Four Theological Schemas for Actively Responding to Modern Slavery

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Abstract

Although there is broad consensus within the Christian community that slavery in all its forms is morally abhorrent, there has been little theological reflection on the question of *how* the Christian community engages in anti-slavery work. Rather than discuss the obvious ethical issues raised by the abuses that constitute modern slavery, this article focusses on how theology influences *the processes of addressing those abuses*. The article describes the dependence of strategies selected to bring slavery to an end on pre-commitments to particular theological schemas. Four theological schemas are presented. In each case, a description of the schema is followed by a discussion of the types of anti-slavery intervention enabled by that schema. The first two—focusing respectively on personal sin and structural sin—are commonly expressed or assumed by Christian anti-slavery organizations. The final two—mimetic theory and restorative justice—are less frequently expounded by anti-slavery organizations, but suggest important alternative strategies for addressing modern slavery.

Keywords: Christianity, mimetic theory, modern slavery, human trafficking, restorative justice, theological schema

Introduction

The anti-slavery social movement

According to the Global Slavery Index,[1] over 40 million people are trapped in modern slavery.[2] The bounds of modern slavery are not well defined, but the label encompasses

[1] Published by the Walk Free Foundation and available from https://www.globalslaveryindex.org .

[2] Terminology within the anti-slavery movement has become controversial, and like all authors, I must make some choices that are a compromise between clarity, conciseness, sensitivity, and the pressure of political correctness. I use the terms 'anti-slavery' and 'modern slavery' throughout this essay, recognising that these labels are problematic, but noting that alternatives such as 'human trafficking' have their own problems. As will be clear from the contents of the essay, the scope of 'slavery' is intended to be inclusive of all forms of human abuse, coercion, and exploitation that

diverse forms of extreme labor exploitation, forced marriage, child soldiers, international trafficking of people for sexual exploitation, and a growing online market for the sexual abuse of children. In response to this seemingly intractable global problem, thousands of organizations[3] seek to raise awareness about slavery, to rescue and rehabilitate people who have been abused or exploited, to identify, shame, and prosecute people who perpetrate those abuses, and to prevent specific forms of slavery through legislation and through the alleviation of associated problems such as poverty. I have discussed elsewhere (Clarke 2022) the value of classifying that network of activities to end modern slavery as a social movement.

Many anti-slavery organizations operate within a broadly Christian framework (Gee and Smith 2015; Hertzke 2006, 2015), motivated by a belief that all people are made in God's image and by the Biblical injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:39). Slavery and release from slavery are common topics in Christian scripture (e.g., Colossians 4:1, Galatians 5:1). The abuse that constitutes any form of slavery denies people's value and restricts their freedom, and according to Pope John Paul II, this defacement of God's image bearers is ultimately an attack against God (O'Connor 2014 loc. 1400).

Of course there are other possible motivations for opposing slavery, and many people with other worldviews or ideologies also seek to eradicate modern slavery.[4] However, this article focusses on the Christian tradition, recognizing that "while Christians are largely of the one mind that human trafficking is wrong, the strategies that they use and the ends they hope to accomplish are varied and even conflicting" (Zimmerman 2011:567). One reason for those variations is the pre-commitment to alternative theological positions (Gee and Smith 2015:3643). These differences become especially pronounced when applied to social problems such as slavery. I argue here that theological pre-commitments wield significant

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reflect an assumption that one person can in any sense 'own' another, whether that pretence of ownership be legal, psychological, financial, or otherwise. For a more detailed examination of these terms, see Bravo 2019; 2017.

In a laudable attempt to counter the idea that being a victim is a person's defining trait, recent discourse increasingly repositions 'victims' as 'survivors.' Given that 'survivor' privileges those who are alive over those who have not survived, I would prefer the longer phrase 'people who have been abused or exploited,' but that wording becomes ungainly when repeated often. In many cases 'survivors' simply does not make sense because I am commenting on the process of victimisation, not the process of survival. This is especially true in the section on mimetic theory in which victims *qua* victims is a central theme.

The desire to avoid labels that define a person based on one trait also needs to be applied to 'perpetrators' or 'traffickers.' To avoid implying that their whole identity is defined by that label, I have chosen to use phrasing such as 'people who abuse or exploit' or 'people who perpetrate modern slavery.'

[3] See for instance 2645 listed in the Global Modern Slavery Directory at https://www.globalmodernslavery.org (accessed 28 Sep 2021).

[4] By way of example, the Global Freedom Network has inspired the co-operation not only of Christian leaders, but also leaders of the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim faiths.

influence on Christian contributions to the anti-slavery social movement in terms of how to respond actively to modern slavery.

A large body of theologically-informed scholarship has sought to clarify the moral motives for opposing slavery, religious justifications for and against the perpetuation of slavery, and the application of religious language and resources to mobilize anti-slavery sentiment (e.g., Smith 1972; Cannon 2004; Brooten and Hazelton 2010; Glancy 2011; Gee and Smith 2015; Reddie 2016; Zimmerman 2019). However, little has been written about the application of theology to actual strategies for eradicating modern slavery. Relevant statements have been published by the World Council of Churches (Tveit 2019), the Church of England (The Clewer Initiative 2019), the Roman Catholic Church (Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development 2019; O'Connor 2014), and undoubtedly others. But most of what has been written goes no further than the principles already noted: that in Christian theology every person has been formed in the image of God and consequently ought to be treated with deep respect; that slavery in all its forms violates that image; and that Christians should therefore condemn slavery and work toward its eradication. This article moves the conversation on from the theological reasons for opposing slavery to a more explicit description of theological implications for *how* to eradicate modern slavery.

Harnessing the sociological concept of schema

To assist with the framing of theological options, this article applies the concept of a *schema*, in particular the use of the term by William H. Sewell (Sewell 1992). Schemas are akin to Anthony Giddens' 'rules' in that they are abstract (or virtual) prescriptions, conventions, recipes, moral codes, etc. (Sewell 1992:8). Schemas encompass both the formal rules encoded in laws, liturgies, creeds, and contracts, as well as the informal metaphors and assumptions that undergird those formal rules. Schemas are the "transposable procedures applied in the enactment of social life" (Sewell 1992:17). There is consequently a duality between schemas[5] and social life. Schemas structure the practices of social life, but equally, social life is the sea out of which schemas arise. A schema simultaneously enables and constrains options for social actions, while implying a border between what is possible (or at least permissible) and what is not.

A schema that arises from one social context becomes an abstract entity that can later be applied (enacted) in other, quite varied, social contexts. This transposability[6] of schemas across multiple practices is the reason they must be understood as virtual. "To say that schemas are virtual is to say that they cannot be reduced to their existence in any particular

[5] Strictly speaking, Sewell sees this duality as occurring between *structures* and social life, where a 'structure' is a combination of schemas and resources. However, for the sake of simplicity, this essay does not discuss the role of resources in how schemas become enacted in social practices. Our emphasis here is on the conceptual theological frameworks that motivate anti-slavery organisations' actions, rather than the process of co-opting resources for those actions.

[6] The term 'transpose' comes from Bourdieu (Sewell 1992:17).

practice or any particular location in space and time: they can be actualized in a potentially broad and unpredetermined range of situations" (Sewell 1992:8). Schemas thus provide a basis for describing how theological ideas, formed from a long history of humanity's engagement with the divine, can be transposed into the context of modern slavery, even when this transposition is unconscious and pre-critical.

The structure of this article is based on four theological schemas within the Christian tradition, schemas that diagnose the disease of slavery differently, and consequently lead to different treatments. The first two schemas—personal sin and structural sin—dominate current anti-slavery work by Christians and Christian organizations. Others have documented the influence of these two schemas, especially in the context of public anti-slavery discourse in the USA (Campbell and Zimmerman 2013; Choi-Fitzpatrick 2014; Zimmerman 2011).

To assist with the way those schemas are framed, I draw on formal and informal statements of faith from 16 Christian anti-slavery organizations. Some of those statements are publicly available on the organizations' websites, while others were sent to me in response to emailed requests in which I agreed not to link their comments to specific organizations. To respect the contributions of those respondents, when I quote their comments in this article, I have left the comments as anonymous. Based on my experience of searching for such statements of faith, it seems that many anti-slavery organizations founded on Christian convictions either do not document that foundation or choose not to publicize such statements.

I augment those two dominant theological schemas with two others, selected from the vast armory of Christian theology because of their generativity in the context of options for how to respond actively to modern slavery. These two schemas—mimetic theory and restorative justice—are rarely recognized by Christian anti-slavery organizations, but provide insights that could improve their theories of change and enable additional intervention options.

These four schemas are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, and the aim of this article is not to critique their theological soundness, nor to discuss their relative levels of influence within the Christian community. Including all four schemas in a single article introduces the risk of over-simplification. Nevertheless, as the various quotes seek to indicate, these are not intended to be caricatures, but rather summarized theological understandings actually held by people and organizations within Christian orthodoxy. The specific question addressed here is *how each of the candidate schemas enable and constrain the options for treating the problem of modern slavery.* If a group of Christians who are motivated to act against modern slavery follow any of the four schemas, what opportunities are implied and what constraints imposed by that schema on the actions available to them?

Root Cause: Personal Sin

Schema

A prevalent theological schema within Christian tradition—perhaps the most prevalent in current Protestant churches—maintains that all evil arises from personal sin. The essence of this schema is as follows.

Since Genesis 3, humanity has rebelled against God and fallen into moral depravity. Although created in the image of God, each person, by virtue of their inherited human nature (labelled by some as 'original sin') as well as by their own decisions, has turned away from the good that God intended and toward evil. All people are equally infected with personal sin, including slaves and their owners. All deserve to be punished, or at least to receive the 'wages' of their sin. Those wages include physical and spiritual death, and, according to many, eternal suffering in Hell. One Christian anti-slavery organization who responded to my request for comment about their approach to modern slavery believes that "[People] will either exist eternally separated from God by sin or in union with God through forgiveness and salvation. To be eternally separated from God is hell. To be eternally in union with him is eternal life. Heaven and hell are places of eternal existence."

In response, God acts in the world self-sacrificially to provide a means by which people can escape sin and its consequences. For many Christians, this rescue is conditional. Each individual must admit to their own moral failure and accept God's rescue plan in order to make it effective. This conditionality is inherent in the Reformed doctrine of *sola fide*, and expressed, at least stereotypically, as the need to "accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior." For some Christians, this conscious assent is all that is needed to be 'saved' from sin and from God's just wrath. In one respondent's words "We believe salvation is a gift from God to man. Man can never make up for his sin by self-improvement or good works—only by trusting in Jesus Christ as God's offer of forgiveness can man be saved from sin's penalty."

For other Christians, prayers, almsgiving, and other morally laudable acts are also important. Several organizations who provided comments to me engage in regular times of prayer. One hosts an annual global Day of Prayer for victims of human trafficking, another gathers survivors to pray themselves.

Observations

This way of telling the human story was labelled by Choi-Fitzpatrick as a *salvation schema* and shown to be a common element of American evangelicals' attitudes towards modern slavery (Choi-Fitzpatrick 2014). He compares this modern emphasis with the evangelical influence on the abolitionist movement of the 1830s, which arose from schemas of confession and sin (Young 2002:664).

From this theological schema, three key concepts enable and constrain Christian responses to slavery: personal guilt, punishment, and rescue.

The first concept is personal guilt. As with all evil, the root cause of slavery is personal moral depravity. People who abuse or exploit others are sinners, as are those they abuse or exploit. All have sinned against God, against other people, against themselves, and they all have been sinned against by other people as well. Nevertheless, some sins are more heinous than others, more abhorrent to God, and more damaging to other people. For some Christians, perhaps the most abhorrent aspect of slavery is the violation of sexual integrity.[7] A common assumption is that slaveholders and human traffickers act as they do because of the extremity of their sinfulness: their greed, self-centered arrogance, disregard for the rule of law, lust for pleasure and power, and their lack of compassion or even empathy for their victims.

The second concept is punishment. From this theological perspective, for a slaveholder or human trafficker to receive justice is synonymous with them being punished. They should suffer for the suffering they have caused so that the scales of justice will be balanced. Although there is little to connect logically a belief in personal sin with a belief in retributive punishment, the two are commonly held together, especially in anti-slavery organizations that subscribe to Reformed theology. In that theological tradition, personal sin, justice, punishment, the wrath of God, and its avoidance through Christ, are inextricably linked (Packer 1973). Reformed theologian W.G.T. Shedd, writes that "Justice necessarily demands that sin be punished, but not necessarily in the person of the sinner. Justice may allow of the substitution of one person for another" (Shedd 1888:373). Note that Shedd is commenting about a person who has sinned, and deducing the requirement for punishment, along with a hint that another person, namely Jesus, might in some cases be able to stand in for the sinner to receive the punishment.

This approach to punishment is neither rehabilitative nor designed as a deterrent. Although it may result in both of those outcomes, the intention of punishment is primarily and fundamentally to harm the person who has perpetrated abuse or exploitation because that is what they deserve. "The heart of the justice which expresses God's nature is retribution, the rendering to men what they have deserved" (Packer 1973:158).

[7] Yvonne Zimmerman claimed this view was central to the conservative Christian opposition to slavery in the USA (Zimmerman 2011:573). She and Leititia Campbell extended that claim several years later to argue that, under the influence of American evangelicalism, the whole "anti-trafficking movement's dominant rhetorical and conceptual framework" was of "human trafficking as 'sold sex'" (Campbell and Zimmerman 2013). Perhaps that categorisation is less applicable outside the USA, and perhaps the discourse has shifted over the past six years, in part due to their earlier challenging work. For example, recent anti-slavery legislation in Australia focusses on supply chains and labour exploitation, as does the recent Australian book by Justine Nolan and Martijn Boersma (2019). The Global Slavery Index considers 'situations of exploitation' without regard for whether that exploitation is sexual or otherwise. Although the drawcard of 'sexual immorality' is still used to mobilise support, even Western Christian voices like Gary Haugen and Kevin Bales locate the roots of slavery elsewhere (e.g., Bales 2007; Haugen and Boutros 2014). Nevertheless, at the International Human Trafficking & Social Justice Conference held in the USA during 2020, over half the presentations (at least 34 out of 65) still focussed primarily on sex trafficking.

Several principles guide the application of this retributive justice. For instance, the Old Testament principle of *lex talionis*—an eye for and eye and a tooth for a tooth—imposes an upper limit to punishment. Furthermore, punishment should be prescribed by an authority within a judicial system designed to curtail escalating vigilante retaliation. Since the core of modern slavery, like any sinful behavior, is its affront to God, God retains the ultimate position of judge and punisher.

The third concept influencing responses to modern slavery is that of rescue. From this theological position, all people need rescue, whether they know it or not. For many who hold this theological position, the *only* important strategy for dealing with slavery is to encourage each person, whether victim or perpetrator, to repent of their personal sinfulness and place themselves in the hands of a merciful God. Anything other than that will leave them outside God's rescue plan and condemned to eternal punishment. To such people, 'rescuing' a slave looks the same as rescuing anyone. To be rescued means to be saved from the future punishment of God, not to be saved from the challenges of this life. As one Christian anti-slavery organization declares, "The greatest need for all humankind is forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ." Another commented "Man can never make up for his sin by self-improvement or good works – only by trusting in Jesus Christ as God's offer of forgiveness can man be saved from sin's penalty."

This also appears to be the view of evangelical theologian Don Carson, who is quoted as saying "The overthrowing of slavery, then, is through the transformation of men and women by the gospel rather than through merely changing an economic system" (Strobel 1998:168). Carson does not think that slavery is unimportant, nor that it should be condoned. Releasing someone from slavery may be tactically useful in that it enables the person to hear and respond positively to this other, larger, message of salvation. But the fundamental 'rescue' is not from external slavery but from the internal slavery of personal sin.

In further emphasis of this point, another anti-slavery organization who responded to my request offered the following statement:

> Through a holistic approach of rescuing, restoring, and reintegrating survivors of trafficking and preventing sexual slavery, [our organization] seeks to meet survivors' spiritual, emotional, social, educational, and physical needs. Our intention is that they may come to know their worth and value in Christ, develop a dependence on Him, and develop skills for a sustainable life.

Note the centrality of the rescue motif in this quote. This statement also highlights how the desired outcome is not just physical well-being of the survivors, but also a re-orientation of their self-image as dependent on Christ. This does not mean that the organization requires survivors to already be or to become Christian, but that outcome is their explicit intention.

Not all Christians operating from a theology of personal sin take such an instrumental approach. Within his study of evangelicals, Choi-Fitzpatrick found that 'a belief in spiritual salvation is readily rearticulated as the corporeal salvation of victims' (Choi-Fitzpatrick

2014:120; see also Wiss 2013). The salvation schema, derived from a spiritual context, has thus been transposed into the physical context of slavery victimization. In this transposed form, guilt, rescue, and punishment still dominate the narrative, but the schema now confers a mandate to rescue slaves from their oppressors, and bring slaveholders and traffickers to justice here and now rather than leaving the enactment of justice to God in the afterlife.

In summary, assuming a theological schema in which personal sin deserves to be punished, the appropriate Christian response to modern slavery is seen to be, first, encouraging all people to repent and accept God's eternal rescue plan, and second, in the here-and-now we ought to rescue and rehabilitate people who have survived the abuses of modern slavery, and incarcerate the people who have perpetrated those abuses so that they are justly punished.

Root Cause: Structural Sin

Schema

Whereas the previous theological schema places maximal emphasis on personal agency, a second schema emphasizes the role of structural failures in human systems. There is some evidence that so-called mainline churches in the USA tend to approach modern slavery via this schema, in contrast to the evangelical reliance on a schema that emphasizes personal sin (Choi-Fitzpatrick 2014). This move, from a narrative of personal sin to that of structural societal causes, has also been emphasized in the context of sex trafficking, along with the need for them to be countered by grace and compassion (Brock and Thistlewaite 1996).

The term 'social justice' is often applied to this schema, sometimes embraced positively, for instance by the Sojourners Community,[8] at other times denigrated by people who argue, from the 'personal sin' standpoint, that 'social justice' does not faithfully reflect the essence of the Gospel.[9] Still others see the two aspects of sin in a more unified fashion. South African theologian Albert Nolan, for instance, writes:

> All sin is both personal and social at the same time. All sin is personal in the sense that only individuals can commit sin, only individuals can be guilty, only individuals can be sinners. However, all sins also have a social dimension because sins have social consequences (they affect other people), sins become institutionalised and systematised in the structures, laws and customs of a society, and sins are committed in a particular society that shapes and influences the sinner. (1988:43)

[8] https://sojo.net/about-us/who-we-are

[9] An example of this position is The Gospel Coalition. While recognising that Christians should promote moral reform in society, they emphasise that "as progressive social causes became more foundational to the social gospel movement, the good of justice overtook the greater good of evangelism" (Carter 2018).

To the extent that sin is embedded in social structures, there is a clear mandate in the Bible to expose and oppose those structures. For example, Isaiah's condemnation of oppressive regimes—"Woe to those who make unjust laws …" (Isaiah 10:1-2)—and Jesus' expulsion of exploitative money-changers from the Temple in Jerusalem (Matthew 21:12-13). One response to my request for statements of faith from Christian anti-slavery organisations included the comment, "We affirm that acting justly involves … being able to name injustice, and denounce the powers that cause it."

Observations

In the case of modern slavery, many systemic factors contribute to both the vulnerability of victims and the propensity of other actors to victimize the vulnerable. Modern slavery could not exist without global trade, a consumerist mentality that demands cheap goods and services, an economic system that creates an underclass of people vulnerable to exploitation, cultural attitudes that undervalue certain people, information technologies that enable anonymity, and psychological mechanisms that promote widespread sexual abuse.

A recent report (LeBaron et al. 2018) analyzing the root causes of modern slavery named four structural components of the current global political economy that "contribute to creating a pool of workers vulnerable to exploitation:" poverty, the systematic denial to some people of the rights and status of full personhood, limited labor protections, and restricted mobility regimes. They also named four structural components that encourage the exploitation of those vulnerable people: concentrated corporate power and ownership, outsourcing, irresponsible sourcing policies, and governance gaps. Reading that diagnosis through the lens of Christian social justice prompts the consideration of how Christian communities can expose and oppose the systemic injustices of the global political economy. An associated view is that taken by Miroslav Volf, who documents important differences between a religious vision of flourishing and the vision of flourishing promoted by the current dominant form of globalization, and notes that "a vision of flourishing found in the quarreling family of world religions is essential to individual thriving and global common good" (Volf 2016:2).

Advocates of social justice often point to Biblical verses that demonstrate God's bias towards the well-being of the poor and marginalized. One of many examples is Psalm 146:7-9:

> He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

Based on a theological belief that God abhors any form of injustice and acts in the world to address injustice, Christians throughout history have been inspired to stand on the

side of the disempowered and to facilitate social change that promotes human rights.[10] One respondent to my request for statements of faith from Christian anti-slavery organizations said that "It's kind of absolutely core to Christian doctrine that we're about the business of liberation and release of those who are captive and oppressed." The same respondent noted the importance of understanding that "society themselves included are part of the problem in terms of issues like consumerism and other factors that actually can promote trafficking, modern slavery," and drew attention to "the whole Christian narrative about liberation and justice."

The structural sin schema enables Christians to consider far broader forms of anti-slavery intervention than the schema of personal sin. If God is concerned about human flourishing before death just as much as after death, then God's followers should be actively involved in working toward a society in which there is the potential for all to flourish. In the words of one Christian anti-slavery organization, "We affirm that churches should faithfully respond to the impulse of God's holy love by working for God's reign to be ever more visible." This reflects the words from Jesus' prototypical prayer. He did not instruct his followers to pray "May all evils on earth be resolved in heaven" but rather "Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). The important theological concept of hope looks much different from these two vantage points. For those who focus on personal sin, the hope of the Gospel is an escape from this world to an eternal life in heaven; for those who focus on social justice issues as a corrective to structural sin, the hope of the Gospel is God's presence with us here and now.

In relation to modern slavery, this structural focus encourages Christians to be involved in strategies such as:

- Applying economic pressures to make slavery unprofitable;
- Lobbying for stronger laws and strengthening the institutions that enforce those laws;
- Alleviating poverty, disease, military conflict, and ecological disasters in order to reduce people's vulnerability to exploitation;
- Challenging the exploitative consequences of economic rationalism and neoliberal globalization.

Whereas the personal sin schema tends to support the idea that perpetrators deserve to be punished, the structural sin schema allows a more nuanced attitude towards punishment. All forms of punishment can be re-imagined as deterrents that reduce criminality pre-emptively rather than just punishing it retrospectively. Many forms of punishment can be viewed as opportunities for the rehabilitation of offenders. Incarceration can be seen as a way of protecting society from slaveholders and traffickers by removing them from contexts in which they can abuse others. However, prisons (and other forms of punishment) can themselves be systems of injustice—ideological puppets that entrench

[10] This position is stated well in "A Theology of Modern Slavery" (2019), Tveit (2019) and affirmed by the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren (2008).

racial biases, corruption, and social power imbalances—and consequently in need of faith-driven reform.

In summary, a schema that posits structural sin as the root cause of slavery prompts Christians to call prophetically for social justice, to initiate social changes that promote human rights, and to co-operate with others, regardless of their diverse ideologies, in the construction of a world in which all people can flourish.

Root Cause: Human Propensity to Violence

Schema

Having discussed the two theological schema that dominate Christian anti-slavery discourse, we now consider what other theological resources could be applied fruitfully to the context of modern slavery. Theological understandings of liberation, gender, ecclesiology, mission, suffering, and prayer can all be mined for relevant insight. This article chooses two theological schemas because neither receive much attention in current Christian anti-slavery practice, and because both enable significantly different anti-slavery interventions than the personal sin and structural sin schemas.

The third schema recognizes that modern slavery is but one example of the human propensity to treat each other abusively, coercively, and violently. Although victims of all forms of deception, abuse, betrayal, and violence are typically treated with sympathy today, for most of human history the overwhelming majority of people and cultures have assumed that the suffering of victims is a result of their own failure and guilt. This is one of the conclusions of René Girard, whose mimetic theory attempts to account for why this is the case: both why victim blaming was an essential feature of primitive[11] civilization, and why the effectiveness of victim blaming has been increasingly undermined.

The following few paragraphs provide a very brief overview of mimetic theory (for a more detailed theological account, see Girard 1989, 2001; Bailie 1997).

Imitation plays a fundamental role in learning and socialization. Importantly, we learn what to *desire* by imitation, and this 'mimetic desire' inevitably leads to rivalry, conflict, and violence. Any sustainable form of communal life must somehow enable imitation while also containing the conflict and violence that arises from imitation. If unconstrained, collective violence escalates to a point of mimetic crisis that could destroy the community. One way to avoid that destruction is for the community to band together against a single victim who can be blamed for the crisis. If the violence can be channeled against that victim, the pressure is released and the crisis resolved, at least temporarily. This 'mimetic unanimity' of a crowd against a victim, which is depicted symbolically in the process of scapegoating described in Leviticus 16, has been the *only* effective means by which human communities have resolved such crises, and is the founding mechanism of all human culture.

[11] 'Primitive' here and throughout reflects the technical sense employed by Girard. It implies foundational rather than inferior, the founding elements of human society and of religion.

In primitive civilization and religion, the victim is always seen as guilty and deserving of their punishment. The Judeo-Christian scriptures, however, offer a critique that undermines the effectiveness of this single victim mechanism. Both Old and New Testaments affirm the essential innocence of victims and portray a God who not only cares for the plight of innocent victims, but actively promotes—through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—a non-violent alternative to the scapegoating mechanism. The Gospel signals an end to any need for sacrificial victims.

The effectiveness of scapegoating to resolve mimetic crises depends to a large extent on the mechanism remaining hidden. Under the influence of the Bible, victims have increasingly been understood to be innocent (Bailie 1997:20), and consequently the old approach to casting blame onto an arbitrary victim no longer protects us from our own violence. As a result, "Human beings must become reconciled without the aid of sacrificial intermediaries or resign themselves to the imminent extinction of humanity" (Girard 1987:136). In general however, we have not yet embraced an effective non-sacrificial alternative, although structures such as international law and the global market have the effect of restraining violence while simultaneously obscuring the underlying mechanisms of violence (Cowdell 2013:4; Girard 2001:186; Palaver 1995).

As a result of the unveiling of the scapegoating mechanism by the Gospel, and the consequent reduction in the mechanism's effectiveness in addressing mimetic crises, we actually see an increase in violence. Since the sacrifice of a single victim is no longer efficacious, and we have not embraced a non-violent alternative to conflict and rivalry, we instead sacrifice more and more victims in a vain hope that a larger sacrifice will work more effectively. Warfare in the 20th century and increasing prison populations are obvious examples.

Observations

Modern slavery can be understood as another expression of this systemic deceit. I mentioned earlier the view of LeBaron et al., who see the root cause of modern slavery embedded in the structure of the current global political economy. For the sake of that global political economy, and the benefits it brings to the privileged, we are willing to accept the coercion of massive numbers of exploited laborers. Our global inability to forsake the primitive sacred enables this acceptance of victimization and allows us to dissociate ourselves from responsibility by blaming the slaveholders and traffickers.

Mimetic theory describes a primitive sacred schema in which the single victim scapegoating mechanism is unconsciously relied upon to constrain the contagion of mimetic violence. Although labelled as 'primitive,' this schema continues to be enacted today in the way blame and othering are used to control social identity and communal action. Mimetic theory also describes a second schema, one counter to the primitive sacred schema. In this alternative schema, the unveiling of the previously hidden scapegoating mechanism undermines the effectiveness of blame and othering, and suggests that we need to find non-rivalrous forms of imitation.

Both the primitive sacred schema and the non-rivalrous imitation schema may be transposed into the context of modern slavery. Three aspects of that transposition are examined below: the nature of imitation and desire, the innocence of victims, and the scapegoating of perpetrators. In each case, I show how mimetic theory generates insights about the causes and structure of modern slavery, and follow that with several alternative anti-slavery interventions that are enabled by the mimetic schema.

First, the dynamics of imitated desire play a fundamental role in the way our society maintains ongoing support for modern slavery. The foremost example is the way the 'developed' world drives consumption. Under the influence of advertising, peer pressure, and the urge to build social status, we accumulate cars, electronics, food, and fashion far beyond our needs. As a consequence of these mimetic desires, huge pressure is exerted to minimize the price of consumer goods, and massive wastage is generated through the disposal of goods which, though still functional, are no longer deemed desirable. This cycle of consumption is one of the primary drivers of labor exploitation, which constitutes 40% of modern slavery incidents (ILO 2017).

Mimetic desire also plays a role among slaveholders and traffickers, and perhaps to a more limited extent among the people they abuse. People who perpetrate modern slavery learn their contempt of victims by imitating those around them: their parents, peers, and the society in which they live. Perpetrators also aspire to a certain vision of success, perhaps based on wealth or power, that is derived from the same imitative process. Some evidence suggests that a high percentage of slaveholders and traffickers were themselves victims of modern slavery (McLaughlin 2019; O'Connor 2014 loc. 903; Svensson 2011; UN.GIFT 2008), in which case their pattern of abuse is also directly imitative.

In the light of these negative consequences of imitation, one reasonable strategy for addressing modern slavery is to rethink what we desire and from whom we copy our desires. How could we break the cycles of imitation that lead to acts of slave-like abuse and exploitation? The alternative, which Girard claims is proposed by the Gospel, is to imitate God rather than each other (Girard 1987:430). The movement from imitation to rivalry, which is inevitable with humans, is absent from God. Being almighty, God has no rivals, and there is no need for us to position ourselves as God's rivals. By imitating God, as exemplified by Jesus in passages such as John 5:19 and directed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:1, we can avoid the escalation of conflict that leads to victimization.

On the basis of this principle, a Christian might seek to undermine modern slavery by redirecting imitation and the desires that result from destructive imitation. Some examples of interventions with that aim might be:

- Personal demonstration: that is, be imitators of God ourselves, and call others to imitate God rather than each other. Demonstrate through the doctrines, structures, and liturgies of the church that all people are equally valued.
- Challenge our peers in the 'developed' world to stop locating their sense of meaning and status through excessive consumption. Re-channel people's desires towards

goals that enable rather than constrain other people's freedom. In doing this we may need to dismantle the manipulative power of modern advertising and marketing.

- Address the psychopathology of abusive sexual desires to reduce the demand for coercive sexual experiences.
- Education, awareness raising, and counselling approaches specifically targeted to people who have survived the abuses of modern slavery, and designed to encourage them to avoid repeating the abuse that was done to them. Empower survivors to flourish through other means so that the life of a trafficker is not perceived to be their only option.
- Showcase examples of profitable business models that do not require labor exploitation. An example of this is the Fair Employment Agency,[12] in the context of the Hong Kong's exploitative recruitment of domestic workers from the Philippines. A typical recruitment agency in that market misleads immigrant workers about working conditions and pay levels, charges the workers a placement fee, and then abandons the worker to potentially abusive employers. In contrast, the Fair Employment Agency provides preparatory training in the Philippines, charges the employer rather than the employee, and maintains ongoing relationships with both employer and employee. The Fair Employment Agency still intends to make a profit and is likely to build a more sustainable network of relationships that ensures repeat business. Their hope is that demonstrating a successful alternative to the traditional abusive model will put pressure on the other recruitment agencies to follow suit.

A second implication of mimetic theory for modern slavery relates to the innocence of victims. Girard's theology reflects a trajectory within the Bible that upholds the rights of the marginalized and equates 'the least of these' with Jesus himself (Matthew 25:40). Arising from that thinking would be the type of anti-slavery intervention that questions any victim-blaming in public discourse, and that protects exploited or abused people from any assumption that they are guilty. An example is providing training for police so that when they raid a site of suspected slavery, they separate the people who have been exploited from their exploiters (Haugen and Boutros 2014:130–33). Another is modifying laws and legal processes so that those who have been exploited are not unduly traumatized by implications that they are at fault. A positive example of this is the Swedish approach to prostitution, which treats men buying sex as criminals, not the women selling themselves for sex (O'Connor 2014 loc. 636).

Third, mimetic theory highlights the way society attempts to resolve internal crises by arbitrarily choosing a scapegoat on whom to lay the blame. There is an important sense in which the victims of modern slavery are sacrificed to meet the desires of slaveholders, traffickers, and the consumers of goods and services produced by those victims. But mimetic theory also suggests a deeper process of social dysfunction in which the scapegoats are the slaveholders and traffickers.

[12] https://www.fairfoundation.org.hk/

As the Girardian Duane Armitage notes, our modern world is deeply confused about who the victims really are, a confusion that leads to "the necessity of persecuting (even violently) victimizers in the name of victims" (Armitage 2021:99). The scapegoating of perpetrators is a convenient ploy to obscure the root causes of modern slavery. Rather than acknowledge the complex causal relationships between consumption, global supply chains, politics, displacement of people by conflict and environmental disasters, poverty, etc., it is far easier for our society to arbitrarily nominate the slaveholder or trafficker as the culprit. For the most part, the only strategy we have implemented for dealing with those who perpetrate the abuses of modern slavery is to prosecute and incarcerate them. But this attempt to cast all blame onto the perpetrator creates a new class of victims. While celebrating the arrest and conviction of a slaveholder or trafficker provides temporary relief for our societal tension, it does not resolve the systemic mimetic rivalry driving that tension.

An alternative would be to consider the role and the psychology of slaveholders and traffickers more deeply. Instead of turning those perpetrators into victims, a more effective anti-slavery strategy would be to understand their internal motives and external drivers with sufficient depth that we can undermine or redirect those motives and drivers.

In summary, a schema that posits mimetic violence as the root cause of slavery prompts Christians to find other ways to deal with mimetic crises apart from violence and scapegoating. We could implement anti-slavery interventions that avoid the escalation of violence by breaking negative cycles of imitation, and by challenging any structure or process that blames the victim, even when that victim might be a slaveholder or trafficker.

Root Cause: Broken Relationships

Schema

One way to read the Biblical narrative is to highlight the centrality of *shalom,* the Hebrew word for peace that encompasses material well-being, prosperity, right relationships, and moral integrity. *Shalom* is the state of justice, of straightforward wholeness, of goodness and salvation (Yoder 1989). *Shalom* is initiated through God's intention for creation and, although that intention has been lost through human brokenness, the restoration of *shalom* remains the eschatological hope of the Gospel.

For those who understand the root cause of slavery as personal sin, justice is nearly always conceived of as retributive. That is, justice is served when perpetrators are appropriately repaid: punished and denounced in accordance with what they deserve (Marshall 2001:109–10). The concept of *shalom*, however, implies that a retributive understanding of justice is inadequate. God's intention to reconcile all things in heaven and on earth (Colossians 1:20) cannot be achieved through the punishment of sinners, as though the evil of violence can be corrected by greater violence (see Marshall 2001:109–28 for a detailed critique of retributive punishment). In contrast to the violence of retributive justice, many Christians believe in a non-violent God and in a restorative approach to justice. Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, writes that "Evidently justice has something to do with the fact that God's love for each and every one of God's human creatures takes the form of

God desiring the *shalom* of each and every one" (Wolterstorff 1999:113). Wolterstorff deduces that "each and every human being has a morally legitimate claim to the fundamental conditions of *shalom*—that is, of human flourishing" (Wolterstorff 1999:117).

The concept of restorative justice has gained popularity as a consequence of Howard Zehr's (1990) work. Zehr grounded his notion of restorative justice in the Bible, and scholars such as Chris Marshall have extended the Biblical and theological basis for this approach. Marshall notes that, "Unlike retributive justice, which centers on the notions of law-breaking, guilt, and punishment, restorative justice focuses on relationships, reconciliation, and reparation of harm done" (Marshall 2001:2).

The fundamental evil of slavery is that it destroys *shalom*. It prevents material well-being and prosperity, breaks right relationships, and undermines the integrity (in the sense of personal wholeness) of both those who are abused or exploited and those who abuse or exploit. In that context, *shalom* will only be restored through addressing the broken relationships, including relationships between consumers and producers, between children and the parents who handed them over to traffickers, between workers and the bosses who exploit them, between people across all the social divisions of race, gender, caste, and ideology.

Observations

In the context of modern slavery, the straight-forward approach of rescuing people who have been abused or exploited and punishing those who abuse or exploit is not the only, nor the most sustainable, alternative. Each survivor rescued can easily lead to another being purchased as a replacement. Each perpetrator in jail may be replaced by a family member or colleague, and the perpetrator is likely to resume their abuse once their sentence is completed. However, as Marshall points out, it is a mistake to think that our concern for victims necessitates a form of justice whereby the offender must be forced to lose in order to equal out the offence, as though this were a zero-sum game. Instead, 'one of the primary needs of victims is reassurance about their future safety—a guarantee against repetition—and the best way to provide this is by working to secure the transformation of offenders' (Marshall 2018:115).

If people who are abused or exploited are released from those dehumanizing situations, they must also be empowered in such a way that they can resist re-exploitation. If people who perpetrate the abuses and exploitation of modern slavery are apprehended and prosecuted, they must also undergo some transformation if they are not to re-offend once released from jail. Those outcomes can be fostered by a restorative schema, which "prioritizes the values of healing and respect, participation, truth-telling, mutual care, reconciliation and peacemaking" (Marshall 2018:118).

This thinking lies at the heart of the approach taken by the Salvation Army. In their International Positional Statement on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (The Salvation Army 2020), they recognize that what is common to all acts of modern slavery is "the exploitation of some people by other people." Since the problem is relational,

"Transformation and healing of hearts and minds of everyone involved in modern slavery and human trafficking is both necessary and possible." The Statement notes that "everyone" must include the perpetrators of exploitation as well if the cycle of exploitation is to be broken.

A theologically grounded approach to restorative justice prompts anti-slavery interventions such as:

- Facilitating truth-telling in contexts where people involved in modern slavery have not been willing or able to speak honestly or to hear honestly. Encouraging the mutual recognition by all parties that each are divine image-bearers. Fostering the ability to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39) and even to "love your enemies" (Luke 6:27-31). Discussing what would be required for justice, reconciliation, and for true peace.
- Such interventions do not have to wait until abuse has already happened. They might operate earlier in the cycle by raising awareness before trafficking occurs. An example is the 'Warrior or Wolf?' program run by Homes of Hope in Fiji,[13] which works with village communities to encourage young men to decide whether they will defend the women in their community or act as wolves who prey on those women. Through generating honest conversation, such programs can foster communities of mutual care that actively resist exploitation.
- Working with those who have been abused and exploited to build their self-respect; to allow them to grieve, lament, and complain against God; to surround them with relationships that will support them as they find a new place in society (see for example, Corey 2016).
- Working with those who abuse and exploit too, since they also need to recover self-respect and find a new way forward. This might include helping them understand the real consequences of their actions on those they have abused (O'Connor 2014 loc. 1562). An important component would be to create transformative opportunities for people convicted of trafficking offences while they are in jail.
- In the right context and at the right time, with an expert facilitator and the clear permission of participants, a victim-offender conference (Amstutz 2010) may bring about substantive, life-giving change. Given the extremity of abuse, bringing survivors into the same room as their abusers will not always be wise, and never easy, which may be one reason why there has been little direct application of restorative justice to modern slavery.[14] Nevertheless, with appropriate professional training, there is a large opportunity for Christian communities to lead the way in applying this approach.

[13] https://www.hopefiji.org

[14] One exception is the recent journal article by I. Sil Yoon (Yoon 2019) arising from her PhD dissertation. Although she describes an explicitly Christian model for applying restorative justice to human trafficking, the article does not indicate whether the approach was implemented or merely considered.

- Christian faith communities have a particular calling to model right relationships. That may need to start with admitting historical complicity and complacency (see, for instance, Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren 2008; O'Connor 2014 loc. 1236), and our own enslavement to vices such as prejudice, greed, and power.

In summary, a theological schema that posits 'broken relationships' as the root cause of slavery prompts Christians to interact with those who have been abused and exploited, with those who abuse and exploit, and with communities of faith to prioritize the values of healing and respect, participation, truth-telling, mutual care, reconciliation, and peacemaking.

Concluding Remarks

As an example of how ideological pre-commitments influence the practice of human rights, this article has highlighted four theological schema and argued that they lead to quite different strategies for ending modern slavery. Table 1 summarizes the strategies enabled and constrained by the four schemas respectively. These are not mutually exclusive, and addressing the varied forms of modern slavery will require insights and strategies from all four to be applied.

Table 1. Summary of theological schemas and associated anti-slavery interventions

Theological schema	Summary of pertinent anti-slavery strategies
Personal sin, guilt, punishment, eternal salvation	■ Encouraging all people to repent and accept God's eternal rescue plan ■ Rescue and rehabilitate the people who have been abused and exploited ■ Punish the people who have perpetrated that abuse and exploitation
Structural sin, social justice	■ Prophetically expose and oppose the unjust systems that enable or even require slavery ■ Initiate social changes that promote human rights ■ Focus the penal system on deterrence, rehabilitation, and protection rather than (only) retribution ■ Co-operate with others in the construction of a world in which all people can flourish
Mimetic theory, rivalry, violence, scapegoating	■ Find other ways to deal with mimetic crises apart from violence and scapegoating ■ Avoid the escalation of violence by breaking negative cycles of imitation ■ Demonstrate and encourage the non-rivalrous imitation of God rather than the rivalrous imitation of each other

Theological schema	Summary of pertinent anti-slavery strategies
	■ Challenge any structure or process that blames the victim, even when that victim might be a slaveholder or trafficker
Broken relationships, restorative justice, *shalom*	■ Prioritize the values of healing and respect, participation, truth-telling, mutual care, reconciliation, and peacemaking ■ Work with both the people who have been abused and those who abuse separately to recover their self-respect and to support them with a network of positive relationships ■ Where appropriate, facilitate victim offender conferences to open opportunities for reconciliation ■ Build communities of faith that demonstrate right relationships

The intention of making the implications of these varied theological schema explicit is to enable Christian anti-slavery organizations to review more self-consciously their own assumptions and consequently improve their theories of change.

Beyond that intention, the following paragraphs offer my own reflections on those schema from a neo-Anabaptist (Augsburger 2006; Gish 1979) and Hauerwasian (Hauerwas 1991) perspective in which the character and behavior of Jesus are seen as normative for Christian ethics. From this perspective, the community of Jesus' followers works non-violently with God as co-creators of a society[15] in which all can flourish, and in which the flourishing of one is never at the expense of another. This community's ethical discernment is informed by a desire to be "ambassadors of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:11-21; Myers and Enns 2009), and through that lens, modern slavery is seen to be one expression of the human brokenness that the good news of Jesus seeks to ameliorate. God—in Jesus, and through the ongoing presence of the community of Jesus' followers—stands in solidarity with those broken, dehumanized, and brutalized by abuse and exploitation.

A theology of *shalom* encompasses the valuable parts of the three other schemas while avoiding the conflicts between them. Viewing the moral evil of slavery as its violation of *shalom* accounts for both the personal and structural aspects of sin. A theological position that sees God, and God's people, working towards restoration will inevitably foster both personal and social change. Furthermore, this restorative approach adds flesh to Girard's proposal that we imitate God. If God is working towards the reconciliation of all things, and in that process even God's enemies are loved, then when we imitate God's desires, God's values, and God's strategies, we will of necessity be engaging in restorative justice.

[15] Rather than 'society,' the term more typically used by Jesus was 'kingdom.' His subversive purpose in co-opting that term, however, has become so muddied that it is perhaps better to use the more modern and politically neutral term 'society.'

We should not assume that if we end slavery, then *shalom* will be restored. Ending modern slavery could conceivably be achieved without any real transformation or reconciliation. If all known forms of slavery were outlawed and law enforcement was perfect, but our communal heart has not been changed, then there will still be vulnerable people—both people vulnerable to being exploited and people vulnerable to becoming exploiters—and modern slavery will be replaced by some even more horrendous abuse.

For that reason, I have repeatedly mentioned the crucial role that perpetrators play in the system of modern slavery. Understanding and addressing that role is the most under-appreciated area within the modern anti-slavery movement, and an area in which the Christian community can take a significant lead. To that end, the relational and restorative aspects of the *shalom* schema provide a robust framework for developing anti-slavery strategies that apply wholeness, forgiveness, restoration, and reintegration to both the exploited and exploiters.

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