

Scapegoats

Death by Stoning has become a real and present threat for the people of Brunei, which now joins other jurisdictions that impose cruel physical sentences such as mutilation and execution.

Sad to say, such barbaric punishments are often 'justified' on religious grounds. Vulnerable people and minority groups are singled out for deviating from strictly interpreted behavioural norms or dissenting from narrowly defined doctrines.

This association of religion and extreme acts of violence once found expression in ritual sacrifice in which humans or animal substitutes lost their lives to placate imagined angry, capricious gods in the hope that everyone else would be spared from divine wrath.

Over time a less bloody practice emerged alongside temple sacrifice, in which a goat was selected to act as a representative bearer of human sins. These sins were ritually placed on the goat's back before it was driven away into the desert.

This was the scapegoat from which we get the concept of people or groups of people being unfairly singled out for ill-treatment.

Even when ritual sacrifice was abandoned secular and religious rulers employed execution and maiming to enforce rigid standards of thought and behaviour. Those accused of witchcraft, heresy or apostasy fell victim to kangaroo courts and public humiliations.

Given such a mixed and depressing history we do well to be on guard against new forms of scapegoating. Of course, it is not confined to religious communities; our own more secular societies are in no way immune from the phenomenon. Think about how populist politicians point the finger of blame at refugees, migrants, ethnic minorities, foreigners, etc.

In the face of this we require people of faith echoing the joyful message of the angels at Bethlehem to work hand in hand with all people of good-will; people who take a different approach.

People like Sr Helen Prejean who has spent most of her adult lifetime advocating against the death penalty in the USA; for her:

The movement to abolish the death penalty needs the religious community because the heart of religion is about compassion, human rights, and the indivisible dignity of each human person made in the image of God.

Sister Helen's approach demonstrates what some C18th Jewish mystics called: *mochin d'gadlut*, a *spacious mind*, which is contrasted with the narrow mind or *mochin d'kanut*. According to one writerⁱ: [the] *narrow mind* imagines itself as separate from the world. It is isolated, often alienated, and sees the world as a zero sum game in which [the] success [of my people, my interests, or my religion] depends on another's failure. [Thus] scarcity defines the world of the narrow mind: fear is its primary emotion, and anger its most common expression.

On the other hand the spacious mind sees the self as part of the whole, and our identity maybe conditioned but is not defined by nationality, ethnicity, creed or sexual orientation.

The hallmark of spacious-mind-living is abundance; love is its primary emotion and this finds expression in deeds of lovingkindness that extend beyond the narrow confines of any one community.

When Jesus was confronted by those who questioned him about the fate of the woman caught in adultery, he didn't ratchet up the rhetoric by contradicting their interpretation of the holy texts. He sought to create a calmer atmosphere, distracting everybody present by writing in the sand. He then rather gently invited them to look into their own hearts where perhaps they recognised how each of us falls short of God's love.

For the beautiful truth is that we have all been gifted with feelings, desires, instincts and impulses. These were designed to create a harmonious society; but we don't always use them for such high purposes.

Today's gospel reassures us that this is something Jesus understood and we can be grateful for the way he demonstrated this for all who are willing to listen, be they accusers or accused.

ⁱ Rabbi Rami Shapiro, *The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness*