

René Girard and the Symbolism of Religious Sacrifice

Eugene Webb

Department of Comparative Literature
University of Washington
ewebb@u.washington.edu

René Girard is well known for his critique of the imagery of sacrifice. As he reads religious symbolism and the rituals that present and enact it, these constitute ways of simultaneously commemorating and masking the real collective violence and victimization that gave rise to human society. His *Violence and the Sacred* argued forcefully for the universality of this fundamental cultural force: “All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim, and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from ritual. . . . It could hardly be otherwise, for the working basis of human thought, the process of ‘symbolization,’ is rooted in the surrogate victim” (306). As a counterforce to the general pattern of religion, Girard went on to argue in later studies, the prophetic tradition in Israel, culminating in the story of Jesus of Nazareth, gradually disclosed these secrets “hidden since the foundation of the world” (Matt. 13:35, the epigraph of Girard’s *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*). This revelation, however, was more than its recipients could bear, and they soon buried it again under a “sacrificial reading” that interpreted Jesus’ death not as the unmasking and exploding of the victimizing mechanism but as itself the ultimate satisfaction (and confirmation) of its exigency. In *Things Hidden* Girard identifies the Epistle to the Hebrews in particular as the fountainhead of this sacrificial misreading of Christianity.

I would like in this essay to explore from the point of view of the comparative study of religious symbolism the theme of sacrifice in Hebrews and to suggest some ways in which Girard’s analysis of that theme might benefit from the broader perspective that the history of religions can provide. In particular I will try to show that the epistle’s symbolism and the experience of spiritual transformation it represents may be understood more deeply and more favorably than Girard may have realized, through a comparison with Hinduism and Buddhism.

I realize of course that this comparison may in itself look problematic from a Girardian point of view, since Girard has spoken critically of those religions too. Near the end of *Things Hidden*, Girard makes the important observation that no

merely intellectual process of thinking can win victory over mimetic desire and the urge to victimize; rather that requires a kind of “conversion experience,” which “always retains the form of the great religious experiences”; then he adds that “[t]his kind of experience can be found in the great oriental religions. But there the aim is to allow the individual to escape completely from the world and its cycles of violence by an absolute renunciation of all worldly concerns, a kind of living death” (400). Hinduism and Buddhism are most probably the “great oriental religions” he had in mind. I hope to show, however, that it may be possible to discover in these something greater, and also more congenial to Girard’s own thought, than the cultivation of “a kind of living death.” I will argue, that is, that both the Epistle to the Hebrews and these Asian traditions may share more with, and offer more to, Girard than he has realized.

For the sake of brevity and because I have already done so at length elsewhere, I will not try to present a full exposition of Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, mimetic rivalry, and the sacrificial crisis with its trajectory toward identifying, and sacrificing, some victim as a scapegoat.[\(1\)](#) I will simply summarize a few points pertinent to my initial focus on Girard’s critique of sacrifice and of Hebrews.

In Girard’s interpretation, the secret “hidden since the foundation of the world” referred to in Matt. 13:35 (and Luke 11:50-51)—and alluded to, of course, in his book’s title—was the founding role played in all human enterprises by the *mécanisme victimaire* (victimizing mechanism) of scapegoating, which is itself an outgrowth of mimetic desire. Mimetic desire is a deeply rooted tendency in human beings to imitate the desires of others. This eventually leads to mimetic rivalry and mimetic conflict—not only because to desire what another desires, in a world of finite resources, will inevitably lead to conflict over the same objects of desire, but also because even in a world of unlimited fungibility it would still be precisely our rival’s object we would desire and not even a perfect equivalent would satisfy us. The victimizing mechanism is both a further development in this process and also, in most societies that have developed historically, the solution to the crises it generates. To explain the logic of Girard’s idea very simply:

- Since mimetic desire is a fundamental trait of human beings, people will inevitably fall into mimetic rivalries and these will spread like wildfire, especially where no system of traditional restraints and boundaries has been developed or where such a system has broken down.
- When these circumstances (lack of an effective system of restraints) prevail, the mimetic conflict will multiply until it threatens to destroy the entire society in a paroxysm of violence.
- At this point the victimizing mechanism will be triggered by the same mechanism that started the trouble to begin with, namely mimesis. Some

individual (perhaps someone with a limp, or with noticeable racial differences, or with non-conformist ideas) may attract the attention of several others who will gang up on him, and others will also be drawn to join them by the mimesis of their violence.

- Those drawn by mimesis into such shared hostility to a common victim will experience among themselves, in place of their earlier rivalry, a new unanimity and fellowship.
- But the peace that proceeds from this is inherently fragile: new rivalries may develop and threaten the group-until once again they seek a new common scapegoat.
- Or, as the ancient Israelites did, they may forswear intra-group violence and restrain themselves from mimetic rivalry by adherence to a Law deemed transcendent. And they may reinforce their loyalty to that system of restraint by instituting ritualized commemorations of the original collective victimization, i.e., ritual sacrifices, to remind them of its originating, life-giving effects while protecting them from having actually to repeat it in all its dangerous reality.
- But such a system of the control of violence is far from perfectly effective, especially because it masks the reality of the whole complex of mimetic desire, rivalry, and victimization. New crises therefore continue to arise and call for new victims.

2

This, says Girard, is the reality behind all the imagery of sacrifice in primitive religions and in the Hebrew Bible, except where the prophets gradually moved toward the realization that the God of Israel did not want “the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats” (Isaiah 1:12).⁽²⁾ In the imagery of the gospels, the Satan that Jesus resisted and finally conquered is a personification of the victimizing mechanism and the symbol of the insidious force with which it sneaks up on us from behind and takes possession of us in all our endeavors.⁽³⁾ The principal act of Jesus and of the gospel writers was their exposing of this hidden force. This, for Girard, is the truth that makes us free-or *can* do so, if we relive in the conversion of our own hearts, the realization the gospels try to share with us.

The power of the victimizing mechanism to resist being exposed and disarmed is exemplified with supreme irony in the development Girard calls “historical Christianity”—the religion that took shape around a sacrificial reading of what had been the anti-sacrificial revelation in the gospels.⁽⁴⁾ In this distorted tradition, Jesus came to be interpreted as having cooperated voluntarily with his victimizers in order to offer himself in his crucifixion as a sacrificial victim for the purpose of appeasing an angry God. This conception, says Girard in *Things Hidden*, “was most

completely formulated by the medieval theologians, and it amounted to the statement that the Father himself insisted upon the sacrifice. Efforts to explain this sacrificial pact only result in absurdities: God feels the need to revenge his honour, which has been tainted by the sins of humanity, and so on. Not only does God require a new victim, but he requires the victim who is most precious and most dear to him, his very son" (182).

Girard identifies the Epistle to the Hebrews as the chief New Testament source of this misreading: "The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews interprets Christ's death on the basis of the sacrifices under the Old Law. The new bond with God, like the old one, is inaugurated in blood. But as it is perfect, it is no longer the blood of animals[,] which is 'powerless to remove sins,' but the blood of Christ" (228). The author, Girard says, "may well say that Christ's sacrifice is, by contrast with the others, unique, perfect, and definitive. But in reality he can see only continuity with previous sacrifices, if he takes no account of the scapegoat mechanism." Hebrews, one might say, is to Girard what the Epistle of James was to Luther: the one book of the New Testament that really missed the point.

I think Girard is correct that much traditional reading of Hebrews has fostered a way of reading Christian symbols that has obscured the very important truth Girard has himself done such admirable work in bringing to light. I hope, then, that it will not seem merely retrograde if I suggest that there may be more to this text, and to the theme of sacrifice in Christianity and in other religions, than Girard's immensely valuable, but rather narrowly focused, anti-sacrificial critique has yet managed to take into account.

Girard's interpretation of Hebrews attributes to it two key ideas that might be analyzed logically as:

- The true, fully effective sacrifice = Jesus' crucifixion.
- The function of the crucifixion = appeasement of God.

I will try to show, however, that on a more careful reading Hebrews can be seen to be saying something quite different:

- The true, fully effective sacrifice is not Jesus' crucifixion but something else that I will try to clarify below (although his willingness to face death on the cross was an expression and sign of that something else).
- The crucifixion did have a redemptive function, but that function was not sacrificial in the sense Girard focuses on and had nothing to do with appeasing God.

Girard is correct that Hebrews is not especially concerned with exposing the

scapegoat mechanism in the manner Girard himself does, but neither is it concerned with affirming or hiding it; in fact, its explicit critique of the sacrifices of the Temple system as ineffective constitute an explicit repudiation of the idea that the slaying of victims can be in any way salvific.

Let me begin my own analysis by looking at a few passages from Hebrews that I think an interpretation of the theme of sacrifice needs to consider. I will not attempt an interpretation of Hebrews as a whole, and I will ignore the final 13th chapter entirely, since it does not appear to have been a part of the original document, which was something more like a sermon or “homiletical midrash” than a letter, according to George Wesley Buchanan in the Anchor Bible edition.[\(5\)](#)

Buchanan’s commentary on Hebrews also presupposes, by the way, the sort of sacrificial reading Girard criticizes, as do the editors of the New Oxford Annotated Bible (Revised Standard Version). This way of reading Hebrews has become pervasively conventional, and Girard is quite right to criticize it. My own reading presupposes Girard’s critique of sacrifice; far from wanting to oppose or correct it, I wish to complement it with a recovery of what I think is a deeper, genuinely “anti-sacrificial” (in Girard’s sense) reading intended by the epistle’s author—or at least implied in what his epistle says. I hope also, through some comparison of this early[\(6\)](#) Christian text with Hindu and Buddhist themes, to show that there can be further meanings in religious images of sacrifice than only those that mask and act out the *mécanisme victimaire*.

I use purposely the phrases “there *can* be further meanings” and “at least implied,” because there is no way to prove with certainty what some ancient author meant or “had in mind,” especially one so lost in anonymity as the author of Hebrews. But a good way to approach the question of what this text might have meant for its author or at least to an intelligent Jewish-Christian reader of the mid-first century, is to separate out and set aside meanings that would seem incoherent or that are based on later ways of thinking that have lost touch with the original milieu of meaning.

3

One example of what has to be set aside as such an anachronistic reading is the now conventional notion of what it means to speak of Jesus as “son of God” or “Christ”: that he was some kind of divine figure. For first century Jews like the author of this text and his readers,[\(7\)](#) references to someone as “son of God” or as “the anointed one” (the precise meaning of “messiah” or “Christ”) would not in themselves have involved the idea that the person referred to was divine. The term “son of God” had a long Biblical history. Its most important use was to refer to the

calling of Israel as a people, as when God tells Moses to say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord, Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me’” (Exodus 4:22), or when God says in Hosea 11:1: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”⁽⁸⁾ To say in the first century Jewish milieu that Jesus was “son of God” was to say that he truly fulfilled the calling of Israel to live in sonship to God. When Hebrews speaks of him as a “pioneer. . . leading many sons to glory” (2:10),⁽⁹⁾ it is clear that the focus is on the idea of the first true Israelite leading others to fulfill the same calling, i.e., the calling of Israel to sonship.

“Anointing” was an image used to refer to the idea that God called and empowered some individual for an important work. In so far as it might refer to one called and empowered to fulfill the calling of Israel as a whole to heed God’s will in a filial manner and help others to fulfill it, the titles “son of God” and “messiah” or “christ” could even overlap in meaning. In first century Palestine “anointed” was most commonly used to refer to someone called to drive out the Romans and restore an Israelite state like the one attributed to David and Solomon. But like “son of God,” the symbolism of being “anointed” had a long history of more diverse use behind it. In the Hebrew Bible it was used to refer to a wide range of figures, mainly kings—including Saul, David, Zerubbabel, and even Cyrus of Persia (Isaiah 45:1)—and important priests, such as Aaron (Exodus 29:7). We know it was used in the first century B.C.E. community that left the Dead Sea scrolls to refer to expected leaders of both the kingly and the priestly type, spoken of in the scrolls as messiahs “of Israel” and “of Aaron” respectively. In most New Testament documents, “anointed” was used mainly to identify Jesus as a kingly figure fulfilling the prophecy that someday Yahweh would rule in Zion, but in Hebrews it is Jesus’ role as high priest that is emphasized, a role that is underscored by associating him with Melchizedek, whose superior priesthood even Abraham recognized and deferred to (Hebrews 7:4).

Although he says Jesus “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3; literally: “being the radiance of his glory and the representation of his reality” [tes hypostaseos autou⁽¹⁰⁾]), the author of the epistle emphasizes that he was fully human: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature [shared in the same things], that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (2:14-15). Only a human being could die a human death, but also, only a human being “who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4:15) could conquer, as representative of all humanity, the power of sin and death.

This is the central idea of Hebrews: that Jesus, fulfilling the calling of Israel to divine sonship, raised humanity itself into sonship in his own person by conquering sin and

breaking the power of Satan over all human beings. Satan's power was in Biblical tradition the power to tempt and lead astray. But it was also the power of death. Hebrews is quite explicit in linking the tendency of humans to sin (i.e., to fail to fulfill their calling to sonship) to their fear of death.[\(11\)](#) They have been enslaved by the fear of death, and Jesus' death has delivered them from that slavery so that now they are free to respond to the calling to sonship as he did.

How did Jesus free them from this? How did he break the power of Satan over them once and for all? Here is the crux of the text. Hebrews does not spell out the answer to this obvious question, probably because the author expected the answer would be obvious to his readers. But it is no longer so obvious as it once was. To a western Christian reader today, as to Girard himself, there is one very obvious answer: Jesus did it by dying on the cross as a propitiatory sacrifice, that is, by offering his "blood" to appease the anger of the God who inflicts death as a punishment. The reason this is so obvious now is that Anselm of Canterbury answered the question in this way in the 11th century in his *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why Did God Become Man?).[\(12\)](#) But would this have been obvious (or even credible) to the epistle's first century audience, a millennium before Anselm and three centuries before Augustine developed the ideas of Original Sin and inherited guilt that Anselm could interpret as an offense against God's honor? This propitiatory-sacrificial reading is clearly incoherent with numerous elements of the text. For example, the one who is described in 2:14-15 as having "the power of death" is not an offended God but "ton diabolon," the devil. And God is described repeatedly in the text as not wanting the kinds of sacrifice that involved killing offerings. Girard says in the quotation above from *Things Hidden* (182), that "[e]fforts to explain this sacrificial pact only result in absurdities." Might it not be possible that this western medieval reading of Hebrews would have seemed just as absurd to its author and first century audience as it does to Girard?

To an early Christian there would have been another obvious way to interpret the idea that Jesus' death freed human beings from enslavement by the fear of death, a way that is clearly attested as current in the first century Christian milieu: that Jesus' death was the prelude to his resurrection. To someone who believed in Jesus' resurrection, it would have shown in the most dramatic and convincing way that the conquest of death was no longer merely a dream or hope for the future, but had actually become, in the life of one concrete human being, a reality. And as such it was also a token of future resurrection for others. Paul alludes to this idea again and again in his own epistles, so it should not be surprising to find it in Hebrews as well.

That Hebrews does not represent Jesus as seeking crucifixion in order to make his own death a propitiatory sacrifice should be evident from 5:7: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to him

who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear [literally, devoutness (*eulabeias*)].” This is hardly coherent with the idea of a conscious pact with God to die as a propitiation, but it is perfectly coherent with the idea that in fulfillment of his prayers he was raised from death and that their belief in this could be interpreted as delivering the epistle’s author and audience from enslavement by the fear of their own deaths.

4

But what then was Jesus’ sacrifice if it was not his death on the cross? For Hebrews does represent Jesus as offering a sacrifice: “he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:26) And this new covenant with God is even said to be inaugurated in blood: “But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent . . . he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (9:11-12)

Is this physical blood, like that of the goats and calves, or metaphorical blood? If it is physical blood, then certainly Girard is right to say that the author of the epistle “can see only continuity with previous sacrifices.” But if Jesus’ blood here is a metaphor for some other sort of sacrifice, then the picture is quite different. Which kind of meaning does the text suggest, and what sort of sacrifice?

It will help to clarify the question further if we consider where the sacrifice is supposed to take place. It is certainly not in the Temple in Jerusalem like the Levitical sacrifices, but is it on Golgotha? Several passages in Hebrews make clear that its locus is not there either. The passage just quoted from 9:11-12 says that passing “through the greater and more perfect tent” he “entered once for all into the Holy Place. . . .” Where might that be?

The “tent” is a reference to the structure of the Jerusalem Temple, which was spoken of as divided into two “tents”: “the Holy” and “the Holy of Holies.” [\(13\)](#) The “Holy Place” of 9:12 would correspond to the part of the Temple called “the Holy,” where the sacrificial offerings were prepared for the altar which stood in front of the first tent. The Levitical priests who prepared offerings there, Hebrews tells us, “serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary” (8:5). Jesus, on the other hand, offered his “blood” in the true, heavenly “Holy Place,” and having done that, has now passed in his resurrection life into the true Holy of Holies, “into the inner shrine behind the curtain” (6:19), “not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (9:24).

So Jesus’ sacrifice took place not in a physical place but a metaphorical place. The

“blood” he offered in this metaphorical place, was perforce metaphorical blood. But what “heavenly” (spiritual or psychological) reality might that metaphor represent?

To get an initial sense of what Jesus’ sacrifice might have involved, let us consider further the way the text contrasts it with those of the Temple tradition: “When Christ came into the world, he said ‘Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired . . . in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure. Then I said, “Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God,” as it is written of me in the roll of the book”(10:5; the quotation within the quotation is Psalm 40:6-8). Hebrews then goes on to say that God, .” . . abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:9-10) “The first” clearly refers to the traditional animal sacrifices; “the second,” just as clearly, is “to do thy will.”

These passages make it abundantly clear that the “blood” of Jesus’ sacrifice, like the Holy Place where it is offered, is a metaphor: the sacrifices that involved physical blood have been abolished; the new, fully adequate sacrifice, “the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all,” is the perfect fulfillment of God’s will. What might that mean, and why might “blood” be an appropriate metaphor for it? The text does not spell it out, but again the answer was probably sufficiently evident to the original author and his intended audience not to require that. Perhaps the author is referring to what was probably already Jesus’ well known dictum about the two great commandments cited, for example, in Matthew 22:37-39: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” [\(14\)](#) This certainly describes the calling of Israel, the calling to sonship to God, that was fulfilled, from the early Christian point of view for the first time in a fully adequate way by Jesus.

As fine a formulation of God’s will as these two commandments are, however, they remain by themselves a bit abstract, and it may not be immediately clear just how fulfilling them could appropriately be imaged as a kind of sacrifice, even if one demanding only metaphorical blood. To get a better sense of how the imagery of sacrifice operates here it may help to turn to a consideration of some parallel ideas and images in “the great oriental religions” to which we saw Girard refer.

It is noteworthy in this connection that Bede Griffiths, a Catholic monk who spent more than two decades in India practicing a life of contemplative prayer and writing about it in a way that draws on both Christian and Hindu symbols, opens his book, *The Cosmic Revelation: The Hindu Way to God*, with an allusion to the Hebrews: “We are going to reflect on what I call the Vedic Revelation; and I use the word revelation intentionally because I think we have to recognize today that God has revealed Himself in other ways than through the Bible. God has been speaking to

man, 'in many and various ways,' as it says in the Letter to the Hebrews, from the beginning of time" (7). Griffiths develops further this idea of a "cosmic revelation" beyond the confines of Israel and Christianity by invoking the same imagery of Melchizedek as does Hebrews: ". . . the Messiah is said to be 'a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek'—not the order of Aaron, of the Jewish priesthood, but of Melchizedek, this 'pagan' priesthood. . . . That is why, when I enter a Hindu temple, I feel that I am entering a holy place. . . ." (30).

Griffiths' point of departure for understanding "the Hindu way to God" is the Vedic fire sacrifice. He explains its symbolism as representing a circulation of gifts: gifts from the divine to humans and the return of those gifts to the divine. The fire symbolizes the transcendent source of life and spirit: ". . . the whole Vedic religion is centered on the fire sacrifice. The god of fire is *Agni*, and worship was paid to the sun as the source of fire. But the sun is the source of light to the mind as well as to the body" (22). The symbolism of fire in this rite compresses a large range of meanings: the fire is vitality, it is consciousness, it is energy; it is not only the divine energy descending into incarnate life, but it is also the energy of the liturgical offering, and as such it is simultaneously worldly and divine, immanent and transcendent:

5

Agni, as we have said, is the god of fire. The fire is centred in the sun. . . . The fire comes down from heaven and is buried in the earth and when you take twigs or a flint and rub them together, the fire, Agni, leaps up. This is the god of fire who has come down from heaven to consume the sacrifice. But this fire is also a spiritual fire. . . . Agni, the fire, is the All-knowing One. It is a physical fire, yet they call it the fire of knowledge, of wisdom, and he is the All-knowing One. He is the mediator between God and man. He takes the sacrifice, consumes the sacrifice, and carries it back to heaven, and you ask him to direct your sacrifice. (23) What sacrifice in this interpretation symbolizes essentially is the recognition that all life comes from a transcendent source and ultimately belongs to that transcendent source. The failure to recognize that concretely, to relinquish one's claim to possession, and to thankfully allow all gifts to belong to the one source is the essence of sin: "In the Vedas it is very clear that everything comes down from above, from heaven. We receive everything from above and everything must be returned. A sacrifice is the return to God, and sin is the opposite, the appropriation of something to one's self. . . . I am not my own possession; I am a gift—my being is a gift from God. I have got to return that gift. Sacrifice is this return" (49).

Likening the Vedic sacrifice to the Christian eucharist, Griffiths says:

So it reads: 'Who in all his work, sees Brahman, he in truth goes to Brahman; Brahman is his worship, Brahman is his offering, offered by Brahman, in the fire of Brahman.' Now that really is a Eucharistic action. In the Eucharist God is worshiped. You offer what you are doing to God. At the same time it is God Himself who makes the offering and who is being offered. God is both priest and victim. And it is offered in the fire of God. . . . So every action should be a Eucharistic action, that is the goal, to be united with Christ in His offering, so that one's total life is offered to God. The offering is God Himself, He is offering Himself in us, in the fire of His own love, that is by the power of His own grace, resulting in a totally transformed human life. That is to make one's whole life a sacrifice. (99) To get a more concrete sense of the particular sacrifice and transformation pointed to in Hebrews, it may help to consider further some of the symbols of the Vedic religion and then compare them with those of Buddhism. There are many deities in Hindu religion, but in the tradition of the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, they are all symbols and embodiments of what Griffiths terms "the One Being" which the Rig-Veda says "the wise call by many names" (Griffiths 18). In Hinduism there are three major symbols that encompass all of the divine in its various forms: Brahman, Atman, and Purusha. Brahman is the One Being, considered as the radically transcendent source of all that is, but also as that which can become immanent in the forms of Atman and Purusha. Atman is usually translated as "self." It is the spirit of the One Being present within consciousness and animating consciousness. Purusha is usually translated as "person." To the extent that the presence of Brahman becomes embodied as true Atman, one might say, the result is a true person or "purusha." Whether one says Atman is the center or animating principle of one person or of many persons will depend on the angle from which one considers it; as Griffiths puts it, "Each of us is a little Purusha, and there is one great Purusha who embraces us all" (74).

The symbolism of the possible unity or multiplicity of Purusha also connects with the symbolism of sacrifice: ". . . creation comes from the sacrifice of Purusha. At the beginning of time Purusha is sacrificed and his limbs are scattered all over the world. In the ritual sacrifice Purusha is gathered together and becomes one again" (75).

"Aha!" one might hear a strict Girardian say, "Here is an obvious instance of the imagery of sacrifice masking a primordial collective murder." Well, that may be true—but it does not imply that there can be no more meaning to the symbol than that alone, as I hope will be clear from the comparison Griffiths proceeds to with some similar Christian symbols: "This has a profound relationship to the conception of Adam and the Son of Man. As St. Augustine said, 'Adam at his fall, was scattered over all the earth.' Man was once one, one with nature, one with himself, one with God. And then when he fell he was scattered and divided. The atonement means

that God comes into this divided universe and gathers those scattered pieces together and in his sacrifice reunites mankind. He brings all these persons together in his Person. Another wonderful text of St. Augustine says, 'In the end there will be *unus Christus amans seipsum*—One Christ, loving himself in all his members'" (75).

The Hindu symbolism is complicated by the fact that the symbols Brahman, Atman, and Purusha can have levels of meaning. For example, there is "the Atman in man which is the Spirit of God in man; but *Atman* can also be the 'spirit of man'" (105). Similarly, Purusha can refer to the "Supreme Person," but each one of us can also be said to be "a purusha." (The ambiguity is similar to that with which St. Paul uses the word "Christ" to refer sometimes to Jesus as an individual and sometimes to what sounds more like a cosmic person embracing all of the redeemed humans who live "in Christ.")

It is this ambiguity in the Indian tradition—the idea of Purusha and Atman as also human and individual—that seems to have given rise to the core Buddhist teaching of "anatman," or "no-self." For Buddhism (very much as in Girard and Oughourlian, as will be explained below) the human self is not an enduring, substantial reality but an accidental configuration of memory and desire. If, from the Buddhist point of view, one believes that one has an individual, substantial "atman" or "self," then that belief is an illusion that enslaves one to illusory desires—desires that seek to preserve and augment that illusory, insubstantial self. The whole purpose of Buddhism is to assist the individual held in this bondage to discover, through meditative practice leading to inward realization and transformation, the truth of "anatman": that there is no such self. Although Buddhists, having dropped the theistic language of Hindu religion, do not use the symbolism of sacrifice, the Buddhist radical relinquishing of the individual atman through realization of anatman could also be called a kind of sacrifice of the self.

6

There have been patterns of thought in Indian tradition (especially in Jain) that have emphasized the idea of atman as individual in a way to which the Buddhist critique is appropriate, but the two traditions are not inherently in conflict over this point, as can be seen from a Vedic verse Griffiths quotes: "When by the real nature of the Atman he sees as by a lamp the real nature of Brahman, then having known the one eternal God, who is beyond all natures, he is freed from bondage" (82). Griffiths says that the insight this verse expresses is "not merely a speculative theory but a fact of experience." The same is certainly true for the Buddhist realization of anatman. Both refer to psychological reality that must be known experientially.

If the symbols of Hinduism and Buddhism are expressions of potentially universal

human experience, then they may also serve as analogies for the experience the author of Hebrews refers to as Jesus' sacrifice. Sin, the force within us that causes us to center in the false self of our mimetic desires rather than in the love of God and of our neighbors, is the ultimate obstacle to the sonship to which Israel understood itself to be called. In psychological terms sin may be described as equivalent to what Buddhism calls the "craving" that binds us to the false atman or illusory self. It was by his conquest of sin and the shift of the center of his being from the false self to its true center in God that Jesus fulfilled, for Israel and for mankind, God's call to sonship. In psychological terms this shift of the center of personhood may be considered equivalent to putting to death, or "sacrificing," the false self.

It is appropriate in this connection to mention also a pertinent Girardian symbol, the *moi-du-désir* or "desire-self" that Jean-Michel Oughourlian explores extensively in *The Puppet of Desire*. This, like the Buddhist idea of the atman, is an accidental configuration of memory and desire—of memories, that is, that collect around and give an illusory sense of permanence to constantly shifting patterns of desire. As Oughourlian explains his specifically psychological development of Girardian theory:

I have always thought that what one customarily calls the *I* or *self* in psychology is an unstable, constantly changing, and ultimately evanescent structure. I think . . . that only *desire* brings this self into existence. Because desire is the only psychological motion, it alone, it seems to me, is capable of producing the self and breathing life into it. The first hypothesis that I would like to formulate in this regard is this: *desire gives rise to the self and, by its movement, animates it*. The second hypothesis . . . is that *desire is mimetic*. This postulate, which was advanced by René Girard as early as 1961, seems to me capable of serving as the foundation for a new, pure psychology—that is, one unencumbered by any sort of biologism. . . . These two hypotheses make it necessary to revise earlier psychologies, since these are psychologies either of the subject or of the object. They demand that one renounce the mythical claim to a self that would be a permanent structure in a monadic subject. (11-12) The idea of the atman that the Buddhist doctrine of anatman opposes is precisely such a "mythical claim to a self that would be a permanent structure in a monadic subject." The very valuable Girardian addition to the Buddhist insight is the idea of the force of unconscious mimesis and the role of the mediator of desire as a model for the patterns of desire that spring up and grip us.

Perhaps it may be helpful if I explain this idea a little further. Girard initially developed his concept of mimetic desire and the role of the mediator of desire in a study of the novel, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (*Deceit, Desire, and The Novel*), the 1961 work that Oughourlian refers to. It has frequently been

observed by literary scholars that a (if not *the*) principal focus of the novel as a genre has been the conflict between appearance and reality, both in society and in the life of the individual. What Girard found in this study of the novel from Cervantes to Dostoyevsky and Proust was that the great novelists he examined showed that most of what appear to us to be “our” desires are really imitated from what we perceive to be the desires of others in our milieu. More particularly, we seek out models of desire (what Girard calls “mediators”) in order to learn what is worth desiring.

Why do we do this? The reality Girard thinks the great novelists discovered and disclose to us is that each person who comes into the world begins with a feeling of radical lack or emptiness, of weakness and vulnerability. Beginning as helpless infants utterly dependent on powerful others, we feel acutely our lack of power. We also have a strong inner drive to seek to become like those powerful others so as to acquire their power for ourselves. We think of the mediator as free from the lack of power we feel. When we notice that the mediator has desires, we assume that these must be for things the mediator perceives as having the potential to augment his or her “being” (i.e., power). That is why we want them for ourselves: we want to “be.” This is why Girard also calls mimetic desire “metaphysical desire”: mimetic desire is only superficially a desire to have what the other has or wants; on a deeper level it is a desire to possess not the other’s objects but his “being,” to *be* what he is.

All of this normally takes place below the threshold of our awareness—though it is not exactly unconscious either. Rather our consciousness is virtually “possessed” by our fascination with the mediator, the prestigious other we strive to imitate.⁽¹⁵⁾ The great novelists, however, raise this into awareness and give us the opportunity to reflect on it and, ideally, to break free from it. This is the “novelistic truth” Girard’s title refers to, and the “romantic lying” is our tendency in our ordinary lives to avoid noticing that truth.

“A basic contention of this essay,” Girard said at the beginning of that work, “is that the great writers apprehend intuitively and concretely, through the medium of their art, if not formally, the system in which they were first imprisoned together with their contemporaries” (3). Something else they can be said to have apprehended intuitively and concretely, to put the matter in Buddhist language, is that life in that self-generated prison is characterized by *dukkha*, the Buddhist term often translated as “suffering” but more accurately translated as “unsatisfactoriness.” Mimetic desire is unsatisfactory for some very fundamental reasons:

- As desire, it is really illusory. That is, we do not really want what we think we want or for the reasons we think we want it. We want it because we think

(mistakenly) that the reason our mediator of desire wants it is that he actually knows what will enhance his being and make it invulnerable. (This is the “romantic lie.”)

- Even if we could acquire the object of desire, it would not bring us satisfaction, because the “being,” the power and invulnerability, we really long for and of which the object is only a symbol, will always remain out of reach. We are finite and can never achieve the divine super-sufficiency or plenitude of being that we attribute to our mediators. (This is the “novelistic truth”)

7

To win freedom from self-imprisonment in this system of illusion requires that one both understand its real structure and be willing to relinquish its illusory comforts—in particular the comforting belief that if only one could make just a little more progress in acquiring the mediator’s objects or becoming what the mediator is, or if only one could defeat the rival (which is really only a negative version of the mediator), or kill the scapegoat (another negative version of the mediator), then one would enjoy the plenitude of being one longs for.

The core of the Girardian idea, as of the Buddhist, is that the desire-self, though a tenaciously powerful force in one’s psychic life, is ultimately insubstantial and that seeing through it can lead to liberation from the power of the illusions it generates. Jesus’ breaking free in this way from the whole complex of mimetic desire and its conflictual and victimizing mechanisms is the heart of Girard’s own christology. Although the word might surprise a strict Girardian, Jesus’ seeing through and letting go of the desire-self could also appropriately be described as a kind of sacrifice.

The excursus into “the great oriental religions,” then, has not been a mere detour. One might even say that Girard is closer to these than he seems to have noticed.

If the imagery of sacrifice in Hebrews is interpreted in the light of these considerations, the sacrifice talked about there shows two aspects: (1) it refers to something that might be imaged as the “bloody” sacrifice or putting to death of what Buddhism calls the atman and Girardian psychology the desire-self; and (2) it refers to the consecration of the true person, the “body” of 10:5 to a life that finds its true center in God: “but a body hast thou prepared for me.” The image of Jesus’ “own blood” (9:12), that is, represents what dies in the sacrifice; the image of his “body” represents the person who is consecrated. It also refers to the continuing life of that consecrated person, which Hebrews speaks of in 8:2 as that of “a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent, which is set up not by man but by the Lord.” Jesus’ willingness to undergo crucifixion rather than abandon his prophetic calling was an

expression and sign of his complete consecration of his life to God's service. His sacrifice in its full meaning was not his crucifixion alone but his self-emptying throughout his life: both his sacrifice of all false selfhood, of the desire-self, and his self-giving to God. The "offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10) was the total consecration of his living personhood, of his whole life, to heeding and fulfilling the calling of Israel to sonship. This was a ministry which constituted Jesus' life in this world before his crucifixion and continues still, from the point of view of the author of Hebrews, in the heavenly sanctuary.

Of course if one were to approach this idea from the point of view of the sort of mythifying later christology that sometimes interpreted Jesus as a pre-existent divine person who took on a human body and walked around in it omnipotent and omniscient but without a really human mind and psychology, then it would be inconceivable that Jesus could actually experience the pull of a desire-self, the gravitational force of a false center. After all, he would just be God, and how could the infinite source of all that is experience temptation or be deceived by a false self-understanding? From this point of view, Jesus' fidelity would simply be an expression of his divine nature, not the kind of costly, even painful, self conquest to which the image of shedding blood would be appropriate. With no desire-self, there would be nothing to sacrifice or blood to shed except the physical blood of his physical body on the cross. If one were to view the whole picture in this way, it would seem natural and virtually inevitable to interpret Jesus' sacrifice in the conventional way that Girard rightly finds absurd. But this is not the vision expressed in Hebrews, with its emphasis that Jesus was truly human and was "in every respect . . . tempted as we are, yet without sin" (4:15). Nor is it what eventually came to be defined in the councils of the fourth and fifth centuries as orthodoxy: the Council of Chalcedon in 451 echoed the epistle's phrasing when it described the second hypostasis as "complete in manhood" and "in every way like us, except for sin." [\(16\)](#)

This leaves only the question of what light this analysis of Jesus' sacrifice in "the Holy Place" might throw on what it could mean to speak of him as also a manifestation of God, one who "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Hebrews 1:3). Any modern New Testament scholar would object to the anachronism of reading back into this very early document the doctrine of the Trinity, which was not formulated until the fourth century. But it is not anachronistic to recognize that the seeds that developed into the Trinitarian idea are in the New Testament already in references to Jesus as in some manner manifesting divine presence and to the Holy Spirit as indwelling both him and those who faithfully follow him. The symbol "son of God," as was mentioned earlier, carried no connotations of divinity, but "spirit of God" did. How might the idea of the Holy Spirit relate to the picture developed so far of Jesus' sacrifice as a self-emptying and

self-dedication? In particular, how might it relate to the psychological and spiritual structure of the person, the true self, who is left after the death of the desire-self?

In Buddhism, too, the question arises as to what remains when the atman is seen through and transcended. The answer there is “Bodhi,” enlightenment. One who has actually realized anatman, “no self,” does not cease to exist but becomes an enlightened one, a Buddha. Sometimes Buddhists also speak of what is left in enlightenment as Buddha-mind or Buddha-nature and of the compassion or love for all living things that characterizes the Bodhisattva life or nirvana. Contrary to conventional western misunderstandings, it is not the case that in nirvana there is simply nothing left. The word “nirvana” or “nibbana” means literally to be “blown out” or to be “cooled by blowing.” What is cooled is the fire of craving, and what is extinguished is the desire-self, the atman—but it was never real anyway. What is left is Bodhi, Buddha-nature, Buddha-mind. Buddhism is not therefore a nihilism or annihilationism; it does not, *pace* Girard, cultivate “a kind of living death.” One who becomes enlightened is freed from the power of karma and the wheel of rebirth, symbols that refer to the power of the illusory atman, the desire-self, to endlessly regenerate itself in the psychology of the person who succumbs to its lure. Freedom from that is true life, the freedom to live with a clear mind and a compassionate heart.

8

Buddhism is explicit about this new life or animating principle that would be left after the realization of anatman. The Epistle to the Hebrews may spell it out less explicitly, but it does seem to have a parallel to Buddha-mind or Buddha-nature in its symbolism of the Holy Spirit. In many places in the New Testament the Holy Spirit is spoken of as indwelling Jesus and guiding and impelling him in his work, and also as giving new life to his followers in fulfillment of the prophecy that the Law that was formerly written on tablets of stone would one day be written on the hearts of God’s people (Jeremiah 31:33). In Hebrews the Holy Spirit is mentioned explicitly only once, but in that one verse it is indicated as the animating principle of Jesus’ sacrifice and of the new life that sacrifice opens to his followers: “. . . how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience . . .” (9:14).

This may be the only reference in Hebrews to the Spirit, but it has implications that gradually unfold as the author goes on to describe the consequences of Jesus’ sacrifice for his readers: He exhorts them to hold fast in faith to the new life Jesus’ sacrifice has won for them by freeing them from slavery to the fear of death and by renewing their consciences. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). Freedom from the fear of death comes from

their faith in Jesus' resurrection and the hope for their own to come. The renewal of their consciences comes from the breaking of that fear's power to make them cling to the life of the illusory desire-self that must be given up. This means they are called to undergo their own metaphorical but very real deaths: "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (12:4). In the last line of what Buchanan thinks is the original "homiletical midrash" we can even hear a distant echo of the image of the Vedic Agni as the fire that comes down from heaven, is buried in the earth, and leaps up again to consume the sacrifice: "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire" (12:28-29).

Notes

1. A reader wanting a full exposition of those theories might look at Webb, *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France*, especially 87-119 and 175-193. [\(back\)](#)
2. Cf. the important theological study of Girard's thought by Raymund Schwager, S. J., *Must There Be Scapegoats?: Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, 88. [\(back\)](#)
3. Cf. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 187: ". . . the kingdom of Satan is not one among others. The Gospels state explicitly that Satan is the principle of every kingdom." [\(back\)](#)
4. See *Things Hidden*, 225-227. [\(back\)](#)
5. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, 246. [\(back\)](#)
6. Buchanan, 257, thinks Hebrews, because it refers to Temple sacrifices that are still going on, dates from before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. This would make it, along with the epistles of Paul, one of the earliest documents in the New Testament. J.H. Davies (*A Letter to the Hebrews: Commentary by J.H. Davies*, 8) agrees with Buchanan on this early date of the document. [\(back\)](#)
7. If this text really does date from the mid-first century, it would be just one more anachronism to interpret the author and his audience as "Christians" (as opposed to "Jews") in the sense that word later took on. There is every reason to suppose that it would have been a very rare Christian of the first century who might have thought that Christianity was a new religion separate from the Jewish tradition; for all of its earliest adherents, the Christian movement was understood as a development within the Jewish tradition, not something radically different from it. [\(back\)](#)

8. Passages from the Bible will be quoted in the Revised Standard Version translation. [\(back\)](#)

9. Material in brackets will be my own comments and occasional more literal translations. A more literal translation of *archegon* than “pioneer” might be something like “original leader.” Arndt and Gingrich’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* spells it out as “one who begins someth[ing] as first in a series and thus supplies the impetus.” [\(back\)](#)

10. On the meaning of “hypostasis” in early Christian usage, see Webb, “The Hermeneutic of Greek Trinitarianism.” [\(back\)](#)

11. For a psychological discussion of the idea of enslavement by the fear of death, see Becker, *The Denial of Death*. [\(back\)](#)

12. Written ca. 1094-1098. Anselm is clearly the major figure among “the medieval theologians” Girard refers to in the quote above from *Things Hidden*, 182. The reason I speak of this as obvious to specifically western Christians is that Anselm was a westerner working out of a tradition deriving from Augustine of Hippo, who developed the idea of Original Sin, which for Anselm is the offense the propitiatory sacrifice was needed to compensate for. The Eastern Christian tradition did not read either of these Latin writers, had no doctrine of Original Sin as heritable guilt (although it did believe humanity had “fallen,” in the sense of going astray from the path God intended for it), and had an entirely different idea of atonement; for the Christian East, atonement (at-one-ment) was effected by the Incarnation as such, which was believed to have united humanity and divinity, rather than by propitiation of divine wrath. [\(back\)](#)

13. See Buchanan, 140-142. [\(back\)](#)

14. This interpretation of the essence of Torah was not an invention of Jesus but was already familiar to his Jewish audience, as can be seen from the fact that in the parallel passage in Luke 10:25-28 it is stated not by Jesus but by the “lawyer” whom Jesus challenges to tell him what in his view the principal commandments are. For the traditions behind this summation, see, for example, Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18. [\(back\)](#)

15. The psychology of possession is a major theme of Oughourlian’s *Puppet of Desire*. He considers it, in fact, the key to understanding the other phenomena he analyzes: hysteria and hypnosis. [\(back\)](#)

16. “. . . teleion . . . en anthropotéti” and “kata panta homoion hémin choris hamartias.” The conventional picture of Jesus as omniscient divine person is in fact

a mixture of some of the positions the Council of Chalcedon explicitly rejected in its definition of the hypostatic union: docetism, monophysitism, and apollinarianism.[\(back\)](#)

9

Works Cited

Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: The Free Press, 1973.

Buchanan, George Wesley. *To the Hebrews*. Translation, Comment, and Conclusions by George Wesley Buchanan. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972.

Davies, J.H. *A Letter to the Hebrews: Commentary by J.H. Davies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.

Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965. Translation of *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1961.

—-. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. With Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort. Trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987. Translation of *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (1978).

—-. *The Scapegoat*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

—-. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977. Translation of *La violence et le sacré* (1972).

Griffiths, Bede. *The Cosmic Revelation: The Hindu Way to God*. Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1983.

Oughourlian, Jean-Michel. *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*. Translated with an introduction by Eugene Webb. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993. Translation of *Un mime nommé désir*. Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1982.

Schwager, Raymund, S. J. *Must There Be Scapegoats?: Violence and Redemption in the Bible*. Trans. Maria L. Assad. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987. Translation of *Brauchen Wir Einen Sündenbock?* Munich: Kösel, 1978.

Webb, Eugene. "The Hermeneutic of Greek Trinitarianism: An Approach Through Intentionality Analysis." In *Religion in Context*, ed. Timothy P. Fallon and Philip Boo Riley. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1988. Also online at <http://faculty.washington.edu/ewebb/R428/trinity.pdf>.

—-. *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1993.