



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The art of scapegoating

Clay Nelson@31 October 2021

When I read the [Centre for Informed Futures'](#) summary of Social Cohesion in a post-covid world I wondered how they could get it so wrong. It did not describe the Aotearoa New Zealand I was experiencing. Then I noticed the date of publication. A lot has happened in the 17 months since its publication. Remembering back, its description of the high level of social cohesion was accurate. The team of five million seemed to be a fair description. Our Prime Minister was trusted. When her 1.00pm briefings were aired on Facebook the country had her back against the few trolls who dared to malign Auntie Jacinda. The comments were a flurry of hearts, smiley faces and thumbs up. Her party was elected in numbers not seen since MMP was introduced. The vast majority followed the rules and we were well on our way to eliminating Covid from the community.

That level of social cohesion no longer exists. What changed? First, the virus did. While we dodged the bullet much longer than many countries, the much more contagious Delta variant finally broke through. What worked during the first wave was no longer fully fit for purpose. The second change was the availability of a vaccine. While it is the best tool currently available to fight Delta, it has also broken or at least seriously dented our social cohesion. During the first wave we were all in the same boat. Our only defence was to look after each other by following the restrictions. Now there are two boats. One for vaccinated and one for those who aren't. The latter may be refusing the vaccine for valid health reasons, ideological reasons, fear of how they may react and some because they belong to groups that have been marginalised by xenophobia or systemic racism. They have little reason to trust anyone outside their whānau. It can hardly be a surprise that Māori have the lowest vaccination rates, considering their past and present treatment by those in power who have routinely left them at the bottom of the heap.

What is true about the occupants of these two boats is they are convinced they are in the right boat. They see the other boat as a threat at the very least to their well-being, freedom, and financial security. We are in turbulent waters

and social cohesion is at risk. We only need to look at the US and Oz to know what that can look like.

What exactly is social cohesion? Ideally, social cohesion involves building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community.

That is unquestionably a desirable outcome. But there are a couple of cautions in pursuing it. [Bertrand Russell in his *A History of Western Philosophy*](#) makes this observation:

“Social cohesion is a necessity, and [hu]mankind has never yet succeeded in enforcing cohesion by merely rational arguments. Every community is exposed to two opposite dangers: ossification through too much discipline and reverence for tradition, on the one hand; and on the other hand, dissolution, or subjection to foreign conquest, through the growth of individualism and personal experience that makes cooperation impossible.”

The other caution is the means by which social cohesion is sought. There are many positive routes and there is an evil one — scapegoating. We have all heard the term, but to what does it refer?

In Jewish legends a scapegoat bore the sins of the Jewish people. Two male goats were chosen for the ritual, one designated by lots for the Lord, the other to placate the evil fallen angel Azazel (Leviticus 16:8). The ritual was carried out by the high priest. After the high priest symbolically transferred all the sins of the Jewish people to the scapegoat, the goat destined for Azazel was driven into the wilderness and cast over a precipice to its death. By extension, a scapegoat has come to mean any group or individual that innocently bears the blame of others. While this understanding is from the Torah, there is nowhere on earth where a scapegoat mechanism does not exist.

One of the most influential observers of scapegoating is [René Girard](#), a French polymath, historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science. In his book *Scapegoating*, he describes it as acts of violence committed directly by a mob of murderers — such as the persecution of the Jews during the Black Death, or witch-hunts — that are legal in form but stimulated by the extremes of public opinion. These persecutions take place in times of crisis, which

weaken normal institutions and favour mob formation. Such spontaneous gatherings of people can exert a decisive influence on institutions that have been so weakened, and even replace them entirely. These phenomena are not always produced by identical circumstances. Sometimes the cause is external, such as an epidemic, a severe drought, or a flood followed by famine. Sometimes the cause is internal political disturbances, for example, or religious conflicts. No matter what circumstances trigger great collective persecutions, the experience of those who live through them is the same. The strongest impression is without question an extreme loss of social order evidenced by the disappearance of the rules and “differences” that define cultural divisions. Descriptions of these events are all alike. Some of them, especially descriptions of the plague, are found in our greatest writers — Thucydides, Sophocles, William Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, Thomas Mann, to name only a few.

At such times people feel helpless. The culture seems to be eclipsed and human relations begin to disintegrate in the process and the subjects of those relations cannot be utterly innocent of this phenomenon. But, rather than blame themselves, people inevitably blame either society as a whole, which costs them nothing, or other people who seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable reasons. Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite their relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society.

At this point all that is left is choosing the scapegoat. All societies reach for the low hanging fruit: religious and ethnic minorities, those who don't fall within cultural norms like the disabled, mentally ill, sick. The further one is from normal social status of whatever kind, the greater the risk of persecution. This is easy to see in relation to those at the bottom of the social ladder. This is less obvious when we add another marginal group to the poor and outsiders: the marginal insider, the rich and powerful. In times of crisis, the monarch and his court are often reminiscent of the eye of the hurricane. This is indicative of a social organization in turmoil. In normal times the rich and powerful enjoy all sorts of protection and privileges which the disinherited lack. In times of crisis a mere glance at world history will reveal that the odds of a violent death at the hands of a frenzied crowd are statistically greater for the privileged than for any other category. Extreme characteristics ultimately attract collective destruction at some time or other, extremes not just of wealth or poverty, but also of success and failure, beauty and ugliness, vice and virtue, the ability to please and to displease.

In these circumstances, social cohesion for the persecutors is achieved through violence in all its many forms against the designated scapegoat decided by the collective. In the mind of the persecutor, once the scapegoat is destroyed or exiled, normality will return. In truth, cohesion is destroyed as we come to understand at some level that we could be the next scapegoat. Trust is destroyed.

In the New Zealand context that means the Prime Minister can be the target of the unvaccinated boat and Māori could be the target of the vaccinated boat. If we are to get through this crisis we must not let ourselves fall into blaming and the delusion we aren't all connected. To scapegoat one is to scapegoat ourselves. To do so is a form of societal suicide to seek a normal which has always been an illusion.

If there is a "norm" Girard observes,

"No culture exists within which everyone does not feel 'different' from others and does not consider such 'differences' legitimate and necessary. Far from being radical and progressive, the current glorification of difference is merely the abstract expression of an outlook common to all cultures. There exists in every individual a tendency to think of [them]self not only as different from others but as extremely different, because every culture entertains this feeling of difference among the individuals who compose it."

Overcoming this desire to believe we are fundamentally different is key to whether we achieve greater social cohesion as we navigate our present crisis or spiral down into social disintegration. Historically both outcomes have happened in such times. It is up to us to choose.

Meditation / Conversation starter:

Identify someone or some group you feel most different from.

How do you deal with that?