Christian Mystery and Responsibility Gnosticism in Derrida's *The Gift of Death*

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> "In place of the clear and rigid ancient law, You made man decide about good and evil for himself, with no other guidance than Your example."
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> ("The Grand Inquisitor," *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky, p. 307)

In response to criticisms that deconstruction is ethically "relativist" and "nihilist," Jacques Derrida in his recent book *The Gift of Death* skeptically questions the very intelligibility of the notion of responsibility (85). Derrida polemically attacks and seeks to undermine what he calls the "good conscience" (85) of modernity, the illusory confidence that we can ever justify our actions rationally. Responsibility, for Derrida, can never actually be responsible, for it preserves "within itself a nucleus of irresponsibility or absolute unconsciousness" (20). Furthermore, any particular instance of responsibility necessarily involves the scandalous "betrayal" and "absolute sacrifice" of all other possible responsibilities (68-69). In the hyperbolic language of deconstruction, the exercise of responsibility is "absolute treachery" (68), an incomprehensible and monstrous "gift of death" (96).

Derrida approaches the idea of responsibility historically, proposing nothing less than a history of responsibility and the self from Platonism to Christianity to the modern world. The "irresponsibility" of modernity can be traced to Christianity, specifically, Christianity's unacknowledged and repressed core of the demonic sacred (24-26). Derrida understands Christian responsibility and selfhood as a response to the Christian *mysterium tremendum*, which he defines as the

experience of being transfixed or possessed by the unseen gaze of a mysterious and inaccessible “wholly other” (31).

The most obvious problem with Derrida’s argument in *The Gift of Death* is his misconception of Christianity. In his description of Christian mystery, the crucified figure of Jesus is strikingly absent, having been replaced by a mysterious “infinite other” (32). In this respect, Derrida’s understanding of Christianity is essentially gnostic; the humanity of Jesus is displaced by gnostic mystery. Although Derrida claims to describe historical Christianity, in fact, his argument is based on a serious distortion of Christian practice and theology. Although the title might seem an obvious reference to Christ’s atoning death, Derrida’s book can only be characterized as an overt and unacknowledged displacement of the Crucifixion and its central place in Christian worship.

Derrida’s displacement of the Cross is symptomatic of a larger displacement of the anthropological or specifically human basis of religion and responsibility. The primitive or sacrificial sacred has traditionally fallen within the domain of the history of religion and/or anthropology, disciplines which, unlike Platonic metaphysics, are essentially historical. Derrida, as is well known, operates within a metaphysical framework (there is no “outside” to metaphysics) in order to deconstruct metaphysics. At the same time, he connects responsibility to the sacred and the history of religion in order to demonstrate the incoherence and, thus, the “irresponsibility” of responsibility (25). The sacred, because of its inherent ambivalence and ambiguity, is a perfect tool for deconstructing metaphysical concepts such as responsibility. But if, as Derrida claims, responsibility can never actually be responsible, then how can he account for the existence of responsibility at all? This question, the anthropological question, is displaced by Derrida’s metaphysical framework. The resistance of the sacred (and hence of responsibility) to stable conceptualization does indeed suggest the limitations of traditional metaphysical thought; on this point I agree with Derrida. The sacred and responsibility have no timeless essence apart from human history.

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The solution to this problem, however, is not to declare that the concept of responsibility is incoherent–in effect, abandoning responsibility–but rather to abandon Platonic metaphysics and seek to understand responsibility in relation to its (pre)historical origin–this is the method of generative anthropology.[(1)] The argument of generative anthropology is that human culture began in a collective revelatory event, and that the essential elements of the human–including the sacred, responsibility, and language itself–can only be fully understood in relation to this “originary event.” The heritage of responsibility in this revelatory event

includes an *ostensive* element which Platonic metaphysics fails to recognize.[(2)]

The emergence of the human is not fortuitous; the dangers of mimetic violence made the the birth of representation and responsibility necessary for the survival of the human group. The validity and coherence of responsibility lies in its original and continued ethical function within human culture. Although the originary event, by definition, is a one-time occurrence, religious revelations are in effect re-enactments of the originary event; they give us essential insights into our origin, the minimal conditions of our cultural existence. A major religious revelation comes as the result of a historical crisis such as the Hebrew revolt against the Egyptians or the threat which Roman rule posed to the Jews. Revelation points to a new stage of cultural evolution, a "transvaluation of all values," and inaugurates a new sense of community. For this reason, Christian responsibility can only be understood in relation to the "originary event" of the Christian revelation, the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. In contrast to Derrida, I will argue that Christian mystery is fundamentally ethical and non-sacrificial. The persistence of sacrificial violence in modernity is not due to any repressed core of the demonic sacred within Christianity but rather the constant temptation of the sacrificial which is posed by mimeticism or conflictual desire, our anthropological condition. We can and must distinguish Derrida's gnosticism from historical Christianity.

René Girard vs. Derrida

René Girard's anthropology begins with Aristotle's observation that "Man differs from the other animals in his greater aptitude for imitation" (THSFW 1). Girard's theory of mimesis goes much further than Aristotle's, however, in that Girard sees desire itself as fundamentally mimetic and therefore conflictual (GR 9-44). The conflictual tendencies of humankind find expression in the "scapegoat mechanism," the collective murder of an arbitrarily chosen human victim, an event which inaugurates the human community and which is memorialized in myth and ritual (THSFW 3-47). The sacred, as expressed in myth and sacrificial ritual, is essentially a mystification of mimetically-inspired violence. In direct opposition to myth, Christianity is the revelation of the truth of the scapegoat mechanism, the human violence which hides behind the sacred (THSFW 141-223). The Gospel narratives reveal that sacrality is created through victimization.

In *The Scapegoat*, Girard distinguishes two basic hermeneutic modes. On the one hand is the mythic mode, which begins by demonizing the other as the prelude to sacrificial violence, and which ends by sacralizing or deifying the scapegoat victim. The mythic mode displaces human responsibility for violence onto the demonic or divine other. On the other hand is the hermeneutic mode which finds its most distinctive expression in Christianity but is not limited to Christianity, since the

interpretative method here is essentially anthropological and does not depend on faith. The Christian revelation demystifies sacrificial violence by revealing that the scapegoat is only a scapegoat, an innocent victim rather than the hated and feared other. The Cross reveals our inherent violence so that we can no longer so easily project our violence onto the other. Thus the Cross confronts individuals with their shared human guilt and asks for the same radical renunciation of violence that Jesus made in passively accepting his Crucifixion.

The Christian identification with the victim begins in the Hebrew scriptures, for example in Isaiah's identification of Israel as the suffering servant who will redeem the world (Girard, *Scapegoat* 103-105). The ancient Hebrews found meaning in their sufferings by identifying with the role of the sacrificial victim. Their historical situation as a small tribal nation surrounded by much larger empires is interpreted as a sign of election through a narrative of testing, punishment, and redemption: "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth." Judeo-Christian identification with the victim is historically based and thus distinct from the Athenian spectator's identification with the tragic hero-victim. Rather than repressing the orgiastic, the Hebrews were able to *live through* the drama of victimization, exposing it for what it is, while retaining and appropriating the power of transcendence produced by the sacrificial.

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In view of the central and unique role of the sacrificial victim in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Derrida's assertion that the "secret" of Christianity is the demonic sacred is rather surprising. Rather than repressing the demonic, Christianity reveals the hidden truth of demonic violence. The Gospel narratives are fundamentally demystifying, precisely in regard to violence and the sacred (THSFW 158-223). The demystifying power of the Christian revelation makes possible the evolution of the modern secular world. While Derrida is correct in asserting that sacrificial violence continues, "even in the space of the *Aufklärung* and of secularization in general" (21), the Gospel message both opposes and unmasks the sacrificial. The ethical core of the Christian religion is the unconditional refusal of violence, as exemplified in Jesus' passive acceptance of the Cross. The Cross inaugurates a new sense of individual responsibility based on a recognition of shared human guilt for sacrificial violence.

Secrecy and Irresponsibility

Derrida's analysis of responsibility in *The Gift of Death* is twofold and contradictory. On the one hand, the concept of responsibility is incoherent (25-26), an "ordeal of the undecidable" (5). Supposedly responsible ethical decisions are all ultimately

arbitrary, ungrounded, and even “sacrificial” (68). On the other hand, however, he recognizes the cultural necessity of responsibility. The polemical thrust of his book, surprisingly enough, is a condemnation of the irresponsibility of modern technological civilization. He calls for “a religion [and thus an ethic] without religion,” a “logic” which “has no need of *the event of a revelation or the revelation of an event*” (49). In order to criticize Derrida’s attempted reformulation of the ethical, we will need to review his argument in more detail.

In classic post-structuralist fashion, Derrida begins with a binary opposition–the demonic sacred and responsibility–which he then proceeds to destabilize. This opposition is taken over from an essay by the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka (Patocka 95-118). According to Patocka, responsibility develops in opposition to the orgiastic or sacrificial violence (101). Patocka’s understanding of the human is phenomenological. The basic polarities of human existence are (1) authenticity and inauthenticity, and (2) the orgiastic and the everyday or work (97-99). Patocka’s essay is a critique of the decadence of modern technological civilization, and he tells a narrative which derives our current historical situation from Platonism and Christianity, which he sees as the two most important efforts to overcome the orgiastic and establish responsibility. Patocka contrasts Platonic mystery (the mythology of the soul’s journey towards a transcendent Good) with the Christian mysterium tremendum (106-7). While Platonism attempts to establish responsibility rationally (thus disciplining the orgiastic), Christianity sees responsibility as a relationship or duty to the person of God (107). The mystery of Christianity, for Patocka, lies in the absolute incommensurability between God and man (108). This incommensurability sets up a sense of never-ending striving towards an inaccessible ethical goal; the humility (and dynamic power) of this never-ending striving constitutes the superiority of Christian responsibility over Platonism. For Patocka, the decadence of modernity can be traced mainly to the hubris of Platonic rationalism (110-12), while Christianity remains the preeminent way of overcoming the orgiastic (108). Patocka clearly distinguishes Platonism from Christianity (107-8), although he sees both as significant influences for modernity.

Derrida complicates or rewrites Patocka’s argument in several ways, in a frankly speculative manner. First of all, Derrida adds a Freudian psychology to Patocka’s phenomenology; the orgiastic is understood in terms of sexual desire (3). Next, Derrida views the Christian mysterium tremendum as a repression or conversion of Platonic mystery. Conversion, for Derrida, is understood in psychoanalytic terms as a form of Freudian repression, in which the repressed element is incorporated as the unconscious (9). Since Platonic mystery is a repression of orgiastic violence, and Christian mystery incorporates Platonic mystery, then it follows that Christian mystery incorporates orgiastic violence (9). Christian responsibility and selfhood are based in Christian mystery and therefore also incorporate demonic and

irresponsible violence. But Christianity is wholly unconscious of this internal violence: Christian selfhood is actually “incapable” of reflecting on “orgiastic mystery” (24). Derrida’s description of Christian mystery implies this hidden demonic and violent dimension:

> The gift made to me by God as he holds me in his gaze and in his hand while remaining inaccessible to me, the terribly dissymmetrical gift of the mysterium tremendum only allows me to respond and only rouses me to the responsibility it gives me by making a gift of death, giving the secret of death, a new experience of death. (33)

The mysterium tremendum is “the terrifying mystery, the dread, fear, and trembling of the Christian in the experience of the sacrificial gift, . . . being paralyzed . . . by the gaze of God” (6), “a gaze that I don’t see and that remains secret from me although it commands me” (27). Although the historical-textual basis for this description remains obscure (in both Patocka and Derrida), the emphasis on secrecy, terror, and death strongly suggests the demonic sacred.

According to Derrida, since modernity incorporates Christianity as part of its historical evolution, then modernity also incorporates the secret of the demonic sacred. The result of this repression and denial, broadly speaking, is the “decadence” or “decline” of modern technological civilization (35). This decadence manifests itself above all in a return of the orgiastic –spontaneous and/or organized outbreaks of violence (35-6, 85-6). Technological modernity produces first of all boredom, which then allows the demonic sacred to re-emerge: “The domination of technology encourages demonic irresponsibility” (35-6). Following Heidegger, Derrida believes we have become enslaved to technology and are in danger of losing our souls, the “unique self” behind every social role or mask (36). We have lost our relation to primordial Being and now worship inhuman force (37).

The logic of Derrida’s argument works by focusing on the ambiguity inherent in the notion of the sacred. Patocka postulates two forms of sacrality, which he seeks to distinguish absolutely as opposites: the demonic sacred and Christian mystery (Patocka 106-108). Derrida then plays with this ambiguity in Patocka’s argument to show how each of the two forms of the sacred is infected by the other (8-9). Since responsibility and irresponsibility are the corollary opposition for Patocka, we have the rhetorical figure known as a chiasmus, a repetition and reversal which fatally undermines the stability of the terms. If Christian mystery incorporates the orgiastic, then it follows that responsibility incorporates irresponsibility.

Derrida argues that Christianity incorporates both Platonism and the orgiastic, but he fails to provide any specific historical evidence for this claim. In Derrida's argument, Christianity tends to be reified as a metaphysical or discursive structure rather than considered as a historical religion. But religion, unlike metaphysics, is based in historical events. And Christianity is the supremely historical religion because it is based on a strictly *human* event: the Crucifixion. Derrida speaks of Platonism and Christianity as metaphysical systems which are more or less independent of their historical manifestations in thought and practice. Near the beginning of his book, he makes an anti-essentializing gesture, declaring that he wants to historicize responsibility (5). He argues against a Platonic metaphysics which would try to bring out the timeless essence of the concept and relegate its historicity as something "extrinsic" (5). This gesture towards strict historicity suggests that he will focus exclusively on historical manifestations of Christian responsibility, either in theology or actual practice. But as we read, it becomes apparent that Derrida is not especially interested in history. The prime example here is his central claim that Christian mystery is a conversion of Platonic mystery (9). His description of Christian mystery is itself unhistorical, and the crucial connection between Platonic mystery and Christian mystery is left completely unsupported. His use of Patocka as an authority here does not make up for his lack of historical evidence because Patocka simply does not make the claim that Christian mystery is derived from Platonic mystery. For Patocka, Christianity and Platonism are two different responses to the problem of the orgiastic, and he is more concerned to distinguish Christianity from Platonism than to conflate the two: "In the Christian conception of the soul, there is a fundamental, profound difference" from Platonism (Patocka 107).

So while Derrida begins with an anti-essentializing gesture that suggests that he will refrain from any generalizations, he goes on to make many vast statements about responsibility. For example, "The secret of responsibility would consist of keeping secret, or 'incorporated,' the secret of the demonic and thus of preserving within itself a nucleus of irresponsibility or absolute unconsciousness" (20). Responsibility here is connected to Christianity and thus, at least superficially, "historicized." But because Christianity remains an ahistorical metaphysical structure, responsibility also stays within the ahistorical realm of metaphysics. Responsibility remains primarily a "concept" with only the most superficial connection to history. Derrida's gesture towards historicity is to a large extent a red herring; he still operates under the presupposition that the concept has a life independent of historical practice and thought. The process of history remains "extrinsic" just as in the Platonic metaphysics which he criticizes, but within which he finally remains. Tracing out an abstract lineage of a concept is no substitute for historical, textual scholarship. This is not to deny the validity of intellectual history, but such a history must be solidly based in historical texts.

Christian Mystery and Responsibility

The strongest argument against Derrida's claim that the Christian mysterium tremendum derives from Platonism is the historical connection between Christian mystery and the great prophetic revelations of the Old Testament. The Mosaic law is given in fear and trembling: "there were thunder and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled" (Exodus 19:16). The mysterium tremendum serves to effectively impress the law upon the memory and thus to internalize the law as conscience, an internal law. A law which is given with the power of fire and earthquakes is easily remembered. The experience of the awful power of the holy gives the law an emotional affect which ensures its memory. The dangerous proximity of violence (i.e., the Hebrew revolt against the Egyptians) generates the event of the Mount Sinai revelation, a law which reflects the ethical needs of the community. The ambivalence of love and fear in the mysterium tremendum is generated by human resentment; the power and majesty of God reflects the danger of human violence. The Hebrew reverence for the law makes the law into an internal force which guides individuals and preserves the community, deferring violence.

With the prophets following Moses the law is further internalized and integrated into the life of the individual and the community. The prophets also repudiated the economy of sacrifice and ritual (Girard, THSFW 141-179). Isaiah questions the traditional sacrificial practices: "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me, saith the Lord. . . . I delight not in the blood of Bullocks. . . . Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isa. 1:11, 17). In a similar vein, the author of Psalms writes, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (51: 17). We see here a turn away from the sacrificial towards a more spiritual or internal form of worship accessible to everyone and not controlled by the priestly hierarchy. While not every Israelite is able to enter "the Holy of Holies" and stand in the awesome presence of the Lord, a broken and contrite heart is the common result of sincere devotion and worship. The prophets demand a radical interiorization of the law in place of external rituals and sacrifice. The revelations of the great prophets, received in fear and trembling, are directed toward reviving and deepening the ethical insights given on Mount Sinai. The Old Testament makes clear that the experience of the mysterium tremendum is directly connected with the ethical standards of the community–ethical standards, moreover, which are explicitly non-sacrificial, directed toward the protection of the weak and helpless: "oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent

blood” (Jer. 7:6).

After the Mosaic revelation, the second great locus of the mysterium tremendum is the Crucifixion of Jesus. The figurality of the Cross–the crucified body of Jesus–is an important difference from the Mosaic revelation. The figurality of the Cross reveals the humanity of Christ and thus our brotherhood with him. No longer do we confront a non-figural presence which cannot be visualized or represented; but rather, we come face to face with God, staring into the eyes of one who suffers and forgives with infinite love. The typical worship experience in Christianity is the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper, a spiritual or symbolic re-enactment of the Crucifixion. The figurality of the Cross is first and foremost the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism in the disfigured body of the victim. The body of the scapegoat victim is not outwardly sacred but rather human. The essential difference between the bruised and bloody body of the scapegoat victim and the resurrected Christ performs and thus reveals “the operation of divinization as it occurred in the originary event” (Gans, SF 106).

The figurality of the Cross as retained in the memory is the realization of the Old Testament promise: “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts” (Jer. 31:33). The morality of the Sermon on the Mount is implied by the Cross. The event of the Crucifixion produces the ineradicable memory of our guilt and demands the radical interiorization of the law. We have to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, in full awareness of our guilt. The ethical implications of the Cross are thus a deconstruction of sacrificial ritual and a radical simplifying and profound deepening of the law. Jesus proposes a minimal ethic based only on the principle of reciprocity: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.”

The fear and trembling of the Cross goes beyond the experience of the holy in the Old Testament. The Christian mysterium tremendum passes through the violence of the Crucifixion and therefore includes guilt as its basic feature–an inherent human complicity in the sacrificial which transcends any particular transgression. We fear and tremble not because God is absolutely different, but precisely because he is identical to myself. No longer can we project our violence onto the other; we are confronted with our own violence and modern self-consciousness begins, a consciousness and responsibility founded in guilt. Absolute otherness is recognized as internal to the self qua the shared human capacity for violence. At the same time, the human capacity for violence is the other side of the human potential for transcendent love through faith in God, as the triumph of the Resurrection suggests.

The historical success of the Christian religion, however, has not meant the end of

conflict and sacrificial violence. And many of the worst offenses, the Spanish Inquisition for example, have been carried out in the name of Christianity. The sacrificial is a constant temptation within human culture because of our inherent propensity to mimetic rivalry and conflict, and Christianity is by no means immune to the temptation of the sacrificial. The Cross in particular presents individuals with the temptation of a sacrificial interpretation, which is the idea that if I had lived in the time of Jesus, I would not have acquiesced in his sacrifice (Girard, THSFW 182-185, 224-262). In other words, it was the evil Jews who crucified Jesus, not ones such as I. The sacrificial interpretation of the Cross has had catastrophic consequences in terms of the historical persecution of the Jews. Arguing against the sacrificial interpretation, René Girard stresses quite rightly that when Jesus faced Crucifixion he was abandoned by *everyone* including his own disciples (*Scapegoat* 149-164). Any interpretation of the Crucifixion which would limit blame to one particular individual or group is sacrificial and essentially anti-Christian. While the sacrificial reading is historically consequential, it is not essential to the moral implications of the Crucifixion as preserved for us in the Gospel narratives. Without this realization of shared human guilt, the story of the Crucifixion becomes only another sentimental narrative. Derrida's argument that Christian mystery incorporates orgiastic violence implies that the Cross is simply an instance of sacrificial violence like any other. But as Girard has argued, the only way that Christ could undermine the mystifying power of the scapegoat mechanism was by deconstructing it from the inside, by living through the drama of the victim, revealing it for what it is, while appropriating its power of transcendence for his followers (*Scapegoat* 100-124).

While Christianity has not produced the kingdom of heaven on earth, its historical consequences have been profound. A consideration of the historical impact of Christianity is beyond the scope of this essay, but the debt of modern individualism to Christianity is generally recognized. The demystifying power of the Christian revelation allows for the liberation of the individual from the authority of ecclesiastical hierarchy and thus the development of modern democracy and a market economy. When the Second Coming of Christ did not materialize, it became apparent that God will not intervene in human affairs. We are left to work out our own destiny. This is our historical burden, that God will not resolve our problems for us. Whether the modern world is getting better or worse, whether modernity is "decadent" is a question that I leave to others. But the yearning for ancient, more stable forms of society is now only a form of nostalgia. We refuse to tolerate any form of absolute sacred authority (at least in the absence of acute crisis), and this is a probably a good thing. With no rigid divine law to guide our actions, ethics becomes a matter for debate and reasoned consideration. We face real political and ethical problems today–war, poverty, pollution, environmental degradation, and so on. The question for us here is whether Derrida offers us any substantive

contribution to the current debate over these issues or rather a romantic nostalgia for secrecy and mystery in the guise of primordial Being.

Gnosticism in *The Gift of Death*

Gnosticism is one of those terms, like Puritanism or Romanticism, that means so many different things to so many different people that it threatens to mean nothing at all. Gnosticism refers, first of all, to a diverse group of religious sects of the early Christian period (first through fourth centuries) and the metaphysical systems of Marcion, Valentinus, and their followers during the same period. Despite the diversity of gnostic cultic practices and thought, gnosticism has some broad common features which I will outline in this section. My claim here is that what Derrida describes in *The Gift of Death* is not Christianity but rather a gnosticism which shares certain essential features with these early sects. Furthermore, although the influence of gnosticism upon Christianity is well known, gnosticism is essentially opposed to Christianity, especially in the crucial area of responsibility.

First, gnosticism is a form of mysticism, involving a “special, transrational knowledge, limited to a select few, and largely incommunicable once acquired” (Jones 61). Derrida’s emphasis on secrecy and mystery is more gnostic than Christian; the esoteric nature of gnosticism is directly opposed to the universal call to discipleship and evangelism which pervades the New Testament teachings. Second, gnostics typically read the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, symbolically and allegorically. They denied the historicity of scripture and the humanity of Jesus. While Christ is usually understood to be the Savior, he “merely seemed to be human” (Grant 17). The gnostics, like Derrida in *The Gift of Death*, ignore or minimize the humanity of Jesus and the historical dimension of scripture. Unlike Christianity, gnosticism is unbiblical and unhistorical. Finally, in gnosticism the world was created by angelic powers in rebellion against the supreme God. As a result, the material creation is fundamentally evil, the work of the evil demiurge (or fallen angelic power) who governs this world. The radical dualism or manicheism of gnosticism is very different from Judeo-Christian monotheism. For the purposes of this essay, the key feature of gnosticism is that the responsibility for evil tends to be displaced away from humanity onto various demonic forces. In place of the call to individual repentance and reform in Christianity, gnosticism places the blame for evil on the evil demiurge. Gnosticism is thus mythic in the Girardian sense; human responsibility is displaced onto the demonic other. The fundamental ethical dimension of Christianity is missing.

When Derrida charges Christianity with incorporating Platonism and the demonic

sacred, he is confusing Christianity with gnosticism. Gnosticism is Platonic in the tendency to metaphysical speculation and the incorporation of mythic elements. Gnostic thinkers such as Saturninus and Basilides were influenced by the tradition of Platonism in late antiquity (Grant 107, 143). Gnostic cults made the demonic a fundamental part of their religious mythology. Gnosticism, not Christianity, incorporates Platonism and the demonic.

Yet we cannot deny that gnosticism (and Platonism) have exercised a powerful influence of upon Christianity. It is not difficult to find elements of gnosticism within orthodox Christianity during every step of its history. Even as the early church fathers battled against the gnostic heresy, elements of gnosticism crept into Christian theology. One might even argue that gnosticism simply emphasizes features already present in Christianity. For these reasons, the refutation of Derrida's analysis demands more than simply showing that his conception of Christianity is gnostic. It is necessary to demonstrate that the gnostic and Platonic influences do not undermine the fundamental core of responsibility within Christianity. Augustine is a key figure in this regard since he was both a gnostic and a Platonist before he became a Christian, and he formulated his theology in opposition to the gnostic heresy.

Augustine's solution to the problem of evil was to insist on the fundamental guilt of mankind in his doctrine of hereditary or original sin (Blumenberg 133). Humans are both fundamentally responsible and at the same time completely dependent on divine grace. Augustine refused to compromise the element of human responsibility, and this refusal distinguishes Christianity from the various gnostic sects. Augustine saw quite clearly that gnosticism tends to undermine individual responsibility. The Manichees taught Augustine that "it is not we who sin but some other nature that sins within us" (Augustine 103). Augustine turned from the Manichees to the Platonists to help him understand the problem of evil, but the problem with both Platonists and Manichees was that they lacked "the tears of confession" (156), the imperative for repentance which alone can generate the experience of redemption. The influence of classical philosophy on Christianity can be seen here in the need Augustine felt to construct a system of theology that could reconcile the existence of evil and an omnipotent God.[(3)]

In *The Gift of Death*, Christianity is represented as a mystery religion, a religion of secrecy and sacrifice. Dostoevsky criticizes this strain of Christianity with devastating irony in "The Grand Inquisitor" chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov* (297-319). The Grand Inquisitor presents Christianity as a priestly religion of "miracle, mystery, and authority" which the ordinary people supposedly desire in place of the burden of freedom placed on them by Christ (309). Dostoevsky juxtaposes this false demonic form of Christianity with the true Christianity of

Alyosha, which consists in faith and charity. The Grand Inquisitor's religion is based on a repression and denial of the historical Jesus, and, as such, is hardly representative of Christianity as a whole. While "miracle, mystery, and authority" play a not inconsequential role in Christianity, they constitute a retrograde movement within its overall history.

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The gnostic basis of Derrida's understanding of Christian mystery can be demonstrated through a close reading of his text. The experience of the mysterium tremendum involves the unseen gaze of "an absolute being who transfixes me, takes possession of me, holds me in its hand and in its gaze (even though through this dissymmetry I don't see it; it is essential that I don't see it)" (32). The main problem with this definition is that it ignores the Cross, the human figure of the crucified Jesus. Historically, the locus of the Christian mysterium tremendum is in fact the Crucifixion. The mystery of the Cross is traditionally articulated in a variety of ways: God's unmotivated forgiveness, his human suffering, and so on. Generative anthropology would minimize but not eliminate the mystery by extracting from the Cross the central paradox of all human culture: the emergence of transcendence from immanence. Girard's "fundamental anthropology," on the other hand, would see the miraculous generation of transcendent love from collective violence through the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. But no adequate understanding of Christian mystery can forget (1) the humanity of Jesus, and (2) his preternatural forgiveness. Without the combined humanity and divinity of Jesus, we have regressed into the demonic sacred. Derrida's description of Christian mystery blurs the distinction between the demonic sacred and the transcendent love of Jesus. In Derrida's description, the one who looks into my soul without being seen, who controls me from the inside against my will is in actuality the demonic other of mimetic desire (i.e., the demonized mimetic rival). When God begins to irrationally haunt me, spying on me unseen, paralyzing me with his hypnotic gaze, we are no longer in the Judaic or Christian universe, but rather the gnostic universe of the evil demiurge. Derrida's misreading is instrumental to his assertion that Christian mystery incorporates Platonism and the demonic sacred, but it is based on a serious distortion of Christianity.

The rhetoric of Derrida's description of Christian mystery and responsibility offers us an important clue to the presuppositions that underlie his argument. Derrida's description emphasizes (1) the incommensurability of God and (2) the non-figurality of God. In both these respects, Derrida is typical of a certain anti-humanist and academic (rather than pastoral or devotional) strain of post-modern theology that foregrounds the absolute difference of God, while the humanity of Jesus is ignored or minimized. The popularity of this interpretation in academic circles can be

attributed to the modern suspicion of fixed (i.e., figural) centers of mimetic fascination. We resist the attempt to fill the mimetic center, the locus of sacrality, with any defined figure. It becomes imperative in modernity to keep the center open-ended and fluid in terms of the figures which inhabit it. This imperative is a function of our instinctive resentment towards any source of authority. We resist the attempt to fix authority in any one figure, including, and especially, the crucified Jesus. But we should recognize that this scepticism about the mimetic center is made possible largely through the demystifying power of the Cross itself; it is highly ironic, and yet strangely appropriate, that this scepticism should now be directed towards the attraction of the Crucifixion itself, its ultimate source.

In the final analysis, the iconoclasm of post-modern theology is political: if God, the ultimate authority, is absolutely incommensurable and non-figurable, then my allegiance does not lie with any earthly source of authority. Iconoclasm is a declaration of political and, in this case, individual independence. The problem is that this form of iconoclasm tends to distort and thus trivialize historical Christianity. While iconoclasm is a crucially important element of our Judeo-Christian heritage, in the case of Derrida it becomes simply another rhetorical posture in the hyper-mimetic atmosphere of post-modern theory.

While Derrida iconoclastically refuses any figuration of the sacred, he still insists on the incommensurability, the absolute difference of God. As a reaction against the fear that we have lost or forgotten the sacred (or Being), and thus the source for all significance, academics have brought back the sacred with a vengeance. But as a result of iconoclasm, the sacred now takes the abstract form of absolute difference or alterity, and any attempt to understand or even discuss rationally the incommensurable is abandoned. Derrida’s incantatory language–the poetical cadences of his prose, the long and rapturous repetitions–reveals an aestheticism which is at heart rooted in a deep nostalgia for the sacred. His hostility towards modern technological civilization reflects the fear that the modern forgetting of the sacred will allow for unrestrained violence. The so-called primitive ambivalence of the sacred continues then, even in modern academia. On the one hand we resent any defined figuration of the sacred for presuming to colonize the space which is essentially spiritual and thus (for modernity) individual. But on the other hand, we still long for a sense of sacred difference, an absolute sacred immune to the corrosive power of resentment.

9

Derrida’s interpretation of Christian mystery is on the one hand directed towards deconstructing responsibility, but also, on the other hand, towards the articulation of a new “more radical form of responsibility” (27). On what, then, will Derrida

found this “more radical” form of responsibility? He proposes the “experience of singularity” in the individual’s “apprehensive approach to death,” a Heideggerian “being-towards-death” (43). What is missing in “being-towards-death,” however, is the recognition that “The real power of death is *sacrifice*,” the death of the *other* (Girard, TE 241). The sacrifice of the other, specifically Jesus, is precisely what Derrida’s metaphysical framework tends to displace. Whereas the death of Jesus on the Cross has ineluctable ethical implications, the “being-towards-death” does not suggest any overt ethical dimension.

This new “more radical form of responsibility” emerges as the result of his critique of the orthodox notion of responsibility. Derrida considers the idea that our responsibility exists in our relation to the other or, rather, every other–“an infinite number of them” (69). The “other” is defined here as “wholly other”: “every other is every bit other” (68). Responsibility consists in responding to singularities, and thus every possible duty is absolute and non-negotiable. Since we are absolutely responsible to every other there is no way to negotiate conflicts of duty. By fulfilling one’s duty to one singularity,

> I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the other others whom I know or don’t know, the billions of my fellows (without even mentioning the animals who are even more other others than my fellows) . . . my family, my son, each of whom is the only son I sacrifice to the other, every one being sacrificed to every one else in this land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day. (69)

So this ordinary form of responsibility proves to be contradictory and incoherent (27, 68-69). If every other is completely and irrevocably other, as Derrida argues, then ultimately he is left alone with only the alterity of an inner secrecy (108-9). As a result, his only real and true responsibility is to himself and the event of his death: “My first and last responsibility, my first and last desire, is that responsibility of responsibility that relates me to what no one else can do in my place” (44). Derrida ends with a purely secret or private idea of responsibility. This is not only a “religion without religion,” it is an ethics without ethics. If responsibility does not relate us to other human beings, then it seems fair to say we are not dealing with ethics at all, but a private aestheticism. The idea that one could have a purely private or personal sacred unmediated by any other(s) is the romantic myth of the autonomous subject of desire, the one who creates himself (as God) out of nothing. But this very desire for autonomy is itself mimetic, a function of social relations. There is really nothing “radical” about Derrida’s concept of the self as an

“irreducibly different singularity” which is threatened by modern technological civilization. This imperative for individual differentiation is the basis, after all, for consumer society, precisely because this imperative finds expression in consumption (cf. Gans, OT 166).

The scandal of Christian teaching is that it threatens this self-differentiation by revealing its source in the arbitrary death of the scapegoat victim. Everyone becomes equal, and equally guilty before the Cross. But this very realization of guilt can form the basis for the experience of redemption and regeneration. The Christian self is born out of the recognition of humility and brotherhood. The radically leveling power of the Cross allows for the liberation of the individual from ecclesiastical hierarchy and thus for the development of the romantic modern self. In this respect, Derrida’s “more radical form of responsibility” is neither new or radical, but rather the familiar *mensonge romantique* which we as moderns seem unable to do without.

For Derrida, ethics is precisely *not* the universal, but rather the private, the singular, the unjustifiable. For this reason, ethics is ungrounded, metaphysically and rationally. Derrida’s understanding of ethics is exactly the opposite of Kant’s. An ethical decision is that which can never be communicated or justified in universal terms. This point depends, of course, upon his assertion that “every other is completely or wholly other.” Why is every other so completely other? Because, for Derrida, every other is secret and mysterious. The problem with this “more radical form of responsibility” is the denial and refusal of our anthropological condition. We do not exist in some kind of metaphysical or existential vacuum, but only and essentially in relationship to other human beings; this relationship is what makes us human. The question then is, what are the essential conditions of our relationship with other humans? Derrida’s metaphysical framework displaces the facts of mimeticism (i.e., conflictual desire), the possibility of human conflict, and language itself–“the deferral of violence through representation” (Gans, EC 301). Ethical decisions are played out against the possibility of human violence. This possibility is what makes ethics necessary. Ethics is not something extra or added onto our cultural existence, it is essential to culture, and it can only be adequately defined in relation to our social condition, which Derrida does not do.

10

Derrida not only begs the question of how and why the individual is “wholly other,” he also ignores the full implications of this gesture towards singularity. It is very significant that he insists, “*every* other is every bit other” (emphasis added, 68). This is a leveling gesture, a refusal to privilege any one sacred. Each individual is equally and absolutely valuable. But in contrast to the traditional humanist value of

the individual, this equality is founded on the incommensurability of individuals. The anthropological basis for this intuition of fundamental human equality is, of course, the reciprocal exchange of the sign (Gans, OT 47). And in this anthropological basis exists the means for overcoming the apparent challenge to ethics which Derrida presents. Humans are singular in that each has a private and "secret" interior scene of representation (the memory or imagination), but humans are also similar for exactly the same reason. We all share equally in the scene of representation, which is both public and private. The use of a sign, even within the imagination, always implies the real or virtual presence of an other or others. And the signs we use are fundamentally public and available to all. Our singularity is thus also our similarity and equality, and this underlying similarity forms the basis for a dialogue about ethics and thus the possibility of justifying one's ethical decision. Derrida's argument has the disturbing implication of simply leveling all ethical distinctions. Feeding his cat becomes equivalent to Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac in the Old Testament (71). Derrida represents the "post-modern triumph of the victimary" (Gans, "Moral Contradiction") taken to its logical and absurd conclusion. The assertion that sacrifice is everywhere and always amounts, pragmatically, to a justification of the sacrificial. If there is nothing we can do to avoid the sacrificial, then obviously this is not a problem we need to worry ourselves about.

Acknowledging the role of the sacrificial in human culture does not have to mean simply accepting violence as inevitable, or denying the distinction between the sacrificial and the non-sacrificial. Considered as simply another act of sacrificial violence, there is nothing mysterious about the event of the Crucifixion. Such acts of scapegoating are all too common within human history. The miracle and mystery of Christianity can be found preeminently in the unconditional refusal of violence and the supremely human potential for love.

Notes

[1] Generative anthropology builds on the pioneering work of René Girard while also offering an independent theory of human culture. See Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985), *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993), and *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997).(back)

[2] See Eric Gans on Platonic metaphysics and the ostensive, "Plato and the Birth of

Conceptual Thought," *Anthropoetics* , II, 2.(back)

[3] Revelation recognizes the problem of evil but deals with it in a completely different manner. See for example The Book of Job, and especially the "voice from out of the whirlwind," chapter 38.(back)

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