

Violence and religion: cause or effect?

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THE QUESTION OF VIOLENCE AND RELIGION AROUSES a great deal of justified interest today. It is a difficult and complex question. If we simply ask, "is this or that religion violent or peaceful?," we do not take into account the fact that violence comes from us human beings. We all believe this regardless of whether or not we believe in God. The question of religious violence, therefore, is first and foremost a human question, a social and anthropological question, and not a directly religious question.

I am going to focus on the role of violence in archaic religions and in the biblical religions. Which religions should be called archaic or primitive? My short answer is that all religions are archaic that are now dying or already dead. This definition includes all the religions of the small non-literate cultures that still existed one, two, three, or four centuries ago. It also includes the religions of the ancient world and all the prehistoric religions about which we know nothing. There probably were religions long before the painted caves of Cro-Magnon man in Southwestern France, 30,000 and 40,000 years ago.

Among modern humanists, there has been a long tradition of interpreting religion as some sort of narrative, in which its practitioners were supposed to believe. In the 19th century, for instance, the French philosopher Auguste Comte regarded all religions as failed attempts to account for "the mysteries of the universe." The postmodern theory of religion is not very different. Theorists call religions "grand narratives," which they regard as entirely fictional, as they do almost all texts.

The archaic religions are completely indifferent to the mysteries of the universe. The only narratives they have are not "grand" but small, strictly limited to the local genesis of the cults to which they belong. To Darwinian biologists and sociobiologists the fact that religion may be as old as humankind itself suggests

that it must have some more vital function than satisfying our idle curiosity about the mysteries of the universe. If it did not, it would have disappeared long ago.

In my opinion, the relationship between violence and religion is so entangled that it should not be mentioned unless one considers the problem in its entirety. I am going to summarize my views on the subject. To do so in the limited space of this essay, however, I must streamline my observations so much that some points may seem arbitrary.

Intraspecies violence already exists among animals, notably in sexual rivalries, but it remains moderate. The victor spares the vanquished, and this is how the relations that play the main role in animal life are established. They are relations of dominance. Human beings are more violent than animals since they often kill each other. We blame this state of affairs on aggression. The problem with this notion is its one-sidedness. It aggressively divides mankind between the aggressors and the aggressed, and we include ourselves in the second category. But most human conflicts are two-sided, reciprocal.

We are competitive rather than aggressive. In addition to the appetites we share with animals, we have a more problematic yearning that lacks any instinctual object: desire. We literally do not know what to desire and, in order to find out, we watch the people we admire: we imitate their desires. Both models and imitators of the same desire inevitably desire the same object and become rivals. Their rival desires literally feed on one another: the imitator becomes the model of his model, and the model the imitator of his imitator. Unlike animal rivalries, these imitative or mimetic rivalries can become so intense and contagious that not only do they lead to murder but they also spread, mimetically, to entire communities. They probably would have annihilated our species if something had not prevented this outcome. What was it?

The foundational myths of archaic religions suggest an answer. They describe the birth of the religion to which they belong. They all begin with a mimetic crisis and conclude with the same type of drama: a single victim is killed by the entire community and is finally divinized. In the Oedipus myth, for instance, the citizens of Thebes firmly believe that this hero not only killed his father and married his mother but also brought a plague epidemic to the city of Thebes. Because of this, they believe that he certainly deserves to be punished. Myths present their single

victims as guilty and the mobs who do the killing as innocent.

The 20th-Century Rejection of Realism

As I have already observed, during much of the 20th century, it has been fashionable to believe that myths and other religious texts are purely fictional. If all religious texts are imaginary, the differences between them originate in the private imaginings of a few individual authors and do not have anthropological and social significance. I believe, however, that all the recurrent features in the texts of archaic myths militate against the fictional theory. To begin with there is nothing poetic or playful about these texts. They sound much more like echoes of mob violence reported by the mobs themselves. Four categories of clues, in my view, support this hypothesis:

1) In many myths, the people seem terrified by their prospective victim, concerned solely with protecting themselves from this frightful monster. In reality, the victim seems to be in the situation of the persecuted narrator in the biblical psalms, surrounded by menacing crowds and completely helpless. In the end, the single victim always dies and the people are unharmed.

2) Many of the crimes attributed to the single victims are obvious stereotypes that reappear in myth after myth, such as rape, infanticide, bestiality, and the like. The parricide and incest of Oedipus belong to this group. Far from being the unique insight imagined by Freud, they are banal accusations of the type still bandied around nowadays by mobs on the rampage. Highly revealing as well are such magical accusations as the evil eye, the supposed power to kill with a single glance. These are opportunistic accusations routinely resorted to by mobs to justify killing whomever they feel like killing.

3) Another highly revealing clue is the physical impairment of many victims: some limp; others are one-eyed, hunchback, or crippled. These handicaps suggest how mobs really select their victims. Animal predators select visibly abnormal prey because they are easier to spot and to catch. Something similar happens, it seems, in the human world: visibly "damaged" individuals attract the attention of mobs.

4) Another telltale sign, I think, is the remarkably large number of mythical heroes defined as "foreign." In isolated and ignorant

communities, cultural differences are disturbing. A visiting stranger may start a panic and be attacked simply because his speech and mannerisms differ slightly from the local standards.

I do not claim that myths are accurate accounts of the mob phenomena, but rather that the phenomena are real while the accounts are systematically inaccurate, always distorted in the manner that is to be expected from a bunch of unrepentant killers reporting their own actions. That is the reason why the victims are always portrayed as guilty and the mobs never make the slightest mistake. They always kill a bona fide troublemaker. It was not the discovery of some authentic criminal, as claimed by myths, that reconciled these archaic communities; it was the illusion of such a discovery. The communities mimetically transferred all their hostilities to the single victim and became reconciled on the basis of the resulting illusion.

How can the same imitation, the same mimetic contagion that previously caused the mimetic rivalries and therefore the violent disintegration of the community suddenly turn into a force for the reintegration, the reconciliation of the community?

As mimetic rivalries intensify, during mimetic crises, they gradually erase all existing cultural differences and turn the best-ordered communities into undifferentiated mobs. Beyond a certain intensity, the objects of desire are consumed, destroyed, or forgotten. The mimetic frenzy refocuses on the antagonists themselves. The same human beings who, a little before, could not stop fighting because they shared the same desires, now share the same antagonists and the same hatred. Paradoxically, when mutual love is absent, the only sentiment that can reconcile human beings is its opposite, a common hatred.

The contagious mimesis polarizes against fewer and fewer antagonists until finally, for some of the insignificant reasons I mentioned earlier, or for no reason at all, the crowd becomes polarized against one last individual. At that point, no one has an enemy left in the community except for that common target and as soon as it is destroyed, violence must come to an end. In Greek the word for this seemingly miraculous operation is catharsis, which signifies the purification or cleansing of all the violence inside the community. The unanimous mimetic contagion transforms the disastrous violence of all against all into the healing

violence of all against one. The community is reconciled at the cost of one victim only.

Ritual Sacrifice

When thus reconciled, archaic communities felt that they had experienced a miracle and were greatly relieved, of course, but not for long. Human nature was unchanged and, sooner or later, the mimetic rivalries had to reappear. The frightened communities tried to limit these rivalries by a system of prohibitions that kept the people most likely to engage in them away from one another. They also tried to preordain rigidly the distribution of the potentially most divisive "goods," especially women.

Frequently, these precautions failed, it seems, and when they did, the terrified communities remembered that their previous mimetic crisis was ended by the killing of a victim. They now wondered if the killing of more victims might not repeat the earlier miracle. The result was the invention of the most important religious institution of humankind, ritual sacrifice. All archaic cultures solemnly immolate victims in the hope of preventing mimetic conflicts.

In many archaic cultures, notably in Africa, the important rituals began with some deliberate disruption of the community: the various subgroups taunted and insulted one another; they even came to blows. The idea behind these "mock crises," as the anthropologists call them, was to insure the success of the ritual sacrifice through an exact reproduction of the entire original sequence, including an abbreviated version of the mimetic rivalries. The goal was to facilitate the triggering of the victimage mechanism, and the "mock crisis" probably helped.

Let me sum up the "mimetic theory" of religion and culture: when future human beings became too mimetic to live as animals do, their dominance patterns collapsed and the resulting crises triggered the mimetic victimage mechanism around which the first systems of prohibitions and sacrificial rites coalesced. These were the first religions and the initial form of human culture. Religion enabled humanity to turn to positive use its mimetic power, which is not all violence only but is also our great capacity for learning, our superior intelligence.

If my analysis is sound, far from being the cause of our violence, archaic religions are, or rather were, first a consequence of that violence and, secondly, our

primary protection against it. During the longest part of our history or pre-history, they enabled human communities to survive their own violence. Archaic religions are essentially combinations of prohibitions and sacrifices. Prohibitions forbade violence directly, but they often failed and, when they did, archaic communities fell back upon their second line of defense, sacrifice. The paradox of archaic religion is that, in order to prevent violence, it resorted to substitute violence. Jean-Pierre Dupuy has observed that sacrifice, understood broadly, contains violence in both senses of the word. It contains violence as an army contains the attacks of its enemies, and sacrifice also contains violence in the sense of being inhabited by it, of making violence its main resource against violence itself.

During the greater part of human history, the single victim mechanism generated many religions, no doubt, that operated efficiently because the faithful never became aware of their generative principle. They were deluded into believing that their gods, rather than the community itself, had to be appeased with victims. It was the community's own anger that threatened its survival, but no one realized it. The victimage mechanism that produced archaic religions was so unanimous that the first demonized, then divinized victim seemed responsible both for the mimetic crises and their happy conclusion. Those who surrendered to the spirit of the mob saw their own unanimity not as the mimetic contagion that it really was, but as the certain proof of their correct interpretation of the single victim drama.

The Biblical "Difference"

The Hebrew Bible and the Christian Gospels are the only religious texts that contain reversals of this mythical scheme. The mobs in the Jewish and Christian scriptures think and behave exactly like the mobs in archaic myths. The difference is not in the events but in their interpretation. In myths, the victims have really committed the crimes of which their persecutors accuse them. In the Jewish and Christian scriptures, mobs are blamed for persecuting innocent victims.

In the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible, the perspective of the mob is condemned and reversed. For example, Joseph's brothers turn into a kind of ugly mob in their behavior towards him. Job's entire community acts with the solidarity of a mob. In many psalms, the narrator watches helplessly as mobs surround him for the purpose, it seems, of killing him. Many of the prophets were persecuted

and even killed by hostile mobs. The most spectacular example is the killing of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52-53), whom the Gospels compare with Jesus. The prophetic literature is a long march away from this violent social phenomenon that seems to have played an enormous role in human cultures before and even after the arrival of judicial systems.

The Gospels contain the same overall sequence as myths. Once again, there is a great crisis at the beginning, the crisis of the small Jewish state under Roman occupation, and it culminates in the drama of a single victim, Jesus, who is collectively killed and later divinized by the Christians. But the difference is that the Gospels reverse the verdict of the crowd in myths: the victim is innocent, and the mob is guilty. Especially striking in the Gospels is the fact that the two perspectives--the mob's and the victim's--are displayed side by side. Almost everybody agrees with the local mob. The dissenters are very few, but precarious as their perspective seems at first, it ultimately triumphs' for one essential reason, in my view: it happens to be true.

I use the word "truth" here in an anthropological and social context, not in a religious context. All rational human beings would agree, no doubt, that mobs are notoriously unreliable as judges of right and wrong, especially when it comes to their own victims. It was not the discovery of some authentic criminal, as claimed by myths, that reconciled these archaic communities, but the illusion of such a discovery. The communities mimetically transferred all their hostilities to the single victim and became reconciled on the basis of the resulting illusion.

Since the victim is innocent, what is the force that unites, each time, a large group of violent men against an irrelevant victim? The answer is once again imitation, mimetic contagion.

Whereas myths submit to the mimetic contagion against the single victim, the biblical interpreters resist that same contagion and rehabilitate the victim who is indeed innocent. The biblical resistance to the mimetic contagion reveals the essential deceptiveness of archaic religions, the spirit of the mob that dominates them. This unique power to demystify the unanimous violence is applicable not merely to the specific victims represented in these texts--Joseph, Job, the Suffering Servant, or Jesus--but, potentially, to all similar victims of collective victimage phenomena wherever they happen to occur. To demystify a myth, all

we need to do is to slip, for example, the account of the crucifixion beneath its text and compare the one with the other.

The (synoptic) Gospels make it obvious that all witnesses of the crucifixion behave mimetically. Peter's denial is a spectacular example: as soon as he finds himself surrounded by people hostile to Jesus, he imitates their hostility. His triple denial is a mimetic phenomenon. Pilate is poles apart from Peter and yet, in the end, he behaves just like the apostle. Even though he would personally prefer to save Jesus, he surrenders to the mob; he imitates the mob and orders the crucifixion. The two thieves crucified with Jesus (only one in Luke) are another, even more caricatured example of crowd imitation. Instead of sympathizing with the man whose dreadful fate they share, they insult Jesus in imitation of the crowd, in a last, desperate effort to rejoin the crowd, to deny their own crucifixion.

The modern world does not perceive this biblical demystification. Just the opposite. Biblical texts are often believed to be equivalent to myths because they do, indeed, resemble myths. In reality, far from insuring the sameness of all the religious doctrines rooted in all these texts, the presence everywhere of a victimage mechanism opens up the possibility of an enormously significant difference. The tendency to define all texts as mythical is due to the inability of most modern researchers to go beyond the themes and motifs of these texts and to see that the surrender or resistance to the mimetic contagion is the most important factor in the type of text ultimately produced. A text can conceal the deceptiveness of the victimage mechanism and be itself deceptive, or it can reveal that same deceptiveness and, together with it, the injustice of the mob and the undeserved suffering of the victim. The first way is the way of mythology, and the second is the way of biblical texts and, most explicitly, of the Gospels.

The picture of the human world conveyed by myths is rosier than the biblical picture precisely because it reflects the persecutors' deceptive perspective, rather than the more truthful victims' perspective. The only philosopher who realized that this preference for mythology was equivalent, in fact, with siding with the persecutors was Friedrich Nietzsche. But, far from inciting him to shift to the side of the victims, this discovery reinforced his bias in favor of unjust violence and, at least indirectly, his writing on the subject encouraged some of the worst abominations of the 20th century.

The prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels stand in absolute opposition to the mythical and sacrificial mentality of archaic religion. Many statements and formulae confirm this opposition. Hosea attributes the following words to Yahweh: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). Jesus advises his listeners to become reconciled with their brothers before they bring their sacrificial offerings to the altar. He warns them, in other words, that they should not count on sacrifices any more as an artificial means of getting along with their neighbors. The truth of sacrifice, which is about to be revealed in the crucifixion, will destroy once and for all, in the long run, the effectiveness of all sacrifices. As it becomes impossible to elude violence with ritual, a face-to-face reconciliation becomes the only means to avoid the destructive unleashing of mimetic violence.

The Modern Evolution Away from Violence

The non-violent side of the biblical inspiration can be seen quite directly in the long-range historical evolution of our Western societies. In some important respects, ever since the high Middle Ages, our historical world has been moving in the direction of less and less violence. Our world has abolished serfdom and slavery. Our penal legislation has become more humane, the status of women has been raised, and we protect children and the aged. We have invented such things as the hospital, free medical care, and various forms of social protection for the weak and the handicapped. However feeble these mitigations of violence may seem compared with our aspirations, they are without precedent in all of human history.

Our world has become progressively more aware of arbitrary victimization, and our social, political, and legal institutions are making greater and greater efforts to avoid it. The preoccupation with victims often becomes, in the contemporary world, the object of a novel kind of mimetic rivalry that encourages exploitative distortions and turns the whole thing into a caricature. In spite of these faddish aspects, the modern concern for victims, which has been in the making for many centuries, is a major historical development. We are constantly accusing ourselves of persecuting victims not only at the present time but also in the past of our nations, our religious traditions, and our ethnic traditions. We are rewriting history from the standpoint of victims. We often manage, I repeat, to turn this remarkable concern into more mimetic rivalry, and we spend a good deal of time throwing old corpses at each other's heads, in a renewed attempt to justify

ourselves at the expense of our neighbors, but these regrettable aspects should not obscure the larger significance of these phenomena.

While our world is less violent than any previous world, I do not have to remind you that this is only one aspect of the world in which we live. The other aspect is the very reverse: a tremendous increase in violence and in the threats of violence. The two opposite trends have been developing simultaneously for quite a few centuries, no doubt, and the gulf between them is forever widening. Our world both saves more victims than any previous world and kills more victims than any previous world. The 20th century not only had the greatest wars in human history, but it was the century of death camps, genocides, and nuclear weapons. And every day, it seems, new and even worse threats confront us, such as the possibility that our most monstrous weapons will fall into the hands of terrorists ready to die in order to kill the greatest possible number of innocent people.

How can these two aspects characterize our world simultaneously? Is it not a terrible indictment of the biblical tradition that it has proved unable to make peace among us? Is it not true therefore that even the most peaceful-sounding religions do cause violence after all? Many people answer with a resounding "yes" without taking into account or even suspecting what we discovered earlier regarding sacrifice and the sacrificial values that still permeate our society.

The violence that is slowly undermined by the biblical demystification of sacrifice is sacrificial violence, in other words, the violence that "contains" violence and has long kept the worst forms of violence in check and, to a certain extent, still does. We are always in debt to sacrificial violence, therefore, and when we get rid of it in a great burst of self-righteous indignation against hypocrisy, it may be a worse violence that, unwittingly, we help unleash.

Because of the sacrificial background, one must refrain from evaluating the influence of the biblical religions and of other religions from the standpoint of a simple opposition between violence and non-violence. The elimination of sacrificial violence is not simply "good" or "bad"; it is an ambiguous and ambivalent progress in the struggle against violence, which may include regressive aspects if the human beings whom this violence restrained in the past become more violent as a result of this development. The peace that has been

available to us until recently often rests on a sacrificial violence, which is no longer present in the form of blood sacrifice, of course, in this country, but in institutions such as the police, the American army, the superior American power, and the respect it still inspires throughout the world.

When one eliminates the violence of sacrifice, or even weakens it, one cannot avoid weakening the peaceful effects of this violence just as much as the violent aspects. The rejection of sacrificial violence is certainly something good in principle, the result of a righteous battle against the hypocrisy of religious, social, and political institutions always suffused with sacrificial values. But the more we succeed in this undertaking, the more we destroy traditional institutions and the more we weaken the stability of our own world. The more we promote individual freedom, the more all individuals should feel that they have to prevent violence themselves by non-violent means; we must avoid without outside help the disorders that sacrificial cultures prevented through legal violence.

The disappearance of sacrificial limitations and religious prohibitions facilitates the unleashing of mimetic rivalries not only at their most creative, in scientific competition for instance, but also at their most destructive, in the suicidal forms of terrorism that turn the marvels of modern technology into indiscriminately murderous weapons.

Conclusion

Even if my observations are too sketchy to convince you that the mimetic theory of religion is the breakthrough I believe it is, you will agree, I hope, that even the most obviously "untrue" religions are worthy of our respect. Archaic religions are not simply false explications of the universe. They always had more urgent business to attend to than satisfying the curiosity of idle men. They have always been in charge of keeping the peace. Even if they had to resort to violent means to reach their goal, these means were not really their own invention; they were provided more or less ready-made by the spontaneous course of human relations. We cannot condemn these religions as something alien to our modern humanity. Even as we try to do better than the old religions did, we understand that the task is infinitely more difficult than it was thought a hundred years ago. The violence we would love to transfer to religion is really our own, and we must confront it directly. To turn religions into the scapegoats of our own violence can

only backfire in the end.

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