The Scapegoat Archetype:  
The World as Replica of Our Unknown Face

_The root of all disturbance, if one will go to its source, is that no one will blame himself._  
--Dorotheus of Gaza, 6th c. monk

The act of scapegoating—the social mechanism by which one projects fault and blame onto others—is ubiquitous. It is found in all strata of society, from playgrounds to governments, families to entire ethnicities. For all of our modern psychological awareness, scapegoating with its ancient roots in ritual sacrifice is still at the source of much of today’s violence, and even “a common pre-condition in the evolution of genocide” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004, p. 14). In this paper I would like to examine scapegoating from a depth psychological vantage point with three foci: as a once-sacred ritual with ancient mythical and historical origins; as an archetype with a distinct psycho-dynamic function, and as an archetypal phenomenon which has taken on the literalistic characteristics of our era and demands our conscious attention.

**Origins:**

The scapegoat phenomenon and rituals that surround it might well be said to derive from this archetypal layer of the collective unconscious for it is one of the “inborn, innate predispositions of the psyche” (Kirsch, 2004, p. 185), evidenced throughout the world from the Bronze Age to present. And while Westerners may be most familiar with the term derived from the ancient Hebrew sacrifice at Yom Kippur (cited in Leviticus 16), the ritual of evil-riddance predated the ancient Hebrews, as we shall see.

Before we consider ancient forms of scapegoating though, it is important to remember the worldview in which they existed. In *The Scapegoat Complex*, Dr.
Brinton Perera says: “The scapegoat was a healing, curative agent, a *pharmakon*. Such rituals were dedicated to and identified with the god” (1986, p. 8). Unlike our modern and post-modern sensibilities, God was not separate from existence, but rather infused all life. The transpersonal dimension was the matrix of the community and all action, ritual or otherwise, was carried out in relation to it. In this context scapegoat rituals were not just expedient acts of guilt-purging; they were also a plea for blessing and fertility, used “to enrich meaning or call attention to other levels of existence. . . . [They] incorporate[d] evil and death along with life and goodness into a single, grand, unifying pattern” (Douglas, 1966, p. 53).

In his classic work, *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer (1922) cites numerous examples of demon expulsion from Peru to the Arctic to India and beyond. In all cases, the ritual sacrifice, whether animal or human, served to remove sin and guilt from the community while inviting the transpersonal powers to purify and renew it.

In many cases, the scapegoat rituals occurred at the time of the New Year. Likewise, the Yom Kippur scapegoat rite which was performed at the Hebrew New Year, was adapted from older Canaanite rites. It seems to have been a conflation of two evil-riddance sacrifices employed among neighboring tribes: The first exorcised sickness by making animal sacrifice to the Semitic goat-god named Azazel. The second was a yearly human sacrifice offered for the sake of the purification and renewal of the community (Brinton Perara, 1986, Chapter 1).

The Babylonian Talmud (Yoma 39a, b) records how the Hebrew ritual was fulfilled: Two goats were procured for which the High Priest selected lots from a wooden case. On one lot was written the words: “*For the Lord*” and on the other,
“for Azazel.” The High Priest would then lays his hands with the labels on the two goats. The first would be sacrificed as a sin offering to YH-VH. On the second goat, the one for Azazel, he fastened a scarlet thread and laid his hands on its head, reciting a confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness. Then the goat was led away (presumably by its red cord) far into the Judean wilderness, where it would be pushed off a precipice. At the moment of the goat’s ejection, white kerchiefs or flags waved by witnesses along the way would signal the High Priest that the deed had been accomplished; the people’s sins had been expiated.

Recasting it in new symbolic language and imagery, the ancient Hebrews redefined their polytheistic neighbors’ annual rite of ritual death. It still produced purification and a return to wholeness. But instead of the orgiastic annual festival of their neighbors in which ecstasy reigned and the community was returned to an inchoate wholeness through participation mystique or an unconscious identification with their gods, the new Hebrew ritual demanded order and purification. “The God of Abraham and Moses stood against such modes of renewal through return to license and the prima material of chaos via ecstatic unity” (Brinton Perera, 1986, p.12).

How fascinatingly out of character that the priests of the new monotheistic order continued to make sacrifices to Azazel, a horned goat god! In the context of Mosaic law and the many injunctions to stone or burn to death those Israelites who adopted the gods of their neighboring Canaanite tribes (see for example, Deuteronomy Chapter 13; 6:13-15, 29:17), it is more than remarkable that the eternal God known as YHVH would share offerings with a chthonic deity—and a lowly representative at that—of the outlawed polytheistic order. Perhaps there
was some deeper law at work, one which demanded the priests’ unconscious adherence. The fact that such a sacrificial rite to a tabooed deity remained for centuries as a practice on the holiest day of the year (and is to this day read from scripture at Yom Kippur services around the world) may reflect a subliminal recognition of the profound archetypal need we have to propitiate the dark forces in the universe.

The Psychodynamics of Scapegoating

To understand the scapegoat phenomenon psychologically one must first consider the function of shadow and projection in the psyche. The shadow, “that part of us which we fail to see or know” (Johnson, 1991, p. 4) contains aspects of our character which the ego finds intolerable. The shadow which flies in the face of our persona or public self-image might contain feelings of inadequacy, shame, aggression, and fear, to name but a few. Unless one is deeply devoted to the psychological work of integrating these unacceptable feelings, they remain unclaimed by our ego selves and fall fragmented into the unconscious. Like a closeted animal starved for air, our repressed shadow grows stronger and more demanding when denied the light of consciousness.

One way or another our dark aspects find a way to vent themselves. Turned inward, the unintegrated shadow might express itself in the form of an ill-temper or psychosomatic illness. Less charitable is the shadow in externalized form: The parts of ourselves which we find unseemly and insufferable and cannot possibly recognize as aspects of our personalities are unconsciously projected onto others, individuals or groups that serve as a kind of blank screen for our own suppressed ugliness. These unfortunate scapegoats bear the brunt of our “misplaced vilification, blame and criticism (Crosby, 1997). And just like the
goat bearing the community’s guilt is run out of the camp into the desert, so the recipient of our unconscious projections is evicted from our consensual community into alterity and now bears the stigma of “other.”

The scapegoater and those within her/his influence are now the “insiders” with a more binding sense of identity. Along with strengthening insider status, the process of projection often produces a feeling of ego-gratification or superiority. But ultimately, shadow projection renders us less whole. Disconnected from our own darkness, we are isolated in a world of our own distortion. As Jung says, “The effect of projection is to isolate the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is now only an illusory one. Projections change the world into a replica of one’s own unknown face” (Jung, 1960, p. 9, paragraph 17, italics added). It is this unknown face, the face of our own frailty, aggression, or fear, unconsciously cast upon others, which wields the most danger socially.

Just as the unconscious individual displaces deeply held complexes onto another, so it is in society when the collective shadow of a group—it’s inferiority, fear, or traumatic history is released. But possession by the cultural complex of a group is projected with even greater force because “the behavior and emotions of the collective psyche…unleash tremendously irrational forces in the name of their ‘logic’” (Singer & Kimbles, 2004, p. 7). As for who plays the part of scapegoat, psychoanalyst Erich Neumann says:

The aliens who provide the objects for this projection [of evil] are the minorities…heretics [i.e., religious minorities], political opponents and national enemies,” and the "fight against . . . [them] is actually the fight against our own religious doubts, the insecurity of our own political position, and the one-sidedness of our own national viewpoint (Neumann, 1990, p 52).
And while an individual might engage in the hard work of reclaiming his or her projections—sometimes called *eating one’s shadow* (Bly, 1988, throughout)—once the collective shadow is released it is far more difficult to retrieve. Unlike the subjective personal shadow, “the experience of the collective shadow is an objective reality, which we commonly call evil…[T]he collective shadow is not touched by rational efforts” (Zweig & Abrams, 1991, p. 165).

Jung referred to the psychic epidemic of mass-mindedness in his Terry Lectures in 1937, when he delivered a precognitive description of the collective scapegoating that would shortly ensue in Germany:

> “But if people crowd together and form a mob, then the dynamisms of the collective man are let loose—beasts or demons that lie dormant in every person… Man in the mass sinks unconsciously to an inferior moral and intellectual level...ready to break forth as soon as it is activated by the formation of the mass…” (Jung, 1937, pp. 230-1, para. 463). (vol X)

Testimony to Jung’s insight are the mass murders of World War II, in which millions of Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals were scapegoated to create a “stronger, purer” Germany. Possessed by a racial complex that compelled “keeping the blood and the (Aryan) race pure” from mixing with “inferior people,” Adolph Hitler, declared war on his chosen sacrifice to prevent the “defilement of the blood” (Quoted in Reich, 1946/1970, p. 76). The German people, overtaken by their leader’s charisma and the powerful collective possession of the archetypal force that he embodied, accused these groups of the nation’s ills. In the process of such a participation mystique, individual moral discernment was sacrificed to the frenzy and fervor of the collective. As Jung explains: “For the group, because of its unconsciousness, has no freedom of choice, and so psychic activity runs on in it like an uncontrolled law of nature...a
chain reaction that comes only to a stop in catastrophe” (quoted in Storr, 1983, p. 202)

Like the Azazel offering, the minority who bears the collective shadow projection inadvertently forfeits its own fate and serves the need of the collective for purification and evil-riddance by being exiled from the camp of the insiders’ society. But unlike the ancient ritual, social scapegoating is unconscious and motivated by the need to displace our own egregious cultural shadow, to which we are blind.

As Hitler did in his anti-Semitic manifesto, Mein Kampf, “usurping religious language and images… shifting criticism away from the true locus of (Germany’s) troubles” (Rash, 2006, p. 2) is part of the game. From Islamic jihad to American political campaigns, scapegoating rhetoric characteristically resorts to wild globalizations and spiritual attributions. It attempts to simulate the prophetic oratory of true religion but falls flat because it is dismally disconnected from the transpersonal.

**Working with the Scapegoat Archetype in Our Midst**

The act of collective scapegoating, the unconscious mechanism of making minorities bear our shadow—that which we refuse to see, own, and take responsibility for—has cast a dark pall on human history. Our own era is littered with examples of the dehumanization that allows for mass violence perpetrated against scapegoated minorities: ethnic cleansing campaigns in Bosnia and Rwanda, racial and homophobic hate crimes throughout the United States, and the post-9/11 War on Terror with its many insidious implications for Muslims around the world. One might say that such psychic epidemics are unconscious
enactments of an ancient archetype gone awry. Unlike their sacred antecedents though, they create no link to the transpersonal dimension and invite no blessings.

Yet scapegoating prevails, an almost universal phenomenon that does not seem to go away. Are we humans hopelessly doomed to act out our unconsciousness on others? Ursula Le Guin’s short story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973) circumambulates this question. Omelas is a utopian city which is rich and joyful but has a hidden atrocity upon which it’s good fortune depends: the endless suffering of one young child who is stowed away endlessly in a dark cellar in squalid filth and misery.

Each of Omelas’ citizens is informed of this truth when they come of age. After getting over their initial shock and disgust, most make peace with this necessary fact and ignore the child’s pleas for release because they understand that his salvation will destroy their world which is perfect in every other way. However, a few do make the choice to leave, silently walking away from the city. No one knows where they go. The story closes: “The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible it does not exist.”

Le Guin seems to be suggesting that the scapegoat archetype is built into human culture and walking away from this truth is unimaginable, perhaps even impossible. Her story prompts one to ask: Are humans fated to endlessly repeat the dark ritual of scapegoating our own inner alterity onto others? In mythic terms, is the dark god Azazel insatiable? Or in other words: Will humans ever take responsibility for the shadow within instead of transferring our own darkness onto the condemned alien “out there?”
These are questions that dare not be dismissed. Nor should they be answered glibly or axiomatically. The tension they produce is important for they call us to humble awareness of our own blindness. While there are no facile answers to the scapegoating problem, three points stand out as important in considering how to work with these issues in our era.

One is the idea brought forth by psychologists and philosophers alike, that we each must learn to bear our own shadow. This means to recognize it, retrieve it from our inclination to project it, take responsibility for our darkness, and integrate it into the totality of our personality. A lifetime’s work! From the perspective of depth psychology, there is no more important work than that of confronting and reintegrating our shadow; it is the very core of individuation.

Struggling with one’s own shadow deepens and relativizes our sense of wholeness, renders our ego more empathic, and opens us to creative forces that our persona would not otherwise allow. Jung put it this way: “It is everybody’s allotted fate to become conscious of and learn to deal with this shadow…The world will never reach a state of order until this truth is generally recognized” (Jung, Vol.10, par. 455).

The second point is inherent in the Christian myth, which centers around a deity who was himself a scapegoat, and who, it is believed, willingly died for the sins of the world. This Messiah, sometimes called the Suffering Servant, is elemental to the Western psyche and must not be overlooked in this examination of the scapegoat archetype. While Jesus Christ is not part of my personal mythos, I believe there is power and truth in the archetypal figure of the conscious scapegoat.
Erich Neumann called the phenomenon of “vicarious suffering” the very opposite of eliminating our own evil by projecting it onto others.

... we now find the exact opposite is happening: The individual assumes personal responsibility for part of the burden of the collective, and he decontaminates this evil by integrating it into his own inner process of transformation. If the operation is successful, it leads to an inner liberation of the collective, which in part at least is redeemed from this evil. (Quoted in Brinton Perera, 1986, p. 99).

I recently witnessed such “vicarious suffering” on a small scale. A congregant had lost her 30-year old son to suicide. When she received the news, her rage and guilt were intolerable. A dear friend of hers had received texts from the young man in the year prior to his death about his suicidal ideation, and had reported these to the mother. The mother had chastised her friend not to bother her with “every crazy thought that passed through his head.” As it turned out, the last text the friend received from him was the night before he shot himself. She did not call the mother, per her request. But when it came to light that the friend had heard from the son and not contacted her, the mother forgot her prior rebuke and lashed out at the friend with enormous vengeance and blame.

In this case, the friend had become the scapegoat for the mother’s rage and guilt. The burden of her son’s death was too great to bear and she defused her self-blame by scapegoating her friend. Remarkably, the friend did not defend herself. Instead she received the rage and blame willingly, taking on the “vicarious suffering” of the situation.

Each of us has the empathic capacity of the Suffering Servant archetype within us. By abstaining from our natural instinct to defend ourselves and attack others and instead absorb the shadow consciously and willingly, we can contribute to alleviating the pain of the whole.
Finally, we have seen how unconscious scapegoating is a perversion of the religious archetype, a distortion of an ancient ritual that sought to purify the community of its negativity and invite blessings from the transpersonal dimension of life. Restoring a healthy connection to the dimension of Self, gods, God, Spirit, requires symbolic acts and rituals instead of unconscious acting out. As Robert Johnson says: “Culture can only function if we live out the unwanted elements symbolically. All healthy societies have a rich ceremonial life. Less healthy ones rely on unconscious expressions” (Johnson, 1991, pp. 52-53).

The idea here is not to regress into archaic cultural forms, but rather to understand that in the absence of a ritual connection to the transpersonal dimension, our modern scientific tendency is to literalize our instincts, and this has dangerous consequences. Symbols and rituals help us to relate to the psyche and its deep influences without acting out or objectifying our impulses in the literal, physical world. “There is a failure to ritualize this need to deal with shadow….When it’s not ritualized, it becomes literalized, then dangerous” (Kipnis, lecture, Dec. 14, 2011).

The scapegoat, like all archetypes, has two poles, both positive and negative. Jung reminds us: “Every archetype contains the lowest and the highest, evil and good, and is therefore capable of producing diametrically opposite results” (Jung, Vol. 10, para. 474). The scapegoat carries within itself the potential for apocalyptic evil as well as a mirror of our own shadows. It calls us to wake up, become conscious, recollect our projections and take responsibility for our own darkness. It calls us to go farther yet and take part in the sacred pole of the archetype, to become conscious and willing vicarious sufferers, extending our sympathetic imagination to others and in so doing, digest a portion of the
collective evil.

Finally, the scapegoat archetype invites us to restore our relationship to a more symbolic life through ceremony and rituals that aid us in seeing ourselves in perspective of the vastness of creation, in relationship to the source of our lives. We thus come full circle, ending our exploration where we began it, in recognition of the deep power and influence of the unconscious psyche and our need to relate to it, hold tension with it, and awaken to it’s dual potential within us.

References


