

# Religion: Natural or Supernatural?

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In examining the question of advanced technologies, we have seen how true it is that “myth is dense in science,” to use Michel Serres’s profound formula.<sup>1</sup> Mankind dreams science before doing it. It is futile to try to “disenchant” science, for it irreducibly conserves traces of its origin in myth. There is no science without metaphysics, as Karl Popper showed, and before him Émile Meyerson.<sup>2</sup>

I now turn to the following question: is it possible to imagine a science concerned with the universal phenomenon of religion in human societies that is nonetheless completely freed of any connection with religion, in the manner of astronomy, for example, which developed by detaching itself from the belief that the stars exert an influence on human beings, and therefore, in particular, on astronomers?

Newtonian mechanics was still plainly dependent on astrology, with its notion of action at a distance. In the first chapter I likened the work of René Girard to the

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Serres, *Rome, le livre des foundations* (Paris: Grasset, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> “Man does metaphysics the same way he breathes, without trying and, above all, without suspecting it.” See Émile Meyerson, *De l’explication dans les sciences* (Paris, 1927).

Einsteinian revolution in physics. But Girard admits that his theory of religion is completely dependent on religion, from which it derives its claims to knowledge. Here is a case where the object of a science acts upon the science itself. The epistemological radicalism this requires is inaccessible to the ordinary positivism of scientists. When scientists purport to treat religion in the same way that they treat heat or electricity, there is every reason to fear that they are constructing monuments to their own stupidity.

### **1. On the Wrong Trail**

One can speak of religion only by involving oneself in its discourse, by engaging the full resources of the intellect, as well as one's feelings, passions, and emotions--in other words, by engaging all of one's convictions and beliefs. ^Our being is indissolubly bound up with religion, permanently shot through with it<sup>3</sup>, no less than we are filled with society and history, even when we pretend to critique or demystify them.

It is useless to speak of religious in the third person, affecting a disinterested attitude of the sort befitting a

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<sup>3</sup> "Nous sommes embarqués", said Pascal. The game has begun and whether we like it or not we have to place our bets.

scientific approach conceived on the positivist model. The proof is that those who try to do this very often cannot avoid betraying the hatred they feel toward their object of study. It is altogether natural, then, that they should hold themselves at a respectable distance from the excrement, abuse, and ridicule that cover it, not out of a concern for scientific objectivity but because they are the ones who have made it stink, and so prevented themselves from understanding anything about it.

Do I exaggerate? The literature I wish to examine, a rather unappetizing one it must be said, is a by-product of attempts made by cognitivists in ^biology, psychology, and anthropology to account for religion--which stands revealed as their stumbling block, their *skándalon*--in terms of evolutionary theory. To be fair to them, these scholars have understood that they can realize their ambition of conquering the vast continent of the humanities and social sciences, philosophy included, only on the condition of succeeding first of all in explaining the universal presence of religion in human societies. How do they see this universality? ^The ethologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins argues that religious beliefs are irrational, nonsensical, and pathological; that they spread like a virus, infecting the brains they attack; that they teem like parasites, vermin, and

cockroaches, infesting human populations; and that we should be ashamed of holding them. Pascal's wager is the wager of a coward, we are told. As for the Gospels, the only thing that separates them from *The Da Vinci Code* is that this is a modern fiction, whereas they are an ancient fiction.<sup>4</sup> The cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer, even if he has a less vulgar way of putting things, will not be outdone when it comes to irony and facile humiliation. He regards rituals as cognitive "gadgets," and maintains that there is "something dramatically flawed *in principle* about religion as a way of knowing things," with the result that in the Church's competition with science to explain "what happens in the world ... [e]very battle has been lost and conclusively so."<sup>5</sup>

Cognitivism is not the only doctrine to have expounded crude idiocies in the matter of religion, of course; nor is the critique of religion only due to thinkers who lack intelligence or education.<sup>6</sup> Voltaire saw in religion a conspiracy of priests, and Freud a neurosis; Bertrand Russell, for his part, thought nothing of making the slanderous remark

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<sup>4</sup> See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 188-189, 104, 97.

<sup>5</sup> Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 255, 321, 320 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>6</sup> Having read, pencil in hand, the nearly eight hundred pages that make up the books by Dawkins and Boyer, I have not thought it necessary to add to them two others that I had every reason to believe were of the same kind: Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), and Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). I am perhaps guilty of negligence, ^though the chance that these books redeem the others seems to me remote.

that the "immense majority of intellectually eminent men disbelieve in Christian religion, but they conceal the fact in public, because they are afraid of losing their incomes."<sup>7</sup>

Let me clearly state my own interest in this matter at the outset. I willingly call myself an intellectual Christian. Note that I do not say that I am a Christian intellectual, like Gabriel Marcel or G. K. Chesterton, who writes in the light of his faith. By "intellectual Christian" I mean that I have come to believe that Christianity constitutes a *body of knowledge about the human world*, one that is not only superior to all the human sciences combined, but the principal source of inspiration for these. And yet I do not belong to any of the denominations that compose Christianity. I might with equal justice say that I am also an intellectual Jew, to the extent that I believe that Judaism was the condition of possibility for Christianity. It was my collaboration with thinkers such as Ivan Illich, and later René Girard, that led me to this *epistemological* conversion to Christianity.

I believe that the Christian message, as it is expressed in the Gospels, is a human science--without which no other human science would be possible. Because Christianity deals with the human world, it bears upon all the religions that have

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<sup>7</sup> Bertrand Russell, "Freedom versus Authority in Education," in *Skeptical Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1928); quoted in Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 97.

contributed to the history of humanity. What is more, the body of knowledge that Christianity represents is fatal for all these religions.

If Christianity is a body of knowledge about the religions of mankind that, by the very fact of explaining them, destroys them as well, it can only be because Christianity is not a religion like the others. Indeed, one might even say that it is not a religion at all; that it is the religion of the end of religions. Many thinkers in the Western tradition have said something similar, from Kant to Hegel and Max Weber and, nearer our own time, Louis Dumont and Marcel Gauchet.

If this is true, one sees at once that cognitive approaches to religion are embarked upon the wrong trail. Like Nietzsche, though without his genius, Dawkins and Boyer both take malicious pleasure in treating Christianity as a religion like any other; in their view it is much more humiliating for Christianity to be reduced to the common run of religions than for any other faith. Boyer recounts a personal anecdote that so impressed Dawkins that he quotes from it and then devotes almost a page to commenting on it. The challenge these authors set for themselves is to understand how human beings, people like you and me, can believe unbelievable things, such as the existence of a mountain that is alive and feeds on animals that are sacrificed to it. Boyer was explaining this

challenge, and his method of meeting it, in the course of a dinner in Cambridge, England, when a prominent Catholic theologian turned to him and said: “‘That is what makes anthropology so fascinating and so difficult too. You have to explain *how people can believe such nonsense.*’ Which left me dumbfounded.”<sup>8</sup>

Fearing that the reader will fail to understand why, Dawkins hastens to list the nonsensical beliefs that a Christian is supposed to entertain, none of them less absurd than stories of flying witches who cast spells on their victims or invisible dragons that wear cologne. These include the belief in a man born of a virgin mother without the aid of a biological father. This same fatherless man brought back another man from the dead. If you have private thoughts or if you act, whether for good or for evil, the fatherless man, as well as his father (who is also himself), knows it and will reward or punish you after you die. As for the fatherless man’s virgin mother, she never died--and her body rose directly up into heaven. And then there is the business of the bread and the wine, which, so long as they have been blessed by a person who has been ordained as a priest (and who

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<sup>8</sup> Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 297 (italics in the original); see Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 178.

must have testicles),<sup>9</sup> are transformed into the body and blood of the fatherless man.<sup>10</sup>

*Credo quia absurdum*, as Saint Augustine said. The striking thing is that this grotesque enumeration omits something at the heart of the Gospels--something that, despite its extreme familiarity, nonetheless constitutes the central article of Christian faith: the Passion. This fatherless man, God become man, has been put to death under the most horrible conditions imaginable, rejected on all sides (even by his own disciples), accused of crimes he did not commit. Nietzsche, at least, understood this, and summed up the essence of Christianity in the formula: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."<sup>11</sup> One must be blind not to know this, or else fantastically blinkered, if one lives in a Christian land, in the sight of the thousands of crosses that dot the landscape. It is *this* that is incredible--not that supernatural beings engage in improbable exploits. It is incredible that a religion--if in fact Christianity is a religion--should choose as its god the victim--the human, all-too-human victim--of a collective lynching. Still today in Mexico, in Oaxaca, one

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<sup>9</sup> I doubt that Dawkins displays such coarseness in discussing other subjects. It may be that he imagines himself to be freed from all rules of decency by the justice of his campaign against the ignominy that attaches to religious belief.

<sup>10</sup> Readers may satisfy themselves that I have invented nothing by consulting Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 178-179.

<sup>11</sup> From aphorism 125 ("The Madman") in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181.



can see the crosses that the missionaries who brought the Gospel there had designed to convert the native peoples, Mixtecs and Zapotecs: simple wooden crosses with the face of Christ at the center; that is, a head without a body--and therefore without the body of a victim of torture. The Franciscan missionaries did not want their god to appear as a pitiable being, inferior to the local deities for seeming to be nothing more than a defeated man, oozing blood.

It is this story that the West, and then the whole world, committed to memory, and that shaped the world in return. Whatever else it may be, it is not that kind of fantastic story that spread solely on account of its counterintuitive nature--because, by its shocking contradiction of common sense, it would easily be memorized and transmitted. On the contrary, it is a purely human story in which it is very easy to recognize oneself, for everyone at one time or another has been the innocent victim of the wrath of others or a party to such an offense. From this one of two things follows: either the cognitivists regard Christianity as part of what they call religion, in which case their explanation does not hold; or they exclude Christianity, in which case their explanation fails to capture their favorite prey.

## 2. Religion as *Social Effervescence*

The second fundamental error committed by the cognitivists, which causes them to lose their way at the very start, is to believe that religion is above all a system of ideas, beliefs, and concepts. Two questions therefore arise. First, how can such ideas, held by the cognitivists to be absurd, actually be conceived and maintained in a person's mind? Second, how can they then spread, like an epidemic, passing from the mind of one person to another? What has altogether been forgotten is that religion is first and foremost an *activity* that is practiced collectively, in the company of others, and that it is in this active, social context that religious ideas are formed simultaneously in the mind of each person. Dawkins sees ritual as the product of myth,<sup>12</sup> and as something still more enigmatically ridiculous than myth itself. "Why do humans fast, kneel, genuflect, self-flagellate, nod maniacally towards a wall, crusade, or otherwise indulge in costly practices that can consume life and, in extreme cases, terminate it?" he asks, apparently sincerely--and pathetically, in view of his confessed incomprehension.<sup>13</sup> For

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<sup>12</sup> See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 173-174.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 166. Boyer, for his part, takes up the question of ritual only on page 229 of a book whose text runs to 330 pages. As it turns out, he has nothing to say about it: "[R]itual is not an activity for which we can demonstrate some specific disposition or a special adaptive advantage;" or again: "[W]e have no evidence for a special 'ritual system' in the mind, at least not so far" (p. 234). It is as if, in seeking to explain human

the theory of evolution, which serves as the theoretical basis for cognitive psychology and anthropology, explaining ritual presents an even more formidable challenge than accounting for the origin of religious ideas. Indeed, Darwinian selection acts in the same way as Occam's razor: hating wastefulness, it eliminates the superfluous and, like a utilitarian judge, ruthlessly punishes everything that strays from the optimum. How could the grotesque extravagance of religious practices have been allowed to pass through its selective filter? That cognitivists should find no satisfactory response to a question that arises only because they have approached the problem the wrong way around comes as no surprise. Their failure is a consequence of this very mistake.

Already in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Émile Durkheim identified the same misapprehension:

Most often, the theorists who have endeavoured to express religion in rational terms have seen it, above all, as a system of ideas that correspond to a definite object. This object has been conceived in different ways: nature, the infinite, the unknowable,

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phenomena by reference to the theory of general relativity, one were to say: until now we have not been able to find in the brain of the modern individual a black hole that would account for the universality of selfishness. Nevertheless there is one point of interest: Boyer, unlike Dawkins, does not explain ritual in terms of beliefs nor, for that matter, beliefs in terms of ritual. It is a given of social life that people perform rituals--in effect, "cognitive gadgets" whose origin is poorly understood—and entities called "gods" are invented in order to fill a "causal gap" (pp. 234-235, 261-262). I shall come back to this account below.

the ideal, and so on. But these differences are unimportant. In all cases, it was ideas and beliefs that were considered the essential element of religion. As for rites, they seem from this point of view to be merely an external, contingent, and material expression of these inner states that were singled out as [being the only ones to have] intrinsic value. This conception is so widespread that, for the most part, debates about religion revolve around the question of knowing whether it can be reconciled with science or not, that is, if there is a place next to scientific knowledge for another form of thought that would be specifically religious.<sup>14</sup>

Durkheim's explanation of religion and of the preponderant place that ritual plays in it is well known: the reality to which mythologies and religious experience refer, without knowing it, is society. Now,

Society can make its influence felt only if it is in action, and it is in action only if the individuals who compose it are assembled and act in common. It

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<sup>14</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 311. [The Cosman translation is based on the corrected edition of *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* published in Paris in 1991 by Livre de Poche and incorporates additional corrections supplied by Dominique Merllié.--Trans.] [In brackets, author's correction to that translation.]

is through common action that it becomes conscious of itself and affirms itself; it is above all an active cooperation.... Therefore, action dominates religious life for the very reason that society is its source.<sup>15</sup>

This explanation is not itself without serious problems, to which I shall return. But one cannot help but be impressed by the force of conviction one finds in a passage such as this one:

A philosophy can indeed be elaborated in the silence of inner meditation, but not a faith. For faith is above all warmth, life, enthusiasm, the exaltation of all mental activity, the transport of the individual beyond himself. Now, without leaving the self, how could one add to the energies he has? How could he surpass himself with his forces alone? The only source of heat where we might warm ourselves morally is that formed by the society of our peers; the only moral forces with which we might sustain and increase our own are those [lent to us by] others.... [B]eliefs work only when they are shared. One can certainly maintain them for a time through wholly personal

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 313.

effort; but they are neither born nor acquired in this way. It is even doubtful that they can be preserved under these conditions. In fact, the man who has real faith has an irrepressible need to spread it; to do this, he leaves his isolation, approaches others, and seeks to convince them, and it is the ardour of their convictions that sustains his own. His faith would quickly [wilt] if it remained alone.<sup>16</sup>

In the light of this remarkable passage, it becomes clear that the laboratory experiments conducted by cognitivist researchers to make religious beliefs grow in the mind of an isolated individual have as much chance of succeeding as the attempt to make roses grow on Mars.

Dawkins and Boyer find it the height of absurdity that believers should prostrate themselves before an inanimate statue and address prayers to it—in keeping with Molière's Don Juan who refused to yield to "the marvel of a moving and speaking statue". It is highly revealing that Boyer sees in this behavior not a ritual act, but a religious concept. Like every religious concept, it combines a particular ontological category--in this case an "artificial object," from which all sorts of propositions

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 320. [Cosman's version very slightly modified.--Trans.]

can be inferred (for example, that the object was made by someone, that it is not found in several places at the same time, and so on)--with the violation of at least one of these inferences (the artificial object hears the requests addressed to it and may, if it wishes, grant them). It is this combination of an inference-bearing ontological category with a counterintuitive feature, Boyer claims, that characterizes every religious concept--and that constitutes one of the necessary conditions for it to be able to reproduce itself and successfully pass through the filter of Darwinian selection.

The distressing thing is that Boyer does not make the least effort to look, beyond what he takes to be "supernatural" phenomena (because they are not reducible to the intuitions of ordinary physics and psychology--the distinctive mark of religious *ideas* in his view), for purely human experiences--so human that all of us share them, even when they are transfigured by the effect of the emotions that one feels in those moments of *social effervescence* that, according to Durkheim, are the very condition of religion itself. Only a very small effort of imagination is needed to produce plausible hypotheses. Durkheim himself proposes this:

[T]he fact that collective feelings are attached in this way to foreign things is not purely a matter of convention; it tangibly embodies a real feature of social phenomena, namely their transcendence of individual consciousness. Indeed, we know that social phenomena arise not in the individual but in the group. Whatever part we play in their creation, each of us receives them *from the outside*. When we imagine them as emanating from a material object, we are not entirely wrong about their nature. Although they do not come from the specific thing to which we attribute them, they do originate *outside us*. If the moral force that sustains the worshipper does not come from the idol he worships, from the emblem he venerates, it is none the less external to him and he feels this. *The objectivity of the symbol merely expresses this exteriority.*<sup>17</sup>

The original sin of cognitivism, if I may be permitted such a phrase, was to stop at the apparent irrationality of religious phenomena and to assign itself the heroic task of producing a rational explanation of this irrationality. It does not for one moment occur to Dawkins and Boyer that

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 176 (my emphasis).



this irrationality may in fact conceal a great wisdom, a subtle body of knowledge about the human and social world. Dawkins frankly acknowledges his puzzlement. Quoting the philosopher of science Kim Sterelny, he asks how can people be *so smart and so dumb* at the same time? Dawkins is referring to aboriginal peoples in Australia and Papua New Guinea who have a detailed knowledge of their natural environment--a knowledge that is indispensable to their survival in very difficult conditions--and who, Dawkins says, "clutter their minds with beliefs that are palpably false and for which the word 'useless' is a generous understatement." These are people, after all, who are prey to profoundly destructive obsessions with female menstrual pollution, magic, and witchcraft. More than this, he asks, is it not plain to see that they are chronically tormented by the fears they experience and (in Sterelny's phrase) "*by the violence that accompanies those fears*"?<sup>18</sup>

Astonishingly, Dawkins fails to see that the answer to this question is contained in the question itself. Aboriginal peoples have every reason to fear internecine violence--violence that threatens to destroy the social order, much more efficiently than a cyclone or a tsunami. This violence seems to be the product of religious beliefs

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<sup>18</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 165-166 (my emphasis).

and behaviors, but it is nonetheless true that these things constitute a rampart against violence.<sup>19</sup> The relation to violence constitutes the central enigma of religion: how can it actually be both remedy and poison? This coincidence was built into the very language of the ancient Greeks, who had only one word for these two opposed notions: *phármakon*--a word that itself derives from *pharmakós*, ^one who is sacrificed as an atonement for others. In other words, a scapegoat.

### **3. Sacrifice and Murder**

The psychotherapist Bernard Lempert, in a profound and disturbing analysis of the sacrificial mind,<sup>20</sup> reports an atrocity that occurred in Kosovo in the spring of 1999. On the day of Aid al-Kebir (the Great Feast), Serbian police burst into a Kosovar home. Among Muslims, the ceremony of Aid commemorates Abraham's non-sacrifice of his son: the throat of a ram is cut in memory of the animal that the angel substituted at the last moment for the human victim. The policemen asked if the family had carried out the

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<sup>19</sup> Boyer has an unwitting moment of lucidity, whose illumination might have shown him the way out from the impasse in which he had landed himself, when he writes: "From the anthropologist's viewpoint it seems plausible that ... rituals create the need they are supposed to fulfil[1]" (*Religion Explained*, 20).

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Lempert, *Critique de la pensée sacrificielle* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

sacrifice. No, they replied, we are too poor for that. The policemen then seized the son of the household, a young man seventeen years of age, saying "He is fattened enough for the sacrifice," and slit his throat in front of his parents.

This act was all the more vile as it cynically exploited religious feeling. To be sure, it was not a religious act; it was a murder, pure and simple. Nevertheless its perpetrators knew a great deal about religion, much more in any case than all the world's cognitive anthropologists put together, which enabled them to ape a ritual form in a particularly dreadful way. The murderers knew that the sacrificial ritual rested on the substitution of victims. The non-sacrifice of Ishmael, for the Muslims - or of Isaac, for the Jews and the Christians -, marks an exceptional moment in the history of religion: the passage from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice. By usurping the bloodstained clothes of the sacrificer, and by substituting a human victim for an animal victim, the Serbian policemen not only brought about a barbaric regression; they also exposed the disconcerting kinship of violence and the sacred.

It is easy to commit a twofold mistake here. The first error consists in not seeing that sacrifice rests

upon a murder--a relationship that all religious thought works to conceal. The second, and converse, error consists in simply asserting the identity of sacrifice and murder (as the atrocity committed by the Serbian policemen did) without taking into account the difference between the two acts--a difference that lies at the very source of civilization. The history of humanity is the history of a kind of evolution peculiar to sacrificial systems, by which civilization made a dramatic advance in replacing the human victim by a stand-in--first an animal, then certain plants, and finally abstract symbolic entities. It is in this sense that the history of humanity is a story of symbolization.

Not all the cognitivists' intuitions are false, however, and it is this that gives the matter its special fascination. Despite having set down the wrong path, their thinking is illuminated by the religious mind that informs them, however much they may regret this. Extending his definition of religious concepts, according to which a particular ontological category is combined with a feature that clashes with some of the inferences one can derive from that category (a mountain that feeds on the flesh of animals, for example), Boyer writes: "[R]eligious concepts invariably include information that contradicts certain

expectations triggered by the category activated."<sup>21</sup> Let us take the category of murder. This is a category that is familiar to us from the origin of the world, at least if one credits the great mythologies of the planet, which all begin by a murder: Oedipus killing Laius, Romulus killing Remus, Cain killing Abel, and so on. Now consider the subcategory of collective murder, where a mob is outdoing itself in lynching a particular person. We are immediately capable of drawing a multitude of commonsensical inferences, for example, that the victim suffered horribly and finally died. If we consider the same scene in a sacred context, which is to say (as the etymology indicates) a rite of sacrifice, we find that certain inferences are violated. The victim (for example, a child who is burned at the stake) does not suffer; more precisely, the ritual is carried out in such a way as to encourage belief in an absence of suffering. The mother caresses the child so that he does not moan, witnesses do not weep or cry out for fear of compromising the dignity of the ceremony, and so on. Nor does the victim consider himself a victim, since his mother has handed him over to the priest, and since he has been made to understand that

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<sup>21</sup> Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 65 (emphasis in the original). The quote was modified following the French version.

his sacrifice is necessary to appease the wrath of the god.<sup>22</sup>

In this regard Durkheim notes: “[T]he sacred character [cloaked by] a thing is not implied by its intrinsic features, it is *added to them*. The world of the religious is not a particular aspect of empirical nature: it is *superimposed to it*.”<sup>23</sup> The features that the sacrificial rite *adds* to the sordid reality of the murder are a shock to intuitive understanding. At the cost of a small “cognitive effort” among those who are witnesses to the rite, they arouse rich “mental inferences,” to use the jargon of the cognitivists, who say that such ceremonies “maximize relevance.”<sup>24</sup> One should rather say, more simply: they capture the imagination. Is it this that makes something supernatural of it, something whose elements will be memorized and transmitted to millions of minds, thus constituting a religion, as Boyer supposes? One has rather the impression that one is dealing instead with a ruse, a quite human, all-too-human enterprise of collective self-

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<sup>22</sup> Thus the account given by Diodorus of Sicily of a ritual sacrifice performed in 310 B.C.E. by the Carthaginians: see François Decret, *Carthage ou l'Empire de la mer* (Paris: Seuil, 1977); and Bernard Lempert, *Critique de la pensée sacrificielle*, 169-171.

<sup>23</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 174 (translation slightly modified).

<sup>24</sup> I will be forgiven, I trust, for pointing out that what Boyer calls “relevance”—the maximization of which is defined as a minimization of cognitive cost *and* a maximization of inferential effects—is a meaningless notion, because it commits the fallacy of double maximization: generally speaking, it is not possible to maximize or minimize two functions at the same time. The only way to salvage this concept would be to convert the costs and the effects into a common measure and then to decide, for example, whether or not the incremental increase of an inferential effect is worth a corresponding increase in cognitive cost. It is not clear, however, on what psychological foundations such a *cognitive economy* could rest.

deception, a pretence that everyone engages in toward everyone else--whose meaning is: "This is not violence!" It is enough that a few people (parents, to start with) refuse to be fooled for the violence the sacrificial rite was meant to contain to start up again with renewed vigor.

It will be objected that here I am speaking of ritual and not of religious ideas or beliefs. But myth does not do anything other than what ritual does: in order to contain social violence, the violence of religion must be transfigured, at the cost of violating the physical and psychological intuitions that constitute common sense. In Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Iphigenia accepts her sacrifice, which is to say the slaughter that she is made to undergo, but the horror of her fate is covered up. A messenger reports:

.... Oh, then I stood with my head  
Bowed, and a great anguish smote my heart--  
But suddenly a miracle came to pass ....  
[A]fter, with no man knowing where or how,  
The maiden vanished from the earth.  
Then the priest with a great voice cried aloud  
And the whole army echoed him--this when  
They saw a portent which a god had sent

But no man had foreknown. Though our eyes saw,  
It was a sight incredible, for a  
Panting hind lay there on the earth ....<sup>25</sup>

This was indeed a miracle, a sight that could not be believed: a young girl transformed into a doe. But who, apart from our cognitivist friends, will believe that the supernatural had anything whatever to do with this?<sup>26</sup> Who, apart from the naïve or the persecutors, is still fooled by the vulgar ruses through which religion hides from itself its dual relation to violence? For religion *contains* violence, in the twin senses of blocking it while at the same time having it inside itself.

Or consider the rite of capital punishment. This is not a religious ritual in the strict sense, even if they have many features in common.<sup>27</sup> The natural facts are not any less horrible than in the case of a collective murder. Nonetheless the ritual and its interpretation superimpose to the brutality of the facts features that run contrary to intuition, or, I should say, rational naturalistic intuition. For example, it is neither the executioner nor

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<sup>25</sup> Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, 1579-1588, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4:385.

<sup>26</sup> Here I follow Lempert's analysis in *Critique de la pensée sacrificielle*, 174-185.

<sup>27</sup> See François Tricaud, *L'accusation: Recherche sur les figures de l'agression éthique* (Paris: Dalloz, 1977).



the witnesses to the scene who put the condemned person to death. The extreme rigor of the macabre sequence of events that takes place is meant to emphasize exactly this point. It is the entire nation that delivers the fatal blow. A follower of Boyer would protest that no one has ever seen a nation place a noose around anyone's neck. Of course not. But is this in fact a supernatural feature that makes the act a quasi-religious ritual, and the nation a quasi-sacred transcendental entity? If the ritual slips out of control --say, because the executioner insults the person about to be hanged, as recently happened in Iraq on the occasion of Saddam Hussein's execution--the fragile distinction between a death sentence and an act of vengeance dissolves and it suddenly becomes clear to all that the whole point of the ritual is to say: "This is not an act of vengeance!" There is nothing supernatural in any of this. It is human, all too human.

Let us move still further away from religious ritual and consider the central political ritual of every democracy: voting. In the next chapter I shall propose a detailed analysis. For the moment it will suffice to note the following paradox. No potential voter is unaware that his voice risks going unheard in the immense clamor that surrounds the summoning of the people to the polls.

Indeed, this is why many people stay away, out of a sense that their votes do not matter. Yet every voter knows perfectly well that the outcome of an election is determined by counting all the votes cast, ^and that in this sense every vote matters. To resolve the paradox, one has only to adopt a symbolic mode of thought, which in the case of national elections we do spontaneously. We interpret the results of the balloting, even (or perhaps above all) when they are close, as the manifestation of the considered choice of a collective subject: the people, the electorate, or the like. From the perspective of the strict naturalism insisted upon by the cognitivists, the collective subject that is appealed to in this instance is a pure fiction, a supernatural entity no less undiscoverable than a ravenous mountain or a dragon that is everywhere present at every moment. Yet this collective subject causes the paradox to vanish on the moral level, which in this case involves the question of responsibility. An election need only be sufficiently close that repeated and conflicting tabulations of the ballots cast fail to yield an unambiguous result for the crucial purpose of the collective subject, threatened with dissolution, to be revealed, together with the function of the electoral procedure that underlies it. Like many religious rituals,

the rite of voting proceeds through two phases: first a rivalry is being staged, and it is then transcended in such a way as to bring forth an overarching entity that is the guarantor of the social order.

#### **4. Sacrificial Thought and the Blurring of Categories**

Spontaneously, New Yorkers--and, following them, all Americans--baptized the place where the twin towers were struck down by the terrorists of 11 September as a "sacred space". There is no doubt that they did this without reflecting, for on many occasions afterward they asked themselves what had prompted them to do it. ^Was it because they saw in the event a manifestation of divine purpose? But surely no god, at least no god recognized by Americans, would have sanctioned such an abomination. Were they inspired by the martyrdom undergone by the victims in defense of American values ("democracy, pluralism, and productivity," as one internet discussion group summarized them), which the terrorists hated above all else? But many of the victims were not American, and probably some of them did not share all of these values, having been "chosen" at random or, rather, blindly. This is a question that I

regularly pose to my students in the United States, and I have still to this day not received an answer *that they themselves* judge satisfactory.

In their *Essay on the Nature and Function of Sacrifice* (1898),<sup>28</sup> Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss came up against the following paradox: it is criminal to kill the victim because he is sacred, but the victim would not be sacred if he were not to be killed. "If sacrifice resembles criminal violence," René Girard observed, "we may say that there is, inversely, hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice--as Greek tragedy clearly reveals.... [S]acrifice and murder would not lend themselves to this game of reciprocal substitution if they were not in some way related."<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, the answer to the question posed at the outset is simply this: what renders the site of the terrorist act sacred is the very violence that was committed there. To call the Shoah a "holocaust" responds to the same logic, and the same impulse.

During his trip to Japan, in 1958, the German philosopher Günther Anders learned of the appearance of a new book by his rival, Karl Jaspers, *The Atomic Bomb and*

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<sup>28</sup> Originally published as "Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice," *Année sociologique* 2 (1898):29-138.

<sup>29</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 1.

*the Future of Man*.<sup>30</sup> Stigmatizing the sort of pacificism associated with Ghandi and shared by Anders, Jaspers objected that the ^"radical 'no' to the atomic bomb includes the willingness to submit to totalitarianism," and warned that ^"[o]ne must not conceal from oneself the possibility of having in the near future to decide between totalitarian domination and the atomic bomb." But what outraged Anders was the use that Jaspers made of the words "sacrifice," "victim," and "sacrificial victim."<sup>31</sup> Thus, for Jaspers, lamented Anders in his diary, in order to prevent any form of totalitarianism from taking over the planet, it would be necessary to use the bomb and consent to a "total sacrifice": "In the worst case", writes Anders, "it might become morally inevitable, according to Jaspers, ... to risk the sacrifice of the victim, and therefore of humanity. I want to know *who*, therefore, according to Jaspers, would sacrifice *whom*? And *to whom* would the sacrifice be made?" Anders goes on to say:

If only [Jaspers] had contented himself with the sober phrase "suicide of humanity"; that is to say: in the

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<sup>30</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Politisches Bewusstsein in unserer Zeit* (Zurich: Artemis V, 1958); published in English as *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

<sup>31</sup> Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, ^\_\_, \_\_, \_\_, \_\_. [= pp. 23, 84, 135, 478 in the French edition]

worst case, it might become morally inevitable ... that humanity kill itself--which would be quite mad enough. For it could not be said that the millions of those who would be annihilated with their children and grandchildren during an atomic war, that these millions meant to collectively commit suicide. They would not sacrifice themselves, they would be "sacrificed." The only undeceitful term that would be left [in that case] is "murder." As a consequence: if need be, it might become inevitable to assassinate humanity. Grotesque! I refuse to believe, before having seen it clearly and with my own eyes, that Jaspers would replace the term "murder" ... by "sacrificing oneself."<sup>32</sup>

What appalled Anders was the recourse to a religious vocabulary in order to hide an unspeakable abomination. And yet this German Jew, a former student of Heidegger's and Hannah Arendt's first husband, a radical atheist, recognized the existence of a form of transcendence: "What I recognize as being 'religious' in nature is nothing at all positive, but only the horror of human action

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<sup>32</sup> Günther Anders, "L'Homme sur le pont: Journal d'Hiroshima et de Nagasaki," in *Hiroshima est partout*, (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 123.

transcending any human scale, which no God can prevent."<sup>33</sup> What Anders did not see was that it is precisely this negative transcendence that legitimizes the terminology of victim and sacrifice. The fundamental disagreement between Anders and Jaspers can be summarized in the following way: whereas Jaspers regarded the bomb as an instrument in the service of an end, and the victims as the necessary price of preserving liberty, Anders argued, in effect, that the use of the bomb could not be considered a sacrificial act, since the only divinity or transcendence that remains in that case is the bomb itself.

Now, if Anders had read Hubert's and Mauss's essay on sacrifice, he would have understood that this confusion between the sacrificer, the victim, and the divinity constitutes the very essence of sacrifice. In Mexico, the two anthropologists observed, "at the festival of the god Totec, prisoners were killed and flayed, and a priest donned the skin of one of them and became the image of the god. He wore the god's ornaments and barb, sat on a throne, and received in his place the images of the first fruits." The sacrifice *to* the god was only a form derived from the sacrifice *of* the god: in the beginning, "it is ...

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<sup>33</sup> Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, 2 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1980); from the French translation by Michèle Colombo of vol. 2, chap. 28, "Déshabitude de la méchanceté," published in *Conférence*, no. 9 (1999): 182.

the god who undergoes the sacrifice." In other words, Hubert and Mauss conclude, "*the god was offered to himself.*"<sup>34</sup>

In matters of religion, the confusion of categories can be a sign of lucidity. Clear and distinct ideas are misleading. We are accustomed to assume that sacrifice involves the offering of a victim to a divinity through the intercession of an agent, the priest or sacrificer. As we no longer believe in the existence of a divinity, however, it seems natural to conclude that the sacrifice corresponds to nothing real. But the account given by Hubert and Mauss enjoins us to conflate what analysis distinguishes: not only does the god emanate from the victim, "[h]e must still possess his divine nature in its entirety at the moment when he enters into the sacrifice to become a victim himself."<sup>35</sup> To be sure, the circular form of the logic of sacrifice has a paradoxical appearance. But this paradox is found at the heart of many philosophical or theoretical systems that like to think of themselves as being perfectly secular. In Rousseau, for example, the form of the social contract is expressed by the formula "Each man, in giving

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<sup>34</sup> Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. W. D. Halls (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 80, 88, 90 (emphasis added).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 81. Translation modified.



himself to all, gives himself to nobody,"<sup>36</sup> where "all"--which is to say the body politic--is constituted only during, and by means of, this act of offering. To paraphrase Hubert and Mauss, one might say that it is necessary that men in a state of nature (always) already form a body so that they can give themselves to it. If the analogy seems unconvincing, let us turn Rousseau's formula inside out, as Benjamin Constant did so ruthlessly in drawing out the terroristic implication of the principle of popular sovereignty, which consisted in "offering to the people as a whole the holocaust of the people taken one by one."<sup>37</sup>

The paradox disappears if one considers, with René Girard, that the sacred is the externalization of human violence in relation to itself.<sup>38</sup> One has only to substitute "violence" for "divinity" in the formulas of Hubert and Mauss in order to demystify a conception - theirs - that still stood beneath a mystical halo, as it were. Violence hypostatized in the sacred is nourished by the "offerings" that ordinary violence makes to it. Violence is capable of *externalizing itself*, of *transcending itself* in symbolic and institutional forms--

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<sup>36</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Contrat social* (1762), 1.6.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Principes de politique applicables à tous les gouvernements* (1806-1810).

<sup>38</sup> See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, *op. cit.*

the rites, myths, and systems of prohibitions and obligations that both control and incubate violence, *containing* it in the two senses that I mentioned earlier. Anders' negative transcendence corresponds to this schema.

## **5. Religion and Morality**

The third fundamental error committed by the cognitivists follows from the second. Since they do not detect the preponderant place of ritual in religious practice, they remain blind to the contradiction that religion harbors between ritual and the system of prohibitions and obligations that regulate everyday life. Very often ritual works to portray the violation of these prohibitions and obligations, within the clearly delimited space and time of a sacred festival. Not to see this contradiction--which forcibly struck Hegel, among others--is to foreclose any chance of understanding the least thing about religion.

Dawkins and Boyer almost never use the words "prohibition" or "taboo." And why should they--since for them religion is merely a collection of ideas, beliefs, and concepts? It is only when they examine the relationship between religion and morality that they begin to deal with

the questions that must primarily concern any serious student of this subject.

I shall consider Boyer's analysis, which at least has the merit of originality. Boyer takes issue with the customary view that morality depends on religion. "Religion," he says, "does not really found morality, it is people's moral intuitions that make religion plausible."<sup>39</sup> Relying as he does on a large body of research conducted throughout the world that explores the neurophysiological substrate of morality and the emergence of cooperative behaviors in evolutionary models, Boyer has scarcely any need of religion in order to naturalize morality. Instead he chooses to take the opposite approach: since the naturalization of religion presents a more serious challenge, he looks to naturalize morality first and then to apply this result in naturalizing religion. Let us accept, then, for the sake of argument, that the formation of a moral sense was selected by evolution and incorporated in human minds in the form of a specific capacity for moral reasoning. The question is therefore how religious concepts come to be, in Boyer's phrase, "parasitic upon" moral intuitions.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 170. Translation modified following the French version.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

Before answering this question, it will be instructive to examine the general strategy that evolutionary anthropologists and psychologists typically adopt to account for the genesis of features or characteristics whose putative "adaptive advantage" is by no means clear to the uninformed observer. For these authors, as I say, the quasi-universality of religion in human societies constitutes the supreme challenge, above all in its ritual aspects. If evolution favors "relevance" as much as they maintain, to the point of ruthlessly eliminating everything that confers no advantage, how is it that people who otherwise behave reasonably in everyday life should believe in superstitious nonsense? Why should they waste their time and energy, to say nothing of their property and, at times, life, frantically rushing about and making gifts to nonexistent beings?

In the form given it by Dawkins, this general strategy depends on the notion of "by-product."<sup>41</sup> Though religion itself does not seem to possess any discernible selective advantage, it may yet have arisen from the dysfunction of one or more cognitive mechanisms that were selected for their usefulness in the reproduction and perpetuation of the human species. Cognitivists therefore apply themselves

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<sup>41</sup> See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 172-179.

to the dual task of identifying such "cognitive and inferential modules," whose own usefulness is fairly obvious, and of analyzing the mechanisms that cause them to depart from their intended function and produce something as grotesque and harmful, but also as widespread, as religion.

The ingenuity employed by cognitivists to respond to this challenge is equaled only by the perfectly arbitrary, and sometimes quite ridiculous, character of their inventions. I will give only a small number of examples since readers are free to look at the books to which I cite. Dawkins asks us to consider the situation of a child, for whom believing in authority may often be an absolute condition of survival. If the child happens to cross paths with a tiger, for example, his inability to rapidly analyze the situation obliges him to obey his father's orders, without asking any questions: he must believe what his father says, period. But an undesirable by-product of this faculty of belief is credulity. If his father tells him to throw himself onto the pyre to appease the god, the child willingly goes to his death.<sup>42</sup> Or consider the deeply irrational propensity of human beings to fall in love. It is irrational, yes--but useful. For

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<sup>42</sup> See *ibid.*, 174-177.

is not love at first sight, and the neurotic attachment that results from it, in fact an inducement to remain at home once children are born--an indispensable element in the rearing of offspring and therefore in the reproduction of the species? But this same intense fixation on the loved one can misfire, as it were, with the result that it comes to be transferred to this or that divinity.

One cannot help but wonder, and not at all out of spite or mean-spiritedness, whether in order to be an evolutionary anthropologist or psychologist one must have had no personal experience of love, or indeed of many other things in life, such as reading novels or watching films. One book comes to my mind in particular, Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World*,<sup>43</sup> which served as a sentimental education for many young Europeans of my generation. Romantic love, Rougemont showed, so far from being rooted in biology, is a cultural creation intimately linked to the religious history of the medieval West; what is more, there is an utter incompatibility between romantic love and the institution of marriage, as the *myth* of Tristan and Iseult marvelously illustrates. One quotation will suffice: "[I]t is unbelievable that Tristan [could] ever marry Iseult. She typifies the woman a man does not

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<sup>43</sup> Denis de Rougemont, *L'Amour et l'Occident* (Paris: Plon, 1939).

marry; for once she became his wife she would no longer be what she is, and he would no longer love her. Just think of a Mme Tristan! It would be the negation of passion."<sup>44</sup>

Boyer's line of argument is ^superficially less implausible, and in any case it brings us back to our subject, morality. Let us grant that morality has in fact been selected by evolution in the form of cognitive modules that lead us to develop special relationships with our relatives, to exchange gifts, to feel empathy for others, and so on. Unrelated modules have passed through the filter of selection as well, for example our very great capacity for detecting intentional agents in certain threatening environments--a vestige of our past as hunters, when it was essential to be able to spot prey and predators in the tangled growth of a forest. The key to the explanation Boyer advances is found in the following claim: "Moral intuitions suggest that if you could see the whole of a situation without any distortion you would immediately grasp whether it was wrong or right. Religious concepts are just concepts of persons with an immediate perspective on the whole of a situation."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion, rev. and aug. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), 35. (Translation slightly modified.)

<sup>45</sup> Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 190.

In other words, our system for detecting intentional agents is so hypersensitive that it is apt to malfunction and invent such agents for us, even when there are none-- and particularly when we violate a taboo. As supernatural agents, they have the singular property of possessing every piece of *strategic* information about our doings. Not that they know everything about us, for this would include a great many things that are not "relevant"; they are interested only in our moral choices and, most especially, our transgressions. "If you have a concept of [an] agent [as someone having] all the [relevant] strategic information," Boyer says, "then it is quite logical to think of your own moral intuitions as identical to that particular agent's view of the situation."<sup>46</sup> Logical? Myself, I prefer the deeply moving force of poetry:

"Has the eye disappeared?" asked Zillah, trembling.  
Cain answered back to her, "No. It's still there."  
And then he said to them, "I want to live underground  
Like a hermit in his tomb--in some place without sound  
Where no one will see me, and I won't see them as  
well."

And so they dug a ditch, and Cain replied, "You've

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Quote modified following the French version.



done well."

Then he went down into the black crypt alone.

And when he was sitting in the darkness on his throne,

And they had sealed the vault in which he would

remain,

The eye was in the tomb there and looked straight at

Cain.<sup>47</sup>

To sum up: Boyer denies that the religious mind begins by positing the existence of supernatural beings with absurd and inconceivable properties, and then proceeds to act morally, feeling himself to be watched. Boyer inverts the perspective: the moral intuitions of ordinary--not necessarily religious--people lead them astray, so that they come to feel that they are interacting with supernatural agents, or else being spied upon by beings with special powers, which in turn gives rise to the belief that these agents exist. One is put in mind of the old joke: "The proof that God exists is that atheists do not believe in Him." This is precisely what a whole tradition of commentators has said about Molière's Don Juan, who claimed not to believe in anything other than "2 + 2 = 4,"

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<sup>47</sup> Victor Hugo, "La Conscience," in *La Légende des siècles* (1859); from *Victor Hugo: Selected Poetry in French and English*, ed. and trans. Steven Monte (New York: Routledge, 2002), 217.

but who until his descent into hell spent his life defying a god in whom he said he did not believe.

I shall limit myself to two remarks in the face of such a baroque construction--far more baroque, in fact, than the system of beliefs entertained by a religious mind. First, ^it seems extremely odd that cognitivists should insist on transgression as the embodiment of moral evil. For there to be transgression, must there not be taboos? If so, are they part of our moral intuitions, hardwired into our brain? A moment's reflection shows not only that our moral intuitions do not necessarily include the notion of transgression, but that just behavior may actually consist in ignoring prohibitions. There is a Christian illustration that is particularly telling in this regard. It may be objected that I am being inconsistent in choosing it, since at the outset I placed Christianity apart from other religions. Quite so--but here I take the point of view adopted by Boyer, who makes no such distinction. I ask you to consider the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), which in my view is the principal source of the Gospels' influence on the modern world.

A legist asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"--this neighbor whom the law bids everyone to love as himself. Jesus responds with a story that subsequently spread

throughout the Western world and beyond, although no supernatural being figures in it; no protective river that, on discovering that an act of incest has been committed, begins to flow backward toward its source; no forest that supplies game only on the condition that one sings to it. Indeed one wonders, following Boyer and Dawkins, how this story could possibly have had the success that it did. For it is a purely human story.

A man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked by robbers, who left him for dead. A priest passed by, and then a Levite; neither one did anything to help him. But an inhabitant of Samaria--which is to say a foreigner--took pity and did his utmost to give the injured man aid and comfort, and paid for his care. Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" The lawyer replied, "The one who showed mercy on him." At this Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

This magnificent text contains nothing that conflicts with our ordinary notions of physics and psychology. It is hard for us today to appreciate how forcefully, however, it must have contradicted the moral intuitions of Jesus's listeners. The dying man might after all have been ritually unclean, and in any case the two clerics could not

disregard the duties that awaited them at the Temple in Jerusalem. As for the Samaritan, his obligations of mutual aid extended only to the people of his own community, not to a foreigner. What Jesus meant to tell us is that our neighbor, our true neighbor, can be literally anyone. The lesson, then, was to ignore the prohibitions and obligations that form the basis of ethics, and to see them as cultural barriers that turn each people in upon itself. Paul expressed this message in the Letter to the Galatians (3:28): "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."<sup>48</sup>

The second remark that I wish to make about Boyer's account bears upon traditional (or primitive) religions, which are characterized by three elements: myth, rites, and prohibitions and obligations. In a rite of enthronement, marriage, passage, or the like, when a sacred boundary is ritually transgressed before all the celebrants (incest, for example, or murder, or the eating of impure foods), what, according to Boyer, do the supernatural beings think about this transgression, which, according to his account, triggers their intercession? Are they capable of seeing

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<sup>48</sup> Ivan Illich saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan the key to Christianity's extraordinary capacity for destroying traditional social orders; see David Cayley, ed., *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), 29-32.

that it is also, within the time and space proper to the rite, an obligation? What sense do they make of the violence inherent in the ritualistic violation of moral injunctions? For as Durkheim remarked, "[I] do not believe it is possible to characterize the mentality of lower societies by a kind of unilateral and exclusive penchant for refusing to make distinctions. If the primitive mingles things we keep distinct, conversely, he keeps apart things we yoke together, and he even conceives of these distinctions as violent and clear-cut oppositions." These include the stark contrast between sacred and profane things, which "repel and contradict each other with such force that the mind refuses to think of them at the same time. They exclude one another from consciousness."<sup>49</sup> For cognitivists, who ignore both the central role of ritual and the clear-cut opposition between ritual and prohibitions, such distinctions have no meaning. One of chief virtues of the anthropology of violence and the sacred elaborated by René Girard, by contrast, is that it illuminates in a very simple and elegant way the radical separation between the prohibitions of ordinary life and the acting out of their violation within the framework of ritual.

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<sup>49</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 182.

At the heart of Girard's analysis, as I say, is the idea that the sacred is human violence that has been expelled, externalized, hypostatized. The mechanism for making gods operates by means of mimeticism. At the height of the sacrificial crisis, when murderous fury has shattered the system of differences that constitutes the social order, when everyone is at war with everyone else, the contagious character of the violence triggers a catastrophic swing, causing all the hatreds of the moment to converge arbitrarily on a single member of the group. The killing of this person abruptly reestablishes peace, and gives rise to religion in its three aspects. First, myth: the victim of the foundational event is regarded as a supernatural being, capable both of introducing disorder and of creating order. Next, rites: always sacrificial in nature to begin with, they mimic the violent decomposition of the group in order to more powerfully dramatize the reestablishment of order through the putting to death of a surrogate victim. Finally, the system of prohibitions and obligations: by preventing the recurrence of conflicts that already have embroiled the community, it performs an opposite function to that of ritual, the latter having to represent the transgression and the ensuing disorder in order to reproduce the sacrificial mechanism.

The sacred is fundamentally ambivalent, because it holds violence back by means of violence. This is clear in the case of the sacrificial gesture that restores order: it is just another murder, even if it pretends to be the last word of violence. The same is true of the system of prohibitions and obligations: the social structures that bind the members of the community to one another in normal times are the very same ones that polarize it in times of crisis. When a prohibition is transgressed, the obligations of mutual loyalty, by breaking through local boundaries in both time and space (one thinks of the mechanism of the vendetta), draw into an ever-widening conflict people who were in no way parties to the original confrontation.

## **6. Scapegoats and Sacrificial Victims**

We know "these things hidden since the founding of the world", for they have now become an open secret. One has only to look at the newspaper, or listen to the radio, to find that the term "scapegoat" is readily adapted to any purpose. Although the word points directly to the innocence of the victim, by revealing the mechanism for

externalizing violence, its meaning is often misinterpreted. A politician, for example, will say, "They want to make me look like a scapegoat, but I won't let them." What he means, of course, is that others want to make him look guilty, but in fact he is innocent. And yet, properly understood, he is really saying the opposite--they want to make him look like an innocent victim.

The scapegoat mechanism, by which society causes its wrongs to fall upon an innocent individual or group, or at least an individual or group that is not more culpable than any other, does not function as an intentional act. The "pure" persecutors are those who persecute others without knowing what they do. This, perhaps, is why they must be forgiven: the very act of persecution produces in them, through an unconscious process, the conviction that their victim is guilty. "Innocent persecutors," as one is almost tempted to call them, are persuaded of the well-foundedness of their violence; indeed, in the world of pure persecution, neither the word nor the notion of a scapegoat exists.

The opposite use of the term demonstrates that the scapegoat mechanism has now been emptied of any real meaning. Instead it is cynically manipulated, to the point that persecutors no longer themselves believe in the guilt



of their victim, or, at the very most, they pretend to believe that they believe in it. Modern-day persecutors have a bad conscience: in order to achieve their aims, they have to portray their victim as a persecutor. In this upside-down world, in which roles are reversed and accusations fly in every direction, one can say the opposite of what one means without anyone noticing it. Everyone understands what is going on, whatever what is being said.

A glance at the dictionary reminds us, however, that the figure who is routinely wheeled out for political purposes is lacking an essential element: the sacred. The scapegoat first appeared as part of a particular type of sacrificial ritual, the best known example of which is described in the Book of Leviticus (16:8-22). On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the priest symbolically laid all the sins of the people of Israel on the head of a goat, which was then sent away into the wilderness, to the demon Azazel. In *The Golden Bough* (1890), the anthropologist and historian of religion Sir James Frazer claimed that the like of this ritual can be found in the four corners of the earth, beginning with the rite of expulsion associated with the *pharmakós* in ancient Greece, and grouped them under the general rubric of scapegoat rituals. From this point of

view it is highly paradoxical at first sight, but ultimately no less revelatory, that the entry for "scapegoat" in most Western dictionaries gives as its primary or literal sense the ritual, and as the figurative, derivative, or metaphorical sense the psychosociological mechanism underlying the ritual. This is a rare instance of a copy coming before the original, where the ritual or theatrical representation of a thing precedes the thing itself. When René Girard's book *Le Bouc émissaire* appeared in Japanese, the title chosen was a word that referred to one of the rituals falling under the category defined by Frazer. This was obviously a misinterpretation, for Girard meant to designate the mechanism and not its representation. But it may well have been impossible to do better than that: the mechanism seems not to have been named because it is nameless in Japanese. It is as though the ritual, in blurring the operation of the mechanism beneath a ceremonial veil, became more universal, more transcultural than the lucidity about the mechanism, which everywhere and always, through persecution, has transformed the victim into the guilty.

According to Girard, all of this proves that the message of the Gospels penetrates the world through and through, albeit incompletely. In this sense, and despite

all the statistics indicating a decline in religious observance, one may rightly speak of the triumph of Christianity in the modern world.

The account of Jesus's death on the cross, as nineteenth-century religious anthropology well recognized, is similar to the accounts that one finds at the heart of a great many religions. As far as the *factual* basis of these accounts is concerned, there is no major difference between Christianity and primitive religions. It is exactly this that foils the best efforts of the cognitive anthropologists. Yet the *interpretation* that Christianity gave to the story of Jesus's crucifixion, under the influence of its Jewish heritage, was radically new. Here, paradoxically, Girard renders homage to Nietzsche. The Gospel narrative innovates in that it is not told from the point of view of the persecutors; it takes the side of the victim whose perfect innocence it proclaims. This is why Nietzsche believed himself justified in accusing Christianity of being a slave morality.

The mechanism for manufacturing sacredness in the world has been irreparably disabled by the body of knowledge constituted by Christianity. Instead, it produces more and more violence--a violence that is losing the capacity to self-externalize and contain itself. Thus

Jesus's enigmatic words suddenly take on unsuspected meaning: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). Nothing can be understood about the question of religion in the world today if one has not first tried to elucidate this terrible passage. Those who see religion as filled with omniscient dragons and carnivorous mountains are not in a position even to begin to try.

The triumph of Christianity is everywhere to be seen, but its effects are dreadful. Quite often Christianity is incarnated in the modern world in the form of its monstrous double. I have already mentioned this reversal, by which the concern for victims becomes a ground for persecution, and I will come back to it at length in the chapter after next. The lesson of Christianity can be applied only if it has first been completely and thoroughly understood: human beings must renounce violence once and for all. For the Kingdom is like the eye of a cyclone: if one tries to reach it by a continuous and incremental path, trying at every step of the way to improve the effectiveness of the habitual, which is to say violent, means for containing violence, one will be cast into the vortex like a wisp of straw, spinning all the more rapidly as one believes that

the calm center is drawing nearer. Either one jumps into the Kingdom with both feet--or one dies from it.

## **7. The False Promise of Salvation by Morality**

A recent poll testifying to the rapid decline of Catholicism in France appeared under the headline: "The Church Will Be Conquered by Liberalism."<sup>50</sup> "This does not mean that there is no longer religious feeling, no longer faith, no longer religious observance," the political scientist Jean-Marie Donegani remarked. "But there is a deinstitutionalization in the sense that, instead of thinking in terms of attachment to a church, people think in terms of attachment to values and of identification, wholly or in part, with a source of meaning." Donegani went on to say: "Subjectivity is overtaking dogma; religion is what I define it to be. In a poll of young people between the ages of twelve and fifteen taken a few years ago, words such as 'justice,' 'truth,' 'liberty,' and 'friendship' were considered by a majority of those questioned as religious in nature: that which one most

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<sup>50</sup> See the special interview with Jean-Marie Donegani, *Le Monde* (21-22 January 2007) concerning a poll commissioned by the religion section of this newspaper and conducted the same month that showed that only half of the French people identified themselves as Catholics, as against 80% thirty years earlier.

values is religious. Instead of an external, objective, and institutional definition of religion, one finds a personal and fluid definition." Donegani associates this *subjectivism* with the rise of liberalism. No doubt a great many readers will have concurred in the death foretold of Catholicism--the Church, for its part, having not ceased to condemn this "privatization of religion"--and, beyond that, of Christianity. But is this forecast correct?

At this point it will be useful to go back in time, to Émile Durkheim, whose insights have guided us so far. In July 1898, at the height of the controversy surrounding the Dreyfus affair, Durkheim published an article that is no less fresh and pertinent today than it was then. Entitled "Individualism and the Intellectuals,"<sup>51</sup> it was a rejoinder to charges made by the anti-Dreyfusard Ferdinand Brunetière, who, in an article published several months earlier under the title "After the Trial: Replies to a Few Intellectuals,"<sup>52</sup> had castigated *individualism*--the "disease" peculiar to those who were not yet called social scientists, and which led them, in the name of the scientific spirit and respect for truth, to challenge the verdict brought by the authorities competent to rule in the

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<sup>51</sup> Émile Durkheim, "L'individualisme et les intellectuels," *Revue Bleue*, 4th series, 10 (2 July 1898):7-13; reprinted in (Paris: Éditions Mille et Une Nuits, 2002), with an afterword by Sophie Jankélévitch.

<sup>52</sup> Ferdinand Brunetière, "Après le procès: Réponses à quelques intellectuels," *Revue des Deux Mondes* 146 (15 March 1898).

matter, thus imperiling the survival of the nation.

Maurice Barrès revived this argument four years later, in 1902, when he defined the intellectual as an "individual who is persuaded that society must be founded on logic and who fails to understand that in fact it rests on necessities that are prior, and perhaps foreign, to individual reason."<sup>53</sup>

I do not doubt that cognitivists, if they were to read these articles, would feel proud and reassured of the justice of their mission to defend logic and rationality against the attacks of obscurantist and reactionary authors. The interesting question remains, however, how Durkheim--one of the first Dreyfusards, and an active member of the League for the Defense of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen--managed to defend the intellectuals against the charge of individualism. He did this by showing that individualism was a *religion*, the sole guarantor of the social order and, what is more, a religion issued from Christianity.<sup>54</sup>

Durkheim contrasted two types of individualism. The one that served as a target for the attacks of the anti-Dreyfusards, as though it were the only imaginable kind of

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted by Jankélévitch in Durkheim, "L'individualisme et les intellectuels," 47.

<sup>54</sup> See also the articles published during this time by Charles Péguy in the *Revue Blanche*, where the Dreyfusard "religion" is described as a defense of the innocent.

individualism, is "the narrow utilitarianism and utilitarian egoism of Spencer and the economists."<sup>55</sup> This individualism, which rests on the unleashing of selfish interests, is in fact incompatible with the common good. "However, there exists another individualism over which it is less easy to triumph. It has been upheld for a century by the great majority of thinkers: it is the individualism of Kant and Rousseau and the spiritualists, that which the Declaration of the Rights of Man sought, more or less successfully, to translate into formulae, which is now taught in our schools and which has become the basis of our moral catechism."<sup>56</sup> The ideal sought by this individualism, which Durkheim connects with the great tradition of eighteenth-century *liberalism*,

goes so far beyond the limit of utilitarian ends that it appears to those who aspire to it as having a religious character. The human person, by reference to the definition of which good must be distinguished from evil, is considered as *sacred, in what can be called the ritual sense of the word*. It has something of that transcendental majesty which the churches of

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<sup>55</sup> Émile Durkheim, "Individualism and the Intellectuals," in *Durkheim on Politics and the State*, ed. Anthony Giddens, trans. W. D. Halls (Cambridge: Polity, 1986), 79.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.



all times have accorded to their gods. It is conceived as being invested with that mysterious property which creates a vacuum about holy objects, which keeps them away from profane contacts and which separates them from ordinary life. And it is exactly this characteristic which confers the respect of which it is the object. Whoever makes an attempt on a man's life, on a man's liberty, on a man's honour, inspires us with a feeling of revulsion, in every way comparable to that which the believer experiences when he sees his idol profaned. Such a morality is not simply a hygienic discipline or a wise principle of economy. *It is a religion of which man is, at the same time, both believer and god.*<sup>57</sup>

The anti-Dreyfusards criticized the individualism of the intellectuals in the name of a conservative Christian morality. "But are those who take this position unaware," Durkheim objects, "that the originality of Christianity has consisted precisely in a remarkable development of the individual spirit?"<sup>58</sup> And if, he goes on to say, "that restricted individualism which constitutes Christianity was

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 81 (the emphasis is mine).

<sup>58</sup> Steven Lukes, "Durkheim's 'Individualism and the Intellectuals,'" *Political Studies* 17 (1969): 26.

necessary eighteen centuries ago, it seems probable that a more developed individualism should be indispensable today; for things have changed in the interval. It is thus a singular error to present individualist morality as antagonistic to Christian morality; quite the contrary, it is derived from it. By adhering to the former, we do not disown our past; we merely continue it."<sup>59</sup>

Let us compare Durkheim's position with the findings of the poll I mentioned a moment ago on the decline of Catholicism. Yes, Durkheim would say, moral liberalism does threaten Christianity in the strict sense, but only in order to better realize its promise. Furthermore, he would take issue with the claim that these findings furnished evidence of "subjectivism." The supreme values shared by the young people Donegani mentions, out of which they have made a religion that permits them to go beyond themselves, to transcend themselves, are anything but catalytic agents of anarchy and anomie. "Once a goal is pursued by a whole people," Durkheim notes, "it acquires, as a result of this unanimous adherence, a sort of moral supremacy which raises it above private goals and thereby gives it a religious character."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 25.

In his reply to Brunetière, Durkheim relies heavily on the idea that this religion of humanity, by which "man has become a god for man,"<sup>61</sup> is absolutely indispensable to social cohesion. Speaking of the Dreyfusards, he writes:

If every attack on the rights of an individual revolts them, this is not solely because of sympathy for the victim. Nor is it because they fear that they themselves will suffer similar acts of injustice. Rather it is that such outrages cannot rest unpunished without putting national existence in jeopardy.... A religion which tolerates acts of sacrilege abdicates any sway over men's minds. The religion of the individual can therefore allow itself to be flouted without resistance, only on penalty of ruining its credit; since it is the sole link that binds us to one another, such a weakening cannot take place without the onset of social dissolution. Thus the individualist, who defends the rights of the individual, defends at the same time the vital interests of society.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 27.

Here we reach the limits of Durkheim's theory of religion, for which "the idea of society is the soul of religion."<sup>63</sup> At the same time we find ourselves in a position to appreciate the magnitude of the error that Durkheim commits with regard to Christianity.

Durkheim's moral individualism defends mankind in general, mankind *in abstracto*.<sup>64</sup> Like young people today, he is less troubled by the torments of actual individuals than by attacks on what he takes to be the universal and transcendent values of liberty, truth, justice, and reason. Durkheim himself had made this unmistakably clear when, at the beginning of his essay on individualism and intellectuals, published only a few months after Commandant Esterhazy's acquittal and Zola's trial, while Dreyfus was rotting away on Devil's Island, he wrote, "Let us forget the Affair itself and the melancholy scenes we have witnessed."<sup>65</sup> No doubt a great many Dreyfusards judged that the surrogate victim, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a graduate of the École Polytechnique, was unworthy of the noble cause they upheld.

Christianity, as I understand it, stands in complete opposition to this. Neither mankind in general nor some

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<sup>63</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 314.

<sup>64</sup> See Durkheim, "Individualism and the Intellectuals," 80.

<sup>65</sup> Lukes, "Durkheim's 'Individualism and the Intellectuals,'" 20.

set of supreme values deserve to be divinized, on pain of idolatry. The person who suffers, the person with a given name, the lost sheep of the flock, must be saved, even if it means endangering the ninety-nine others.<sup>66</sup> This is the only thing that counts. Far from being the ultimate guarantor of the social order, Christianity acts as a lethal agent of disruption, a source of turmoil that is bound to destroy all humanly constituted authority, all powers-that-be. If it is destined to triumph, this will be at the expense of everything that makes up our world today.

There is a great irony in this, for Boyer and his fellow cognitivists have arrived today, though by a quite different route, at the very same error committed by Durkheim. All of them devalue religion, to the advantage of morality, by denying the religious foundation of human societies. Religion for Durkheim has no morphogenetic power: it is an interpretation--a "collective representation"--of a unique, sui generis, and preexisting reality, namely, society. It may be the case, and this is for Durkheim especially true of Christianity and the morality that flows from it, that this interpretation strengthens the social order. But it does not create

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<sup>66</sup> On the fundamentally anti-utilitarian--because anti-sacrificial--character of Christianity see two of my earlier books, *Le Sacrifice et l'envie* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1992) and *Libéralisme et justice social* (Paris: Hachette, 1997), as well as chapter 5 of the present work, "Justice et ressentiment."

society. As for the cognitivists, they make morality the offspring of biology, and they see religion as a purely illusory account of moral intuitions. Ultimately the same impulse of denial is at work, the same blindness in the face of two disconcerting truths. The first truth is that it is the sacred that gives birth to human societies. The second is that Christianity is not a morality, but rather an epistemology: it conveys the truth of the sacred and, by virtue of just this, deprives it of creative power--for better or for worse. Only human beings will decide.