

The Gospel and Russia in Chechnya

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An ancient ritual is being acted out in the North Caucasus. And the Russian people approve. Indeed, that is the reason it is happening.

Acting President Putin knows something about how societies work. Whether he knows enough about the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not so clear, but more about that later.

What does Mr Putin know?

He knows that he must create social cohesion if he is to succeed as a politician popular enough to win the election for President in March. He knows that the quickest way to create social cohesion is to identify a scapegoat. This is how the sacrificial violence of ancient societies operated. To some extent, it continues to work today.

First, somebody must be identified as responsible for the problems the community faces. This person is the scapegoat. The process is described in the Old Testament during the wanderings of the Hebrews en route to the Promised Land. From their account we get the word “scapegoat.”

To qualify as a scapegoat, it helps to have some existing difference from most of the community. Or, at least, from most of those who wish to wield power. Thus, witches were almost always women. Jews, homosexuals, and other minorities have often been made scapegoats. Sometimes, even the King became the scapegoat (as in the French Revolution).

Identifying the scapegoat gives the community the opportunity to say “J’accuse.” Once the community’s leader points the accusing finger, the power of imitation that is a characteristic of all human personalities takes over. We jump on the band-wagon of accusation. Few things are more attractive and powerfully seductive than the opportunity to accuse the common enemy.

Modern politics everywhere is full of examples, more or less subtle perhaps, of this basic human phenomenon. NATO makes Serbians scapegoats for Balkan instability, neatly overlooking centuries of colonisation, decades of communism, and years of exile. The whole Serbian scapegoat is personified in one man, Milosevic. The President of the United States asserts that once Milosevic goes, everything will be fine. Do we really believe this? Or do we believe that Clinton will go soon, so what he says now only matters now. Politics these days is so much about short term opportunism.

So what has this got to do with Chechnya?

Temporary President Putin is making a scapegoat out of the Chechen people. Two or three explosions, and he points the finger of accusation at all of Chechnya. Then vows to fix the problem once and for all. At least, to give him some credit for sensibility, he did not describe it as a “Final Solution.”

But, one may say, perhaps the bombs *were* laid by Chechens. Sorry, it's not important whether the scapegoat is guilty or innocent. The mechanism works, either way. Perhaps the bombs *were* planted by Chechens. This imbues Mr Putin's political use of the Chechens with marginally superior morality, but little more. Regardless of guilt or innocence, the people of Russia will automatically rise up in support of the leader who points the accusing finger. As they will everywhere. It is human nature.

But there is bad news for Mr Putin. It is the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even when Mr Putin was a dyed-in-the-wool Communist, the Gospel was at work in Russia. And it is the Gospel that, in the end, will make his attack on the Chechen people ineffectual.

You see, Jesus was a scapegoat too. The political authorities of the time, the Romans and their Vichy government represented by Caiaphas, accused Jesus. Caiaphas, no mean anthropologist apparently, said that it was expedient that one man die for the nation. Exactly the scapegoating mechanism. The people rose up in support. They could not help themselves, such is the contagion of scapegoating. And Jesus was murdered.

But then something amazing and unprecedented happened. The story was told from a new point of view. For the first time in history, the scapegoating story was told from the point of view of the victim. And the people who followed this victim, who later became known as Christians, began to expose the violence of the scapegoating mechanism.

From that point on, history changed. No longer would the scapegoating mechanism have enduring power. It might last for a short while, because the natural tendency of humans is to imitate and follow those who accuse the scapegoats. But it has no long term value. Because, sooner or later, the Gospel undermines the mechanism. The more a society has been exposed to the story of Jesus, the more quickly the scapegoating mechanism fails. And Russia has had the Gospel for a millennium longer than it has had Mr Putin.

Popular support for Mr Putin might endure until he gets elected. But it looks like he knows it won't last. He is in a hurry. That's why Mr Yeltsin didn't last until the 21st Century. That's why the election for President is being held in such indecent haste. Mr Clinton found that the popular support for the Gulf War was temporary. Mr Blair found that the popular support for the bombing of Serbia was short-lived. Indeed, NATO planned for it to last only as long as it could be popularly sustained. Unfortunately for them, the accusatory bombing didn't work as quickly as they had hoped. Mr Putin will be hoping his latest foray can convey him into the Kremlin.

After that, of course, he'll be looking for new enemies. And the Gospel will still be at work to transform our world.