but the badness of the act is outweighed by the goodness of the prophetic statement. Similar thoughts run through the minds of Islamic terrorists. And ironically, similar thoughts will no doubt run through the minds of those troops who carry out retaliatory actions against the terrorists, if those actions result in the loss of civilian lives. Everyone is innocent in their own eyes, because everyone is intending a good.

From Kierkegaard we can gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of human evil. From him we can learn that in the case of the most twisted psychologies the self is so filled with rage toward God and the ongoing process of creation that the person's actions no longer make any sense in terms of this world. I am thinking of how the Columbine shooters killed others and then committed suicide. They had already checked out of this world. Their actions can't even be described as selfish since they result in the death of the self. I am thinking here of the way we search in vain to find any shred of rationality in the actions of the World Trade Center terrorists. When terrorists cold-bloodedly board airplanes and suicidally guide them to a murderous apocalypse, their actions can aptly be described as expressing a "transcendental rage." The object of this rage is God. The human self has become so twisted and malformed that the only good it can aim at is the affirmation of the self in utter defiance of God and the goodness

of creation. The self's desire to avoid the pain of growth is so strong that it has declared war on God and God's creatures, which includes the self itself. Thus we can understand the very close relationship between the suicidal mentality and the homicidal mentality. Ultimately, the most effective way for the self to prevent itself from growing psychologically is to end its own existence as a self.

It is sometimes said that self-righteousness is at the root of violence. This is true, and Kierkegaard, Barth, and Girard help us to develop a nuanced understanding of the truth at work here. The most basic root of violence is the self not wanting to become an other to itself, the self not wanting to die and be reborn in a more mature form. The self-righteousness that leads to violence is the attempt of the immature self to fortify itself in defiance of the call of creation. We insist that we are in the right in relation to others, because we want to be in the right in relation to God. We want to be as God, knowing good and evil, so that we can avoid the pain of creation.

H. Richard Niebuhr once said this: "The cross in history may be compared to the kind of an event which an astronomer means when, having computed the positions of the planets with the aid of his excellent Ptolemaean wisdom he discovers a planet in a position that does not fit into the scheme. His whole wisdom is called into question, and eventually the Copernican or Einsteinian revolution of his science may result. So the cross as a simple event calls into question the foundations of our worldly wisdom." From Kierkegaard, Barth, and Girard the full ramifications of this insight can be drawn out. From them we can learn to know the shape of the self, the mechanisms of fallen society, and the heart of the God who calls us all into a new world of grace and truth. I am drawing an analogy between the astronomers and the religious thinkers because there is a real, substantial parallelism at work here. The astronomers broke down the naïve egocentricity of human perceptions of the physical universe, so that we could begin to see the world from a higher, theological point of view. Kierkegaard, Barth, and Girard have also succeeded in breaking down naïve, anthropocentric, and simplistic ways of thinking about human behavior. They have led us out of the darkness in which violence is

incomprehensible, into a new place where we can begin to understand human actions from a transcendent point of view rooted in divine revelation.

Songwriter Bruce Cockburn has written a song ("Child of the Wind") which contains these words:

Little round planet in a big universe
Some times it looks blessed, some times it looks cursed
Depends on what you look at obviously
But even more it depends on the way that you see.

Kierkegaard, Barth, and Girard give us the way of seeing that we need if we are to understand human violence. But intellectual understanding by itself will not bring an end to violence. The end will only come when we human beings spiritually open ourselves up to God's love and allow God to bring us out of the darkness of transcendental rage and into the light of God's grace and peace, so that we can truly begin to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.