

Home

Current Issue

 Currently Browsing
 137 / Aug 2007

Contents page

Cover story

Opinions

Web exclusive

Essays

Debate

Courses

Special report

Journal

Portrait

Reviews

Fiction

Columns

Crossword (PDF)

The List

Publication Dates

Subscriptions
& Credits

The Archive

Subjects

Authors

Issues

Advanced Search

Newsletter Sign Up

 Learn more about the
 newsletter

Outsights Scenario Induction Course

 October 18, 2007
 Central London

A highly practical introduction to scenarios for managers, policy makers and strategists wishing to add more lateral thinking to their planning skills.

Further details:

 training@
 outsights.co.uk

+44 (0)20 7226 2280

www.outsights.co.uk

 outsights
 insights from the outside

The sacred and the human



by this author

Desecrating Wagner

 ROGER SCRUTON
 Contemporary Wagner productions "domesticate" the dramas, betraying a fear of sublime experience...
 Apr 2003

Is private conduct relevant in selection for public office?

 ROGER SCRUTON
 May 2000

Mean streets

 ROGER SCRUTON
 The disorder of the modern city stems in part from the modernist design of telephone booths and...
 Jan 1998

Perfect shadows

 ROGER SCRUTON
 All the bickering about the Royals is beside the point—what matters is the office, not the...
 Jan 1996

see also

Grayling's question

 AC GRAYLING
 FREE Aug 2007

Life in Extremistan

 TOM NUTTALL
 According to Nassim Nicholas Taleb, "black swans"—totally unforeseeable events like...
 Aug 2007

Leap of faith

 RICHARD COCKETT
 Recent Labour leaders have kept quiet about their religious beliefs. As premier, will Brown allow...
 FREE Jul 2007

Grayling's question

 AC GRAYLING
 FREE Jul 2007

[Show More »](#)

August 2007 | 137 » Essays » The sacred and the human

Today's atheist polemics ignore the main insight of the anthropology of religion—that religion is not primarily about God, but about the human need for the sacred. As René Girard argues, religion is not the cause of violence, but the solution to it

Roger Scruton

 Discuss this article at **First Drafts**, Prospect's editorial blog

It is not surprising that decent, sceptical people, observing the revival in our time of superstitious cults, the conflict between secular freedoms and religious edicts, and the murderousness of radical Islamism, should be receptive to the anti-religious polemics of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and others. The "sleep of reason" has brought forth monsters, just as Goya foretold in his engraving. How are we to rectify this, except through a wake-up call to reason, of the kind that the evangelical atheists are now shouting from their pulpits?

What is a little more surprising is the extent to which religion is caricatured by its current opponents, who seem to see in it nothing more than a system of unfounded beliefs about the cosmos—beliefs that, to the extent that they conflict with the scientific worldview, are heading straight for refutation. Thus Hitchens, in his relentlessly one-sided diatribe *God is Not Great*, writes: "One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody... had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as comfort, reassurance and other infantile needs)."

Hitchens is an intelligent and widely read man who recognises that the arguments most useful to him were well known 200 years ago. His book takes us through territory charted by Hume, Voltaire, Diderot and Kant, and nobody familiar with the Enlightenment can believe that our contemporary imitators have added anything to its stance against religion, whatever examples they can add to the list of religiously motivated crimes. However, Enlightenment thinkers, having shown the claims of faith to be without rational foundation, did not then dismiss religion, as one might dismiss a refuted theory. Many went on to conclude that religion must have some other origin than the pursuit of scientific knowledge, and some other psychic function than consolation. The ease with which the common doctrines of religion could be refuted alerted men like Jacobi, Schiller and Schelling to the idea that religion is not, in essence, a matter of doctrine, but of something else. And they set out to discover what that might be.

Thus was born the anthropology of religion. For thinkers in the immediate aftermath of the Enlightenment, it was not faith, but faiths in the plural, that composed the primary subject matter of theology. Hence the appearance of books like CF Dupuis's *Origine de tous les cultes, ou Religion universelle* (1795), and the busy decipherment of oriental religions by the Bengal Asiatic Society, whose proceedings began to appear in Calcutta in 1788. For post-Enlightenment thinkers, the monotheistic belief systems were not related to ancient myths and rituals as science to superstition, or logic to magic. Rather, they were crystallisations of the emotional need which found expression both in the myths and rituals of antiquity and in the Vedas and Upanishads of the Hindus. This thought led Georg Creuzer, whose *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* appeared between 1810 and 1812, to represent myth as a distinctive operation of the human psyche. A myth does not describe what happened in some obscure period before human reckoning, but what happens always and repeatedly. It does not explain the causal origins of our world, but rehearses its permanent spiritual significance.

If you look at ancient religion in this way, then inevitably your vision of the Judeo-Christian canon changes. The Genesis story of the creation is easily refuted as an account of historical events: how can there be days without a sun, man without a woman, life without death? Read as a myth, however, this naive-seeming text reveals itself as a study of the human condition. The story of the fall is, Hegel wrote (in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 1827), "not just a contingent history but the eternal and necessary history of humanity." It conveys truths about freedom, about guilt, about man, woman and their relationship, about our relation to nature and mortality. For Hegel, myths and rituals are forms of self-discovery, through which we understand the place of the subject in a world of objects, and the inner freedom that conditions all that we do. The emergence of monotheism from the polytheistic religions of antiquity is not so much a discovery as a form of self-creation, as the spirit learns to recognise itself in the whole of things, and to overcome its finitude.

Between those early ventures into the anthropology of religion and the later studies of James Frazer, Emile Durkheim and the Freudians, two thinkers stand out as the founders of a new intellectual enterprise—an enterprise which seems not to have been noticed by Hitchens, Dawkins or Daniel Dennett. The thinkers are Nietzsche and Wagner, and the intellectual enterprise is that of showing the place of the sacred in human life, and the kind of knowledge and understanding that comes to us through the experience of sacred things. Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and Wagner, in *Tristan, The Ring and Parsifal*, as well as in his writings on



Roger Scruton is a philosopher and a research professor at the Institute for the Psychological Sciences, Virginia



tragedy and religion, painted a picture that, while rooted in the post-Enlightenment tradition, placed the concept of the sacred at the centre of the anthropology of religion. The lesson that both thinkers took from the Greeks was that you could subtract the gods and their stories from Greek religion without taking away the most important thing. This thing had its primary reality not in myths or theology or doctrine, but in rituals, in moments that stand outside time, in which the loneliness and anxiety of the human individual is confronted and overcome, through immersion in the group—an idea that was later to be made foundational to the sociology of religion by Durkheim. By calling these moments "sacred," we recognise both their complex social meaning and also the respite that they offer from alienation.

The attempt by Nietzsche and Wagner to understand the concept of the sacred was taken forward not by anthropologists but by theologians and critics—Rudolf Otto in *Das Heilige* (1917), Georges Bataille in *L'Érotisme* (1957), Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957), and, most explicitly and shockingly, René Girard in *La violence et le sacré* (1972). It is Girard's theory, it seems to me, that most urgently needs to be debated, now that atheist triumphalism is sweeping all nuances away. For it helps us understand questions that even atheists must confront, and that their dogmatic certainties otherwise obscure: what is religion; what draws people to it; and how is it tamed?

Girard begins from an observation no impartial reader of the Hebrew Bible or the Koran can fail to make, which is that religion may offer peace, but has its roots in violence. The God presented in these writings is often angry, given to fits of destruction and seldom deserving of the epithets bestowed upon him in the Koran—*al-rahmān al-rahīm*, "the compassionate, the merciful." He makes outrageous and bloodthirsty demands—such as the demand that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac. He is obsessed with the genitals and adamant that they should be mutilated in his honour—a theme that has been explored by Jack Miles in his riveting book *God: A Biography* (1995). Thinkers like Dawkins and Hitchens conclude that religion is the cause of this violence and sexual obsession, and that the crimes committed in the name of religion can be seen as the definitive disproof of it. Not so, argues Girard. Religion is not the cause of violence but the solution to it. The violence comes from another source, and there is no society without it since it comes from the very attempt of human beings to live together. The same can be said of the religious obsession with sexuality: religion is not its cause, but an attempt to resolve it.

Girard's theory is best understood as a kind of inversion of an idea of Nietzsche's. In his later writings, Nietzsche expounded a kind of creation myth, by way of accounting for the structure of modern society. On the *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) envisages a primeval human society, reduced to near universal slavery by the "beasts of prey"—the strong, self-affirming, healthy egoists who impose their desires on others by the force of their nature. The master race maintains its position by punishing all deviation on the part of the slaves—just as we punish a disobedient horse. The slave, too timid and demoralised to rebel, receives this punishment as a retribution. Because he cannot exact revenge, the slave expends his resentment on himself, coming to think of his condition as in some way deserved. Thus is born the sense of guilt and the idea of sin. The resentment of the slave explains, for Nietzsche, the entire theological and moral vision of Christianity. Christianity owes its power to the resentment upon which it feeds: resentment which, because it cannot express itself in violence, remains turned against itself. Thus arises the ethic of compassion, the mortification of the flesh and the life-denying routines of the "slave morality." Christianity is a form of self-directed violence, which conceals a deep resentment against every form of human mastery.

That "genealogy" of Christian morals was effectively exploded by Max Scheler in his book *Ressentiment* (1912). Scheler argues that the Christian ethic of agape and forgiveness is not an expression of resentment but rather the only way to overcome it. Nevertheless, there is surely an important truth concealed within Nietzsche's wild generalisations. Resentment remains a fundamental component in our social emotions, and it is widely prevalent in modern societies. The 20th century was the century of resentment. How else do you explain the mass murders of the communists and the Nazis, the seething animosities of Lenin and Hitler, the genocides of Mao and Pol Pot? The ideas and emotions behind the totalitarian movements of the 20th century are targeted: they identify a class of enemy whose privileges and property have been unjustly acquired. Religion plays no real part in the ensuing destruction, and indeed is usually included among the targets.

Girard's theory, like Nietzsche's, is expressed as a genealogy, or a "creation myth": a fanciful description of the origins of human society from which to derive an account of its present structure. (It is significant that Girard came to the anthropology of religion from literary criticism.) And like Nietzsche, Girard sees the primeval condition of society as one of conflict. It is in the effort to resolve this conflict that the experience of the sacred is born. This experience comes to us in many forms—religious ritual, prayer, tragedy—but its true origin is in acts of communal violence. Primitive societies are invaded by "mimetic desire," as rivals struggle to match each other's social and material acquisitions, so heightening antagonism and precipitating the cycle of revenge. The solution is to identify a victim, one marked by fate as outside the community and therefore not entitled to vengeance against it, who can be the target of the accumulated bloodlust, and who can bring the chain of retribution to an end. Scapegoating is society's way of recreating "difference" and so restoring itself. By uniting against the scapegoat, people are released from their rivalries and reconciled. Through his death, the scapegoat purges society of its accumulated violence. The scapegoat's resulting sanctity is the long-term echo of the awe, relief and visceral re-attachment to the community that was experienced at his death.

According to Girard, the need for sacrificial scapegoating is implanted in the human psyche, arising from the attempt to form a durable community in which the moral life can be successfully pursued. One purpose of the theatre is to provide fictional substitutes for the original crime, and so to obtain the benefit of moral renewal without the horrific cost. In Girard's view, a tragedy like Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a way of retelling the story of what was originally a ritual sacrifice in which the victim can be sacrificed without renewing the cycle of revenge. The victim is both sacrificed and sacred, the source of the city's plagues and their cure.

In many Old Testament stories, we see the ancient Israelites wrestling with this sacrificial urge. The stories of Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac and Sodom and Gomorrah are residues of extended conflicts, by which ritual was diverted from the human victim and attached first to animal sacrifices, and finally to sacred words. By this process a viable morality emerged from competition and conflict, and from the visceral rivalries of sexual predation. To repeat: religion is not the source of violence but the solution to it—the overcoming of mimetic desire and the transcending of the resentments and jealousies into which human communities are tempted by their competitive dynamic.

It is in just this way, Girard argues, that we should see the achievement of Christianity. In his study of the scapegoat, *Le Bouc émissaire* (1982), Girard identifies Christ as a new kind of victim—one who offers himself for sacrifice, and who, in doing so, shows that he understands what is going on. The words "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" are pivotal for Girard. They

**Presents
of Mind**

Give a friend
the joy of
Prospect
MAGAZINE



Print & Online
Gift Subscriptions
are available



Prospect is the
ideal gift for
the intellectually
curious generalist

involve a recognition of the need for sacrifice, if the guilt and resentment of the community is to be appeased and transcended, and the added recognition that this function must be concealed. Only those ignorant of the source of their hatred can be healed by its expression, for only they can proceed with a clear conscience towards the tragic climax. The climax, however, is not the death of the scapegoat but the experience of sacred awe, as the victim, at the moment of death, forgives his tormentors. This is the moment of transcendence, in which even the cruellest of persecutors can learn to humble himself and to renounce his vengeful passion. Through his acceptance of his sacrificial role, Christ made the "love of neighbour"—which had featured in the oldest books of the Hebrew Bible as the standard to which humanity should aspire—into a reality in the hearts of those who meditate upon his gesture. Christ's submission purified society and religion of the need for sacrificial murder: his conscious self-sacrifice is therefore, Girard suggests, rightly thought of as a redemption, and we should not be surprised if, when we turn away from our Christian legacy, as Nazis and communists did, the hecatombs of victims reappear.

Girard's account of the Passion is amplified by many references to Freud and Lévi-Strauss, and by a conviction that religion and tragedy are, as Nietzsche argued, adjacent in the human psyche, comparable receptacles for the experience of sacred awe. The experience of the sacred is not an irrational residue of primitive fears, nor is it a form of superstition that will one day be chased away by science. It is a solution to the accumulated aggression which lies in the heart of human communities. That is how Girard explains the peace and celebration that attends the ritual of communion—the sense of renewal which must always itself be renewed. Girard takes himself to be describing deep features of the human condition, which can be observed as well in the mystery cults of antiquity and the local shrines of Hinduism as in the everyday "miracle" of the Eucharist.

There are many features of Girard's theory that can be criticised—not least the idea that human institutions can be explained through creation myths. We need more evidence than is contained in a creation myth for the view that our "original" condition is one of vengeful competition. And the alleged "mimetic" nature of human competition is underjustified. Moreover, there are other plausible explanations of the ancient ritual of animal sacrifice besides the one offered by Girard; and the success of the Christian ethic has other causes besides the mystical reversal that allegedly occurred on the cross. The growth of towns under Roman imperial jurisdiction meant that people were in daily contact with "the other," and living under competing urges both to exclude and to forgive. Why is that not an equal factor in explaining the rapid spread of a gospel of disinterested love?

Such criticisms do not, it seems to me, account for the comparative neglect of Girard's ideas. Girard's thesis has been received with the same dismissive indifference as Nietzsche's in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and though he has been honoured with a *siège* (seat) at the Académie française, the honour has come only now, as Girard approaches his 90th year. I suspect that, like Nietzsche, Girard has reminded us of truths that we would rather forget—in particular the truth that religion is not primarily about God but about the sacred, and that the experience of the sacred can be suppressed, ignored and even desecrated (the routine tribute paid to it in modern societies) but never destroyed. Always the need for it will arise, for it is in the nature of rational beings like us to live at the edge of things, experiencing our alienation and longing for the sudden reversal that will once again join us to the centre. For Girard, that reversal is a kind of self-forgiveness, as the concealed aggressions of our social life are transcended—washed in the blood of the lamb.

Girard's genealogy casts an anthropological light on the Christian ethic and on the meaning of the Eucharist; but it is not just an anthropological theory. Girard himself treats it as a piece of theology. For him, it is a kind of proof of the Christian religion and of the divinity of Jesus. And in a striking article in the *Stanford Italian Review* (1986), he suggests that the path that has led him from the inner meaning of the Eucharist to the truth of Christianity was one followed by Wagner in *Parsifal*, and one along which even Nietzsche reluctantly strayed, under the influence of Wagner's masterpiece.

Of course, you don't have to follow Girard into those obscure and controversial regions in order to endorse his view of the sacred as a human universal. Nor do you have to accept the cosmology of monotheism in order to understand why it is that this experience of the sacred should attach itself to the three great transitions—the three rites of passage—which mark the cyclical continuity of human societies. Birth, copulation and death are the moments when time stands still, when we look on the world from a point at its edge, when we experience our dependence and contingency, and when we are apt to be filled with an entirely reasonable awe. It is from such moments, replete with emotional knowledge, that religion begins. The rational person is not the one who scoffs at all religions, but the one who tries to discover which of them, if any, can make sense of those things, and, while doing so, draw the poison of resentment.

Discuss this article at **First Drafts**, Prospect's editorial blog



Email this article to a friend



Pdf version of this article



Printer friendly version of this article

Related Subjects

Religion, Philosophy, and Anthropology.

Contact Us

We welcome your ideas, thoughts, and comments. If you would like to send a letter to the editor, or to contact a department, please use the **contact form**.