Galona’s review of victim labelling theory: A rejoinder

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Abstract
In this article the author responds to a review by Galona (2018) of the historical-theological parts of victim labelling theory as elaborated previously in this journal and elsewhere (van Dijk, 2009). According to Galona, the term ‘victima/victim’ as a special name for Jesus Christ was not coined by Reformation theologians like Calvin, as asserted by van Dijk, but was for example already widely used by Roman poets. It also appeared in pre-Reformation theological writings for centuries. In his rejoinder, the author explains that Roman poets indeed sometimes used the term ‘victima’ for human beings but did so in a purely metaphorical sense. He agrees with Galona that the use of this label in its figural sense denoting Christ’s deep and innocent suffering emerged in theological writings pre-dating the Reformation. However, the label only ‘went viral’ around the time of the Reformation and has, from that time onwards, been the universal colloquial term for ordinary people victimised by crime across the Western world. In the second part of the article, the author elaborates on the theoretical and practical implications of the Christian roots of the ‘victima’ label. For centuries, victims of crime were expected to undergo their suffering meekly, in imitation of Christ. Ongoing secularisation has emancipated crime victims from the restraining ‘victima’ label, allowing them to freely speak up for themselves. Recent victim-friendly reforms of criminal justice have been driven by the need to find a new, victim-centred legitimacy in an increasingly secularised world.

Keywords
Victims, labelling, Jesus Christ, the Reformation, retraumatisation, secularisation, criminal justice

Introduction
In an article in a recent issue of the International Review of Victimology, American theologian Galona (2018) critically reviewed victim labelling theory as elaborated by myself, especially some of the historical-theological elements thereof (van Dijk, 2006, 2008, 2009). Galona’s criticism...
focusses in particular on my thesis that the common use of the word ‘victim’ for those harmed by crime originates from the adoption of this term as a designation for Jesus Christ. In this linguistical transformation, the word’s original literal meaning of ‘sacrificial animal’ was replaced by the now dominant meaning of ‘someone damaged by crime’. This transformation has taken place in all European languages and, not coincidentally in my view, in these languages alone.¹

Galona’s criticism is twofold. First it is asserted that the Latin word ‘victima’, from which the English word ‘victim’, as well as the words ‘la victime/vittima’ in French and other Roman languages are derived, was already used for human beings in Roman times, and that our modern use therefore cannot be seen as an offshoot of Christology. This assertion targets a central element of the theory, namely that the marginalisation of victims in Western criminal justice is a Christian phenomenon. Galona’s second issue concerns the context and timeframe of the use of the word ‘victima’ for Jesus Christ. The latter is an important correction of my historical analysis but does not, as I will argue, go to the heart of victim-labelling theory and its practical implications.

**Timeframe of the victima label**

Let me first try to address the first, most challenging issue raised. Galona provides some examples of older, non-Christian uses of the word ‘victima’ for human beings. As is recognised, the word ‘victima’ in the given Latin citations from the poet Ovid and others is used in an abstract, wholly metaphorical sense. Such metaphorical use of the word ‘victima’ is not limited to classical Latin. Dictionaries of several modern European languages provide ample examples of loose, metaphorical uses of the word ‘victim’, such as ‘he was a victim of his own passions’. In fact, in the Gospel of John (1:29, King James version),² Jesus Christ himself is metaphorically compared with a (sacrificial) Lamb, a designation still widely used in Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican liturgy. This metaphorical use, however, does not have the connotations of deep suffering.

Central to my theory of victim labelling is the **figural** usage of the word ‘victim’, which stresses Christ’s real human pain and suffering. According to my argument, images of a deeply suffering Christ had become common features of religious art and festivities such as the Passion Plays in the 17th century. Around that time, speakers of the various European languages seem, I assumed, to have been struck by the resemblance between persons harmed by crime or disaster and the figure of Christ bearing his Cross. An authoritative historical dictionary of the French language supports this hypothesis. According to Rey, the word ‘victime’ was in the French language first used to denote Jesus Christ in the mid-17th century and, subsequently, by extension, for suffering human beings (Rey, 1951: 2450).³ Apparently, Western speakers started to call persons harmed by crime **victims** once they recognised in their lamentable condition the Suffering of Christ who at that time was commonly known as ‘Victim’ (usually ‘Victim of our Sins’). This usage, and not any of the older metaphorical uses of the word, has become the springboard of the extended, colloquial use of the word ‘victim’ for denoting human beings harmed by crime across the Christian world. Galona’s examples of metaphorical uses are, however interesting, simply beside the point of victim-labelling theory.

Galona’s second criticism is levelled against my assertion that the figurative use dates from late medieval, 16th or 17th century, Christian theology. I never said that the figurative use of the term ‘victim’ for Jesus Christ was an exclusive fruit of the Reformation. In my article in the *Review* in 2009, I said for example it surfaced ‘around the time of the Reformation’. But I did indeed cite Calvin as one of the first authors who employed the Latin word ‘victima’ for Christ in his classical book *De Institutiones* of 1536. Here Galona makes two related points of criticism. Firstly, the use
of the word ‘victim’ to designate Christ in a *figural* sense is not primarily introduced by Protestant theologians like Calvin. Secondly, the image of Christ as sufferer ‘victima’ emerged long before the Reformation in several theological writings.

According to Galona, the early Church fathers admittedly never used the word ‘victima’ for Christ. This was unthinkable, because it would have undermined the portrayal of Christ as Victor, a King at equal footing with the Roman Emperor. However, from the 11th century onwards, some authors have, according to Galona, started to call Christ ‘a victima’ in a figural sense. This use subsequently acquired a new emotional salience ‘In late medieval times Christ is labelled victima to stress his new sacrificial role and now also his role as a suffering person. Galona concludes ‘The ambiguous sense of the Latin victima was reinforced by the Catholic Christological tradition and in this form was imported into the thesauruses of the emerging vernaculars throughout Europe’. To sum up his critique, the use of the word ‘victima’ for human beings in all Western languages does indeed, as asserted by me, originate from the sacrificial image of Christ, but this process started earlier than I presumed, and was less closely linked to the Reformation than I had suggested. I interpret Galona’s conclusion as an endorsement of the theological part of victim-labelling theory, though with some important historical amendments for which I am grateful.

Although I was unaware of older images of Jesus as sufferer and may have somewhat overstated the role of the Reformation in the adoption of the present ‘victim’ label, I still see good reasons to highlight the influence of the Reformation on this process. van Eyck (2013), a Dutch theologian, observed in a reaction to my publications, that Protestantism has certainly facilitated the entry of the word ‘victim’ into the vernacular simply by translating the Bible as well as Christian discourse in the colloquial languages of Northern Europe. Without Protestantism, the word ‘victima’ for Christ would not so easily have found its way into the Dutch vernacular as ‘slachtoffer’, in German as ‘Opfer’ or, to give a more esoteric example, in Icelandic as ‘fórnarlamb’.

My reference to the Reformation was not just based on an analysis of Dutch linguistical sources which showed it was, just a few years after Calvin, first used by a German-Dutch Protestant theologian, Gnapheus, in 1557. My reference to the Reformation as a driving force was also, and at a more fundamental level, informed by the writings of a Dutch theologian, A. Lascaris, a follower of the French-American philosopher, René Girard (1977). According to Lascaris (1993), the image of Christ became more harshly sacrificial during the time of the Reformation for social-psychological reasons. Applying Girard’s scapegoating theory, Lascaris interprets the new sacrificial Christology as a response to the mental crisis in late medieval societies undergoing fundamental social transformations. This crisis supposedly had people across Europe searching for or at least susceptible to new, blatant scapegoating imagery to heal their social and emotional tensions and insecurities (Lascaris, 1993). According to Lacaris, Calvin, inter alia, responded to this mental need among his readers by imaging Christ as a real scapegoat, stressing his deep, innocent suffering at the Cross. This tendency was not, according to Lascaris, limited to the theologians of the Reformation but, for example, was also present in the works of their contempory Thomas of Aquino.

Although I still feel that the Reformation played a crucial role in this process in several respects, I agree with Galona that Protestant theologians were not the only ones who called Christ a victima or ‘slachtoffer’ and thereby triggered the adoption of this term for suffering humans. If that had been the case, its adoption into the vernacular could never have been universal across the Western world, equally affecting languages in Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe, and even in the Caucasus. I thank Galona for this clarification.
The victim label and its implications

The confirmation of the Christian, either Catholic or Protestant, roots of the Western denotation of persons harmed by crime as victims/Opfers is important because they form an essential element of victim-labelling theory and therefore have practical implications today. In my publications I have attempted to reveal the ways in which the Christological traditions that lie behind the use of the word ‘victim’, have for centuries negatively affected formal and informal responses to those harmed by crime in the Western world (and in its former colonies as well). Victims of crime were, I argued, for centuries largely ignored by both clerical and state institutions, and often retraumatized by the moral imperative to be silent and forgive their offenders. How Christological notions were projected on those labelled as victims is neatly expressed in phrase 40 of the Mattheus Passion of S. Bach, dating from 1728: ‘May we in our suffering be like Him, and undergo our persecution silently’. In this phrase, commonly expressed across European languages as ‘carrying your cross’, the audience is explicitly exhorted to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ when afflicted by harm, and to suffer their fate meekly. In a Muslim context, such exhortation to respond meekly to criminal victimisation is unthinkable: in the Quran forgiveness is praised, but retaliation remains the inalienable right of victims of crime/murder.

Dutch protestant theologian, de Wit, in a review of my work, admits that Protestantism knows a long-standing tradition of ‘dolorism’ that can be problematic for crime victims. In the Dutch Reformed Church, this ethos was expressed in the widely used saying ‘do not complain, but wear it and pray for strength’ (de Wit, 2013). This ‘dolorism’ has powerful antecedents in pre-reformation Christianity in the form of the cult of Mater Dolorosa. A contemporaneous manifestation is the cult of suffering celebrated by Saint Teresa in her mission in Calcutta, India. She is quoted as saying: ‘There is something beautiful in seeing the poor accept their lot, to suffer it like Christ’s Passion. The world gains much from their suffering’ (Chatterjee, 2016).

Victim-centred criminal justice

In my view, ongoing secularisation has over the past five decades incrementally allowed those harmed by crime to resist their labelling as victims with its adverse, incapacitating role and expectations of meekness. Increasingly, victims reject being called ‘victims’, requesting to be called ‘survivors’ or harmed parties instead (van Dijk, 2006, 2009). In court they stand up for their rights and speak up without a bad conscience, or fear of moral reprisal. Somewhat surprisingly, Galona remains silent about the adverse implications of the victima label for our treatment of those harmed by crime. Galona ignores my pleas for what I have called the ‘emancipation of the victim’. Instead, at the end of the article, concern is expressed about the widening circle of persons self-identifying as victims, now also including perpetrators. Such widening would pose ‘a serious challenge for our future understanding of justice’. This concern reminds victimologists of earlier criticism of the ‘culture of complaint’ of Hughes (1993) and of current discussions around the supposedly ever-widening concept of trauma. At a deeper level, Galona’s concerns also remind us of Boutellier’s thesis that secularisation has undermined the legitimacy of criminal justice by taking away its Christian moral foundations (Boutellier, 2002). If good and wrong are relative, even perpetrators can claim to be victims. I do share Galona’s concern about such post-modernist relativism. But this should not lead us to question the merits or urgency of the victimological discourse. On the contrary. As Boutellier argues, a renewed sensitivity for man-made victimhood is required precisely because of the loss of Christian moral benchmarks. In order to regain its
legitimacy, criminal justice in a secular culture has no option besides reorienting itself towards the interests of those who have been personally at the receiving end of the crime. What is needed is not just a reorientation of criminal justice towards victims in an abstract, philosophical sense, as suggested by Boutellier. Criminal justice cannot, in my view, regain its legitimacy without the active involvement of the harmed persons themselves in its proceedings. Only victim-sensitive practices in ‘macho’ police environments and concrete victims rights in arcane criminal law procedure can give law enforcement and criminal justice a new, victim-based legitimacy (van Dijk, 2011, 2015).

In this broader perspective, victim-labelling theory is closely related to Boutellier’s analysis of the contentious legitimacy of criminal justice in a secular world. Without victims as active parties, the criminal trial will increasingly be seen as an empty, impotent ritual, incapable of fulfilling its peacemaking functions. The role of victims in the International Criminal Court (ICC) is a case in point. The contribution of victims to the search for the truth may be limited and their participation may not always really bring closure for them either. However, a court adjudicating humanitarian and war crimes without victim-participation would nowadays lack all legitimacy. The function of the victims unit at the ICC is not just to support victims emotionally and economically but also to assist them to play their indispensable role in court, not as meek sufferers but as harmed parties cogently demanding retribution and redress.

In my perspective then, secularisation both necessitates and facilitates the ‘victimising’ of criminal justice. It necessitates it by undermining its traditional foundations in Christian morality. It simultaneously facilitates it by liberating the harmed ones from their limiting ‘victim’ label and allowing them to freely speak up for themselves in court. Indirectly, it also facilitates it by declining victims the moderating Christian belief that justice will be done in the afterlife (de Wit, 2013). Victims in a secular society demand justice here and now.

The trend towards victim-centred criminal justice is not, as claimed by Garland (2001) a passing, neo-liberal or populist-punitive phase in the history of criminal law. It is the inevitable and lasting consequence of ongoing, irreversible processes of secularisation in the realm of criminal justice. These are the political stakes in this seemingly academic debate on the Christian roots of the ‘victimia’ label.

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Notes
1. The word ‘victim’ for those harmed by crime in Arab and Hebrew must be seen as a loan word from Western languages adopted in the 19th century or later (van Dijk and Shakeshikian (2013).
2. Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.
3. Victim: speaking of Christ (Corneille, 1942); See also Corneille (1658), livre IV, Chapitre 8 (‘Vois comme tout nu sur la croix, Victime pure et volontaire’). ‘By extension, the word is said of a person who suffers from the actions of others or adverse events’. [Victime: parlant du Christ (Corneille, 1642); ‘Par extension, le mot se dit d’une personne qui souffre des agissements d’autrui ou d’évenement néfastes’].
4. Ironically, Lascaris himself, a member of the Roman Catholic Order of the Dominicans, criticises in his writings the sacrificial image of Jesus for its harshness (Lascaris, 1999).
5. The silencing of victims of sexual abuse by the Roman Catholic Church in many countries in defence of its institutional interests is by now common knowledge. In a PhD study, Dutch theologian van den Bergh-Seiffert documented several cases of victim blaming and exclusion by Protestant churches in the Netherlands of victims of sexual abuse by ministers (van den Bergh-Seiffert, 2015).

6. In German: ‘Und dass wir in dergleichen Pein Ihm Ahnlich sollen Sein, und in Verfolgung Stille Schweigen’.

7. In Dutch: ‘niet klagen maar dragen en bidden om kracht’, line in a poem by the Protestant minister and poet Nicolaas Beets (1814–1903) (Beets, 1892).

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