

CAMBRIDGE



P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

volume 15

number 1

march 2006

ISSN 1361-7710

Writing group

Denis Alexander PhD
John Coffey PhD
Caroline Eade MA
Paul Mills PhD
Michael Ovey MTh MA
Julian Rivers LLM
Michael Schluter PhD
Christopher Townsend MA
Margaret Wilson BA DipTh

Donations

The Jubilee Centre
3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2 NZ
Tel: 01223 566319
Fax: 01223 566359
E-mail: info@jubilee-centre.org
www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers
Registered Charity No. 288783

Victim chic? The rhetoric of victimhood

by Michael Ovey

Summary

The rhetoric of victimhood allows us to cast ourselves without qualification as victims, or as saviours of victims, while dramatising our chosen opponents as demonic without qualification. This paper outlines how we sometimes use the role of victim. It analyses the spiritual dangers of manufacturing such blanket identities in relation to usurping God as creator-judge and subverting basic principles of justice, and contrasts victimhood rhetoric with the example of Christ. Instead of victimhood rhetoric, we should prefer roles following the example of Jesus, who sees humans in relation to the perfect justice and mercy of God.

Introduction

In 2004 Rocco Buttiglione's nomination as a European Commissioner was successfully opposed because of, amongst other things, his view that homosexual practice was sinful. His 'homophobia' was intolerable to the gay community in particular, which envisaged itself as a victim of his views, even though Buttiglione advocated no public policy based on his opinions.

The rewards of the role of victim emerge from such examples. Successfully projecting oneself or one's group as victim can result in legislative protection, or the barring from certain offices of one's opponents. Such successful projection can deflect criticism and minimize accountability. This role should concern Christians for two reasons, one relating to justice, one relating to temptation.

Concerning justice, such successful posturing as victims risks encouraging a double injustice: the injustice that real victims have not received justice, and the injustice that those who do not deserve compassion as victims have received it. Such inversion of justice naturally concerns Christians. Proverbs 24:11–12 tells us that refusing to act for the oppressed risks God's anger, while Proverbs 24:24 describes the curse on those who state the wicked are innocent.

As for temptation, of course fallen people find not being held accountable tempting. The role, if not the reality, of victim can be richly rewarding.

For these reasons, the strategies by which I might clothe myself with victimhood deserve attention. We start with Stephen Karpman's analysis of some personal relationships as a 'Victim Triangle'.¹

The Victim Triangle / 'Drama Triangle'

Karpman drew on the framework of Transactional Analysis to describe a triad of relationships, the Victim Triangle. This triangle has three roles – Persecutor, Victim and Rescuer – which Karpman explained using fairy tales. Thus Little Red Riding Hood is a Victim of the wolf, who is her Persecutor, and she needs a Rescuer.

Karpman's Victim Triangle proves an enormously fruitful analytical tool.² First, we note that the three roles can be a continuum.³ Someone may move from Victim to the roles of Persecutor, then Rescuer, before reverting to Victim. A Victim may react to a Rescuer by turning on her, and becoming Persecutor to the erstwhile (perhaps bewildered) Rescuer.⁴ The original Victim may be unaware of this role change, but still see herself as Victim. Victims, though, do not always stay Victims.

Secondly, Rescuers may not be disinterested. They may assume the role for their own reasons, not solely to help Victims.

Thirdly, the roles of the Victim Triangle are unregulated or unlimited. Demands made on Rescuers can be unending, while the Victim role can produce helplessness and dependence. This unlimited aspect of the triangle's roles can make one feel one is

1 The writer is indebted to Mrs Auril Schluter for pointing out the contribution of Karpman's work. The Victim Triangle is described in Karpman's influential article 'Fairy Tales and Script Drama Analysis', *Transactional Analysis Bulletin*, 1968, vol. 7.26:39-43.

2 '[T]his simple but powerfully accurate instrument': Lynne Forrest 'The Three Faces of Victim': http://lynneforrest.com/html/the_faces_of_victim.html accessed 17.01.06.

3 Forrest *op. cit.*

4 Forrest *op. cit.*

‘nothing but a victim’, or in someone being so identified as a Rescuer that this consumes them, or, of course, that a Persecutor is purely demonic. The roles can become ‘blanket’ characterizations of those inhabiting them, totalizing descriptions and exhaustive labels. We shall see later how significant this totalizing aspect is, especially for those designated Persecutors.

Fourthly, while the roles in Karpman’s original schema are not necessarily morally loaded,⁵ more colloquial uses of victimhood ideas do carry moral judgements.

Who is a victim?

However, this use of the word ‘role’ suggests one may not genuinely be a victim, but only playing a part.⁶ What makes a real victim? First, a victim is someone’s target. P. Utgaard discusses real victimhood when dealing with Austria’s self-image as a victim of Nazi aggression.⁷ He notes that a real victim is the target of another’s actions with the intention of harm, and that Austria was not intentionally targeted by Nazis for harm as other groups were. Real victimhood presupposes hostile intention by another, and is not something one appropriates for oneself without that intention. This differs from Karpman’s Victim Triangle, because there one has (or plays?) the role of Victim without necessarily being the target of someone’s hostile intention.

Secondly, victimhood readily suggests being the undeserved target of another’s actions. Utgaard needs supplementing: an armed gunman with hostages is legitimately targeted by police. An important part of current victim discussion is undeservedness or innocence. Thus key works in post-war Japan endorsing Japan as victim stress the purity of their protagonists.⁸

The corollary of these elements of real victimhood is that the victimizer becomes an intentional inflicter of harm on the innocent. Naturally, such a person can readily be pictured as a ‘demon’, as D.B. MacDonald indicates happened in the characterization of opponents in recent Balkan conflicts.⁹ This makes the mantle of victim still more attractive: it proclaims not merely our own innocence but our opponent’s guilt. Yet if one may be a Victim within Karpman’s Triangle without being a true victim, one may also be a Persecutor without being a true persecutor or victimizer. How roles are claimed or imposed therefore assumes acute significance.

The rightness of retaining victim terms

Obviously some do not deserve the targeting they receive, and not only are they Victims in the limited Karpman role sense, but also in the sense of genuine victim. Self-perception as a victim is clearly not necessarily wrong, and the appropriate biblical expectations when faced with wrongs is, where possible, to right them. Nor is self-perception as victim necessarily simply harmful to oneself or others. Certainly P.C. Vitz notes that perceiving oneself as a victim can encourage passivity,¹⁰ but post-war Austria suggests more positive outcomes remain possible. Austria’s self-perception for some while after the Second World War was as a victim of Nazism, but this helped build social consensus about Austrian identity which arguably assisted in nurturing a democratic ethos. This benefited Austria, and its neighbours during the Cold War. Orr likewise notes that some Japanese pacifists saw Victim-status as generating more energy for pacifism than awareness of having been a victimizer would have.¹¹

The dangers of thinking in victim terms

Nevertheless, victim-thinking brings real dangers. In particular, some current victim-thinking goes hand-in-hand with ideas of collective innocence or guilt. Controversially, post-war Japan has sometimes been pictured (and perhaps pictured herself) as a victim-nation following the A-bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Several striking tendencies result: first, a tendency to exonerate members of the Japanese armed forces as nationals of a victim-nation (notwithstanding war criminal trials: given the scale of Japanese Imperial army activity in China and south-east Asia, the trials could be described as token). Secondly, victim-status tends to be extended to subsequent generations and those from areas physically unaffected by the attacks. Thirdly, there is a tendency to seek a preferential voice in disarmament discussions, especially when linked to the idea that Japan’s victimhood is unique.

The problem here is how wide the collective innocence has gone. The scant recompense for *real* victims of the Japanese army is less surprising given the nation’s *status* as victim. Similarly, argues Utgaard, Austria minimized war indemnities by her successful self-casting as collective victim.

Moreover, as noted above, the corollary of victim-status is that the victimizer is evil. Again, the Balkans affords painful recent examples. Even granting certain claims about Kosovar activity before the wars, Serb reaction in propaganda was to impute collective guilt (Serbs were not unique in this) and, with the ‘other’ safely categorized as demonic and guilty, act without restraint. One’s opponents ‘deserve’ such treatment. Thus MacDonald speaks of the ‘construction’ by Serbian writers of the myth of ‘Serbophobia’, ‘...an anti-Semitism for Serbs, making them victims throughout history.’¹²

This is striking. First, Serb propaganda turned on being a victim as an act of self-definition, not because of concrete actions by others. Secondly, someone else’s perfectly genuine status as victim is assumed (Serbs and Croats courted Israel as a fellow victim). Thirdly, being victim is not morally neutral, as in Karpman’s original models, but in itself indicates moral innocence. Fourthly, action against ‘Serbophobes’ becomes legitimated self-defence, an act of justice. Fifthly, refuting the charge of Serbophobia becomes increasingly difficult, since denial is readily construed as a cunning Serbophile ploy. Sixthly, tragically, the myth of Serbophobia can become reality.

Hence the power associated with victim-status should not be underestimated. A victim claims to speak with unique authority because he or she has been wronged.

However, this power associated with victim-status can be shared. I may cast myself as a ‘white knight’, succouring the victim against the victimizer. Analysts rightly comment about the Karpman triangle, that a Rescuer may have mixed motives in assuming that role. For a white knight’s actions are also cloaked with innocence and righteousness as he battles the victimizer, and, like the victim, he can enjoy the benefits of non-accountability. The interests of white knight and victim may not be identical, but can coincide, both benefiting from depicting a third party as victimizer deserving punishment. Thus the American Democratic party has been criticized with elevating victim groups so as to cast itself as a hero in this way.

How does one claim victim-status?

However, since such enormous rewards come from victim-status, how does one achieve it? MacDonald is disturbing and illuminating on this point. He suggests both Serb and Croat propagandists made highly selective readings of history, suppressing material that qualified understanding the other side as irrevocably seeking one’s own destruction. The relationship with a putative victimizer is read in unqualified, simplistic terms: all there is to Croat treatment of Serbs is Serbophobia (and vice versa).

5 Thus Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf can each be classified as both Persecutors and Victims.

6 In what follows terms about victimhood are not used in Karpman’s technical sense.

7 *Remembering and Forgetting Nazism*, New York/London: Berghahn Books, 2003.

8 J.J. Orr, *The Victim as Hero*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001, p.135. Thus Tsuboi Sakae’s book *Twenty-Four Eyes* follows the lives of several children and their teacher into the Second World War. We meet the protagonists as children, continue to see them as such, while, very largely, men of soldiering age are absent from the book. Yet the innocence or guilt of just such men goes to the heart of whether Japan was primarily a ‘victim’ in the war.

9 *Balkan Holocausts?*, Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press.

10 *Psychology as Religion: the cult of self-worship*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, p.64.

11 *Victim*, p.116.

12 *Balkan Holocausts?*, p.83.

This suggests that, to cast myself as a victim, I characterize another as victimizer. To be best seen as victim, I need another to be seen as victimizer. I am the casting director, awarding myself victim-status, the innocent target, and casting my opponent as demonic, evil victimizer. My actions against him are righteous; his against me, wicked. Such self-adjudication is closer to Western thought, and therefore easier, than we might imagine. J-J Rousseau, a notable influence on Romanticism, models this process. In answering charges of immorality against him (notably over placing his children in orphanages), Rousseau suggests first, a man's goodness is not weighed by his outward actions: his actions may appear one thing, but in fact are not. Thus in *The Confessions* Rousseau acknowledges acts of theft but insists he is not 'a thief'.

Secondly, a man is weighed by his intentions and motives. Rousseau knows his intentions were pure, so he acquits himself of wrongdoing.¹³ He acquits *himself*. No wonder one apologetic work is titled *Rousseau the Judge of Jean-Jacques*: no-one else could be the judge. Rousseau has unique access to his inner state, and Rousseau has already ruled out evaluating someone's true character by external actions.

We have already noted that adjudicating oneself a victim carries the corollary that the other is a victimizer. Hence in Rousseau's case: the result of his self-award of innocence was that those who targeted him were therefore, he felt, malicious – he was the victim *par excellence* of his enemies.

The obvious question is why others should accept such a self-award? Several observations are appropriate. First, modern Western cultures feature very limited agreement over universal norms. Instead moral evaluations are frequently treated as irretrievably perspectival and relative. This makes objective judgments of innocence difficult but renders a Rousseauvian subjective framework more plausible. Secondly, collusion becomes tempting: both of us stand to gain by accepting the other's self-acquittal. Thirdly, collusion becomes still more tempting because white-knight status is so advantageous: by accepting your self-award of victimhood, I can be your white knight, thereby legitimating my actions against your victimizer.

Is this theologically or otherwise significant?

Self-righteousness

The victim pattern therefore represents a very significant temptation for human beings. Humans very frequently are genuine victims who do not deserve particular actions aimed at them. However, victim-status can be treated as an exhaustive, totalizing account of who someone is. Defining oneself as a victim can involve seeing oneself as innocent and right, not just in relation to a particular relationship or action, but more globally. Seeing oneself globally as a victim lies very close to self-righteousness.

This link with self-righteousness is deeply troubling because the Gospels criticize self-righteousness so heavily. Spiritually, we frequently experience strong temptations to self-acquittal and self-righteousness. The problems with self-righteousness perhaps deserve development. First, self-righteousness tends to stop us realizing we need mercy. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14) illustrates this danger (although neither character portrays himself as victim). The parable is told to those who trust in their own righteousness while despising others (verse 9). Self-adjudicating oneself as victim and others simply as victimizers can risk this. Self-righteousness accounts for the two different prayers. The tax collector's lack of self-righteousness, his refusal to categorize himself as innocent, means he prays for mercy (verse 13) unlike the Pharisee. Yet the Pharisee actually does need God's mercy, for all fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). The Pharisee, like the rest of us, may not deserve a specific hostile human action directed against him, yet he is still

not innocent in an absolute sense. Designating myself as victim may hide this from me.

Hence a blanket verdict on myself that I am 'victim' and fundamentally innocent, starts to resemble a denial of the helpless bondage of humans in sin. Such a denial implicitly denies Christ's atoning sacrifice for sin was a necessity.¹⁴

Secondly, human self-righteousness is associated with hostility to Jesus. Jesus is certainly opposed because of who he says he is, but also because of who he says we are. The persistent opposition described by the Synoptics to Jesus from the self-righteous, the hypocrites, indicates this. In John, Jesus is explicit, pointing out that the 'world' (John's term for humanity in its opposition to God) hates him because he testifies that its deeds are evil (7:7). Jesus does not allow the world to depict itself simply as innocent victim, and the world hates him for it.

Thirdly, our self-righteousness is associated with our self-construction. Conferring self-righteousness on myself is a sovereign judicial act. I define myself. This readily looks like establishing my own identity and nature independently of God. But, of course, to be a victim, I need another to be seen as victimizer. My act of self-acquittal has its corollary in my act of sovereign condemnation of the other as victimizer. Both acts resemble infringements on God's role as creator. For when I define myself so fundamentally, I risk ignoring that I am God's creature and that, as my creator, he directs my purposes and weighs them. Moreover, when I weigh one of his creatures as if judgement belonged to me, I risk usurping God's place as creator-judge of his creation. Similarly, Proverbs counsels restraint on seeking vengeance: it too readily displaces God. Moreover, to maintain my victim role I may acquire an unhealthy interest in maintaining others as victimizers, while the Bible teaches I should seek their salvation and sanctification. My vested interest may be in their guilt, not their justification.

Fourthly, self-righteousness can mask the true nature of my actions, lessening suspicion of my motives or any inclination to think I may deceive myself, which Romans 1:18ff indicates cannot be ignored after the Fall. Importantly, my lack of self-criticism, born of self-righteousness, may mask from me that my actions allegedly undertaken in legitimately repelling oppression, are themselves oppressive.

Subversion of justice

The pattern of self-award also risks subverting two very basic principles of justice. One is that no-one should be his or her own judge (*nemo iudex in sua causa*). Vitz develops this trenchantly as he describes encounter and recovery groups dealing with recovery from dysfunctional families.¹⁵ There, a child may indeed blame and condemn her parents, thus acting as a judge deciding that she is an innocent victim and the parents guilty victimizers.

The second principle is that both sides of an issue must be heard (*audi alteram partem*). Vitz points out that in the circumstances he describes, the supposed victimizers have no chance to answer their accusers, so that such groups risk resembling a 'typical lynch mob'.¹⁶ To revert to the Balkan case, humans have strong incentives not to abide by this rule of justice. Listening to, say, Croat responses to charges of 'Serbophobia' would mean that Croats were perhaps not victimizers and hence Serbs could not properly be seen solely as victims. This in turn would undercut the legitimation of creating a greater Serbia by force. To be a victim most effectively, I need there to be a victimizer: I have no incentive to listen to their pleas of innocence.

Real difficulties exist here. Doubtless the groups Vitz describes contained children who were real victims. The problem such groups create 'procedurally' is that inequitable processes may make genuine cases of victimhood *more* implausible. Unreal victims cheapen the concept.

¹⁴ The tendency of such attitudes is towards Pelagianism.

¹⁵ Vitz, *Psychology*, 64.

¹⁶ Vitz, *Psychology*, 64.

¹³ *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue*, C. Blum, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1986.

An obvious question arises here for UK society. Our culture currently features two chic victim categories in homophobia and Islamophobia, amongst others. The difficulty is two-fold: first, the relative imprecision of the charge (both ‘phobias’ are variously defined), and, secondly, the difficulty of acquitting oneself. These two points are, naturally, related. Thus when Polly Toynbee was nominated ‘Most Islamophobic Media Personality of the Year’ at the Annual Islamophobia Awards overseen by the Islamic Human Rights Commission in May 2003, one problem was knowing what constituted the ‘offence’, for the offence itself is unclear.¹⁷ Certainly Toynbee’s defence that she wrote the truth seems not to have moderated the Islamic Human Rights Commission’s view of her.

Both factors, imprecision of the offence, and the difficulty of answering the charge, are significant. The first relates to the concept of rule of law, the idea that offences and rules should be defined with sufficient clarity for people to be able to guide their conduct. The second, of course, relates to the biblical obligation not to condemn someone unheard (John 7:51).

These justice problems are compounded by collective victim or collective victimizer categories. For one may identify oneself with a victim group, which has awarded itself victim-status, and indeed identify another as a member of a victimizer group which has been awarded that status by its putative victims. Yet in this latter case the other might resist both the identification of collective membership and the guilt of the group.

‘Victimhood’ in practice

Where do we see victim claims at work? Such claims can be seen both in the individual and collective sphere. Vitz and others see some psychological practices as encouraging a victim-mentality culture in the United States, particularly in parent-child relations, to which one might add marriage and work. Yet, perhaps greater dangers lie at group or collective levels, because of the ready association with collective guilt and innocence. Perhaps the outstanding ‘collective’ questions here are whether all current Israelis are victims by virtue of the Shoah, or whether all Palestinians are victims by virtue of Israel’s occupation of various territories.

Others see victim rhetoric in domestic politics, on issues of race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation and so on, observing how classifying groups as victims enables governments to be white knights, whose interventions to modify social behaviour are ethically justified.¹⁸ Still others observe the corollary, that opponents of such white-knight governments must obviously be in bad faith, bad people.¹⁹ Anthony O’Hear observes that a precursor to such attitudes is found in Oswald Mosley’s New Party, scarcely an encouraging parallel.²⁰

17 Thus it is not agreed whether the ‘phobia’ is simply fear of Islam or irrational fear of Islam. The Runnymede Trust issued a widely cited definition of Islamophobia in 1997, but it consists of a congeries of factors, several of which are open to the objection that they refer to judgements which might legitimately be formed.

18 See P.E. Gottfried, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt*, Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002, pp.1–2.

19 A. O’Hear draws this out: *Plato’s Children: the state we are in*, London: Gibson Square, 2005, p.100.

20 O’Hear, *op cit* p.99.

An alternative

Naturally, with victim games played so rewardingly, one wonders whether such games are inevitable. However, Jesus’ example shows they are not. Jesus was the real victim *par excellence*, innocent (John 19:6), and the target of malice (Mark 15:10). Yet strikingly the lesson we must imitate from the Passion is not to revile in return, nor resort to strategies of intimidation, but to trust in the God who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23). If this is so in cases of real victimhood, and where there is such stress on the justice of God, then adjudging ourselves as victims is precluded.

But Christ’s example is relevant in another way. As the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector indicates, Christ did not collude with people designating themselves as righteous. Nor should we collude with self-dramatizations of ‘victim’ or a white knight where those roles are delusions, particularly since such self-dramatization needs another to be victimizer. Encouraging people to think they, as victims, do not need mercy, can encourage, as the Balkans indicates, the thought that they need not show mercy.

Conclusion

We have seen how tempting it is for humans, both as individuals and groups, to use victimhood rhetoric, and its totalizing dangers of inducing us to see ourselves as not needing mercy, and our victimizers as beyond mercy. No doubt part of the remedy is to remember ourselves in relation to God as his creatures, not to concentrate exclusively on inter-human relations. If we did, we might remember that victim and victimizer alike need God’s mercy and stand under God’s scrutiny.

Yet also if the lessons of Karpman’s Triangle are right, we must beware entering the Triangle in any role, Persecutor and Rescuer as well as Victim. This would be true of our individual relations, spouses, family members, friends, fellow-believers and so forth, and our collective relations. It is enticing to be a Rescuer, yet fraught with temptation to collude with *soi-disant* Victims to create real but unacknowledged victims. Perhaps we should analyse the chic Victims of the day with more care, rather than rushing in self-congratulation to be their Rescuers. Perhaps, too, evangelicals should be a little more suspicious of attempts to enlist us within the Triangle as Persecutors, as the proponents of homophobia and Islamophobia, amongst others, have so successfully done. For such depictions of evangelicals as Persecutors tends ultimately to silence them, thereby silencing the Gospel they preach. And the real losers there would be the very groups claiming to be Victims.

Michael Ovey qualified as a lawyer and worked in Whitehall drafting government legislation. After training at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, he served as a curate at All Saints’ Church, Crowborough. Having taught Christian doctrine and philosophy at Moore College, Sydney, while also doing research on John’s Gospel, he is currently Kingham Hill Lecturer in Doctrine, Apologetics and Philosophy at Oak Hill College.

Receiving Cambridge Papers

If you would like to receive *Cambridge Papers*, and you are not already on our mailing list, please join via our website www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers or send an e-mail to info@jubilee-centre.org

Alternatively, please send your name and address to:
The Jubilee Centre, 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2NZ
Tel: 01223 566319, Fax: 01223 566359

There is no subscription charge but if you are able to do so, you are invited to make a donation from time to time, by standing order, cheque or credit card, to help meet the cost of publishing and distributing *Cambridge Papers*. If you are a UK taxpayer, signing a Gift Aid declaration (available from the Jubilee Centre) will increase the value of your donations.

All available papers dating back to 1992 can be downloaded free of charge from our website.

To encourage debate, we have created a Responses section on our website. There is an open invitation to write a response of up to 500 words to a recent *Cambridge Paper*. Selected contributions will be published on the site at www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers/responses.php

Cambridge Papers is a non-profit making quarterly publication which aims to contribute to debate on contemporary issues from a Christian perspective. The writing group is an informal association of Christians sharing common convictions and concerns. The contribution of each is as an individual only and not representative of any church or organisation.

Next issue: The Christian conscience and the abolition of slavery