

The Stories We Tell: Television and Humanitarian Aid by Michael Ignatieff¹

A Commentary by Philip J Hunt

Ignatieff's analysis of television is second to none. Insightful, profound and accurate. His analysis of human society a little less so. This is because, despite generous acknowledgement of the impact of "Judeo-Christian monotheism", he cannot bring himself to write about human society from a religious standpoint.

In the first part of his paper, Ignatieff explains the modern-day concern for the victim as the product of "narratives." Among his examples are

- moral stories "that we are decent folks trying to do the best we can,"
- metastories "bringing civilisation to the savages," or the more recent "superpower rivalry,"
- parallel narratives of "de-colonization"
- the chaos narrative "large sections of the globe ... have collapsed into a meaningless disorder,"
- the socialist internationalism narrative "that newly independent states were a test bed for the possibilities of a socialist economy and way of life."

Ignatieff is clearly onto something here. But he labels it wrongly. These are not merely stories or narratives. These are myths. They have more to do with religion than journalism. Myths are created in order to validate systems of behaviour and to *obscure the factual underpinnings of those systems*. To put it another way, these myths exist to allow us to live with the wrong we do.

We could accept the destruction of indigenous culture and life in the Third World so long as we believed the myth that the people in those countries were "uncivilized savages."

We can dismiss lots of bad stuff in our societies so long as we believe the myth that "our hearts are in the right place."

We can put up with Zimbabwe's present disarray so long as we believe the myth that de-colonization is a good thing.

We can stop worrying about Africa altogether so long as we believe the myth that Africa is "a basket case."

And so on.

Ignatieff recognises that all these "narratives" (to use his word) have failed. Only one remains, according to him. Namely, "the humanitarian narrative." Which is:

We are in one world; we must shoulder each other's fate; the value of life is indivisible. What happens to the starving in Africa and the homeless in Asia must concern us all because we belong to one species.

This sounds so good, it must be right. But it isn't. Not for what it says. Which is fine. But for what it leaves out. Which is essential.

¹ Distributed by Bryant Myers. From *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention* edited by Jonathan Moore, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham & Oxford, 1998.

Ignatieff's "humanitarian narrative" is just one more myth. And, like the others, it will bring us comfort only as long as the reality it obscures, remains out of sight.

As Rene Girard² has pointed out, the violence about which Ignatieff writes has its roots in mimesis (Ignatieff even uses the word once in this paper). Mimetic desire, the human characteristic (some might say "sin") of imitating the desires of others creates competition and rivalry within human societies. This leads eventually to violence. The violence is resolved through a process of scapegoating victims and the resulting peace and stability in society is then maintained through the creation of a religious structure of ritual and myth.

Each new myth struts into our consciousness with the power of new truth. After a time its truth is undermined and the myth falls apart. Ignatieff's analysis demonstrates this well. At least, up to the point where he fails to see that the latest truth (the humanitarian narrative) is just the next myth, to be debunked soon enough and replaced by a new "truth" (which will just be another myth...).

The power of the Cross is that the whole mechanism of mimesis, violence, scapegoating and myth is exposed. It is naked. By seeing the process at work through the mind and heart of the victim himself, we see what's going on. Ignatieff is right to give credit to "Judeo-Christian monotheism" because it is the power of the Spirit (paraclete) at work in the world that is continuing to expose and undermine the myths of mimetic violence.

Where does this lead us? Now that the humanitarian myth is deconstructed, what do we have left? Quite a bit, fortunately.

For one thing, we should stop trying to pretend that we are **not** mimetic beings. Or, if we admit we are, pretending that it is something we want to overcome. God made us that way for a purpose. The purpose is not so that we can create sinful rivalries that lead to violence. Not so our violence can only be solved by the creation of victims. Not so we end up lying to ourselves by inventing myths.

The purpose of mimesis is so we can imitate God. One of the messages of the Kingdom is that we have a choice whom we shall imitate. We can imitate one another and take the broad road to Hell on earth. It is the most trod way. Or we can imitate God, and take the narrow road of obedience.

Ignatieff, and other proponents of the humanitarian myth, would have us believe that somehow mere enlightenment of old myths will lead us to become loving, caring, unprejudiced, non-violent. Does anyone really believe this?

The truth is that we can only become truly human (in the way Ignatieff urges) by being transformed by the power of God within. The road to human peace cannot be found within the sinful structures of violence and myth. Indeed, as we bear witness to the Kingdom of God we should be vigilant in assisting their demise as quickly as possible. We should expose myths with virulence. We should denounce scapegoating with a passion.

For aid agencies the choice does not need to be between politics and aid, as we so often put it. This is a wrong dichotomy. For the truly Christian agency, the choice is

² Read *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* by Gil Bailie. Available from www.florilegia.com

between the sinful system of violence, victims and myth, and the Kingdom of God.

Ignatieff gives an example of the modern aid agency dilemma:

If aid agencies refuse to tell a political story --- one that attributes causation and consequences for the disaster they are helping to relieve --- they risk falling back on a narrative of simple victimhood, empty of context and meaning.

Within the "humanitarian narrative" to which Ignatieff subscribes this makes one kind of sense. But only because he "attributes causation" wrongly. Russian President, Vladimir Putin's, war against the Chechens cannot be attributed simply to Putin himself. Nor to the Russian people. We should attribute it to the ancient scapegoating system that is inherent to human beings until they are touched by the Gospel and truly transformed by the Spirit of God. Of *course*, Putin will act this way. Anyone would. But Christians are called not to be just *anyone* any more. We are called to be disciples of the Living God. Living in obedience with Him. Only that kind of living, will bring us to the place where we can find peace, without having to go through violence, victims and myth.