

# Religious Differance

**Andrew McKenna**

**Department of Modern Languages & Literatures  
Loyola University of Chicago  
Chicago IL 60626  
amckenn@orion.it.luc.edu**

In one of his more recently published essays, “Foi et Savoir,” Jacques Derrida asks the question: “What would a book with a title like Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (“la simple raison”) look like today?” (*La Religion* 16). All those concerned with the reason/faith, or science/religion, conundrum will have their own candidates, but Derrida’s preoccupation here with links among belief (“croyance”), credence, and credibility with credit, confidence (“fiabilité”), fiduciarity, and market capitalism (see 28, 58, 60), points to Eric Gans’s “The Unique Source of Religion and Morality” as the best place to start. In this brief, programmatic essay, Gans shows succinctly how the transcendental realm of Mosaic religion, whose “iconoclasm” places divinity vertically and utterly beyond figuration or representation, “prepares its dialectical antithesis in the modern process of ‘secularization’” (53). This dialectic extends to the inexorable levelling process that leads to free market economies, a primarily horizontal relation among humans, the market being “a locus where value is determined through exchange” (63) rather than in relation to a ritualized, sacralized centrality. Nothing undergirds or presides over exchange as a principle of order; nothing mediates transactions except other transactions, where needs and desires are especially negotiated by disguising the latter as the former. Paradoxically, or ironically, a certain form of vertical transcendence opens the way to our optimally horizontal system of distribution. In another text, Derrida meditates on “the structure of the laws of the market” as a “permanent operation of ... sacrifice” (*The Gift of Death* 86) driven by substitutive mechanisms in a way that fairly beckons the “return to Girard” that Gans announces in his latest book (*Signs of Paradox* 8), where he yet more fully explores the cognitive implications of René Girard’s theory of the sacrificial origins of human culture.

My own paraphrase here is an excessively condensed summary of an argument spanning several of Gans’s books, including his *Science and Faith*, which reverberates with the title of Derrida’s essay as much as the latter’s subtitle, “Les deux sources de la ‘religion’ aux limites de la simple raison” echoes Gans’s laconic pun on Bergson’s *Les Deux Sources de la religion et de la morale*. The one source Gans avers for all our ethical concerns is evoked as Derridean differance in ways I shall delineate further. I shall conclude with some theological

implications that James Alison has mined in Gans's work. This will leave Derrida somewhat in the margins of centrally religious issues, a position the the author of *Marges de la philosophie* has been wont to occupy.

Neither Derrida nor Gans mention Hegel's *Glauben und Wissen* (i.e., "Foi et Savoir," believing and knowing) as a possible pretext for their reflections, though one of Derrida's commentators does (see Vincenzo Vitiello's "Désert, éthos, abandon: contribution à une topologie du religieux" in *La Religion*). It is worth mentioning for the Hegelian strain that Gans regularly acknowledges in his work, by way of contrasting his interpersonal and historical sense of institutional and intellectual unfolding to Derrida's more recondite and abstract formulations—abstract in the sense that concrete human interaction is less often evoked. Typically, Derrida will evoke human interaction in order to illustrate and ultimately deconstruct concepts (see, for instance, his treatment of the notion of "witness," [83]), while Gans shows how concepts precipitate out of interaction, thereafter becoming philosophical property whose intersubjective context is ignored or forgotten. There is a real methodological difference here between the two authors regarding identical thematic foci; it involves radically divergent notions of origin and history for generative anthropology (henceforth GA) and deconstruction that Gans himself has insisted on in his one-way conversation with Derrida's work—whose importance is nonetheless acknowledged as "a major turning point in postmodern understanding" (*Signs of Paradox* 183).

2

The conversation between Gans and Derrida began as early as *The Origin of Language* (1980), whose abrupt title is fairly a provocation for deconstructive critiques of origins, as it spells out the implications of Derrida's thought for an anthropology whose possibility it denies in principle. According to the Derridean line of argument, a non-theological foundation—for language, for thought, for human culture—is unthinkable, the very notion of origin being a religious principle that deconstruction uncovers, decodes, decrypts as the theo-logocentric motivation of Western metaphysics.

But as Gans shows, this antifoundationalist critique is an obsessive quest for the origins it debunks. It fairly requires that we conceive imitation, replication, or mimesis itself, as originary, which is just what Girard's anthropological hypothesis, as first outlined in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, allows us to do. In order to account for formal mimesis, or linguistic representation, we have to allow as a logical and empirical necessity for the priority of behavioral mimesis—unformulated, instinctual, or genetic: we don't yet know<sup>(1)</sup>—that humans share with the higher mammals from which we are descended. At stake here is our continuity with other living species, in terms of which alone our rupture with them can be imagined or rationally conceived. The first act of naming had to consist in behavior generating performative representation—speech acts—for the possibility of formal, abstract representation to arise at all.

Gans hypothesizes the emergence of language from the protosacrificial destruction of a single victim whose appropriation by its predators is aborted by the very mimetic attraction it exercises upon them. The act of seizing the prey is transformed into a gesture, the ostensive sign, designating the prey to one and all as dangerous to appropriate by reason of the very attraction it exerts on all those surrounding it, on all those dangerously competing for its appropriation, on all those mimetically repeating the sign of its desirability. The use of signs emerges from this fundamental paradox of mimesis, whereby the model of our desiring behavior functions as well as the obstacle to its fulfillment (*Signs* 20). The very act which reaches for the object generates competitors and—consequently, not subsequently—ensures thereby the impossibility of its completion; it compels the deferral of its instinctual aim, according to a mimetic dynamic that conforms to that of difference as described by Derrida:

*First, difference* refers to the (active *and* passive ) movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving. In this sense *difference* is not preceded by the originary and indivisible unity of a present possibility that I could reserve, like an expenditure that I would put off calculatedly or for reason of economy. (*Positions* 8-9)

But this is just what Gans's hypothesis asserts: the originary, indivisible, primordial unity of an antecedent hieratic entity that is awarded to a unique central object is a by-product, a corollary, not a premise, of the active and passive effects of mimetic deferral on the part of all (*Signs* 3). The founding divinity is in effect an afterthought that is viewed by the new-born community as its forethought. The notion of a sacred beginning, of divine origin, is a retrospective illusion that issues from the signing behavior of mimetic partner-rivals.

Our species' first speech act represents its object as immune to contact; it performs that immunity as the condition of survival for each and every one of those surrounding it. The sacred as "immunity" and "indemnity," as "le non-contaminé, l'intouché", as "heilig, sacré, sain et sauf, intact, intégrité saine et sauve, pureté intact," that so preoccupies Derrida in "Foi et Savoir" (34, 59, 83) is born of this hallowing gesture that we might, borrowing a Derridean neologism from *La Carte Postale*, label a "perperformative" (148) to specify its paradoxical dynamic. As Gans writes in *Signs of Paradox*, "It is the object that appears as the obstacle to its own appropriation; this is what we call its sacrality" (24). What is also born with it is the ordinary human capacity to refer to objects by the use of signs, a capacity that will increase and evolve with the ritual repetition of this originary scene, the festive and sacrificial commemoration of origins, that will be necessary for the perpetuation of the newly born human community (and that virtually every community, with its flags and fireworks, repeats periodically down to this day). Reverence and the sacred, and reference

too, as objective representation, are born of one and the same gesture, which had to be the mimetic gesture of all for it to take effect, to effect the presence of a community to itself as mediated by a sacralized center. Thus Gans's hypothetical scenario for the origin of language, a perspicuous revision of Girard's sacrificial scenario at the origin of culture, can accommodate and in fact integrate the deconstructive critique of origins because it shows that origin and mimesis, origin and repetition, origin and doubling are one. Origin and difference as the deferral of violence through representation are one.

3

## RELIGIOUS ORIGINS

I have argued this more amply in my book about Girard and Derrida (1992). My attention here will focus more specifically on religion, as occasioned by Derrida's "Foi et Savoir," which is his contribution to a seminar published under the comprehensive title *La Religion*. It is a volume of essays which rightly assume that the Derridean critique of structure and hierarchy impinges critically on "properly" theological issues. I use quotes for this word because, after Derrida, what is deemed proper to any domain, or even about any name or meaning, invites a critique of what he neologizes as theologocentrism. Likewise, the dynamic and paradoxical relations of sacralized center and gesturing periphery are the focal issues for GA as a cultural-and therefore religious-hermeneutic.

The notion of a single origin can only be theological, or mythical, as we typically find in creation narratives, where human culture is the gift of some divinity. Yet behind such monogenesis there is a stereo-genesis, a relational conception of foundation that Gans hypothesizes and that Derridean difference describes. At our cultural nucleus, we typically find as well a violent death and dismemberment that precedes this gift, as its prelude. This is why anthropological reflection on this notion of the gift, from Marcel Mauss (*Essai sur le don*) and Georges Bataille (*La Part maudite*) through Levi-Strauss (*Mythologiques*) and Derrida, is riddled with unresolved paradoxes bearing on sacrifice. In Derrida, we regularly find a strangely monolithic, undeconstructed conception of sacrifice, in which violent destruction or expulsion is accompanied by notions of indemnification, compensation, or remuneration (Mauss's *do ut des*). From his interviews in *Positions* through his *Donner le temps* (on Benjamin and Baudelaire) and his more recent *The Gift of Death*, we find Derrida judiciously concerned with the "economy of sacrifice," though we are never provided a sense of mimetic activation that explains its emergence or its ubiquity, that makes it necessary or foundational for culture. Sacrifice is just there-it's everywhere in fact; we find it all over "Foi et Savoir"-but there is no effort to explain its first appearance on the human scene. Sacrifice accurately names relations of expenditure and reserve, of order as deferral-economy, in a word-but its genesis, or generation, is never investigated.

There is lacking overall a sense of human interaction in Derrida's thought-he is a

philosopher, after all—that has lately been somewhat recompensed by his attention to performative language. We can trace this attention to his initially polemical encounter with speech act theory in *Limited Inc*, but also to his ever more probing responses to the work of Levinas, where the negative imperative, “Don’t kill me,” is posited as the foundational human utterance.<sup>(2)</sup> When interviewed on “This Strange Institution Called Literature,” Derrida confesses to his disinterest in the novel (*Acts of Literature* 39). The value of Gans’s work, by contrast, is that it builds on the insights first explored by Girard in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* in such a way as to supply a narrative line that is capable of unraveling Derridean paradoxes, lending them a human plausibility, and contributing a perfectly homely realism to their seemingly uncanny perceptions and relentlessly counterintuitive formulations.

Derrida’s declared indifference to realist narrative fiction, his predilection for resolute anti-narratives like those of Blanchot (see, for instance, “Living on/Borderlines,” and “La Loi du genre”) is symptomatic in this regard. What is at stake here are the competing claims of literature and philosophy as cognitive resources for the human sciences, more precisely for human self-understanding that is institutionalized in academic research as anthropology. For GA difference is the motor of history, as the deferral of violence through representation allows for all sorts of institutional development, transformation, and evolution. For deconstruction it is too often evoked as an inhibitor of historical understanding to the extent that its detection is evidence of mystified origins, crypto-theological narratives, false starts (“Faux bonds” is the title of one of Derrida’s texts).

4

The conception of origin that emerges from the mimetic interaction of rival doubles logically requires no antecedent divinity to set it in motion. For deconstruction, theologocentrism is the ontological presupposition underlying foundational discourse; for GA, quite to the contrary, divinity is the effect rather than the cause of mimetic behavior, its organizational or institutional residue, that is retrospectively construed as hieratic origin. The central object of desire is sacred for being at once attractive and repulsive, desirable and taboo, whereby center and circumference regenerate each other dynamically via the active and passive relations of desire, as it issues from the originary gesture of deferral. This logical anomaly conforms to notions of the sacred that we discover in every culture, as we find, for instance, in Emile Beneveniste’s *Vocabulaire des Institutions indo-européennes*, to which Derrida attends in “Foi et Savoir” for other purposes, namely those of deconstructing the etymological lineage of responsibility, of questioning “le couteau tranchant de la distinction assurée” (44) exercised by Beneviste (“par exemple”). More than anyone else, Derrida has made the detection of violence informing conceptual differentiation an axial gesture of hermeneutics. For GA, the fragility of our concepts is coterminous with their dynamic mobility and proliferation, their availability to clarification and extension. For deconstruction, it is a mark of the violence of their origin. For Derrida language begins—and

endures-as violence, which inheres to all representation.<sup>(3)</sup> For GA violence is indeed central to culture, but only as deferred, suspended, first as sacrifice, then as substitutive mechanisms leading to sacrifice's demise, retreat, disguise, or transformation. The god effect, viewed *post hoc* as the origin of language and the foundation of pacific representation among humans, is the transcendental signified of an object whose immunity to appropriation alone guarantees concord and harmony among its signifiers, among its mimetically deferential designators.

The structural linguistics of this originary scene is thoroughly paradoxical in the same way that the Saussurian sign, in its dual make-up as signifier and signified, is itself available at any time as the signifier of yet another sign. For the central object is a genuine referent of the ostensive sign, but it is also a transcendental signifier of reference in general, of reference as such, "the creation of form-in-general" (*Signs* 29). Of course, there is no such thing, not in any real, concrete sense; it must be a god. That explanation alone "makes sense" in strictly human terms-until we see that sense is only made possible by deferring to its imaginary maker.

The origin is paradoxical, to be sure, but it is not inscrutable, undefinable, mysterious, mystical, or in any way theological, except in the eyes of its mystified beholders, who attribute to the sacrosanct center of their non-instinctual attention, of their ec-static signing behavior, the power of deferring violence that they owe to the mimetic interaction of signs alone. Along with the mimetic generation of divine transcendence we can discern the more fundamental-and foundationally human-paradox that consists in the generation of the vertical relation of signs to their referents as emerging strictly from within the horizon of human interaction. We encounter here the generation of a transcendent difference, which attends all nomination, from non-difference, from repetition, which is imminent to the use of signs. The vertical relation of signs to their referents is in fact chiasmic, doubly helical, as Gans describes it: "The sign that is in the world represents the world it is in; the sign that stands above the world remains within the world of the sign" (*Signs* 25). The world and its signs compose a tangled hierarchy that is available to finite analysis, while allowing for infinite elaboration and exploration; concrete and precise explanation is possible for a limitless variety of phenomena and relations.

This structural anomaly of inside as outcast conforms to the deformed logic of the Derridean supplement, which completes an ensemble that it repeats, represents, from without (*Of Grammatology* II.2). This analysis has made the world of signs, and the world they represent, seem scandalously unrepresentable, weirdly unavailable to coherent depiction, as every effort to untangle linguistic reference, or every effort of "straightforward" representation, embroils us in aporetic contortions of self-reference, of hieratic self-grounding, the name that names itself as god or origin being the necessary and impossible basis of all conceptualization. This is yet another version of the "faux bond," a bootstrapping operation (*Signs* 13) in which Gans locates, by the very same logical twist, the

paradoxical source of our rationality. What for deconstruction has long remained a logical impasse, a source of cognitive dissonance, is for GA the dynamic wellspring of cognitive development that ensures the non-closure of human self-understanding, its openness to corrective amplification, thanks to which all science, including anthropology, can proceed on its necessarily open-ended path.<sup>(4)</sup>

5

The originary scene of language, as the paradoxical or “ironic”<sup>(5)</sup> generation of a vertical sign system from within the horizon of protohuman interaction, as a sacrificial scenario that contains violence in a way that generates value as a notion available to reflection and manipulation—this is the very process that we find Derrida describing, however unwittingly and abstractly, in answer to the question that he poses in “Foi et savoir,” namely: “Quelle est la *mécanique* de cette double postulation (respect de la vie et sacrificialité)?”:

This mechanical principle appears to be very simple: life only has absolute value by being worth more than life. And therefore it goes in mourning for it, it becomes what it is in a work of infinite mourning, in the indemnification of a boundless spectrality.

This more than life implies a mourning process, a “trauerarbeit,” implying its other, a death from which it draws its value, and, just as soon, a divinity. It implies a victim, though Derrida’s focus is on the transcendence that the victim occasions:

[Life] is only sacred, holy, infinitely responsible in the name of what is worth more than it and is not limited to the naturalness of biozoology (which is sacrificeable)... Respect for life thus concerns, in the discourse of religion as such, only “human life,” in as much as it bears witness, in some sense, to the infinite transcendence of what is worth more than it (divinity, the law as sacrosanct). The price of the living human, that is to say of the living anthropo-theological being, the price of what must remain safe (holy, sacred, safe and sound, indemnified, immune) as absolute price, the price of what must inspire respect, modesty, reserve, this price has no price. It corresponds to what Kant calls human dignity (*Worthiness*) of the end in itself, of the reasonable finite being, of absolute value that is beyond all value that could be subject to comparison in a market (*Market price*). This dignity of life can only be upheld beyond the individual living at present. Whence transcendence, fetichism, whence the religiosity of religion. (68)

It appears that human life as a value in itself is won at the price of a plus value, a

transcendence. *Homo economicus* is always already *homo religiosus*; there is no “anthropo-” except by being “théologique.” The definition of the human being offered here is one that subsists, exists, persists in its differance with divinity. According to this reading, we put life on a pedestal and proceeded to revere the pedestal as much or even more than life (“whence fetichism”). The absolute respect of human life becomes respect for the absolute at the expense of life. This economy can only be conceived or formulated in sacrificial terms. Such pricelessness can only be envisaged in the face of a violent death, the absolute appropriation of life, “respect, modesty, reserve” being the deferral to the divinity, the absolute, meaning the deferral of violence that Gans locates in the use of signs.

Theology conceives the emergence of humans in divine agency. We have to conceive the emergence of humans and signs-and of divinity-together. We have to “penser ensemble” notions that our logic conceives separately, serially, or oppositively, such “compact” thinking being the methodological link between Derridean and Gansian paradox.<sup>(6)</sup> It is only the identically mimetic behavior on the part of all on the periphery, the simultaneous repetition of their ostensive gesturing toward the forbidden center, that determines the transcendental difference of the central object. The center’s radical, and to its beholders, sacred and founding difference depends on the non-difference of the periphery, every point on the circumference of the circle being held in equidistant tension from its center, which properly speaking is the only point of the structure. The pathos of the sacred, as it issues from the self-organizing system of mimetic desire, is appreciable here.<sup>(7)</sup> The center’s reality has to be felt as superior to its beholders, more real than they, antecedent and more powerful than they, though they alone are real living beings. “What *is* is what stands before us as the forbidden goal of our (originally appropriative) mimetic behavior. In this standing-before or standing-against our desire, the central being appears to be in-itself” (*Signs* 93). What philosophy poses as fundamental, the interrogation of Being, is in fact a belated and mystified inquiry into sacred origins.

6

The ontological priority of the referent to representation, of objects to signs, which is the foundation of all rational thinking, of all realisms, is not illusory-except at origin. The repetition of the very same sign at the horizon of the circle generates the transcendental verticality of its center, which takes the name of god for being misrecognized as the origin of the community around it, of the signs that produce it, though it is only the virtual locus of transcendence or ideality that every sign exercises over its referents. Because the ostensive designates its object as inappropriable, it is destined to become an object of contemplation in turn, and available to transformations leading to declarative utterances about language, which thematize their referent in the absence of the object, and ultimately thematize the absence of language to its referents (Mallarmé’s “rose,” like Plato’s, is “l’absente de tous bouquets”), which is the necessary and sufficient condition of abstract thought, of formal reflection, or theory.



We can state this paradox otherwise by observing that what is “perverformative” about the ostensive is its self-referentiality, the attention it necessarily draws to itself by the interdict it hallows around its central referent. The esthetic, as the formal contemplation of signs, be they poetic, pictorial, or musical, is born at the same time and by the same dynamic that generates the ethical in its most rudimentary and abiding form, namely, as community formation and endurance. The epistemological corollary here is to locate in esthetics, in all artistic representations, a “discovery procedure,”—this is a central thesis in *Originary Thinking*—that is unavailable to philosophies and anthropologies for which beauty is a belated cultural consideration, a sort value-added tax on our imagination. Esthetic contemplation, that so appropriately mystified Kant in his lucubrations on the sublime, was there at the beginning, at the origin to which the interrogation of masterpieces necessarily returns our anthropological attention.

For GA, esthetics is defined as the oscillating attention between the referent and its signs (*Signs* 25, 27, 29, 136-39), whose rapt contemplation is the occasion for their embellishment but also for their manipulation and transformation. Ritual is the path to the technical virtuosity that eventually nourishes empirical science. Derrida intuits this originary ambiguity, as evidenced by his near addiction to neologisms, whereby signs themselves are objects of fascination. In “Foi et Savoir,” the term “mondialatinisation,” which I shall revisit shortly, adds to the stock begun with *differance*, *archetrace* (in *Of Grammatology*), and continued through “heterotautology” (in *The Gift of Death*) and, most recently, “hostipitalité” (in *De l’hospitalité*), to name but a few. There is virtually one neologism for every other text published by Derrida (or one for every other page in the “Envois” to *La Carte postale*), whose very writing activity returns us to the originary scene of language as the birth of the esthetic. This is the inevitable result of the fascination exercised by the sign performing the inaccessibility, or transcendence, of the object it designates. Syntactic and lexical virtuosity is not an accidental effect of Derrida’s intellectual inquiry, a stylistic quirk, but its generative principle. Its very brilliance reflects an arrested stage of development for a potential or virtual hypothesis of origins that is dazzled by its own paradoxes (see McKenna, “Deconstruction”). It is, moreover, continuous with a philosophical (anti)tradition that, with Nietzsche and Heidegger, promotes esthetic solutions to ethical problems, and where counterintuitive utterances displace logical and/or narrative explanation.

The logical scandal is that properly human interaction is enabled, empowered by the sign, rather than the reverse. We want to think, according to an evolutionary gradualism to which Darwin first accustomed us, that first there were humans, who eventually came to the more and more sophisticated and fancy use of signs, however much such a gradual shift from one level to another, from behavior to its formal representation, is inconceivable. What is fancy is generated by the originary fantasm, or imaginary, deferred possession, by which we define properly and uniquely human desire, which is contagiously mimetic. The gesture of deferral represents the central object, whose fascinating power of attraction and repulsion for its beholders is only possible because each gesture also represents and reenacts all the

others. This fascination enables a break, a rupture, in the conduct of animals hitherto linked by instinctual behavior. In this regard, Gans's hypothesis is thoroughly revolutionary, including, in fact requiring, a climate of violence which we always associate with revolution. But violence does not climax this scene at its moment of crisis. On the contrary, the deferral of violence through representation, the unwitting signing behavior of potentially violent rivals, results in a literally staggering and stunning anticlimax, the unwittingly pacifying gesture in which representation originates. If the origin of violence is always already another's violence, its resolution had to be pacific, the substitution of a form for a content, for an appetitive object whose unauthorized consumption could only occasion more violence. It is nonetheless to this substitution that we owe our notion of violent divinity; a sacrificial deity is brought into "being" (like the sign itself, it is the object and indirect agency of formal representation, not a substance of any kind) which indemnifies ritualized violence that is dedicated exclusively to it. It is to this substitution as well that we owe our capacity to substitute signs for things and to exchange things for other things once they are valued as signs of other values. Sacrificial, or metonymic, substitution of one victim for the pacific good of all the community, and eventually the substitution of one sort of victim for another, generates the properly metaphorical process by which goods are exchanged against other goods, and ultimately marketed via monetary tokens, communally accepted symbols of value.<sup>(8)</sup>

7

## ECONOMIES

What is the connection, beyond all ideological posturing, between free markets, open scientific inquiry, and religious faith? This is one of the central questions posed by "Foi et Savoir." Generative anthropology offers a rational hypothesis for what Derrida neologizes as "mondialatinisation." Latinization is a pun on the neo-Roman site of Derrida's discourse at a conference on religion located in Capri in 1994; his neologism refers to the obscure connivance of free market globalization ("mondialization" in French) and Western religious tradition that he describes as "cette alliance étrange du christianisme, comme expérience de la mort de Dieu, et du capitalisme télé-technoscientifique" (21). This compact is what we need to "penser ensemble." As Gans too notes, "the association of modern science with the Christian West cannot be explained away" (*Science and Faith* 119). The association is not haphazard or accidental, but causal; it should give pause to critics of Western epistemic dominance; their denunciation of "hegemony," scientific and economic, can only be performed in the name of a still higher objectivity, of a greater generality, that is authorized by a unique tradition of self-criticism, of demystification that is rooted in turn in the Mosaic "suspicion" of religious figurality, in Israel's critique of idolatrous representation. The death of god as the deconstruction and dissemination of divine centrality is the necessary, if not sufficient, condition of a unanchored and fully dynamic rationality that is destined thereby to a maximal self-understanding in its quest for its own foundations. Our species' first

manipulation of signs, our first social organization, begins (in) religion (the a-syntactic parentheses designating the active and passive relation of signs to religious organization).

Let us dwell on this geometrical configuration of the originary scene a bit more, for we need to imagine its psychological structure if we are to understand our own cultural and historical relation to it. The relation is post-religious to the degree that we can analyze it at all, that we can theorize it, which is to subject it to increasingly formal representation, of the kind that we find in geometry and in all such purely formal representations, whose telos is mathematics.<sup>(9)</sup>

The points we mark on the circumference of this circle are arbitrary, exchangeable; only the center is unique to the structure, its “real” point; howsoever it is marked, it is the reality, however virtual, or in religious terms sacro-sanct, that holds the circle together no less than the god holds the community together in the deference its members pay to it rather than slaughtering one another. This circle remains the invariant structure of all human relations, whose triangular sections consist of rival subjects mediating for one another the desire for central objects. This structure obtains no less today than at our human beginnings, as the advertising industry has clearly intuited: the most conventional way to persuade consumers to desire any product is to represent its possession as a mark of good fortune already enjoyed by the celebrity or any icon of prosperity endorsing it. This is not a trivial example, given the key role of advertising in an ever more globally consumer culture, and, more generally still, given the key role of mediated desire, of mimetic contagion, in the fluctuation of financial markets, where the value of stocks spirals up-or-down-according to investors’ beliefs in other investors’ beliefs (see Dupuy, *Le Sacrifice et l’envie*, ch. 10, and *La Panique*, chs. 3 and 4). Perhaps it is only by assigning to the market’s utter precarity, its fundamental instability, the somewhat hieratic and substantializing epithet of a “system” (e.g., Adam Smith’s “invisible hand”) that we allay the violence that is potential to all modes of internal mediation, in which rival subjects inhabiting the same universe are potential obstacles to one another’s desire. An external mediator, ontologized as the law of supply and demand, raises the principle of order over and above its participants, elevating it as precept, canon, and creed, to dogmatic status.

8

Deconstruction has been instructive in showing us the shifts, displacements and crypto-theological or logocentric substitutions of the “god-terms” (Kenneth Burke’s handy phrase in his *Rhetoric of Religion*, ch. 1) that our secular thinking has posited as the center of culture and motor of history: “nous,” “nomos,” mind, nature, race, history, property, labor, etc., have succeeded one another in a parade of historical agencies or engines that today we assign to free markets. The center, being in fact vacant, empty, or virtual, is available to ideological investments that are frequently no less violent than arbitrary. As Gans notes, “The name-of-God is on the one hand infinitely ‘proper,’ confined to the unique object that

occupies the center, but on the other hand, it is infinitely generic, designating a central locus that may ultimately be occupied by anything whatever" (*Signs* 53).

Today the center is globally touted as free market capitalism, which is supposed to make consumer products so abundantly available to human desire as to remove the prospect of violent competition, of conflictual rivalry, from the scene of human interaction-while exploiting mimetic desire to fuel the largely artificial demand for commodities. This is in fact one of the arguments of GA about the relatively benign effects of consumer marketing. But the marketeers are self-promotionally over-optimistic, as Gans has also insisted ("The Unique Source" 64-65). The reason is that free markets are not driven solely by competition for goods, but, concomitantly, for consumers as well. Like all human institutions, religion among them, they are self-organizing systems that seek their own replication and proliferation, however much this dynamic may work-sacrificially-against their potential participants. It is the very the nature of human institutions to pursue their own perdurance at the expense of some of their membership, as we readily observe in the behavior of military, political and ecclesiastical establishments, but also in that of pedagogical and commercial ones. Capitalist ideologues assume that the ever widening compass of free markets will succeed in absorbing those populations which history has relegated unproductively to its margins. But even assuming that our biosphere could tolerate the waste that such a dynamic requires for its perpetuation, such an expectation ignores the commensurately vast margin for violence on the part of all those whom an increasingly frenetic exchange system exploits or excludes, while depriving them of a religiously sacrificial rationale that would indemnify their privations.

We should find nothing scandalous in the sacrificial character of institutions, once GA enables us to see their origin in the deferral, the economizing, of violence. They are so because they are by definition corporate, conventional, and communal, their ethic being endurance, self-perpetuation. Morality, by which we judge their cruel effects on people, is individual and personal ("The Unique Source" 58-61). Detaching morality from religion, as Kant purposed, and as we so triumphantly do in today's world, is so commonplace as to be regarded as obligatory; the virtual credo of every other intellectual is to abide by no institutional *credo*, to believe in nothing-but unaided, unanchored, venturesome intellect. We understand nothing about this extraordinary attainment if we do not see its roots in religious tradition itself.

For modern secularists, the cultural center is empty, hollow, absent of the divine being worshiped by the periphery. For Gans, this evacuation is, by virtue of yet another paradox, the very work of biblical revelation, which is host to anthropological truths that our human sciences are still trying to catch up with. Where deconstruction shows the origin of philosophical tradition as crypto-theological or theologocentric, GA argues us back to the anthropological origins of theology, but only thereafter to show the properly religious inspiration of anthropological discovery in the key revelations of Judaic and Christian

tradition. Its decisive moments are the Mosaic ban on the concrete figuration of the divinity, whereupon a culture is unmoored from any ritual center, and the Pauline revelation of the victim, whose centrality is now potentially shared by all those on the periphery, by every member of the human community (*Science and Faith* chs. 3 and 4). For the question, “Why do you persecute me?” that the resurrected Jesus poses to Paul en route to Damascus signals the omn centrality of divinity in every human person, as preached by the man whose crucifixion is witness against sacrificial violence. The substitution of one victim for the benefit of all is the sacrificial principle par excellence, as enunciated by Caiphas in John 11:49.<sup>(10)</sup> The inevitable, and for Gans ironic, consequence of this revelation was for Jesus to become the unique focus of the very ritual centrality that much of his preaching aimed to displace.

9

This is a consequence that Gans seems to deplore, as perhaps he must if GA is to remain faithful to the methodological incredulity dictating scientific epistemology (see “The Unique Source” 54). In its astringent minimalism, it cannot, as we say of justice, be a respecter of persons, only of relations, whose minimal alternatives are love and resentment, as richly explored in the weekly “Chronicles” of *Anthropoetics*. For believing Christians, Jesus is the potential mediator of all human relations precisely to the extent that the love he preaches is the antidote to resentment, as prescribed, for instance, by the discourses surrounding his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 and 6. While acknowledging the “extraordinary intellectual strength” of Gans’s reading of our religious tradition, James Alison has gone on to show how his ordinary scene is available, in strictly anthropological terms, to a Christology rooted in forgiveness, which is analyzed as the practicable means of loosening the mimetic bonds of violent interaction on which theology can reformulate its notion of original sin (*The Joy of Being Wrong* II.4 and II.5).

It would follow from this line of argument that humans can love one another through Christ, the incarnation of divine love, rather than for any substantially lovable merits of our own, since by that measure, as Hamlet quips, “none should escape whipping.” Alison’s work allows for a properly theological elaboration of Girard’s mimetic hypothesis that is strictly loyal to anthropological reasoning, as rigorously pursued by GA. As James Williams points out in his review of Alison’s work, what emerges from his “theological anthropology” is “an understanding of the human self and human culture which is supported and explicated in theological terms.... Although a ‘secular’ analysis of human behavior and theological interpretation may overlap and agree up to a point, it is only from the standpoint of the meaning and significance of the resurrection of Christ that a radical view of the human predicament and human possibilities is gained” (7).

Whatever one’s religious belief in the transcendent divinity of Jesus as God’s Son, the Mosaic and Pauline revelations are “autoprobatory,” as Gans states (*Science and Faith*

50-51); that is, they “took,” as we have seen them fulfilled in the ongoing demystification of ritual centrality, and in the moral and cognitive privilege awarded to the victimary position—so much so that this position has itself become the object of mimetic rivalry (*Signs* ch. 12). This decentralization has proceeded apace with the “the disenchantment of the world.” This is Max Weber’s phrase, revitalized by Marcel Gauchet, and cited ambivalently by Derrida in “Foi et Savoir” (84-85). It designates an irreversible path of intellectual progress, in its increasingly rational manipulation of signs, in its progressively formal mastery. It designates enlightenment, but only, as Derrida himself is quick to remind us, as an ambiguous extension of Christian Reformation, “une *Aufklärung* dont la force critique est profondément enracinée dans la Réforme” (“Foi et Savoir” 41).

## **BELIEFS**

Because the engagement here between GA and Derrida centers on religion, I feel it is important to conclude with attention to a believer’s contribution to our understanding of “disenchantment.” For James Alison it would translate as “the desacralization of history” (*Joy* 234) accomplished by the resurrection as proof of divine forgiveness. We have here a notion of divinity as forgiveness, with which the Hebrew bible is already fairly saturated, in a way that is totally alien to the violent reciprocity that inevitably requires still more victims. This is the unequivocal line of conduct prescribed by Jesus in the discourses surrounding the Sermon on the Mount as a foundation of exclusively positive human relations, in which Derrida elsewhere notes the “break with exchange, symmetry, or reciprocity:”

It is a matter of suspending the strict economy of exchange, of payback, of giving and diving back, of the “one lent for every one borrowed,” of the hateful form of circulation that involves reprisal, vengeance, returning blow of blow, settling scores. (*The Gift* 102)

10

Nobody in his or her right mind, a mind organized by rivalry and expulsion, wants to “turn the other cheek,” so for Alison it is left for a divinity to demonstrate its truth when Jesus returns to the “band of semi-traitors” (73) among his followers with a greeting of peace rather than of vindictive reprisal. The gift of love contrasts starkly with the cultural benefits flowing from a sacrificial divinity, whose violent death affords cultural differentiations, and whose cult requires expiatory or propitiatory victims. Derrida for his part, pursues this “sacrifice of economy,” or “aneconomy,” as he calls it, through to “the irreducible experience of belief,” as formulated by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*, in terms of the oscillation “between credit and faith, the *believing* suspended between the credit [*créance*] of the creditor ([*créancier*] *Glaubiger*) and the credence ([*croyance*] *Glauben*) of the believer [*croyant*]. How can one *believe* this history of *credence* or *credit*?” (*The Gift*

115). Perhaps neither philosophy nor GA can take us beyond that question. The scriptural prescription for faith makes it a debatable option; it can only by definition be a free choice, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). As Alison remarks about scholarly and exegetical efforts to explain away the gospel account of the resurrection, “either we accept on trust the apostolic witness or we do not” (72).

Of course it is not quite that simple, for the really strange experience of belief in Western religion is very far from being irreducible, the existence of systematic theologies (from Aquinas through Barth) to witness, along with the existence of their asystematic challenges (from Pascal through Kierkegaard—and Barth again, and against himself). Christians and Jews regularly pray to their god for all sorts of benefits, including, ironically, for the faith to believe in him. This is a founding paradox of Western theological reflection in which confidence and doubt alternate generatively in the rational interrogation of what transcends reason; this makes for a uniquely restless, border-collapsing culture. According to Niklas Luhmann, Western reason abandoned paradox when, after the seventeenth century, it abandoned religious thinking as an intellectual resource, accomplishing a net loss to cognitive transparency that is only lately being recuperated by attention to self-referential systems (*Essays on Self-Reference* 16). This is an argument that requires vastly more scrutiny, as it overlaps with Kenneth Burke’s more forthright observations about language as always already rhetorical. For, upon reflection, words about the world are also words about words, implying what he calls a “logology” in all our most ambitious conceptualizations. This is what deconstruction has rebaptized as logocentrism. Deconstruction is self-referential through and through, but its congenital suspicion of generative or originary thinking impedes its capacity for historical—and religious—understanding. It is too soon—for this writer—to say what the combination of Alison’s analyses with those of Gans will produce in the way of a more coherent theology, which is an oxymoron to rationalists unless they are willing, as one of Derrida’s more recent neologisms seems to urge, to pursue the implications of a “paradoxology” (*The Gift* 83). This is perhaps where our literary tradition is most instructive, as I will venture to show in conclusion.

What GA brings to Western theological tradition as originary analysis is attention to its performative dimensions, to the content of linguistic forms which we can illustrate via Dostoevsky. The wordless kiss that Jesus bestows on his tormentor, the Grand Inquisitor in Ivan Karamazov’s scenario, is imagined by Dostoevsky to be definitive of human relations as prescribed by the Gospels, the basis of a perfectly imitable and exclusively positive reciprocity. It is one that is prefigured in an earlier text by the prostitute Liza’s embrace of the underground man, who torments her (and himself) with the derisive confession of his own malignity towards her. This gesture is exemplified in turn by the kiss that Alyosha bestows on his brother Ivan, who tempts Alyosha with rebellion as the Grand Inquisitor tempts Jesus with the historical vision of his failure. Jesus’ kiss is indeed a performance of love, but it is not a performative in any narrowly linguistic sense, being neither ostensive,

nor imperative, nor still less declarative of anything, of any referent outside itself. It wordless simplicity acts in emphatic and thematic contrast to the Inquisitor's fulsome and by Dostoevsky's lights eminently persuasive discourse about the failure of institutional Christianity, about humans' preference for sacrificial mechanisms and idolatrous servitudes, for "Miracle, Mystery, Authority." This preference includes efforts to explain away or denounce human freedom, efforts which are nonetheless epistemically powerless in the face of forgiving witness against them. Non-mimetic, unreciprocating, aneconomic, asystemic, Jesus' kiss figures as a kind of absolute sign whose meaning coincides totally and unequivocally with its performance as unconditional love. If it has a referent, it is the one named by Jesus as the Kingdom of God. It is absolute in the sense that it imitates and replicates the love of the father for his children, which is expected to spread horizontally, inter- and intragenerationally or fraternally, among them. In the face of its tormentor, it is autoprobatory in its unconditionality, its real transcendence, in a way that the homiletic plea for unconditional love, however "sublime" its imperatives, that the dying elder, Zossima, bequeaths to his readers is not; its give-ness-or grace, for theologians-and forgiveness are one, with no preconditions. Being preemptive and proleptic, it betokens a freedom that no exchange system can rival or dominate, for it is first and foremost a freedom from all rivalry. "Non-contaminé" par excellence, it is exemplarily deconstructive in its break with the dualistic antagonism of self vs other as the construct binding humans sacrificially together (and which Alison has redefined as original sin). Rather than imitate the other's desire for the object, it calls for imitation, identification, with the victim(s) whom rivalry inevitably produces. Not least of the benefits of GA is to provide a vocabulary and a scenario by which we may understand in anthropological terms what Christian tradition refers to as the Word Incarnate.

11

We don't need to ponder the moral-or pastoral-implications of this scene in order to appreciate its epistemic significance, its anthropological ramifications, as it signals a break with the resentment that provokes it-or, in a different sense, that fails to provoke its own replica. For Alison, forgiveness is the source of "joy in being wrong" since it is only via that recognition that human relations can be set permanently and confidently aright. The Nietzschean conception of every action as a reaction, of moral sentiment as resentment, is broken. With forgiveness as the primordial condition or foundation of human freedom, evil emerges from the dynamics of human interaction as "pure choice," as Girard explains in his early book on Dostoevsky (134, 138). For this is how we are to understand the Inquisitor's rejection, dismissal, and expulsion of his victim.

Dostoevsky used to remarked privately, as his "*Credo*," that even if he knew Christ to be "outside the truth, that *in reality* the truth were outside of Christ," he would still "prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth" (Frank 160). This is the antithesis of the Inquisitor's stance, and potentially of Ivan's as well, as he oscillates feverishly between



repentant conversion and rebellious madness, which for the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* means to know Jesus as the truth and freely choose not to believe in him, not to remain with him (in all that that verb implies as a stance, a concrete position rather than a theoretical perspective). The strength of this temptation for Dostoevsky himself is born out by the novels in which he explored his own anxieties through his various characters—"I am a child of the century, a child of disbelief and doubt, I am that today and (I know it) will remain so until the grave" (Frank 160)—which has resulted in a monumental discovery procedure concerning human self-destructiveness. For him, the demonic is just this rebellion, originating in the freedom to reject freedom for idolatrous servitudes. This is the vision of history sketched out by the Inquisitor, and prophetically essayed by the novelist in *Demons*, whose sociopolitical scenario of communal degeneration is historically realized in the eminently sacrificial revolutions of our century, where the devastating mass of victims mounts in inverse proportion to the efficacy of scapegoating mechanisms that produce them. They all have an apocalyptic or end-of-history air about them that is already caricatured in Shigalyov's theory, in *Demons*, that absolute freedom is won through absolute slavery. What Alison allows us to see, with the help of GA, is how these murderous scenarios too, in their own perverse way, accomplish the all-too-human fantasy of religion within the limits of reason alone.

12

#### Works Cited

Aglietta, Michel, and Orléan, André. *La Violence de la monnaie*. Paris: P.U.F. 1982.

Alison, James. *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*. New York: Crossroads, 1998.

Blachowicz, James. *Of Two Minds: the Nature of Inquiry*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1998.

Burke, Kenneth. *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*. Boston: Beacon, 1963.

Davies, Paul. *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.

de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.

Derrida, Jacques. *Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge, 1992.

—. "At this very moment in this work here I am." In *Re-Reading Levinas*. Eds. Robert

- Bernasconi and Simon Critchley. Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1991.
- . *La Carte postale*. Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1980.
- . "Foi et Savoir." In *La Religion*. Paris: Seuil, 1996.
- . "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority.'" *Cardozo Law Review*. 11:5/6, 919-1046 (July/Aug. 1990).
- . *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Willis. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Trans. G. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- . "Living on/Borderlines." In *Deconstruction and Criticism*. Ed. H. Bloom. New York: Seabury, 1979.
- . "La Loi du genre." *Glyph*. 7:176-132 (1980).
- . *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.
- Dumouchel, Paul, and Dupuy, Jean-Pierre. *L'Auto-organisation: De la physique à la politique*. Paris. Seuil, 1983.
- Dupuy, Jean-Pierre. *La Panique*. Paris: Les Empecheurs de penser en rond, 1991.
- . *Le Sacrifice et l'envie: Le libéralisme aux prises avec la justice sociale*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1992.
- Frank, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal 1850-1859*. Princeton: U of Princeton P, 1983.
- Gans. Eric. *The Origin of Language: A Formal Theory of Representation*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1980.
- . *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993.
- . *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation*. Savage, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 1990.
- . *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997.
- . "The Unique Source of Religion and Morality." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*. 3:51-66 (Spring 1996).

Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987.

—. *Feodor Dostoevsky: Resurrection from the Underground*. Trans. James Williams. New York: Crossroads, 1997.

Gauchet, Marcel. *Le Désenchantement du monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1985.

Hurlbut, William. "Mimesis and Empathy in Human Biology." *Contagion*. 4: 14-25 (Spring 1997).

Luhmann, Niklas. *Essays on Self-Reference*. New York: Columbia UP, 1990.

McKenna, Andrew. "Deconstruction and the Resistance to Anthropology." *Paroles gelées*. 8:43-48 (1990).

McKenna, Andrew. *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction*. Champaign-Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1992.

Peperzak, Adriaan. *Before Ethics*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, Press, 1997.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Wade Basking. New York: McGraw Hill 1966.

Tomelleri, Stefano. *René Girard: La matrice sociale della violenza*. Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1996.

Williams, James. "James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes*." *Bulletin of the Colloquium on Violence & Religion*. 14:7-8 (March 1988).

### Notes

1. William Hurlbut offers a capacious view of the chain of mimesis from morphogenesis through affective sympathy in "Mimesis and Empathy in Human Biology." ([back](#))

2. See Derrida, "At this very moment in this work here I am" in Bernasconi and Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas*; and Peperzak, *Before Ethics* for a coherent presentation of Levinas's work which takes human interaction into account. ([back](#))

3. For Derrida's sense of the incorrigible ubiquity of violence, see his "Force of Law."[\(back\)](#)
4. See Blachowicz, *Of Two Minds*, which explores scientific methodology in terms of the structural dynamics of amplificatory correction as it concerns an open-ended epistemology.[\(back\)](#)
5. See *Signs*, ch. 5, for the overlapping inter-reference of paradox and irony.[\(back\)](#)
6. "Nous nous essayons constamment à penser ensemble, mais autrement, le savoir *et* la foi, la technoscience *et* la croyance religieuse, le calcul *et* la sacro-saint" ("Foi et Savoir" 72).[\(back\)](#)
7. On self-organizing systems, more correlation needs to be undertaken that integrates the analyses of Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Paul Dumouchel (*L'Auto-organisation*) with those of Edgar Morin (*La Méthode*), as suggested by Stefano Tomelleri in *René Girard: La matrice sociale della violenza* (ch. 3). The remarkable, because uncontaminated, correlations between the work of Gans and of Niklas Luhmann, as they concern paradoxes of self-reference, fairly beg for an issue of *Anthropoetics* on that topic.[\(back\)](#)
8. These transformations are amply analyzed by Aglietta and Orléan in *La Violence de la monnaie*. Paul de Man's notorious and ubiquitous deconstruction of metaphor as metonymy, of one form of substitution (paradigmatic or vertical) as masking another (syntagmatic, horizontal, serial, contingent), is another case where formal linguistic components are abstracted, and in every sense uprooted from the dynamics of the originary scene of representation, from the event that GA locates at human origins. Cf. *Allegories of Reading*.[\(back\)](#)
9. Notwithstanding, Gödel to witness, the formal incompleteness of the mathematics. There is, I think, an epistemic homology here that Paul Davies's discussion of Gödel in *The Mind of God* (100-103) allows us to explore: a system that is only complete at the expense of coherence, and only coherent at the expense of completion, is redolent with all the paradoxes of the sacred (foundation) as propitiatory supplement. It is also emblematic of the foundational incompleteness of formal representation as such.[\(back\)](#)
10. "You don't know anything at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish."[\(back\)](#)