

Violence, Anarchy and Scripture: Jacques Ellul and René Girard

Matthew Pattillo

(Reprinted with permission from

Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture

Vol 11, Spring 2004)

Introduction

This essay will examine the personal and social consequences of sin, Biblically defined, and will contend that Christian faith necessitates a rejection of the secular political order. Exploring and contrasting the thought of René Girard and Jacques Ellul, we will demonstrate that Girard's mimetic theory supplies crucial theoretical underpinnings for Ellul's theology. Ellul, in turn, sequencing the Biblical narrative somewhat differently, provides Girard the more biblically consistent content of the life of faith.

The ethical content of the life of faith is a continuation of the salvation narrative inaugurated in Genesis 1-2, incarnated and perpetuated in Israel and later, the Church, the universalized community of the Abrahamic blessing. The historical content of this faith demonstrates the incompatibility of political power with freedom in Christ. The Church's ill-fated attempts to maintain an authentic practice of faith while legitimizing the secular order are exposed by

the Biblical critique of power. While the growth of the global state has made a total withdrawal from the political order inconceivable, it is precisely its utter domination today that makes critical continued defiance by the Body of Christ.

Original Sin

Girard observes that when the snake first appears in the Genesis account of the Fall, it is already in conflict with God, opposing him as a jealous rival. Eve is enticed by it to covet divinity, to covet what belongs to God – the knowledge of good and evil – and to herself become God's rival (Girard 1965, 182). Her imitation of the serpent's covetousness forms "an alliance of two against one" (Girard 2000, 171-185), and God is expelled from the relationship. The contagion of metaphysical desire, or mimesis, soon claims Adam and what began as a relationship of obedience without conflict between God and human beings is forever changed. An acquisitive mimesis turns antagonistic and rivalrous (Girard 1978a, 95). When called to account for her disobedience, Eve blames the snake. Adam in turn blames Eve, implying that God is himself at least partially culpable: "The woman whom *You* gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate" (Gen 3:12, emphasis mine).

In the Biblical account of human origins then, rivalry with God produces rivalry between people. Girard argues that although conflict must inevitably lead to violence, here "God takes the violence upon himself and founds humanity by driving Adam and Eve far away from him" (Girard 1978a, 142). God's banishment of the first humans only mirrors the expulsion implied by human collusion with the snake.

"Now we know that covetousness is the crux of the whole affair," Ellul writes, "since sin always depends on it. 'You shall not covet' (Ex 20:17) is the last of the commandments because it summarizes *everything* – all the other sins" (Ellul 1985, 101; see also Girard 1999, 7-12). Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve are not required to choose between good and evil. "All that counted was the relation to God and its expression in action" (Ellul 1976, 51). Here Ellul understands freedom as obedience to God's commandments *within the context of a relationship with God*. Independence from God is mere slavery: "Adam seeks to liberate himself from the limits which God has set for him and in so doing he enters into rivalry with other forces and becomes subject to sin" (Ellul 1976, 49). The knowledge that Adam and Eve covet and usurp from God is "the power to *decide* on one's own *what is good and what is evil*" (Ellul 1985, 96n, emphasis Ellul's). Consequently, human morality is of the order of the Fall, and Girard concurs: the ethical always derives from victimary unanimity (Girard 1978a, 236), in this case the rejection of God.

For Ellul "covetousness is equivalent to the spirit of power or domination" (Ellul 1985, 101)¹ and "no society is possible among people who compete for power or who covet and find themselves coveting the same thing" (Ellul 1991, 20). Civil order between rivals in the Genesis prehistory can only be founded on blood. All the elements of the violent origin of civilization are present in this text.

¹ "Sin is a break with God and all that this entails. When I say that people are not good, I am not adopting a Christian or a moral standpoint. I am saying that their two great characteristics, no matter what their society or education, are covetousness and the desire for power...René Girard has fully shown what the implications of covetousness

Cain murders his brother and rival, Abel, becoming the founder of the first city. The threat of contagious violence is described by the multiplication of Cain's murder into a seven-fold revenge, which becomes his descendant Lamech's seventy-seven-fold revenge, so that by the time of Noah violence engulfs the world. The acceptability of Abel's blood sacrifice is read by Girard as an adumbration of the sacrificial protection on which all social order will be founded: the violence of all against all will be kept in check by the ritualized violence of all against one. For Girard, Cain represents the chaotic mob in the grip of a violent frenzy, uniting against a single victim, a scapegoat. This unity achieves a real peace and allows for the development of all that is collectively termed civilization.² In the emergent order legal codes address that which must be prohibited to maintain that peace, and ritual describes the action by which it was first secured (Hamerton-Kelly 1987, 93). For Girard the fundamental character of ritual is re-enactment of the immolation of the victim (Hamerton-Kelly 1987, 107),³ as it is this act that first brought concord out of chaos. Culture in all its expressions, the arts and sciences,

are" (Ellul 1991, 20). Also note Ellul's humble confession: "I do not pretend to be able to unveil things hidden from the beginning of the world" (7).

² "For years now we have been playing the scapegoat game. It has a profound source, as Girard has recalled...the possibility of universalizing it is the exclusive work of television, the radio, and the press. These attach the label and thereby justify whole nations and each and every individual" (Ellul 1989, 59).

³ Compare: "We all know, obviously, the close link between religion and violence....The psychological reasons for this have been a matter of question....The fact that Christianity, the revelation of the God of love, could have so changed....sets one thinking....Religion *always* produces violence. When violence comes first, it requires the appearance of a religion" (Ellul 1975, 9).

every mode of communication, is seen as having as its *fons et origo* the same ritualized coaxing of order from disorder.⁴

Arguing in a similar fashion, Ellul represents the first city as founded on Cain's rejection of God, specifically his offer of protection against vengeance,⁵ and his choosing instead to create his own protection – the city. The city "expresses the attempt to exclude God, to shut oneself off from him, to fabricate a world which is purely and exclusively human" (Ellul 1976, 39). Such an exclusively human world is necessarily founded and maintained through force,⁶ which is legalized and ritualized:

In its origin law is religious. This is confirmed by almost all sociological findings. Law is the expression of the will of a god; it is formulated by the priest: it is given religious sanction, it is accompanied by magic ritual. Reciprocally, religious precepts are presented in juridical garb. The relationship with the god is established by man in the form of a contract. The priest guarantees religion with the occult authority of law (Ellul 1960, 18).

The civil or secular order is understood as founded on violence and maintained by force.⁷ The clear implication is that what humans

⁴ Compare: "Human society is based on the creative violence which has engendered individual consciousness as well as social order" (Ellul 1971, 246).

⁵ Ellul's is the more literal reading of Gen 4:15: "And the Lord said to him, 'Therefore, whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.' And the Lord set a mark on Cain, lest anyone finding him should kill him."

⁶ "Every state is founded on violence and cannot maintain itself save by and through violence" (Ellul 1969, 84).

⁷ No distinction can be made between force and violence: "It is shortsighted, both politically and spiritually, to say that there is a violence which liberates and another

esteem as "law and order" is established by a crime, and is therefore fundamentally *unjust*. Inasmuch as the founding murder is *arbitrary* violence, there can be no authentic *justice* in the city.⁸ The victim upon whom the city is founded is innocent, and what is believed just is itself only the legitimization of an unjust order, the illusion of justice serving to suppress all consciousness of its criminal origins. In the city "justice" can only mean that the victim of arbitrary violence is also given credit for the establishment of (temporary) peace (Girard 2000, 185). Justice comes too late for the victim, but is timely enough for the consciences of the perpetrators, for whom the ensuing peace confirms the correctness of the original division. Still, the memory of the victim is never effaced and he becomes with time a sort of god, a sacred being who is simultaneously, mysteriously malevolent *and* benevolent. The deification of the victim and the ritualized re-enactment of the crime establishing peace serve to suppress from memory the malevolence of the perpetrators and the victim's innocence. The legal system is thus revealed as a religious phenomenon and its charter becomes the seal of our bondage to the secular order (Girard 1993b, 137). Ellul writes:

Why, after all, does one obey the state?
Beyond factors that may be understood and
analyzed, not everything can be accounted
for, as in the case of the soul that the scalpel
cannot find no matter how close the analysis.

which subjugates. All violence is a crime before the eternal" (Ellul 1971, 151). Compare Girard: "The illusion that there is difference within the heart of violence is the key to the sacrificial way of thinking" (1978a, 266).

⁸ Legal execution, for example, is only ritualized violence (Girard 1978a, 173).

The residue is a spiritual power, an exousia, that inhabits the body of the state (1986, 175).

Society of Technique and the Sacrificial Order

The Biblical narrative confirms the necessity of law in a fallen world – social, moral and physical laws that govern every aspect of life but which are all forms of the same necessity. "From the moment when Adam separated himself from God," Ellul writes, "when his freedom was no longer love but the choice between two possibilities, from that moment Adam moved from the realm of freedom into the realm of necessity (Ellul 1984b, 134)."

The immediate relationship of the Garden is broken in the Fall, disrupting the relation between humans and God, between man and woman, and between man and nature. No longer in the fellowship of love with God, humans are subjected to the laws of necessity, and begin to learn and master them, altering their world according to these laws. They adopt means of mediation in their approach to one another. Cain's descendants are read by Ellul as inventors of these mediating techniques – the domestication of animals, music-making, and the fashioning of tools to subdue nature. These means derivative from the first successful technique mentioned in the Genesis account, Abel's blood sacrifice, which serves as both a screen between humanity and God and an approach (Ellul 1984b, 132).⁹ Girard too,

⁹ "Recently we have witnessed the appearance of a new interpretation grill presented by René Girard...Rather than presenting merely another interpretation, Girard gives us a genuine method. Since it fits no ideological canon, I feel certain it will never attract notice or be taken into account by biblical scholars" (Ellul 1988, 86n). Also: "Concerning the contrast of two themes, pollution and debt, I must underline, as a point of comparison, Girard's much more profound interpretation...with respect to the sacrificial

sees that the sciences and arts, and every form of human communication have their origins in ritual violence (Girard 2000, 171-185). Once the connection between ritual and culture becomes clear, the truly religious nature of all human civilization is made plain. The denial of sacrificial origins for the arts and sciences is an indication of the veiled and veiling character of ritual violence. Suppression of the knowledge of its origins enables human culture to flourish.

The Biblical revelation, then, by unveiling the sacred violence at the heart of religion, poses a threat to human society. The demythologizing effect of revelation undermines the sacred structures of our world. Girard sees the progressive influence of the Biblical revelation in the now universal concern for victims and the growing inability of persecutors to impose their own perspectives on others by fiat. "Centuries were needed to demystify medieval persecutors," he writes, "a few years suffice to discredit contemporary persecutors" (Girard 1986, 201). This does not mean that our world knows less persecution or violence, only that the myths that once protected the persecutors and blinded people to the innocence of their victims have been eroded by the demythologizing power of the Biblical revelation. The world becomes "increasingly apocalyptic" (Girard 1996, 274), as time wears on, for without "sacrificial protections," without a means of limiting it, humans are faced with a global deluge of violence. By unveiling the violent foundations of human society, the Biblical revelation robs it of its means of maintaining order. After the

and nonsacrificial reading of biblical texts. But Girard's approach involves no socioeconomic infrastructure that would permit a Marxist interpretation. The sacrificial interpretation springs from more fundamental facts about human beings and society!" (87n).

proclamation of the innocence of sacrificial victims the violent order can only be maintained by a denuded will to power. Girard observes that because of the Biblical revelation, we save and, paradoxically, produce more victims than ever before. This latter result is the meaning of Christ's warning, "I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Mt 10:34). Both results are evidence of the "unrelenting historical advance" of Christian truth in our world (Girard 1999, 174).

Ellul also traces the historical desacralization of religious forms accomplished by the Biblical revelation – including the desacralization of "Christian religion" (Ellul 1975). But he contends that the primitive sacred has been replaced by a modern sacred, a secular religion whose myths are Progress, Work, and Happiness, and whose ideologies include Nationalism, Socialism, Democracy, and Capitalism.¹⁰

For Ellul, this "desacralization permitted the development of technology and the unlimited exploitation of the world" (Ellul 1986, 143). In *The Technological Society*,¹¹ he argues that the modern world is increasingly dominated by Technique: not merely technology, but the collection of means – political, economic, scientific, etc. – by which humans utilize and master nature and one another. The

¹⁰ "The myth of progress as man's seizure of history in order to make it serve him is probably the greatest success ever brought off by a myth. The myth of work as an affirmation of man's transcendence and everlastingness in the face of, and in relation to, history; the myth of happiness as the joy of participating in a glorious time, which is outside the time in which we now participate, hence both a reality and a promise at the same time - all that appears to be at the very heart of these creations of the modern consciousness. In truth, it is all simply the mythical response to the person in the new situation" (Ellul 1975, 112).

¹¹ *The Technological Society* was first published in French in 1954, the same year that Heidegger's 1949 lecture "The Question Concerning Technology" was first published. The two reach many of the same conclusions.

Society of Technique is concerned above all with efficiency, and elevates means above ends. The magical nature of primitive ritual has been replaced by the conscious design of social engineering (Ellul 1971b, 259). The worldwide domination of the State, which centralizes and integrates all of the various techniques, is creating a global concentration camp in which individuals are valued only for the "role" each plays in the proper functioning of society. Humans no longer control the means but are controlled by them. When technical developments become possible, people are no longer able to ask whether they ought or ought not be pursued. If it can be done, it will be done, and if, for example, the development of nuclear energy and weaponry creates unforeseen environmental and human consequences, the hope is always expressed that future technical progress will at last propose a remedy. Technique always advances according to its own intractable logic.

Where Ellul sees Efficiency as the defining goal and characteristic of the global society, Girard argues that it is precisely the "the concern for victims...[that] dominates the total planetary culture in which we live....The world becoming one culture is the fruit of this concern and not the reverse" (Girard 1999, 178)¹² The ineluctable advance of the Biblical revelation renders "new" myths

¹² "The analogy between the terms 'global' and 'universal' is misleading. Universalization has to do with human rights, liberty, culture, and democracy. By contrast, globalization is about technology, the market, tourism, and information. Globalization appears to be irreversible whereas universalization is likely to be on its way out. At least, it appears to be retreating as a value system which developed in the context of Western modernity and was unmatched by any other culture" (Baudrillard 2003).

incapable of survival.¹³ He considers the principle challenge to the Biblical revelation today to be a kind of "false concern for the victim," the political appropriation of concern for the victims that turns the accusation of victimization against Christians and against the Biblical revelation itself.¹⁴ The result is that the status of victim is eagerly sought, since it is deemed a position of power and a source of political capital. Consider, for example, the debate over abortion rights framed on both sides as concern for the victim.

Ellul, too, sees that the great secular metanarratives since the Enlightenment had been largely discredited. Of Kant and Hegel, he writes:

It was wonderful to set forth an attractive outline of history and its development, but what a fraud, what a swindle, when the only decisive result was the relentless strengthening of the State, the very place where man should have concentrated all his forces to prevent such a thing (Ellul 1973, 278).

The same can be said, of course, for Marx, and a host of utopian dreamers since, Christian and otherwise. The history of the twentieth century is an especially cluttered graveyard of capsized myths of progress and new world ideologies run aground. Most of those that

¹³ "Even if some totalitarian system were to control the entire planet tomorrow, it would not succeed in making its own myth, or the magical aspect of its persecution, prevail" (Girard 1986, 201).

¹⁴ "*The other totalitarianism*...does not oppose Judeo-Christian aspirations but claims them as its own and questions the concern for victims on the part of Christians...(It) does not openly oppose Christianity but outflanks it on its left wing" (Girard 1999, 180 emphasis Girard's).

made serious claims on the age in which Ellul lived and wrote are little more than historical curiosities today. But even today, in the global-capitalist aftermath of the last century's ideology wars, Ellul's analysis tolls true:

Capitalism has progressively subordinated all of life – individual and collective – to money. Money has become the sole criterion for judging man and his activity...money, the source of power and freedom, must take priority over everything else. This belief is well supported on the one hand by a general loss of spiritual sensitivity (if not of faith itself) and on the other by the incredible growth of technology. Money, which allows us to obtain everything material progress offers (in truth, everything our fallen nature desires), is no longer merely an economic value. It has become a moral value and an ethical standard (Ellul 1984a, 20).

Recent years have witnessed the rise and fall of the "Information Age," with its promise of decentralized power and freedom for individuals through the supposed egalitarianism of the Internet. The vastly increased technical power of the State to house and reference information on the lives of individual citizens, the rabid proliferation of electronic surveillance and identification systems since the early nineties, to name just a couple of recent "advances," have made such short work of this craze that it was scarcely uttered before it was dead in the water. Ellul is again prophetic: "Technical aggrandizement of the state...is the only condition under which a contract between state and individual is possible" (Ellul 1965, 309).

Genesis 1-2, Contingency and Chaos

The seeming inevitability of a world dominated by political power has left humanity very little room to hope for a different social reality. In a world where freedom is limited to "freedom of choice" between good and evil, law or chaos, "the true is a moment of the false" (Debord 1983, 9).¹⁵ The exigencies of life within the Society of the Spectacle make it difficult to imagine any action one might take that would not merely strengthen the present order.

We have demonstrated the close connection between the Fall and the foundation of the state. In the same sense that justice within the secular order is strictly relative, so virtue within the state, too, has use-value only as the personal legitimization of secular power. The personal and the social consequences of the Fall cannot be abstracted from one another: the external secular power is maintained by those who have internalized its constraints and its justifications, while secular power "reinforces human sinfulness and conceals our fallen character from view" (Milbank 1987, 209).

The Genesis narrative places the birth of secular morality (the knowledge of good and evil) before the violent foundation of the civil order, implying that political domination or sovereignty is an external manifestation of the internal rejection of God. Rivalry with God leads to rivalry among people and a violent contagion of all against all

¹⁵ "In 1964 I was attracted by a movement very close to anarchism, that is, situationism. I had very friendly contacts with Guy Debord, and one day I asked him bluntly whether I could join his movement and work with him. He said that he would ask his comrades. Their answer was frank. Since I was a Christian I could not belong to their movement. For my part, I could not renounce my faith" (Ellul 1991, 3).

checked only by the violence of all against one. It is thus the civil order emerges.

However, morality or civic virtue is *also* the internalization of the coercive peace of the secular city. As the sacrifice of a scapegoat stills the chaos of unrestrained social violence, so morality is the (violent) inhibition of the supposed chaos of the passions. Ellul writes, "The more complex and refined civilization becomes the greater is the 'interiorizing' of determinations. These become less and less visible, external, constricting and offensive. They are instead invisible, interior, benevolent, and insidious" (Ellul 1976, 41). This interiorization of the political order manifests itself in asceticism, a heroic self-restraint of the passions, and personal enforcement of moral law. As with the "exchange-relations of arbitrary power," freedom is granted only as a concession of power, and a certain mechanical and repetitive peace is imposed; self-denial and the repression of desire produce an artificial calm but never succeed in uprooting the unruly passions.¹⁶

On both the social and individual levels, then, fallen humanity *seems* constrained by only two options: "law and order," or chaos; morality, or depravity. Girard writes, "We cannot postulate the existence in man of a desire radically disruptive of human relations without simultaneously postulating the means of keeping this desire in check" (Girard 1977, 218). John Milbank, following Augustine,

¹⁶ "Augustine is then able to show that all Roman virtue is a merely relative matter because it is only possible within a circle bounded by arbitrary violence: a circle however, which more and more recedes from view as time goes on and political coercion assumes more and more 'commuted' and legally regular forms" (Milbank 1987, 221; cf. 208-9).

argues instead that "desire" is not *necessarily* "radically disruptive of human relations." Primeval chaos is an element of the myth that sustains the civil order. Equally tenable, he argues, is the postulation of an already existing hierarchical order justified and maintained with the help of the myth of a chaos always threatening resurgence. The mythical chaos is feared, yet idolized and celebrated in violent spectacles, e. g. the ultra-violence of Hollywood films, or the public spectacle of American football (Milbank 1987, 208-9; 1991, 394-5).

Following Milbank's argument, if the passions are thought to be an interior disorder brought to order by the interiorized sacrificial order of "fighting virtue," then the notion of a chaos of desire might be just a "mythic" element of the internal coercive order. This is not to say that people are naturally "good" and that removal of personal and social restraint will produce an ideal society. We merely point out that the absence of alternatives to "law and order, or anarchy" is precisely the enslavement of humanity to the "knowledge of good and evil" described in the Bible. We are concerned in this essay to demonstrate that the Biblical narrative insists on a "third" way beyond law, beyond morality, beyond chaos.

Girard convincingly traces the violent origins of the secular political order, but what seems less clear is the shape the way out of this order might take. We contend that by ignoring the narrative priorities of the Biblical text Girard makes it difficult to recover the form anti-sacrificial practice takes. Girard privileges the Fall-Cain narrative over the Genesis 1-2 narrative, so that the sacrificial order he so clearly identifies takes on a predetermined quality. Given the covetous nature of humanity, the resulting sacrificial order of Cain is

inevitable. However, the Biblical sequencing is the more ontologically correct. Adam's Fall obviously implies a fall *from* something, and the prior condition is described for us in Genesis 1-2.

Ellul, too, contends the creation story describes an origin fundamentally different than foundational violence. Genesis 1-2 illustrate "no relationship of exploitation, utilization, or subordination," but rather a "directing which nevertheless leaves the other intact" (Ellul 1984b, 131). God's word, the power of creation, is not an intellectual analysis that divides and separates, but the language of union and love. Adam's naming of the animals is no mere technique in the Ellulian sense, but "the continuation of the word of God" (131). Christian tradition often places the expulsion of Satan from heaven between days one and two in the creation account, but such an expulsion is not in the Hebrew text. Creation emerges from what is "formless and void," not by violence but by the word of God (Girard 2000, 183-4).¹⁷ The later insertion of Satan's expulsion into the creation narrative may be the result of a "sacrificial reading" of the Hebrew Scriptures¹⁸ via a sacrificial reading of the Gospels – the work of Christian exegetes who fundamentally misunderstood the Gospel revelation (Girard 2000, 171-185).¹⁹

¹⁷ Following Michel Serres, Girard traces in the distinction between void and matter the violence of expulsion, or purge.

¹⁸ "The Old Testament is...far from being dominated by sacred violence. It actually moves away from violence, although in its most primitive sections it still remains sufficiently wedded to violence for people to be able to brand it as violent without appearing totally implausible" (Girard 1978a, 268).

¹⁹ "Grace excludes sacrifice. Girard is quite right when he shows how basic sacrifice is to humanity. There can be no accepted life or social relation without sacrifice. But gracious grace rejects the validity of all human sacrifice. It ruins a basic element in human psychology" (Ellul 1986, 159).

Genesis 1-2 describe an "immediate relationship of love and knowledge" (Ellul 1984b, 128) among those who are different: God and humans, man and woman, humankind and nature. Adam and Eve "needed to follow no method, to apply no technique, because there was no force to exert, no need to fulfill, no necessity to overcome" (129). There was "no protocol or sacrifices" (129) because there was no disorder, only order. Genesis 1-2 argue that the sacrificial mechanisms Girard identifies as maintaining law and order do not *necessitate* a primeval chaos from which order emerged. The hypothesis of an original, divine order prior to the Fall de-naturalizes the sacrificial order of Cain; the creation story insists "it didn't have to be this way," and announces, *from the beginning*, the existence of a different way of life. Moreover, the seventh-day creation of the Sabbath marking Jewish practice signals that the Jew-Gentile distinction is not incidental but *inherent to* the "other way of life" embodied in Israel and later, the Church (Soulen 1996, 118). The record of God's original intentions for humanity and creation contextualizes all of the Biblical narratives, up to and including the Gospel revelation. Biblical salvation is not a *return* to Eden, but rather the *inclusion* of the individual into the narrative inaugurated in Genesis 1-2.

Narrative and Idiom

No mere hypothesis of freedom, the Scriptures insert the individual into the narrative itself – the continuing historical embodiment of the divine revelation in time and space. The Gospel revelation is then first received by members of a community not unfamiliar with its themes. We have mentioned the stories of Adam

and Eve, Cain and Abel. The Biblical authors consistently recast preexistent mythologies, adapting them in the spirit of their particular concerns and inverting the relationship between victims and persecutors (Girard 1978a). In fact the Hebrew Bible brims with demythologizing reversals of sacred narrative. The book of Job, perhaps the oldest of the Hebrew texts, depicts persecution from the perspective of a victim who protests his innocence, refusing the accusations of his interlocutors, and is at last vindicated by God. The story of Joseph and his brothers previews the self-sacrifice of Christ and the Father's forgiveness in Judah's offer to substitute himself for Benjamin and Joseph's compassion for the brothers who once victimized and expelled him (Gen 37-50). The Exodus of Israel from slavery in Egypt identifies the community of faith as those who have been set free from bondage to the pagan political order and not merely as those who are free by nature or divine right. The story of Solomon's judgment (1 Kgs 3:16-28) between two prostitutes depicts the judgment of God in favor of she who would sacrifice herself to save another, and against the one who preferred the violent sacrifice productive of victims. The binding of Isaac (Gen 22:1-19), David's penitential Psalms (Ps 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143), Isaiah's songs of the Suffering Servant (Is 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12), the story of Jonah – each in its own way contravenes and reverses the mythic pattern of the secular order.

The revelation of the Hebrew Scriptures is then numerously recapitulated by the Gospels. "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill," Jesus tells those gathered for the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7).

Conversion implies a concomitant break with the pagan narrative, and the reaffirmation of Hebrew Scriptural revelation. Jesus is called "the second Adam" (1 Cor 15:45), and is represented as taking up the cause of immemorial victims, beginning with "righteous Abel" (Mt 23:35). The creation story begins with a social order radically differentiated from that later inaugurated by Cain, an order historically preserved through the descendants of Adam. Cain kills Abel, but Seth replaces Abel. Violence floods the earth, but Noah and his family escape. Abraham is called out of a pagan culture to become the father of faith for all the world. As a consequence, Gentile converts to the Christian faith are deemed "grafted in" to the historical embodiment of the Biblical revelation, forming an organic unity with Israel and not merely as having superseded it. The Jewish followers of Jesus are not called out of Israel as from a pagan political order, but to a restoration of a way of life consistent with Torah and with the counter-sacrificial practice established by Abraham.

Akedah and the Counter-Sacrificial Gospel

The counter-sacrificial revelation of the Hebrew Scriptures begins in the Genesis prehistory but takes a radical turn when God calls Abraham into a relationship with himself. The epidemic consequences of the Fall are here opposed by an act of divine and world-historical conciliation. Where Adam and Eve are evicted from the Garden, Abraham is led by God to a promised land (Gen 12:3). Flouting the one, modest prohibition in paradise the first humans seize for themselves the right to decide good and evil. Abraham is found on Mount Moriah submitting to God's demand of something monstrous, an obedience beyond morality. Abraham will inaugurate

the historical reversal of the Fall, with the promise in Genesis 12:1-3 that this "other way of life" would be offered to all the world.

Abraham's obedience to God's demand for the sacrifice of his son Isaac (the Akedah, or "binding" of Isaac) stands at once for the reversal of human rivalry with God and of God's expulsion of humankind from his presence. Abraham reestablishes a relationship with God based on obedience and submission. His descendants are the continuing incarnation of this relationship. God gives a son to Abraham with the promise that Isaac will be the vehicle of blessing to Israel and the nations. Abraham's future and the fulfillment of God's promises to him turn on Isaac, so that his offering of Isaac is an offering of his own very hope and life, a return to God who initiated the gift.²⁰ Obeying God *for no other reason than simply to obey*, Abraham repudiates the pride of usurpation and Adam's grasping after divinity. He renounces the rivalry of Adam and Eve and refounds submission as the model for human relationship with God. For his part God recapitulates the avowal of Genesis 12:1-3, enlarging it to incorporate Abraham's obedience (Gen 22:15-18).²¹

²⁰ The New Testament confirms that Abraham's offering was not a *disinterested* sacrifice, but that he also expected a return of Isaac: "(Abraham) considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (Heb 11:19). The idea of return can also be seen in God's offering Christ in response to Abraham's offering of Isaac.

²¹ "And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, 'By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.'" (Gen. 22:15-18).

The prohibition against murder in the Noachide laws and the condemnation of Cain's fratricide argue against the view that the Akedah is a mere polemic against murder or human sacrifice. Furthermore, the tacit approval of animal sacrifice earlier in the Genesis text by Abraham, Noah, Abel and even God himself when he covers the man and woman with animal skins in the Garden renders the deflection of violence from human to animal victims inessential to the meaning of the Akedah. Similarly, Torah's prohibition of child sacrifice²² makes the Akedah superfluous as a condemnation of the practice.

Neither Abraham nor Isaac was divinized in Israel, nor were they found guilty of any crime, arguing against the Akedah as an instance of the ubiquitous sacred violence. Although God intervenes at the last moment to prevent Abraham from immolating his beloved son, it is not because God is himself bound to a higher moral law. The Hebrew Scriptures know nothing of "natural law" or a set of universally valid ethical claims independent of God's command. Isaac is liberated from his bondage and rescued from death by the offering "God will provide for Himself" (Gen 22:8) the self-offering of God in response to Abraham's obedience. Abraham and Isaac are rescued from obligation to the sacrificial order of Cain and freed from the

²² "The Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the people of Israel, Any man of the people of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, who gives any of his children to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone him with stones. I myself will set my face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name. And if the people of the land do at all hide their eyes from that man, when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man and against his family, and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in playing the harlot after Molech.'" (Lev 20:1-5).

slavery of sin. All future sacrifice in Israel will recall both their forgiveness and the high cost of liberation.²³

Abraham's obedience to God is mirrored and magnified in Isaac's obedience to Abraham. Isaac takes the form of the victim in the Akedah. Israel is identified with Abraham in his radical obedience to the commandment of God, but is further identified with Isaac as the innocent victim. Even though Abraham's hand was stayed against Isaac, Jewish tradition credits Abraham for the sacrifice of his son. Similarly, although Isaac is spared, it is as though he had been immolated, and he becomes a "resurrected" sacrifice. Where Israel is described as a priestly nation in identification with Abraham, the high priest of the human race, it is likewise a nation of living sacrifices through Isaac.²⁴ After the Akedah, God incorporates identification with the victim into the divine promise of Genesis 12:1-3.

We see then that "all social structure, the entire scapegoating machinery, is revealed as delusional, a delusional quality we are not permitted to see fully unless we observe the victim 'after death' so to speak" (Goodhart 2001). It is the resurrection of Isaac that converts Abraham. Isaac's "apparent resurrection is the subjective correlative of something most objective and real, (Abraham's) renunciation of (Adam's) bad desire" (Girard 1990, 218). The innocence of the victim upon which Cain founded the first city is forever revealed *for Israel* in

²³ One tradition puts Isaac's age at 37 at the time of the Akedah. The reasoning is as follows: Sarah was 90 years old when she gave birth, 127 years old at her death. When Abraham told Sarah what he had been commanded to do, Sarah dropped dead at the thought. $127-90=37$.

²⁴ Paul may also allude to Isaac: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1).

the resurrection of Isaac, and the people of Israel become the incarnation of the Akedah revelation.

The Levitical sacrifices prescribed by the Torah have meaning to the extent that they participate in the meaning of Isaac's self-offering, and are offered in the spirit of Abraham's self-sacrificial obedience. The nature of the Levitical sacrifices – innocent animals, kosher and unblemished – strengthens the identification with Isaac as innocent victim. The insistence that the sacrifices be offered only on Mount Moriah, the present day Temple Mount, underscores the physical connection between the Akedah and the Levitical sacrifices. The Temple sacrificial system contemporizes the Akedah in Israel's history. God's revelation is thereby preserved until the coming of the Messiah when revelation is proclaimed to the entire world. The Levitical sacrifices are of a qualitatively different nature than those practiced among the nations for the temporary expulsion of violence, pointing back in time to the Akedah and forward to the Messiah's sacrifice.

Careful analysis of the later prophetic critique of sacrifice reveals they were directed at sacrifices without repentance and not at sacrifices as such. The prophetic critique condemns sacrifice that has renounced the spirit of the Akedah and has become instead a mere imitation of what mimetic theory terms the single victim mechanism. However, alongside the many prophetic passages condemning sacrifices (see Mic 6:6-8; Is 1:10-17; Jer 6:20; Hos 5:6, 6:6, 9:11-13; Amos 5:21-25). stand many extolling the virtue of obedient sacrifice

and predicting the triumphant return of faithful sacrifice in Israel.²⁵ The prophets are here seen to condemn sacrifice to the extent that it does not partake of the meaning of the Akedah revelation.

The Gospel revelation is that Jesus entered and brought to light that dark place in our culture where we accuse and execute innocent victims to relieve our own confusion, violence and sin. The heart of the single victim mechanism is dark because its true nature is concealed, as it must be in order to be effective. The veiled reality of this mechanism finds a parallel in the holiest place of the Temple, set apart by a veil, and the Gospels record the rending of the veil at the moment of Jesus' death, and the revelation of that dark place by the light of truth. Israel, of course, always knew what was going on behind the veil in the Temple, even if the revelation remained mysterious in its effects: when the veil was finally removed, the

²⁵ "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths'" (Mic 4:1-2); "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant - these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is 56:6-7); "But if you listen to me, says the Lord, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the sabbath day, but keep the sabbath day holy and do no work on it, then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their princes, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and this city shall be inhabited for ever. And people shall come from the cities of Judah and the places round about Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin, from the Shephelah, from the hill country, and from the Negeb, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, cereal offerings and frankincense, and bringing thank offerings to the house of the Lord" (Jer 17:24-26); "For thus says the Lord: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn cereal offerings, and to make sacrifices for ever" (Jer 33:17-18).

mystery of the Akedah was exposed to all the world. The Gospel revelation is a mystery, but it, too, is a mystery patified. The once-secret knowledge of the single victim mechanism is now forever brought to light: the Akedah was the Gospel announced to Israel; the Gospel is the Akedah for the nations.

In his life, death, and resurrection Jesus Christ echoes and confirms all of the great realities of the Akedah: self-offering, obedience, identification with victims, and salvation from the sacrificial order of Cain. In his perfect submission to the will of God and self-sacrificial love towards all Jesus embodies positive mimesis, mirroring and magnifying Abraham's, and amplifying the blessings of the Akedah from Israel to the nations, as promised in Genesis 12:1-3. Christ's resurrection fulfills the meaning of the Akedah and announces the counter-sacrificial revelation to all the world.

The relationship of interdependence between Israel and the nations is ultimately intrinsic to God's revelation to the world. God's invitation goes out from Israel to all the families of the earth to embrace the self-sacrificial character of the innocent victim and to join the family of God in submission and obedience to God. The differentiated unity of the Akedah and the Gospel mirrors the divinely intended and enduring relationship between Israel and the nations. The localized Temple sacrifice is universalized in Christ. The temporary sacrifices of Israel are made eternal in Christ. It is in this sense that Christ has come to *complete* the Torah, by the universal extension in time and space of the Biblical revelation and the inclusion of all people across history in the family of God.

Torah and Law

Israel is the continuing incarnation of the salvation of Abraham out of the existing political order and his passage from the compulsory morality of the Fall to the freedom of obedience to God's commandment. The story of Joseph marks the transition from Abraham to Israel in the Biblical narrative. Here the elements of the divine revelation are all clearly discernible. Joseph's brothers covet his favored status and conspire against him, selling him into slavery. The brothers are then forced by famine many years later to seek aid from the Egyptian government, of which Joseph is now second in command. Joseph insists that the brothers bring Benjamin, the youngest son and now his father's favorite, in exchange for assistance, at which point his brother Judah volunteers to take Benjamin's place. Joseph, moved by his brother's offer, forgives his brothers and the family is reconciled. Even so, his brothers' initial jealousy and their expulsion of Joseph result in their descendants' eventual enslavement in Egypt. Giving in to covetousness and rivalry brings the family into the bondage of the pagan political order of Cain. Self-offering and forgiveness mark the way of redemption.

Israel is the community then of the Exodus from Egyptian captivity. The Passover lamb refers to the lamb of the Akedah "which God will provide for Himself." It signals redemption from slavery and forgiveness for sin. Having been liberated, the Israelites are able to respond to the Torah given by God, not as to a legal document, but

as to the commandment spoken by God to a people who freely answer.²⁶

Their liberation exposes the sacrificial order of Cain as well as the content of the "other way of life" God intends for Adam, Abraham, and his descendants. God does not deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt only to obligate them again under a contractual serfdom. The heart of the Torah is the Levitical sacrificial system that incarnates the salvation and conversion of Abraham and Isaac. The Levitical sacrifices describe God's forgiveness of sins not in the simple stroke of an accountant's pen, but at the cost of bearing one another's burdens. The Ten Commandments define a way of life free from rivalry with God: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me"; and free of conflict among people: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's" (Ex 20:1-2, 17).

Girard points out that the Torah contains prohibitions that subvert prohibition (Girard 1978a, 155). The Torah offers prohibitions like those resulting from sacred violence, yet also contains prohibitions that controvert ritual prohibition, e. g. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lv 19:18), which precludes covetousness, interrupts rivalry, and obviates prohibition. In fact the Torah regularly upsets the secular order of exchange relations: the seventh day Sabbath

²⁶ The well-known tradition that God offered the Torah to all peoples, but the Israelites were the only ones who responded and accepted, indicates that obedience to the Law was not *imposed* upon Israel, but rather freely given.

depreciates the brutal necessity of work; the seventh year redemption of slaves and rest from cultivation of fields undermines the compulsion to exhaust nature and other people as if they had only utilitarian value; the prescriptions for fasting and tithing challenge the determination to consume and to possess.

Salvation in Christ, the "living Torah," is salvation out of the pagan political order into the Jewish familial order, conversion from the coercive legalism of the Fall into the freedom of obedience to God. Again, Jesus did not come to destroy the Torah and the Prophets, but to fulfill. St. Paul's "all things are lawful" (1 Cor 6:12) does not contradict the correct practice of the Torah.²⁷ Rather, the same freedom beyond morality originally attributed to Adam before the Fall is reestablished by Abraham, offered to Israel in the Torah, and extended through Christ to all the world. The offer of grace has been extended from Israel to the nations, and those who respond are grafted onto the tree, Israel.

Fallen humanity by long habit and a stubborn blindness garbles the radical nature of this liberation, inverting it to fit the sacrificial pattern inherited from Cain. It is precisely this misapplication of the Torah Jesus condemns in his scathing indictments of the Pharisees,

²⁷ The ongoing formation of halakhah testifies to the Jewish understanding of Torah not as a disembodied and absolute document, but as a living word from God to be constantly re-appropriated and renewed. Halakhah corresponds to the relative Christian ethics Ellul ceaselessly championed that would prevent examples of relative ethics or halakhah from the New Testament from becoming ossified into absolute law. An example would be Paul's instructions concerning female headdress and behavior in the community of Christ-believers, which were apparently important issues in certain early congregations but have little relevance today beyond a general need for order within the community. Like Christian morality, halakhah had a propensity to become legalistic, and it is this legalistic misinterpretation of Torah, not the Torah itself, that Jesus condemns.

Sadducees, and others who make "the commandment of God of no effect" (Mt 15:6).²⁸ The individual is not set free by God only to submit to slavery under the political order. "Legalism" is a common term in American evangelical circles referring to a kind of sham obedience that seeks to appease an unforgiving god. Unfortunately, legalism is often attributed to the Torah, from which, it is argued, Christ has set us free. The perversity of this reasoning is exposed by putative "Christian Values" that erect a new legality while suppressing their pagan origins by scapegoating the Torah. Compelling Jewish converts to eat pork as proof of their renunciation of "the Law" provides us an especially egregious and risible instance of this tendency from early church history. No less uncomprehending are modern American efforts to legislate Christian morality (prayer in schools, abortion, the debate over posting the Ten Commandments in courtrooms), as if the Christian revelation consisted, like the secular order it oppugns and reverses, in the "restraint of beasts," those afoot in society at large and lurking in oneself.

Salvation and Conversion

The concealed and concealing nature of the secular order is its strength. The innocence of the victims of arbitrary violence is denied and the unjust foundation of law and order suppressed. A godless and self-righteous morality is masked by the appearance of false

²⁸ "The mythical mentality can take (the Gospels) and construe them mythically, but quintessentially they are the destruction of myth." The complicity in the condemnation of Jesus on the part of the Jewish people, who were in possession of the revelation of the Hebrew scriptures, indicates that the Biblical narratives, including the Gospels, can be misconstrued (Girard 1996, 281).

gods of violence whose anger must be continuously appeased.²⁹ The individual is deceived and self-deceiving, both a victim of and a participant in the structures that enslave him. Salvation for the individual consists then in the overcoming of personal "legalism" and deliverance from secular power,³⁰ but emerging from the obfuscations of the sacrificial order requires the intervention of something or someone from outside of its closed system.³¹

The Biblical stories are mythic in form yet subvert myth. From Abel onwards, they reveal the innocence of the victims of sacred violence and take their side, disrupting the victimary unanimity upon which the proper functioning of the sacrificial mechanisms depend. In the Gospels, God himself takes the form of the victim and suffers the predictable and fatal outcome of his encounter with the secular order. By unveiling the complicity of myth and ritual in the maintenance of an unjust order, the Biblical narrative decodes mythology and desacralizes the gods and rituals of the violent sacred.³² It is only in terms of its own truth that the Bible can be interpreted, while at the same time it deconstructs all other mythologies. Milbank observes:

²⁹ "Humans have always found peace in the shadow of their idols - that is to say, of human violence in sacralized form" (Girard 1978a, 255).

³⁰ "Salvation is precisely, *out of* this political domain which constantly reproduces 'original' sin" (Milbank 1987, 220).

³¹ "Rehabilitating the victim has a desacralizing effect" (Girard 1978a, 153); also, "If the first Christians managed to secede from the mimetic consensus, it was not their own strength that did it, according to the Gospels, but God's own Spirit . . . he dismantles the consensus against the victims" (Girard 1993, 350).

³² "Behind and beyond the myths one discerns the sacred of which they are an expression. It is by a kind of geography of the myths that one can discover the axes of the sacral world" (Ellul 1975, 121).

The relationship of the Biblical narratives to the pagan myths is necessarily asymmetric: the former could not be critically read through the latter because it belongs to the mythic grammar to conceal and not to expose arbitrary and fundamental violence. The latter can be critically read through the former because the Biblical narratives constitute and renew themselves through a breaking with sacrificial violence which exposes its social reality (Milbank 1987, 213).³³

Both the political order and the legalistic consciousness of the individual are the result of the original sin, rejection of God. The Biblical narrative represents a break with and an exposure of the secular order. It then invites the individual to make that same break.³⁴ This break, or conversion, involves an identification with the victim and the simultaneous disavowal of complicity with the murderous mob.³⁵ The individual emerges from the mob when he takes the side of the victim *against* the violence of the political order³⁶ and *against* the coercive morality of the Fall. "The proclamation of the Gospel implies, for the liberation of the person to whom it is proclaimed, the indictment of that which holds him captive" (Ellul 1971a, 208). In the

³³ "The three great pillars of primitive religion - myth, sacrifice, and prohibitions - are subverted by the thought of the Prophets" (Girard 1978a, 155 PAGE); compare: "How can we fail to realize that scripture, *in precisely the same way in which the myths contained in scripture itself are treated*, is the true destroyer of myths?" (Ellul 1971a, 206).

³⁴ "Just as conversion always means a break in individual life, so the intervention of revelation means a break in the whole group, in all society, and it unavoidably challenges the institution and established power, no matter what form this may take" (Ellul 1986, 133).

³⁵ "Faith emerges when individuals come out of the mob" (Girard 1996, 279).

³⁶ "Masked violence is found at all levels of society. Economic relations, class relations, are relations of violence, nothing else" (Ellul 1969, 86).

encounter with the Gospel revelation, the individual is persuaded to take the side of Jesus, the innocent victim, and to admit his own participation in the persecution of innocents. Jesus' forgiveness of his persecutors enables the individual to forgive others, and to be forgiven for his own complicity. The fatal necessity of the pagan order is set aside in the witness of the Biblical narrative that invites the individual, liberated from the political order and from a sinful consciousness, to participate in that witness.³⁷

Positive Content of the Life of Faith

The crucifixion of Jesus unmasks the violent nature of the political order, and this revelation sets the individual free from the necessity of that order. The individual may decline the "way of the Cross," and still the offer is made. He is presented with another option and may respond to God's love made manifest in the suffering atonement of Christ, or continue as best as he can to "sleep peacefully in his religious dream" (Ellul 1975, 207-8).³⁸ God's forgiveness in Christ interrupts the "pagan sacrificial chain of offense and revenge" (Milbank 1987, 215) binding individuals to the legal requirements of the city of Cain and its vindictive gods. Christ is the incarnation of a love that cannot be integrated into the Society of Technique. He opposes to its means and ends a perfectly 'useless' truth, something fatal to its order, *ipso facto* (Ellul 1989, 182).

³⁷ "Knowing the shape of sin, and the shape of its refusal, we can at last be radically changed" (Milbank 1991, 397).

³⁸ "The Gospels cannot guarantee that people will act the right way; they are not some kind of recipe for the good society. What the Gospels do is to offer more freedom and to set the example" (Girard 1996, 278).

The Gospels are the record of a small minority who disassociated themselves from the social order that executed Christ and instead proclaimed his innocence, his cancellation of the fatal necessity of that order, and his victory over the finality of death. The Gospels and other New Testament writings bear witness to a community who participate in Christ's crucifixion through a penitential way of life and a forgiving practice that liberates and preserves freedom in opposition to the political order.³⁹ The imitation of Christ in his refusal of violence, his concern for victims, and his suffering endurance of evil constitute the freedom of life "in Christ."⁴⁰

Given the divine unveiling of the secular legal system, the followers of Christ understand the contradiction inherent to Christian participation in the legal order.⁴¹ Writing to the community of Christ-believers at Corinth, Paul asks (1 Cor 15:6), "Dare any of you, having a matter against one another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?"⁴² Paul harbored no illusions about the nature of secular power or its "convertibility."⁴³ All surveys of the Biblical critique of power, however, come up against Paul because Romans

³⁹ "What are the prescriptions of the Kingdom of God? Basically, give up a dispute when mimetic rivalry is taking over. Provide help to victims and refuse all violence" (Girard 1996, 278).

⁴⁰ "In Jesus Christ, who is fully obedient and also fully free, the will of God is freedom...The action of Christ takes effect in daily life through the mediation of our freedom" (Ellul 1976, 15).

⁴¹ "(Christian faith) does not change either the structure or the functioning of the state or politics. It sets up a relationship of conflict" (Ellul 1986, 158).

⁴² "'Violent excess' on the one hand, 'law and order' on the other have always fed on each other. What else could they feed upon? If they did not, we would be rid, by now, of both of them" (Girard 1978, 228).

⁴³ "There is no given Christian form of power...the only Christian political position consistent with revelation is the negation of power: the radical, total refusal of its

13:1-7 seems to challenge all that the Bible, including Paul, has to say on the matter (see Ellul 1991; also Elliott 1997).

Some exegetes have reasoned that Paul's comments in 13:1-7 are too radical a departure from the subject matter surrounding the verses, so that these verses must be a later insertion by redactors. If these verses are deleted, 13:8 seems to follow reasonably from 12:21. Others attribute the traditional interpretation of the verses to Paul, but add counsel concerning extreme cases of political evil not accounted for in Paul's apparently absolute consecration of the powers. Ellul agrees that the verses do come from Paul, but must be properly contextualized both within the epistle and within Paul's other writings. The discussion prior to Romans 13 concerns loving and being at peace with others, both friend and enemy. The last verse of chapter twelve (Rm 12:21), "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good," leads into the discussion of political power, which is an evil that must be endured. Paul is far from advocating revolution or violent resistance, counseling submission instead. If we owe taxes, we pay them, nothing more. We recognize that these *exousia*, or powers are ultimately subject to God alone, but we know, too, that as Christians we have been called to struggle against these *exousia* (Eph 6:12). While these powers are already defeated by Christ, for the time being we experience and admit their necessity, but never their legitimacy.

Mark D. Nanos has recently suggested Paul's epistle has to do with the ordering of the community of faith at Rome, which at the time

existence, a fundamental questioning of it, no matter what form it may take" (Ellul 1988, 172-3).

was a Jewish community into which the Christ-believers are integrated as sub-groups, however marginalized. The community, then, consisted of Gentile Christ-believers along with both believing and non-believing Jews (Nanos 1996). That it strikes Christians today as odd that both Christ-believing and non-Christ-believing Jews together with Christ-believing Gentiles would have comprised a community of faith in the years following Christ testifies to Christianity's disavowal of its Jewish roots. God's historical relationship to Israel is relegated to a propaedeutic function whose purpose has been superseded by Christian revelation, and the result is a gnosticizing of the Christian faith by the evacuation of the historical content of salvation *from* legalistic morality and *out of* the secular political order. Christianity has instead for centuries now consistently sought political power and used that power to enforce morality whenever possible.

In the context of the letter, then, Romans 13:1-7 is "not concerned with the state, empire, or any other such organization of secular government" (Nanos 1996, 291). Instead, Paul's concern is "to address the obligation of Christians, particularly Christian *Gentiles*...to subordinate themselves to the leaders of the synagogues and to the customary 'rules of behavior' that had been developed in Diaspora synagogues for defining the appropriate behavior of 'righteous Gentiles' seeking association with Jews and their God."⁴⁴ Paul's advice is based not on arguments for the

⁴⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail Nanos' recontextualization of Paul's letter, but it is worth noting that Nanos is principally concerned with a coherent reading of Paul's letter, not a polemic against the state. Even so, Nanos concurs that "the call to subordination in Judaism carries an implicit, if not always explicit, judgment against

legitimacy of power, but rather on his previous arguments in chapters 9-11 concerning the historical, present, and future relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Paul is concerned to insure that the community in Rome continues to maintain a "different way of doing things," that the witness of the reconciled community against the secular order is not undermined by a failure to demonstrate the present reality of its eschatological hope. If one takes seriously Nanos' recent work (see also Elliott 1997), a new way is opened up to reconcile Paul's argument in Romans 13 with the rest of his letter, with his arguments against state power in other letters, and also with the entire Biblical witness against secular political power.

In any case, Paul does not suggest that the community of faith will or should seek to overthrow secular government, or that the Kingdom of God will either suddenly or by steady advance appear as the inevitable progression of earthly affairs. His imagery in the letter to the Romans suggests instead the Christ-believers as a remnant, a minority whose encounter with the political order will inevitably produce results in "the way of the cross."⁴⁵ These seven verses in Romans have become *the* text on secular power and the conduct of Christianity toward it, in spite of the overwhelming witness of the Biblical record *against* political power. It is unsettling to speculate on the sociological and psychological reasons that lead exegetes to value a few verses more highly than the vast collection of

foreign governments, even if God was somehow using their evil intentions to accomplish his ultimate goals." (Nanos 1996, 299).

⁴⁵ "The church should always be the breach in an enclosed world: in the world of Sartre's private individual as well as in the world of the perfection of technology, the totalism of politics or the strongbox of the kingdom of money" (Ellul 1971a, 209).

contradictory passages, and allow one brief passage to neutralize the entire thrust of the Scriptures on this matter. In light of our arguments in this essay, the traditional interpretation of the passage results from internalization of the violent order of the state and a secret reflection and validation of secular power. Christian statism is correlative to the "sacrificial reading" of the Gospels. Although they never advocate a fugitive or criminal practice toward the state, both Jesus and Paul consider the state to be neither legitimate nor divinely constituted. Paul was arrested, tried, and executed by the same court system that condemned and crucified Jesus. Their witness attests that the exigencies of secular power are to be suffered rather than sanctioned.⁴⁶

In St. John's Revelation, the Bible depicts an end to the earthly powers, not by the natural progression to the Kingdom of God on earth, but through the intervention of God and the return of Jesus Christ. The promise of God is not a return to Eden but the New Jerusalem, not the work of humans but the work of God who takes up human work into his own (Ellul 1970). The Kingdom of God will not *naturally* materialize on earth, but neither is the absolute dominion of secular power the *necessary* condition of our world. The community of faith, both Jew and Gentile, is called to be liberated and to liberate others from the predations of the state. Ellul writes: "The profound truth of our history can only be given to it by this union of Israel and the Church, the two bearers of hope for mankind, who must

⁴⁶ "If Christianity remains faithful to its inspiration and object, the God of love, it is incompatible with the exercise of political power. The combination of the two came about by accident" (Ellul 1975, 177).

henceforth be one in order that all political actions might receive a meaning" (Ellul 1973, 306). God's revelation conceives no Christian state, but rather poses the question (Lk 18:8 NASB): "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

Conclusion

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them," Jesus says, "*Yet it shall not be so among you*" (Mt 20:25-6, emphasis added). Jesus' refusal of power resulted in his crucifixion, a signal of his failure to overturn the secular order. Paradoxically, it is this failure which is also the victory over the powers,⁴⁷ and the followers of Christ are called to participate in that failure. Ellul writes:

It is truly a *fight*...against a power that can be changed only by means which are the opposite of its own. Jesus overcame the powers – of the state, the authorities, the rulers, the law, etc. – not by being more powerful than they but by surrendering himself even unto death (Ellul 1969, 166).

The Biblical revelation calls the community of faith to be the continuing incarnation of God's atonement, to endure the powers rather than sanctify them,⁴⁸ and to bear the burdens of those who suffer under secular power: "In every situation of injustice and oppression, the Christian – who cannot deal with it by violence – must

⁴⁷ "The Passion is first and foremost the consequence of an intolerable revelation, while being proof of that revelation." (Girard 1978a, 166).

⁴⁸ "The works of the world remain works of darkness, but darkness into which a light has come, which does not validate or justify the darkness" (Ellul 1971a, 36).

make himself completely a part of it as *representative of the victims*" (Ellul 1969, 151-2, emphasis Ellul's). Apart from God resistance to the powers amounts to mere Stoic self-denial and masochistic self-sacrifice. Our confrontation of the powers instead proceeds from *concern for the victims* of secular dominion:

Freedom can be obtained only when we strive for it; no power can give freedom to people. Challenging power is the only way to make freedom a reality. Freedom exists if the negation of political power is strong enough, and when people refuse to be taken in by the idea that freedom will surely come tomorrow, if only...No, there is no tomorrow. Freedom exists today or not at all. When we shake the edifice, we produce a crack, a gap in the structure, in which a human being can briefly find his freedom, which is always threatened. In order to bring this bit of play into the system, however, we must bring to it a radical, total refusal. Any concession to power enables the totality of power to rush into the small space we have opened (Ellul 1988, 174).

Political power cannot self-limit and tends in every case to expand beyond all bounds. The *myth* of its necessity clears the way by paralyzing all resistance. Into this world of fatal necessity, Christ comes announcing liberty to captives: deliverance from the harsh supervision of unmerciful morality and freedom to refuse power's exchange of happiness for servitude. Christ's resurrection defeated death, the true end of all necessity. In Christ we know that *our lives*

will not always be this way, and the present hope of our resurrection enables the faithful (Jew *and* Gentile) to insinuate freedom into an otherwise ironclad system. We proclaim by our words and demonstrate in our action that another path exists beyond the constraints of the illusory "freedom" purchased or wrested by force from the hand of power. Freedom is realized only when we create it by our radical negation of power and our absolute refusal to submit again to a yoke of slavery under the state.

"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil" (Deut 30:15). God commands us to preserve the primordial liberty of life beyond morality and beyond the narrow choice that passes for freedom. The radical transformation of conversion in Christ extends the promise of a different way of life, not tomorrow, not in heaven, but here in the present world. Today, men and women around us will be set free, or continue to wither under a pitiless master. If we refuse to rescue those for whom Christ suffered and died, we surrender again to the forces of death. Today, brothers and sisters, we are either free men, or slaves.

WORKS CITED

- Jean Baudrillard. 2003. "The Violence of the Global." In http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=385
- Guy Debord. 1983. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red.
- Neil Elliott. 1997. "Romans 13:1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda." In *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, 184-204. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.
- Jacques Ellul. 1960. *The Theological Foundation of Law*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- . 1965. *The Technological Society*. New York: Knopf.
- . 1969. *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*. New York: Seabury Press.
- . 1970. *The Meaning of the City*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans.
- . 1971a. *False Presence of the Kingdom*. New York: Seabury Press.
- . 1971b. *Autopsy of Revolution*. New York: Knopf.
- . 1972. *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans.
- . 1973. *Hope in Time of Abandonment*. New York: Seabury Press.
- . 1975 *The New Demons*. New York: Seabury Press.
- . 1976. *Ethics of Freedom* Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans.
- . 1984a. *Money and Power*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.
- . 1984b. "Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis." In *Theology and Technology*, ed. Carl Mitcham and Jim Grote, 123-137. Lanham, MD: University of America Press.
- . 1985. *The Humiliation of the Word*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans.
- . 1986. *Subversion of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans.
- . 1988. *Jesus and Marx*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans.
- . 1989. *What I Believe*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans.
- . 1991. *Anarchy and Christianity*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans.
- René Girard. 1965. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- . 1977. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
 - . 1978a. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
 - . 1978b. *"To Double Business Bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
 - . 1986. *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
 - . 1990. "The Crime and Conversion of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*." *Religion & Literature* 22/2-3: 193-219.
 - . 1993a. "Is There Anti-Semitism in the Gospels?" *Biblical Interpretation* 1/3: PAGES
 - . 1993b. "How Can Satan Cast out Satan?" In *Biblische Theologie und gesellschaftlicher Wandel. Fuer Norbert Lohfink, SJ*, ed. G. Braulik, W. Gross, and S. McEvenue, 125-141. Freiburg: Herder.
 - . 1996. *The Girard Reader*. New York: Crossroad, 1996.
 - . 1999. *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
 - . 2000. "From Ritual to Science," *Configurations* 8: 171-185.
 - Sandor Goodhart. 2001. "Response to Willard Swartley's Book." In http://www.ufsia.ac.be/flw/nieuws/Sandor_Goodhart.doc
 - Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, ed. 1987. *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard & Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
 - Martin Heidegger. 1993. "The Question Concerning Technology." In *Basic Writings*, ed. David Ferrell Krell, 307-342. New York: HarperCollins.
- Holy Bible*
- John Milbank. 1987. "An Essay against Secular Order." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 15/2: 199-224.
 - . 1991. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Cambridge, Mass: B. Blackwell.
 - Mark D. Nanos. 1996. *The Mystery of Romans*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
 - R. Kendall Soulen. 1996. *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

