Sacrifice and Redemption: A New Approach From Mimetic Theory

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SACRIFICE AND REDEMPTION: A NEW APPROACH
FROM MIMETIC THEORY

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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For Robert Doran, S. J.
What is the meaning of theories of redemption, and what use do they have? This dissertation answers these questions from the vantage point of two ideas from Girardian Mimetic Theory: the hypothesis that human relationality is rooted in triangular structures of desire, and the hypothesis that the sacrificial death of Christ is what Girard calls a scapegoating event.

For Girard, ritual sacrifice is a repetition of an original scapegoating event on which social cohesion depends. With the death of Christ, scapegoating has been denuded and sacrifice rendered inoperable, bringing humanity into a novel historical situation. Using Girard’s early seminal texts alongside crucial developments in his later work, I develop the thesis that the redemptive work is structurally a sacrificial act, but aimed at the transcending of sacrifice and the transformation of the generative potential of scapegoating; correspondingly with this objective redemptive work, believers in Christ undergo a conversion that consists in their re-orientation as subjects within a structure of transcendence determined by this sacrificial generativity. This thesis represents a significantly more systematic appraisal of the positive theological utility of sacrifice than is found in Girard’s work.

To bolster my thesis, I reread key biblical and classical theological sources. The biblical foundation narratives and interplay of textual sources witness to a subtle subversion of scapegoating and sacrifice while still relying on sacrifice as an ordering principle. I then examine the paradigmatic theories of redemption of Peter Abelard, Anselm, and Gregory of Nyssa. Each of these theories exhibits the same sacrificial logic, despite the different ways they configure redemption.

I conclude that theories of redemption give us ways to map the reality brought about by the process of redemption. They facilitate the believer, whose triangular relationality has been re-oriented toward the transcendent God, in navigating the new situation in which sacrifice has been transformed.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Nicholas G. Roumas

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My wife, Sarah, and I have managed to support each other through doctoral programs so efficiently that we are both on our way to finishing our dissertations as I write this. Thank you.
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INTRODUCTION

What meaning and use do theories of redemption have today?

When I asked this question ten years ago, this research project began. It is not an easy one to answer. Theories of redemption, also referred to as atonement theories, hit two big snags in the minds of contemporary people, myself included. First, it is not clear why anyone cares. The doctrine of redemption, as distinguished from theories of redemption, indicates a Christian belief about an objective truth, namely salvation through Jesus Christ, who became incarnate, lived, taught, suffered, died, rose again, sat at the right hand of God, and is coming again to rescue what he created. This belief is exceedingly meaningful to many Christian believers, even given the present weak state of the Church in much of the world. Theories of redemption, on the other hand, attempt to give us a quasi-scientific explanation of how redemption works. There is an existential gap here. If redemption works, what further good does it do to know how? If we are meant to know how, why doesn’t Scripture reveal a clear theory of redemption? If theories of redemption are taken too seriously at face value, they become a matter of knowing about something, rather than of knowing something. For theories of redemption to be useful, then, they must contribute something of existential relevance.
Second, theories of redemption have gotten into trouble recently for the
harmful ways in which they construct power relations and values. These
criticisms have come from feminist, class-liberationist, Black and womanist, anti-
colonialist, and anti-militarist perspectives. In other words, traditional ways of
thinking about redemption, and sometimes even the notion of atonement
altogether, have fallen afoul of those who are critical of unnecessary real
violence. The problems raised with redemption theory usually center around the
notion of sacrifice, especially the valorization of obedient self-sacrifice. (Among
recent past generations of European theologians and philosophers who are still
widely read in America, the rejection of sacrifice stemmed largely from the

\footnote{A spectrum of appraisals of sacrifice can be found in contemporary critiques of sacrificial
atonement. For Delores Williams, it is suitable to understand redemption, given black women’s
surrogacy experience, as a ministerial work brought about through Jesus’ teachings, healings,
prayer, and love rather than through the (voluntary or involuntary) surrogacy of a sacralized
Crucifixion. The Cross is, for Williams, the world’s opposition to this life-affirming work (Delores
S. Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,”
pages 19–32 in Marit Trelstad, ed., \textit{Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today}
[Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006]). Kathryn Tanner, like Williams, sees the power of salvation as
residing in life, not in a sacrificial death per se; but, unlike Williams, Tanner construes life as a
sublimated form of sacrifice. One reciprocally offers the gifts obtained from the Word, and
service to neighbor is constituted as a “sacrifice” to God (Kathryn Tanner, \textit{Christ the Key}
[Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010]). JoAnne Marie Terrell pursues a third path,
coinciding in its outlines with Girard’s thesis that Christ’s sacrifice overcomes sacrifice: “Because
God desires mercy and not sacrifice, there should never really be any reason for the act of
sacrifice. [God’s] institution of the sacrificial system and Jesus’ self-sacrifice are thus construed as
the disclosure of God’s mercy. … Judeo-Christian traditions attempt to signify God’s
unwillingness to trivialize the blood/life/loss of any creature (JoAnne Marie Terrell, “Our
Mother’s Gardens: Rethinking Sacrifice,” pages 33–49 in \textit{Cross Examinations}).” The critiques
brought against traditional Western sacrificial atonement models by these authors are to be
affirmed: one must find either a different way to give Christian sacrifice a positive meaning, or
radically repurpose the traditional atonement models. I perform the latter operation on Anselm
in § 22.}
experience of Nazi Germany and opposition to the Vietnam War.\(^2\) Even apart
from such real-life ethical problems, one has a right to demand to know how it is
plausible that one person’s suffering should do any good for other people’s sins,
or affect their mortality. Yet surely the contemporary circumspection toward
sacrifice is overstated. Sacrifice for the wellbeing of another can be a good thing.
Interestingly, the most forceful attempts to rehabilitate the theological idea of
sacrifice have come from margins well outside the Church; the radical leftist
atheists Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Žižek are outspoken proponents for
recovering the idea.\(^3\) And as Darby Kathleen Ray points out, sacrificial
atonement theologies can become empowering in the very contexts in which they
are oppressive.\(^4\) Is there positive value, then, in the notion of Christ’s death as a
sacrificial transaction on behalf of humankind?

I found a basis for answering these questions in René Girard’s theory of
mimesis, sacrifice, and Christian religious conversion. Girard, who began work

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\(^2\) This goes also for the work of René Girard, as Mary Douglas recognizes in Chapter 2 of *Jacob’s Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

\(^3\) Terry Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice* (Yale, 2018), clearly has René Girard in the forefront of his thinking; Slavoj Žižek, who also shows traces of influence from Girard in his thinking on the scapegoat, argues for a rehabilitation of Christianity in *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000); like early Girard, Žižek rejects the idea that Christ’s death is an atoning sacrifice, but the two currents of the subversive power of Christ’s death and the value of a sacrificial ethic carry strongly through his writings. See Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories, 2012).

as a literary critic, is now recognized as a major theorist of sacrifice. Together, his ideas are known as Mimetic Theory (hereafter MT).

MT speaks from and to the place of people in the contemporary world, with its particular concerns and problems: the unprecedented new preoccupation with overcoming violence; the constructive and destructive erasure of intra-human divisions by globalization; the concerns over the differences between the earth’s poor and its wealthy; not finally, the novel amount of political and personal choice that more and more humans—notwithstanding the misguided recalcitrance of the current reactionary movement—are coming to possess. In a word, the late modern age is characterized by our confrontation with divisions and decisions. It is to this aspect of late modernity that MT most directly speaks.

Christian theology’s grappling with the meaning of redemption, on the other hand, has proved a struggle in the contemporary situation. Does not the liberal respect for individuality and particularity undercut the credibility of the concept of sacrifice, especially after the mass oblations that were performed in fascist and communist countries in the name of a militant sacrificial rhetoric? Can transcendence still fulfill a desirable ordering function in an irreversibly

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5 This objection to sacrificial theologies of redemption was the basis for Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (1973; translated by R. A. Wilson and John Bowden [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993]), a work which can be credited with setting atonement theory on its contemporary trajectory more than any other.
plural society? And is the rejection of sacrifice not all the more urgent right now, when a reckless nationalism threatens democratic countries again? The trend today, of which Girard can be counted an emphatic representative, therefore favors non- or anti-sacrificial theologies (though, as we shall see in Girard’s case, an anti-sacrificial theology can at the same time be very sacrificial!)⁶. Not only this, but, to take an even broader perspective on today’s landscape, the trend of ideas has complicated the plausibility of a universal transcendence, a notion that marks traditional Western belief in God and therefore underpins elementary doctrines such as redemption. Not since Derrida’s deconstruction of our refined mythologies of the transcendent, not since Foucault’s Nietzschean refusal of order and essence, not since Heidegger’s unsuccessful project to discover a new transcendence, has this medieval idea seemed seriously viable.⁷ Combine the existential difficulty occasioned by the failure to acknowledge transcendence with the repudiation of sacrifice by sensitive contemporary theologians, and one can see the predicament redemption theory faces. Yet the notion of sacrifice is

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⁶ This insightful parenthetical remark was made to Girard at a colloquium on liberation theology in Brazil in 1990.

⁷ Divine transcendence has been convincingly argued for as a philosophical idea by some recent deconstructionist thinkers, such as John Caputo in The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013). But Caputo’s recovery of transcendence as a basis for open-ended expectation lies open to the reproach that it is toothless, and, moreover, that the theology that justifies it is overly apophatic. In the case of more theologically conservative attempts to rediscover transcendence, like the Heideggerian project of Charles Taylor, it remains unclear where the path they have taken leads. They constitute an unfinished project.
integral to the Christian tradition on redemption, and a subjective orientation toward God’s transcendence is a necessary outcome of the redemptive work.

Even within mainstream theology, then, one finds that there is an ongoing scramble among both soteriological revisionists and their introvertedly resistant orthodox opponents. This is most true of Western and especially Protestant Christianity, probably because these traditions have been forced to engage more directly with the problems occasioned by secularization. Eastern Orthodox theologians have made occasional serious forays into redemption theory, even if largely on Western terms, but these efforts have not contributed much, despite Orthodoxy’s distance from the entanglements of Western atonement theory. Doubtless this is largely because, while theories of redemption have always existed in the Eastern Christian traditions, they are rarely discussed and hold no official status. But moreover, the 20th and 21st Centuries have been a time during which Orthodox theology is struggling to recover its creativity, and, despite inroads made by Bulgakov and Florovsky, Orthodox theology has proved disappointing when it comes to Christology and redemption theory.⁸

⁸ Adding to the deleterious situation of Orthodox soteriology, Bulgakov’s major dogmatic trilogy (Sergius Bulgakov, The Bride of the Lamb [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002]; idem, The Comforter [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004]; idem, The Lamb of God [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008]) has come to occupy only a relatively marginal place in contemporary Orthodox theology, perhaps owing to the condemnation they provoked from the Moscow Patriarchate and the Church in Exile (see Andrew Louth, Modern Orthodox Thinkers [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015], 45); Florovsky’s soteriological essays (collected in Georges Florovsky, Creation
I contend that MT provides a way to construct redemption that responds usefully to the basic concerns I have raised here. Not only this, but the task of constructing a Girardian soteriology can be done without serious damage to tradition. In my final chapters, I will use Girard’s theory to directly capture out of the various ideas of redemption that have fed the Church for millennia elements of truth that are urgent for theology to attend to today. MT, being itself of Christian parentage, born from the Gospels and a man’s conversion, is thus

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and Redemption [Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1976]), on the other hand, amount to a rather conservative synthesis of Patristic redemption theory, and has proven unable to generate much creative follow-up work over time.

9 In Girard’s autobiographical words: “Since the beginning of the ‘novelistic conversion’ in Deceit, Desire and the Novel, all of my books have been more or less explicit apologies for Christianity” (René Girard, Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre [East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010], xv); again: “Mimetic theory is essentially Christian” (ibid., 113). One would not be unjustified in asserting, with proper qualifications, that MT is a Christian theory. Such a claim certainly would not hold true for every iteration of MT by Girardians; but its validity for Girard’s own version of his theory is pervasively apparent in his opus. The following extended quotation from Girard puts it clearly: “There exist thousands of ways to codify and regulate social coexistence, like the laws concerning marriage, for example. But all these approaches have a single goal, that of preventing conflict and so transforming individuals who might experience reciprocal hatred into people capable of mutual amity. Analysis of these cultures makes it possible to identify thousands of buffers that are interposed between potential rivals—buffers that vary, because the problems to be dealt with are various, but that always have the same purpose. I have never ceased to believe that behind relativism there exists a unity of cognizance, which could only exist if this premise is accepted. The principle aim of my work has been to demonstrate that this is true in the most controversial area of all, by which I mean modern anthropology. Anthropology has failed because it was unable to account for the different human cultures as a unitary phenomenon, and that is why we today find ourselves bogged down in relativism. … And in my view Christianity offers a solution to these problems precisely because it demonstrates that the buffers, the limits that individuals reciprocally impose on themselves, serve to avoid a certain type of conflict. If it were understood that Jesus is the universal victim who came for the purpose of overcoming these conflicts, the problem would be resolved” (Gianni Vattimo and René Girard, Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue [New York: Columbia University Press, 2010], 49–50, my emphases). Is not Christianity, then, what Girard discovered to be the very praxis and realization of what he had theorized in MT?
able to feed Christian soteriology the nutrients it needs, that it might grow in accordance with the tradition of the Church, and in proportion to the intellectual and practical demands of contemporary contexts.

The argument of this dissertation will not engage the political or pastoral implications of its thesis, except cursorily in my conclusion; that is work for another time. It will stay instead at the level of theoretical foundations, with the goal of articulating a theological account of redemption that affirms the necessity and utility of the notions of transcendence and sacrifice while remaining in keeping with Girard’s stance that the death of Jesus Christ has a fundamentally anti-sacrificial significance. This position will be presented and advanced through: (1) two basic hypothetical assumptions I will make regarding conversion and sacrifice; (2) a rereading of Girard’s theory of mimesis and sacrifice (especially as expressed in his seminal work Violence and the Sacred); (3) an examination of the operation of sacrifice and transcendence in selected biblical and Patristic texts. In all phases of this approach, I permit MT to shape my reading of the Christian idea of redemption, making Girard my teacher in these matters, while the disciple makes some appropriations of his work that are divergent from Girard’s own tendencies, or emphasize underplayed implications of his views.
Two facets of MT, which I will explain further shortly, present themselves as particularly applicable to this project, namely Girard’s notions of conversion and transcendence, and his theory of sacrifice. I build a hypothesis off of each of these facets: the first hypothesis provides a model of the structure of conversion and divine transcendence, generated directly out of Girard’s theory; the second hypothesis is the assertion, informed by the Bible and traditional theories of redemption, that the redemptive work, as sacrifice, includes an indispensable economic feature that takes the form of an exchange. It is these two assumptions that will inform my reading throughout.

Through this procedure, I develop the following thesis: The redemptive work of Christ is a sacrificial act, aimed at the transcending of sacrifice and its structural-ontological outflow, and whose form includes an exchange; correspondingly with this objective redemptive work, believers in Christ undergo a conversion that consists in their re-orientation as subjects within a structure of transcendence. The nature of the saving exchange (transactional, metaphysical, penal …) and the identity of the parties to the exchange (God’s nature and human nature, God and the devil …) are mutable; it is the form of the exchange, including the dialectical persistence of sacrifice within the anti-sacrificial operation of the redemptive work, that remains a constant. This thesis represents a strengthening of the accepted view in Girardian theology that
Christ’s death is a sacrificial act that causes the unravelling of an all-pervasive sacrificial order. It departs from current views in the field in asserting that, if we take Girard’s claims about sacrifice seriously, the redemptive act must be considered a sacrifice as such. One may therefore affirm the consistent sacrificial character of redemption, which extends even to the form of the converting believer’s intelligence. Redemption, that is, can be understood as radically homogeneous with sacrifice, despite the thoroughgoing transformation that it effects upon sacrifice.

In addition to addressing the major challenges to redemption theory that I articulated, my thesis makes the following contributions with respect to the current state of theology. The theological utility of this reading of redemption as sacrifice-transcending sacrificial exchange, with its attendant consequences for Christian subjectivity, is fivefold:

1. Within the field of Girardian theology, this thesis addresses an impasse between the Girardian anti-sacrificial reading of Christianity and the desire for a doctrine of atonement that defensibly accords with the catholic tradition of the

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11 Contrast with James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 77–83, 139–61. For Alison, the resurrection allows the disciples “to leave the understanding formed by the parameters of death,” but without any apparent repetition of the sacrificial structure in any strong sense.
Church. Until now, Girardian theologians have had to content themselves with two distinct categories of sacrifice, one pertaining to the violent sacred and one pertaining to the Christian Gospel. Honoring Girard’s claims about the structural ubiquity of sacrifice in human culture, my thesis applies the term “sacrifice” to Girard’s concept of archaic sacrifice and to the redemptive Passion and death of Christ univocally, and does so without compromising on his death’s transformative uniqueness and subversive anti-sacrificial power.

2. My thesis provides a new opportunity to address the sacrificial reading of Christ’s death within contemporary atonement theology, where this reading has met with justified discomfort. My Girardian approach can re-inject sacrifice into the center of an anti-sacrificial soteriology. As such, it affords the possibility

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12 The struggle over reconciling Girard’s views with Christian orthodoxy can be witnessed in the correspondence between Girard and his Jesuit friend Raymund Schwager. Schwager succeeded in persuading Girard that his anti-sacrificial reading of the Cross was reconcilable with Catholic dogma. See René Girard and Raymund Schwager: Correspondence 1974–1991, ed. Scott Cowdell (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016). On the struggles of orthodox theologians to accept Girard’s views, see the review in Cowdell, The Nonviolent God, 84–114.

13 See Cowdell, The Nonviolent God, 66–73. Consider e.g. the following passage in René Girard, Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 154–55, where Girard expresses the dichotomy between the two forms of sacrifice: when Solomon judges the two prostitutes (1 Kings 3:16–28), proposing to resolve their dispute by dividing the living child, “One of [the prostitutes] accepts, while the other one prefers to give up her child, in order to save him. This action was prophetic of Christ in the highest sense. … There is no doubt that the distance between these two actions is the greatest possible, and it is the difference between archaic sacrifice, which turns against a third victim the violence of those who are fighting, and the Christian sacrifice which is the renunciation of all egoistic claiming, even to life if needed, in order not to kill.”

14 Sacrificial atonement is often criticized for (a) sacralizing suffering and/or (b) making room for imperialist expressions of Christianity by personalizing and interiorizing the meaning of the Cross; see J. Denny Weaver, The Nonviolent Atonement (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 129–217.
to relieve much of the strain felt by progressive theologies when confronted by their classical source-texts. Conversely, this thesis makes Girard’s anti-sacrificial theology available to those who would retain a strong doctrine of sacrificial atonement. Despite the proximity of Girard’s idea to the sacrificial and especially substitutionary models of redemption sanctioned by various Christian traditions, the Girardian view has proven resistant to reconciliation with these models.\textsuperscript{15} My reading of Girard works toward bridging this gap.

3. Nothing dogs sacrificial theories of redemption like their ambivalent and vague relationship to praxis.\textsuperscript{16} The Girardian theory of sacrifice, on the other hand, is built upon an existential theory of subjectivity (mimetic desire).\textsuperscript{17} By specially including the existential in my considerations of the theoretical, I contribute groundwork for a future practical theology of redemption.

\textsuperscript{15} A case in point is Michael Kirwan’s evaluation of MT from the point of view of Anselm’s satisfaction theory in \textit{Girard and Theology} (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 61–69, which quickly reverses into a diagnosis of Anselm from Kirwan’s Girardian point of view. Kirwan, like Schwager, whom he relies upon, is not able to advance beyond felicitous formal similarities between Girard’s views and Anselm’s; see also Schwager, \textit{Der wunderbare Tausch: zur Geschichte und Deutung der Erlösungslehre} (Munich: Kösel, 1986), 179–84.

\textsuperscript{16} See Kirwan, \textit{ibid.} What exactly is one called upon to do once one’s sins have been atoned for? And if one is to join in the suffering of Christ, in what way is this suffering beneficial? It is difficult to accept as divinely sanctioned an idea that lends itself more readily to empty or nefarious uses than to good ones.

4. My study also holds incidental ecumenical value. It represents, to my knowledge, the first thorough appropriation of Girard by an Eastern Orthodox for systematic theology. Girardian sources, methods, and interests have been, from Girard onward, distinctly Western in their purveyance. In making my appropriation of Girard, I open up a new avenue by which Orthodox may gain better access to the complexities of Western atonement theory, while I bring to bear some distinctively Eastern resources and perspectives for the enrichment of Girardian research.

5. Finally and most importantly, I wish to furnish a potent new paradigm for understanding the saving work of Christ. In doing so, I must, of course, assume responsibility for all use and misuse of my sources. But I believe it to be worth doing, as I know of no more promising synthesis right now of the

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18 Girard evinces in his writings little familiarity with or interest in the literature and traditions of the Christian East. Engagements with redemption theory by Girard’s disciples have foregrounded Anselm almost exclusively (see Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 57–69) and sometimes engaged with the Western academic construct known as the Christus Victor theory (see Cowdell, *The Nonviolent God*, 222–37; Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 48–51). The major exceptions to this trend are Raymund Schwager’s collection of studies on a broad array of historic redemption theories in *Der wunderbare Tausch*, and the research of Robert Daly into early Christian understandings of sacrifice, in *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (London: T&T Clark International, 2009). Schwager’s study, however, is piecemeal, and his collection has not circulated widely due to its being yet untranslated into English. As for Daly, the impact of Girard on his invaluable work is limited.

19 Criticism of Western theories of atonement has been a minor but persistent feature of Orthodox theology at least since the popularization of the idea of the “Western captivity.” The interest continues today, often in a more charitable mode (consider the recent publication *On the Tree of the Cross: Georges Florovsky and the Patristic Doctrine of Atonement*, eds. Matthew Baker, Seraphim Danckaert, and Nicholas Marinides [Jordanville: Holy Trinity Seminary, 2016]), but the direction of this interest and the reasons for it remain unclear.
liberative power of the Christian proclamation than that supplied by Girard’s work.

§ 1. Aims, Scope, and Procedure of the Investigation

The first facet of MT that I will borrow to undergird my procedure is Girard’s notion of conversion, including his theory of transcendence annexed to it.20 Girard’s notion of conversion construes the Christian’s awakening as the transfer of one’s desire from objects of idolatry—the persons whom we sinners, in our search for metaphysical fulfillment, set up as our gods—to the true God, who can never become an idol on account of his surpassing transcendence. The immanent relations arising from the presence of God’s transcendence in the orientation of the will, seen over against the false transcendence of the idol, I term the “transcendence-structure.” The transcendence-structure may become deformed; if one’s orientation is diverted onto a false transcendence, one inhabits such a deformed or “deviated” transcendence-structure.

The removal of the false horizontal transcendence of the idol, when combined with the re-orientation of a person’s desire toward a vertically transcendent God, entails a restructuring of one’s relationships with other persons and with created being as a whole. According to Girard, the ordinary,

20 On Girard’s notion of transcendence, see Deceit, Desire and the Novel, 53–82.
one might say fallen, mode of relationship one has toward others is governed by a triangular structure in which the idol constitutes the medium through which one desires some third element; our desire, that is, for some object is borrowed from the mediator-idol’s presumed desire for or possession of it. God, by contrast, neither possesses nor wishes to acquire any object for himself; when God is the mediator of our desire, then the triangular structure of desire, while formally still in play, is subverted. These two configurations of desire I term “structures of relationality.” These vertical and horizontal structures of desire are the basis on which I understand conversion in the Christian life; they constitute the first major assumption of my method, the conversion-hypothesis.

The second facet of MT that underpins my thesis is Girard’s theory of sacrifice. According to Girard, the triangular relationships among members of a community tend to multiply spontaneously if unchecked. The result is the spread of the desire for some common object, not unlike the outbreak of a contagion. The resulting conflicts of interest precipitate a crisis. The chaos can be assuaged, however, by the unanimous expulsion of a scapegoat, onto whom all presumed

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21 See René Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 14; cf. ibid., 33; cf. Girard’s words in Deceit, Desire and the Novel, 65: “Men who cannot look freedom in the face are exposed to anguish. … There is no longer God, king, or lord to link them to the universal. To escape this feeling of particularity they imitate another’s desires. …”
wrongdoing can be transferred. This scapegoating event is the origin of sacrifice, as well as of human institutions generally.

Christ’s death, Girard maintains, is another occurrence of the scapegoating event, but is unique in that the scapegoating of Christ undoes the power of the victim mechanism over society; it accomplishes this by clearly exposing both the injustice of the victim’s death and the madness of the persecutors. The sacrificial offering of Christ, then, is a reversal of the victimization of the scapegoat, even though Christ himself is the scapegoat par excellence. In Girard’s view, Christ’s sacrifice, as a self-offering for the sake of those held captive by the cyclical recurrence of the contagion—both victims and persecutors—redefines sacrifice for the Christian religion. It is on this last point that I will substantially depart from Girard’s theology.

The rereading of Girard’s theory of sacrifice that I will make pertains specifically to his interpretation of the Cross, and is inspired directly by the traditional Christian ideas of redemption (ransom, satisfaction, exemplification):

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23 Structuring and generative violence are discussed throughout Violence and the Sacred, as well as in René Girard, Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World: Research Undertaken in Collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 45–78.
24 Girard, Things Hidden, 152–72; see also Girard’s general argument in I See Satan Fall Like Lightning.
25 René Girard, The One by Whom Scandal Comes (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 33–45; consult also Robert Daly’s Girardian study, Sacrifice Unveiled. Here I disregard Girard’s earliest view, which denied any place to redemptive sacrifice within Christianity.
since Christ’s redemptive work, culminating in his sacrificial self-offering, operates from within the sacrificial economy, it necessarily takes the form of an exchange in some way. This proposition of divine exchange, through which I supplement the Girardian interpretation of the Cross, will constitute my second major assumption, the exchange-hypothesis.

Some explanation is needed about how Girard’s “scapegoating theory” of the Crucifixion can be brought together with a theory of redemption as an exchange. The link by which I will join these two halves will come from the conversion-hypothesis; specifically, I will understand the reconfiguration of the structure of desire from mediation through a false transcendence—desire as mimesis of an idol—to mediation through Christ—desire as mimesis of the truly transcendent God—as an effect of the redemptive work. Conversely, I will understand redemption to be the means of conversion. This restructuring of the mediation of desire is the reciprocal action that corresponds to God’s Incarnation: the change undergone by the Second Person brings about a symmetrical change in the structures the human subject inhabits. Herein lies the exchange.

26 The notion of Christ as mediator of desire, though emphasized throughout Girard’s œuvre, is never connected by him to the death of Jesus, but only to his Passion; see Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, 121–36.
§ 2. Methodological Remarks

Some brief methodological remarks are in order if we are to ensure a secure approach to the intersection of MT with redemption theory. Of chief concern is a problem of the intelligibility of categories.

MT is constructed from the vocabulary and methods of disciplines far afield from theology, such as literary criticism, anthropology, and the social sciences generally. How well can MT really understand the concerns of theology, and can theology really appropriate the social-scientific categories in which MT speaks? The problem of categories presents, I believe, both a blessing and a difficulty. Social-scientific categories are a blessing, because they are intelligible, relevant, and appealing in the modern framework. They present a difficulty because theology is not accustomed to them.

Every theory of redemption is intelligible within the categories of its time. The early ransom theory, whose motifs still enliven the liturgical poetry of the Eastern Church, speaks the language of myth. The Anselmian theory, having been contrived for a society whose highest virtues could not tolerate deceptive intent on God’s part, elevated God’s honor and justice to the highest place, and in doing so satisfied the needs of an ecclesiastical piety founded on merits. The distinctively Eastern idea of salvation as deification speaks from the categories of
Greek philosophical thought. The modern theory of redemption par excellence, the penal substitution theory, appeals to a conception of justice that Westerners usually find easy to understand. In other modern societies, however, penal substitution may be confusing in exactly the same aspects. The Girardian approach to redemption has its own distinct appeal for its time and place: it is intelligible within scientific categories.

But the concepts of MT cannot be naïvely substituted for traditional Christian expressions about salvation, sin, conversion, end times, etc. One may raise the question of whether MT needs to be restated altogether if it is to overcome this impediment to its intelligibility for religious doctrine. The doctrine of redemption, on the other hand, finds itself beset by its own predicament not just of plausibility as already discussed, but also of intelligibility. The idea of an incarnate God dying and rising for people’s sins and eternal life seems illogical and bizarre today more than it ever did in the past. The proportions of this problem have not been taken seriously enough by theologians, however one cuts it. Perhaps this is because of the greater attention that Christian preachers and


28 One might discern evidence of this in Schwager’s insistence on a redefinition of “sacrifice,” a term central to both MT and atonement doctrine, or in Alison’s inventing or borrowing new theological vocabulary (“intelligence of the victim,” “ecclesial hypostasis”) in order to translate the essence of the Girardian insight into a workable theological language.
thinkers have directed to the more obvious crises of Christian ideology: the threat posed by Darwinian evolution to God’s providence over the animal kingdom, the calling into question of Christian moral hegemony by democratic secularization. An examination of the nature and causes of this crisis in our received ideas of redemption is not within the scope of this study. The most obvious symptom of the crisis, however, is quite relevant to it: when Christians speak of redemption, they are confused about what it is, and when they speak of the fruit of redemption, viz. salvation, they lack any consistent and functional understanding of what is meant by it.

Our ignorance is not always apparent on the plane of theoretical understanding. Many Christian believers have very specific ideas about how salvation works (e.g. by a transaction through blood atonement), about what they are being saved from (perhaps eternal punishment), and perhaps even what they are being saved for (the next life). But a theoretical confidence in the reality of salvation is not sufficient, especially if one’s theoretical conceptions have no bearing, or worse, have a wrong bearing, on reality in the first place. And the latter is always the possibility to be presumed; rather yet, there is no system of ideas that does not bear on how people live. No free-floating thoughts. And so, when we ask whether a Christian who “has knowledge” leads a life that is significantly distinguishable from that of an average “decent person” or
“fulfilled person”; when we ask how much of the difference between the one and
the other consists in works whose value is self-referentially religious, such as
praying and reading the Bible, or in civic virtues, such as the renunciation of the
pursuit of excessive wealth; or when we ask how the institutions belonging to
such a self-evidently radical instance as Christianity can have become socially
conservative forces, predictably aligning themselves with political ends having
no positive relation to the Gospel, we ought to presume a deficiency in
knowledge as it relates to praxis. The Girardian preoccupation with the real, the
constraining materialities of existence, takes theology off the level of the purely
symbolic and shorts out this closed circuit of references, though without
dispensing with the constitutive importance of the symbolic for the real, as we
shall have opportunity to see.

§ 3. Plan of Work

Chapter 1 will explain and justify my first basic hypothesis, defining the
relationships between transcendence, the transcendence-structure, and the re-
orientation of desire, and situating these within the general soteriological
problematic.
Chapter 2 will situate redemption theory within soteriology, and will establish my second basic hypothesis, namely, that redemption is a sacrificial exchange, through an examination of relevant biblical passages.

Chapter 3 will develop and apply the Girardian understanding of sacrifice in the terms set by two basic hypotheses. Beginning from Girard’s theory of triangular desire and the generation of structure through the scapegoating mechanism, the investigation will proceed to an analysis of the sacrificial system and the possibilities for transcending its order, drawing especially from R. G. Hamerton-Kelly’s reading of the Gospel of Mark. The transcending of the sacrificial system coincides, in my reading of Girard, with the divine work of redemption.

Chapter 4 will develop and refine the hypothesis of a redemptive exchange through an examination of illustrative biblical texts and traditions, indicating and highlighting the dialectical relationship between sacrifice and the historical transcendence of sacrifice in the biblical salvation history.

Chapter 5 will analyze a selection of paradigmatic medieval and Patristic theories of redemption, giving special attention to any evident role for sacrificial exchange as the means of modifying the believer’s standing within the
transcendence-structure, as well as to the difference between creature and Creator that constitutes the condition of this structure.

Chapter 6 will conclude the study with a return to the motivating questions concerning the validity of the sacrificial interpretation of Christ’s death and the use of theories of redemption.
CHAPTER 1
SALVATION AND TRANSCENDENCE

In this opening chapter, I define certain terms and relations that necessarily play a role in my approach to redemption and its corresponding subjective act, conversion. I arrange my field of concepts in relation to God’s transcendence, working from theologically plausible assumptions based on Girard’s notion of Christian conversion.29 The terms and relations explored here will provide my methodological foundation, and will enable me to articulate my first major hypothesis.

I begin by relating the existential phenomena of salvation and conversion to the theoretical knowledge we call soteriology; in so doing, I seek to justify the existential significance of my approach to soteriology and to the doctrine of redemption (§ 4). I then present divine transcendence in its structural relationship to salvation and conversion (§ 5). Finally, I clarify my presentation of divine transcendence by situating it in relation to some major historical notions

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of transcendence, highlighting the contrast between spatial and temporal configurations of this concept (§ 6).

§ 4. Salvation, Soteriology, and the Fundamental Conditions of Conversion

A fundamental methodological question that must be addressed preliminary to an attempt to interpret the doctrine of redemption concerns whether, to what extent, and in what manner it is possible or desirable to add determination to our knowledge of the mystery of salvation. This question arises on account of a basic theological axiom, namely that of the radical transcendence of God (the absolute difference between created and Uncreated), and implicitly conditions any soteriology.

The pertinent form of this question for my purposes is whether the absolute transcendence of God excludes the possibility of his communicability qua transcendent. The Dionysian tradition, so informative for the Church’s understanding of this question, affirms that it does not. The “wonderful name” that is “above every name” is “nameless” («ἀνώνυμον»),³⁰ but not not a name. The transcendent Godhead is describable by language that bears on his relationship to created being, especially living being; the Godhead is “the life of

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³⁰ On Divine Names I.6, in Διονύσιος ὁ Αρεσταγίτης, Φιλοκαλία τῶν Νηπτικῶν καὶ Ασκητικῶν, τόμ. 3 (Θεσσαλονίκη, Γρηγόριος ὁ Παλαμᾶς, 2013), 56.21.
the living, and the essence of beings”; only in God’s essence, what he is in himself, does he remain absolutely and permanently inaccessible. There is an attainable contemplation of God, who bestows illuminations proportionate to each mind, drawing intellects upward to participation in him and toward likeness with him. This likeness, which is to be understood neither as actual similarity nor as commensurability, nevertheless makes it possible to speak of God according to likeness, as it were—as it were, since language cannot represent even the likeness of the Essence. But the likeness of language is effective; that is, in spite of God’s utter transcendence, he is truly communicable. It is his communicability which forms the basis of the doctrine of the divine energies. God’s communication is, in truth, a self-communication, which takes place toward a being who is drawn into similarity with him. God’s self-communication, which is a genuine communication of the Uncreated, is termed “grace.” And since this communication is a form of relationality, one is compelled to assert also that knowledge of the divine mystery takes place only in

31 Divine Names I.3 (50.6–7); cf. VI. 3 (168.8–19).
32 Divine Names I.2 (46.21–48.6): “For just as It [the Divinity] has benevolently delivered to us in the Oracles, the science and contemplation of whatever It is is inaccessible to those who are, since It is supra-essentially elevated above all. … Yet the Good is not altogether incommunicable (ἀκοινώνητον) to any thing that is, but benignly shines Its supra-essential ray, fixed uniquely in Itself, by illuminations proportional to each one who is, and elevates to Its attainable contemplation and communication and likeness (θεωρίαν καὶ κοινωνίαν καὶ ὀμοιωσιν) those sacred minds who, as far as is lawful and befitting, strive directly after It. …”
33 Ibid.
34 I.e. the Palamite doctrine; see below, p. 41.
the field of relationality. The structures making such relationality possible constitute the basis for my discussion of conversion.

This relationality of divine knowledge secures the possibility of directing an investigation of redemption into the existential domain, that is, the domain of life as such, the real “scene of action” of all that is to be discussed. One may thus introduce a working distinction between faith on the one hand as an existential reality that is the ground of praxis, versus the theoretization of said faith and praxis on the other. We can see this distinction reflected in conventional theological terminology in the difference between salvation and soteriology. An interpretation of these terms will help elucidate the methodological approach underlying this study.

Let us uncontroversially term “salvation” that which is received by means of divine grace and whose perfection is one’s possession of grace. Salvation determines the structure of one’s relation to God and to other creatures, and so, as an event, entails a re-structuring of one’s relationality. This re-structuring is what is designated by the term “conversion” in MT, whose use of the term falls within the domain of its uses in the theological tradition.35 Conversion as the re-structuring of relationality entails not a mere moral effort, much less a

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35 See Ch. 6.
submission to a numinous force that will from now on govern a person’s life apart from any understanding of what one has gotten into. Conversion presupposes a realization, an enlightenment which, regardless of whether it has taken place instantaneously or over a prolonged period of life, or whether the realization is ever rendered articulate or not, marks a transition in a person’s or community’s life to a new and more truthful understanding of both the Creator and the created, transforming one’s relation to the one and the other, while at the same time entailing a rejection of a previously held false or less perfect understanding. Because, then, understanding is a determinant in one’s re-structured relationships, a knowledge of these new relational structures is implied in conversion, even if, again, this knowledge is left unarticulated, as it may be in the majority of real-life cases. Should one’s understanding extend to the relational structures in which one was engaged prior to one’s conversion, one always has the possibility of knowing the difference between the two sets of relational structures. That is, one always may know the change brought about by grace, and therefore have knowledge of the gift of salvation. Let us term the form and content of such knowledge “soteriology.” Each person who has knowledge of the experience of grace therefore possesses also an at least implicit soteriology, as the term has been defined. Access to such formal knowledge can only be gained, however, through rendering explicit the structures entailed by the event of salvation, i.e.
by beginning from the experience of grace and the re-structuring brought about by the conversion that follows from the acceptance of grace.

The relationship of priority between salvation and soteriology is not one-way. It is not the case that salvation is the sole foundation of all else, something that can self-sufficiently maintain perfect stability, in the life of one who has been vouchsafed the gift thereof. It is true that one can obtain salvation without any knowledge about soteriology, and in this respect salvation is all that matters. But it is also true that the possession of soteriological knowledge is inseparable from salvation. How so? The indispensability of soteriological knowledge is rooted in the intrinsic relation of knowledge to salvation itself, insofar as the realization entailed by conversion presupposes an at least implicit knowledge of what one is converting towards and away from. The necessity of soteriology is, then, similar to that of grammar, a functional understanding of which is inseparable from the use of language, whether or not one is ever enlightened by the thought that there are nouns and verbs; but it is dissimilar from grammar in that grammar is a science imposed a posteriori on a language one already knows and is thus altogether unnecessary for facility in speaking, whereas, on the other hand, the ideal content of a soteriology always has a direct function in one’s conversion, though one’s grasp of it be never so vague. Soteriology thus does not merely serve practical ends, as an intellectual prop or interior awareness that serves as a
stay for one’s easily misled faith in God, or as a basis for “models of salvation” that can be used for evangelistic purposes or to deepen one’s spirituality, though these functions are real as well. The soteriological is, rather, inherent in salvation itself, insofar as it is impossible to undergo a conversion from orientation within one set of structures toward orientation within another without some kind of reflective understanding of what one is doing. And so the proposition stated above may be modified to read that each person who has the experience of grace possesses an at least implicit soteriology; the knowledge of the experience is assumed in the experience itself. Moreover, and equally importantly, it may be asserted that soteriology describes the form of salvation, inasmuch as it lays bare the structures that are formally constitutive of the conversion that is concomitant with salvation. And in laying these structures bare, soteriology, as theory, is feeding back into the enlightenment, the gain of awareness, that is constitutive of salvation. The soteriological is that which manifests the contrast between the two sets of structures implied in a conversion, thereby making possible the judgment to prefer the one over the other, the better over the worse. The soteriological has the place of informing salvation, in the literal sense that it lends salvation its proper form.

What we are doing, then, in constructing a soteriological idea, is not extraneous rationalizing. Far from it, we are dealing with that (soteriology)
which provides the form of what it is describing (salvation) such that the former furnishes the latter with its constitutive existential intelligibility. Soteriology as understood here has to do entirely with the real structures governing life, and the decision to forsake the worse in life in favor of the better; it has to do with nothing else.

But does salvation then prove to be equivalent to a form of knowledge? In making these assumptions, does one unwittingly assert a kind of Gnosticism? By no means: one asserts only that knowledge is a constituent of salvation. Nor does one risk undermining the primacy of faith. On the contrary, faith presupposes some understanding of what one is faithful to; “blind faith” is not only faith that is not founded on evidence—the merits of this kind of faith can be debated as others please—but is also something much more uncertain than unfounded belief ever could be: faith that is devoted to it-has-no-idea-what. Such a situation would be the extreme case of the blind leading the blind.

The subservience of knowledge to faith occupies a yet more fundamental place, however, in the chain of causes. Genuine faith plainly implies a conversion toward God. This conversion is what I have described in terms of changing one’s orientation within certain structures. Conversion and knowledge have mutually constitutive roles. While conversion must, for the reasons given, involve knowledge as a logical prerequisite for itself, the actual conversion, i.e. the
change in orientation, is what makes it possible in the first place to possess the new form of knowledge that in turn makes it possible to speak of a conversion. That is, what is possible knowledge in the field of soteriology is determined by one’s orientation, and therefore by one’s conversion. Knowledge and conversion hold priority over one another in a circular fashion, and knowledge is therefore not at all the foundation of conversion, faith, or salvation. But more important than this restraint on the role of knowledge in salvation is the positive role of knowledge. Knowledge serves the end of faith, not the reverse. Being an irremovable component of conversion, knowledge is therefore partially constitutive of salvation. Knowledge does not save, but knowing is part of believing.

Here the reader must be reminded as clearly as possible that the kind of knowledge in question is the knowledge of structures we inhabit, and certainly not an objective, necessarily thematic knowledge about the world, God, or ourselves. This should be evident based on the manner in which the terms of the problem have already been laid out.

In light of the whole preceding discussion, then, the problematic of salvation will require that the following be worked out:
1. *The structures out of and into which one’s orientation moves in the act of conversion.* These can be approached only by working from the direction of the reception of grace. These structures, since they are intelligible only in light of the orientation of the believer toward or away from the Divinity, will be termed “structures of relationality.” The elucidation of the structures of relationality will consequently elucidate the change in the believer’s life that is his or her conversion. This first aspect of the problematic raises the next two.

2. *Conversion,* one’s change in orientation between sets of relational structures, that is, between structures of relationality. This re-orientation entails a “re-structuring” of one’s orientation. Any “structure of conversion” one may speak of, however, likewise any “structure of faith,” would not itself be a structure of relationality, because one would not live in orientation within such structures, nor, consequently, could one move into orientation within them; one does not “believe in conversion” or “convert to faith.”

3. *Faith.* Let us define faith as one’s changed (re-structured) orientation. One who has faith is a believer. A conversion is directed into a life of faith; the judgment that is necessarily part of a conversion is the act of believing.
4. Finally, but not least, each of the foregoing items must be worked out with a view toward the believer’s relation to the transendent divine, since this same relationality is the condition for salvation and all that it involves.

These tasks call for an immediate characterization of the just-mentioned “transcendent divine,” which will be treated at once under the classic rubric of “divine transcendence.”

As for the structural elements that undergird these items—conversion, faith, transcendence, as well as the structures of relationality themselves—these are to be understood for the time being as hypothetical. The hypothesis that they together constitute will be one means by which I bring redemption theory into engagement with MT.

§ 5. Two Aspects of Divine Transcendence; Transcendence and Orientation

The preceding justification of the possibility and utility of an exploration of the theoretical constituents of a believer’s salvation, as well as of the inescapability of having an understanding of salvation, i.e. a soteriology, so as to render explicit the structures governing the experience of salvation, yielded four items that need to be worked out, namely: the structures of relationality that we have assumed to be the conditions for conversion; conversion itself; faith; and the believer’s relation to divine transcendence with respect to the other three items. The
preliminary essentials of the fourth task, since its results will impact the fundamental approach to the other three, are dealt with in the next pages. Since the relationality of God’s transcendence is the first condition for salvation, it is needful to work out the nature of conversion, faith, and the structures of relationality with an unwavering view toward divine transcendence from the very start.

Here it must be asked, for the sake of clarifying the following discussion, what divine transcendence signifies, since the logic of divine transcendence is a condition for the grammatical integrity of the whole theological system.

Divine transcendence breaks down into two aspects. On the one hand, a person can experience God in God’s transcendence, such that transcendence functions as an attribute by which God is recognized. Transcendence in its aspect as an attribute can be further divided: it can be a generic attribute, encompassing God’s positive attributes, such as his (transcendent) glory, his (transcendent) goodness, his (transcendent) love, etc., as well as his negative attributes, such as his surpassing immateriality, incomprehensibility, immortality …; or transcendence may refer to any one of these particular attributes, and be referred

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36 Cf. Divine Names I.6 (56.21; 58.2): the “Nameless” (ἀνώνυμον) is identically the “Many-named” (πολυώνυμον), and known under each of these names. With each name is conveyed the entire Deity (Divine Names II.5 [74.4–11]).
to by it in turn. One might recognize God under any of his positive or negative attributes, as well as under the generic attribute that encompasses them. All of these are included in God’s transcendence as an attribute.

The experience of God under his attribute of transcendence is what makes it possible to indicate the second aspect of divine transcendence: there is a *structure of transcendence* governing a creature’s relationship to God. This expression “structure of transcendence” is to be read such that “transcendence” is a qualifier of “structure,” not a possessive; it is a *transcendence-structure*, not a structure belonging to transcendence. The transcendence-structure is the condition of possibility for the experience of God’s transcendent attributes. In order to distinguish clearly between transcendence in its aspect as an attribute and transcendence in its aspect as a structurally governing principle, the latter will be consistently designated by the term “transcendence-structure.”

The transcendence-structure governs the structures of relationality that are

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37 The structural signification of Girard’s *la transcendance* is evident on a reading of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, where his term does not signify just “transcendence” plain and simple: “Denial of God does not eliminate transcendency [*la transcendance*] but diverts it from the *au-delà* to the *en-deça*” (Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 59); “Hegel’s unhappy consciousness and Sartre’s projet to be God are the outcome of a stubborn orientation toward the transcendent [*l’au-delà*], of an inability to relinquish religious patterns of desire when history has outgrown them. The novelistic consciousness is also unhappy because its need for transcendency [*la transcendance*] has outlived the Christian faith. … The need for transcendency seeks satisfaction in the human world and leads the hero into all sorts of madness” (*ibid.*, 158–59). “Trancendency,” as Yvonne Freccero translates it, here designates more the relations one inhabits than an objective attribute of a higher Being.
implicated in conversion, and may do so concretely by means of the specific
divine attributes that are subsumed under the generic attribute of transcendence.

The former aspect of divine transcendence, i.e. as an attribute, will be
treated first.

Outside the intra-trinitarian relationships, the relationship to the
transcendent God is necessarily the relationship of a creature to God. In the case
of the human creature a special form of this relationship obtains, due to this
creature’s unique similarity to God (Gen 1:27): the relationship of the human
creature to God is its relationship with God. Leaving aside the perennial question
of the nature of the similarity, it is clear that the relationship of the human person
with God is the only suitable representative case on the basis of which one may
investigate divine transcendence insofar as this transcendence bears on salvation.
The relationship-with is the possibility for salvation.

It is not necessary, on the other hand, to restrict the investigation to the
case of the believer, the one converting, or even such a thing as the Rahnerian
idea of the “anonymous Christian.” Whatever the nature and status of the divine
similitude in the human being, the scripturally warranted assumption that the
image of God is at least potentially present in all people is adequate assurance
that every person possesses a potential or actual specifically human relationship
with the transcendent God. Nor would it be possible to object that some people
have a relationship with God apart from his transcendence, such that the human-
divine relationship does not actually imply transcendence. A God who is
stripped of his proper transcendence is not God at all, but only someone’s
phantom, an idol.

One might, on the other hand, be misled into thinking that all people have
an identical mode of relationship with the transcendent God. This is far from the
case. Conversion implies a change in one’s relationship with God; this takes
place by way of a change in one’s disposition toward him. The re-orientation that
is called conversion is a re-orientation toward God. The relationship with God is
precisely what changes in conversion. Theology understands this change in
relationship as a restoration brought about by grace—a restoration, that is, to a
proper relationship with God. The mode of relationship which one was restored
from is designated as inauthentic, alienated, sinful; it is characterized as
historically secondary to the proper relationship, being a consequence of the fall.

These two modes of relationship with God correspond to and are analogous to the two
structures of relationality that are found on either side of conversion, i.e. before it,
when one is in a state of alienation, still “in one’s sins,” and after it, when one
inhabits a restored transcendence-structure. Conversion is a change in one’s
mode of relationship with God in his transcendence.
But conversion is not any change of this kind. Nor did we hit the mark when we said that conversion is a re-orientation toward God, since this statement does not adequately define conversion so long as one overlooks the question of what one is converting from. What is the nature of the deviated relationship that is in need of being modified or replaced?

There are two possible answers to this question: either one has a relationship with a God who has been reduced to an idol through a failure to perceive his proper transcendence, and so believes in God as e.g. a corporeal being, or a “philosophers’ God,” a “God of the gaps,” or a supplier of values; or one has elevated a creature, whether a natural being or a creation of one’s own, to the status of a divinity, assigning to it an illusory transcendence of its own.

In either of these cases, the object of one’s orientation is neither simple nor singular; one is spun about in an infinite ocean of possibilities, unable to know what one is worshipping, unable to see the impropriety of one’s orientation, and therefore unable even to choose which of the multiplicity of beings one is going to make into one’s idol. To what sort of being has one reduced God? With what kind of being has one replaced him? If one were aware of the answers to these questions, one would not have committed the error in the first place that makes it needful to ask them. Such a state is therefore to be characterized as one of disorientation. Its characterization as disoriented proportionately enriches the
meaning of the re-orientation in conversion: *dis*-orientation implies a more originary orientation of which it is the negation; *re*-orientation does not mean, then, just a change in orientation, but also a restoration of orientation, an orienting-again. Re-orientation is a return to orientation. This is necessarily so, even if in one’s history one was never actually oriented to begin with. *This fact demonstrates the absolute priority of God’s transcendence over any deviation thereof, and over any other transcendence whatsoever.* God, by contrast with beings, is simple and singular by nature. He is the possible object of absolute orientation.

A further important point of terminology remains to be clarified. We have spoken variously of “divine transcendence,” “God’s transcendence,” and “God in his transcendence.” Let us fix the first two terms as synonymous on the grounds that the only true divine transcendence is God’s. Is God’s transcendence, then, the same thing as God in his transcendence? It would seem obviously not; God’s transcendence is an attribute of his, whereas God in his transcendence is God in one of his aspects. But does this distinction really hold up? For two reasons, it holds less water than it at first appears.

The first reason flows from the axiom of divine simplicity. The attributes of God are distinguishable from himself with respect to knowledge about God (theology), but in God’s actuality it is impossible for there to be real
distinctions;\textsuperscript{38} that is, the energies of God are not divided from his essence, but are known distinctly and spoken of as such on the conceptual level only because of the paradox of God’s communicability and essential incommunicability. The multiplicity of God, in other words, is taken up into his simplicity.\textsuperscript{39} It is therefore justified, under appropriate conditions, to speak of an attribute of God or of God himself interchangeably. This is the justification for treating the “transcendent divine” as an equivalent term for God’s transcendence. But what are the appropriate conditions that permit the interchangeability of this language? This question will be answered by the second reason for not unequivocally upholding the distinction between God’s transcendence and God in his transcendence.

This second reason, which draws on the same principle as the first, is that a creature knows God only in his attributes or operations.\textsuperscript{40} This dogma\textsuperscript{41} undercuts any possibility of speaking of God as ontologically distinct from his

\textsuperscript{38} Returning to Dionysius again, there are only four distinctions proper to the Godhead: the three distinctions proper to the divine Persons according to their respective modes of generation, and the distinction of the Second Person as the only Person to be made incarnate (Divine Names II.5–6 [70.20–74.27]).

\textsuperscript{39} Divine Names II.11 (80.7–10): “For the Divinity, being given to all being things, and pouring out of its excessive abundance the impartings of all goods, is rendered distinct in unity, and multiplied in oneness, taking many shapes out of its being One without going out of itself.”

\textsuperscript{40} The energeiai, “actualizations” or “actualities.”

\textsuperscript{41} Constantinople 1351.
attributes. One still has the possibility of theologizing in order to distinguish between what the knower has immediate experience of, i.e. the energies or attributes, and the divine essence. But whenever it is our knowledge that is the subject in question, one may not properly speak of an attribute or operation of God as being actually distinct from God himself. Nor can one rightly object to this that the knower, though he has experience of God only through his attributes and operations, nonetheless has a secondary kind of knowledge about God’s essence as that which is signified or referred to by his attributes and operations. The grace of God—his energies that one experiences—is God’s communication of himself directly, apart from signs or any other real or conceived intermediary. Nor is there any metaphysical entity hidden behind God’s grace that could complete, supplement, or augment the communication of himself by grace. To receive grace is to receive God.

What does this mean for the orientation toward God’s transcendence? It means that the distinction between God “himself” and God’s attribute of transcendence, when both are considered as objects of orientation, is moot. When addressing one’s existential relationship with God, there is no significance to the distinction between relating to God’s attributes or operations and relating to God “himself” personally. In Palamite terms, one has experience of God only through his energies, never directly with his essence. One admittedly runs the risk here of
confusing God’s transcendence with the fact of his transcendence when following this line of reasoning. Naturally, recognition of the mere fact or idea profits nothing, and is not what is meant when speaking here of an orientation toward divine transcendence.

We are now prepared to turn to the transcendence-structure as the key to unravelling the relation of divine transcendence to conversion, faith, and the structures of relationality. The transcendence-structure is the principle in light of which the structures of relationality can be interpreted; their interpretation is to be carried out with respect to one’s orientation within these structures, i.e. toward or not toward God in his attribute of authentic transcendence. A deviation from this orientation will take the form of either a commensurate orientation toward false transcendence, or an incommensurate orientation toward no transcendence at all. The former situation, in which one mistakes a creature for God, would be governed by a deviated transcendence-structure; the possibility of the latter case can be disregarded for the time as overly hypothetical. Now, the phenomenon of conversion signifies a re-structuring into orientation toward divine transcendence, i.e. the configuration of a structure of relationality that is governed by the transcendence-structure. One’s own converted orientation within the transcendence-structure supplies the crucial determinant of the “post”-conversion structure of relationality, and this
orientation is faith; in other words, faith and the transcendence-structure come together to determine the structure of relationality that is constituted through one’s conversion.

With these preliminary guideposts in place, it will be useful to sketch what is meant by the transcendence-structure in more tangible terms. It is with this end in view that I provide the following snapshot of some salient historical ideas of transcendence and the transcendence-structure in theological inquiry.

§ 6. Historical Snapshot of Some Main Ideas of Divine Transcendence; Characterization of the Transcendence-Structure in Light of These; Spatial and Temporal Representations of the Transcendence-Structure

The significance of the transcendence-structure governing the human-divine relationship as it relates to theology’s classical models of transcendence has not been addressed by my discussion thus far; yet this structure has always been present as a foundational principle for the whole problematic of salvation. A brief characterization of the notion of the transcendence-structure against the background of the historical articulation of divine transcendence will prove illuminating.

The ancient Greek concept of transcendence, in its recognizable form, goes back to Plato, whose doctrine placed reality or “truth” (ἀλήθεια) in the realm of the eternal forms (ἰδέα). Later Platonic philosophy took it upon itself to arrange
the forms in a heavenly hierarchy\textsuperscript{42} culminating in the universal condition of “one” (most distinctly in the rejuvenated Platonism of Plotinus). “One” («ἕν») was seen as either synonymous or coterminous with being («ὄν»), though the precise nature of the relationship between these two terms was debated continually since as early as Plato himself\textsuperscript{43} and was never satisfactorily resolved. The Platonic notion of transcendent being bears the notable features of ocularity and isochronicity. The «ἰδέα», as the usual translation “forms” correctly suggests, are apprehended on the basis of visual metaphor and, moreover, in primordial dependence on the actual physical sense of sight (νοεῖν, κατανοεῖν: see, look at, observe). The existence of these forms was also believed to be entirely static: there was no sense of development, evolution, or creation of the forms, and, to the contrary, such notions were rigorously excluded from the domain of the transcendent in the Platonic system. Change pertained only to the material domain of inauthentic being, which was systematically denied any higher significance in itself.

But what makes for “higher” significance? The Platonic tendency to imagine the transcendent as “up there,” ruling from the domain traditionally

\textsuperscript{42} The term “hierarchy” itself is Christian, a neologism of Dionysius the Areopagite.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Sophist}. The earlier Eleatic philosophy of the unity of being does not appear to belong among the philosophies of transcendence, though having provided fodder as it may for Plato’s later writings.
assigned to the gods, was obviously derived from pre-philosophical religious sensibilities; and, however much Plato himself did or did not associate the forms with the celestial realm at any point in his recorded thinking, the Aristotelian positioning of the Prime Mover beyond the heavens gave unequivocal concretion to the philosophical tradition of a heavenly, transcendent God, already in evidence in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Letters*. The transcendence-structure was being thought in spatial terms. As the line of Aristotelian thinking was pursued through the Middle Ages, this spatial arrangement gained strength to the point of sometimes acquiring an almost crudely physical nature.\(^44\)

The Jewish and Christian traditions, while themselves making an appropriation of the Greek metaphysical tradition, exercised an influence of their own upon philosophical speculation, especially on its understanding of transcendence. The Bible proved a source of great enrichment for the philosophy of transcendence once its theological notions had been “translated” into the language of metaphysics. Within Origen especially, the cosmology of Middle Platonism was consecrated in marriage to that of the Jewish-Christian tradition. In this incredible and awe-inspiring conflation of worldviews, the unity of God was joined to the God-‘Ev, and the angelic hosts made one with the intermediary

\(^44\) The 12th-century Persian philosopher Suhrāwārdi’s illuminationist doctrine posited a hierarchy of immaterial heavenly lights whose luminosity made possible the apprehension of lower objects.
minds that fall between the supreme Intellect and the material world. In this way the spatial arrangement of the transcendence-structure persisted, while the primacy of ocularity was retained in the inchoate doctrine of divine illuminations.

The representational systems of the Bible and of Jewish and Christian tradition exerted a far-reaching influence that surpassed the mere reinforcement of what was already present in Greek thought. They opened up a whole new dimension of possibilities—one which the Christians explored and deepened over the centuries, while Hellenist thinkers remained enclosed in their own increasingly sterile thought-patterns. The Christian tradition therefore became the principal location where cross-pollination between its own resources and Greek ideas took place.

The topical scope of this cross-pollination was not limited to images of the divine, the universality of God, or other themes that were expressly discussed by the earliest generations of Christian apologists. The Christian biblical sources brought with them an implicit sense of divine transcendence as *temporal* alongside the evident *spatial* transcendence of the God who is “in the sky.” The development within Greco-Roman Christianity of this sense of temporality was unfortunately stunted by the limitations of Greek philosophical vocabulary, which was calibrated rather for speaking only in visual-spatial categories, and
doubtless also by the increasing ambivalence of the urban ecclesiastical authorities toward millenarian sensibilities over the first three Christian centuries. When Christians did use the Greek vocabulary to speak about temporality, they usually resorted to the Aristotelian language of \( \alpha \rho \chi \eta \) — \( \mu \varepsilon \sigma \omicron \tau \iota \varsigma \) — \( \tau \varepsilon \lambda \omicron \varsigma \) and \( \gamma \varepsilon \nu \epsilon \sigma \iota \varsigma \) — \( \varphi \theta \omicron \omicron \acute{\alpha} \) and suchlike. It is this vocabulary that, in various guises, has shaped the approach to temporality across Christian scholasticism up till relatively recently.

The presentation of God’s transcendence in the Bible, in both its spatial and temporal representations, is obscured by a veil of images and parables. This is not to say that a biblical idea of a transcendence-structure was merely inchoate; the structure-making function of God’s temporal transcendence in particular was highly developed, though not always thematized. Temporality manifested in Scripture rather through the phenomenon of the \textit{call}, a theme prominent in both the Old and New Testaments. By the time of the perspective of the New Testament, the whole history of the people of God had become conditioned by their continual \textit{calling} — a calling which retroactively made a history of them possible in the first place.

The earliest biblical reference to Israel’s being “called” in the relevant sense is Hosea 11:1: “I called my son out of Egypt.” This “calling” at the nation’s origin, the original significance of which is difficult to fix with any precision due
to obscurities in the Hebrew of the surrounding text (Hos 11:2), is picked up again as a theme in deuter-Isaiah, where the calling buds into a distinct theological motif: God has “called [Israel] from the womb” (Isa 49:1), and “called [her] like a woman forsaken” after the catastrophe of her exile (Isa 54:6); the language of “calling” is further attested in the near-contemporaneous material of Jeremiah (7:13; 35:17) and trito-Isaiah (65:12; 66:4), but in these cases the national calling of Israel, which is now a calling to repentance, is refused. This last pair of citations differs, then, in both tone and meaning from the senses of Isa 49:1 and 54:6, which concern the calling of the nation into existence and then back into existence respectively. The motif of the calling is otherwise absent from the language of the Old Testament; at no point do the Old Testament Scriptures speak explicitly of a “calling” of any individual, such as Abraham, traditional as this notion has become.

In the New Testament, the “calling” (κλησις) of God’s people emerges as a central theological theme, which is used to interpret the historical existence of Israel. The most illustrative passage in this regard, Hebrews 11:8, projects this Epistle’s characteristically New-Testament theology of the calling back onto Abraham; Abraham, like the believers in Christ, was called to receive a promise (11:8; 9:12), the fulfillment of which was to belong to the future and, for Christians, to the eschaton (“heavenly calling,” Heb 3:1). The calling, which is
alluded to by name in nineteen New Testament books,\textsuperscript{45} applies variously to the community of the faithful (e.g. Rom 1:6, 7; 9:24; 1 Cor 1:1, 2, 9; Gal 1:6; Eph 4:4, 1; Col 3:15; 1 Thes 2:12; 2 Thes 1:11; 2:14); to individuals who are “called” to a certain ministry (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1); to individuals who are “called” “in” a certain state, such as circumcision or uncircumcision, slavery or freedom, marriage or virginity (1 Cor 7:15–24 and ff.); to the nation of Israel, as in the Prophets (Rom 11:29); or to Christ himself (Eph 1:18). The “calling” signals predestination (in the case of the individual, Gal 1:15; cf. Jer 1:5; in the case of the community, 2 Tim 1:9; in general, Rom 8:30); a heavenly or otherwise eschatological goal (Hebrews; Phil 3:14); the responsibility to follow in Jesus’ footsteps and to reduplicate his beneficence in response to one’s own suffering at the hands of others (1 Pet 2:21; 3:9); the incumbency of living a holy life and forsaking an evil way of life (Matt 9:13; 1 Thes 4:7; 1 Pet 1:15); and the gathering of those called into an assembly (ἐκκλησία) (Col 3:15). Certain of these qualitative aspects of the “calling” bear a phenomenological similarity to the Jeremian-trito-Isaian thread having to do with repentance (cf. Luke 5:32); others pick up on the deutero-Isaian theme of the calling of God’s people into existence (Rom 9:24–26; Col 3:15). These two threads find their richest combined

\textsuperscript{45} I have indexed occurrences by relevant uses of καλέω, κλήσις, κλητός. In the discussion that follows, parallel occurrences across the Gospels are omitted from references.

In the parable of the wedding banquet, those who are invited (κεκλημένοι) yet beg off on account of worldly responsibilities are literally refusing the call. The eschatological character of the banquet is made clear in Matthew by the expulsion of the unworthy guest into “the outer darkness,” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 22:13), and is self-evident in Revelation 19:9. The banquet was traditionally identified by exegetes as the Son’s union with the Church or as the end of the age.46

What is essential for my purposes about these rich contents of the calling is that they represent an encounter with God’s transcendence that is recognizably *temporal* in its structure and *auditory* in its mode of apprehension. The calling is toward an end, understood naively as an actual future time of the world when salvation will take place (Rom 3:11) and the individual will be restored bodily along with the whole of creation. That the *future* consummation of the world coincides with the “restoration” (αποκατάστασις, Acts 3:21) of all things is an indication that the future salvation will also be, in some manner, a return to

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creation’s origin, i.e. to the originary past. The temporal structure of cosmic
salvation thus reaches into both the protological and the eschatological.

The revelation that the world is approaching a time of God’s presence that
transcends the present as much as heaven (spatially) transcends earth has ever
since proven eminently difficult for theology to talk about in an articulate
manner. (Does not all conceptualization of time depend on spatial metaphors to
begin with, including even the notion of “transcendence” itself?) This was
especially the case for the heirs of the Hellenic vocabulary. Perhaps its
maladaptation contributed to Origen’s error of identifying the restoration with
the actual beginning, so as to arrive at a cyclical conception of time. Nothing ever
ultimately changes; the net motion of the universe is emphatically nil. Nor can it
be said that the Orthodox correctors of Origen always did much better. For those
thinkers who engaged the problems of eschatology up through the Middle Ages,
the exit-and-return of creation again amounted to a cycle. It has consequently
been a perpetual struggle for theologies of the fall and redemption to safeguard
the value and significance of the saeculum, the domain of history, which came to
be regarded in Christian civilization as merely transitory. None of this is to say
that the sense of God’s temporal transcendence was missed during this period,

47 Cf. Ps 102:11. Citations from the Psalms will follow Septuagint numbering unless noted.
48 Cf. Divine Names I.7 (58.19–60.2) and the entire Dionysian corpus, passim; Proclus, Elements of
Theology, prop. 35.
during which the popularity of apocalyptic beliefs, books, and artwork made up
for any deficiency in the relatively marginal phenomenon of Hellenizing
scholastic theology; it is the latter that has had the most trouble groping for
appropriate language. In today’s scholasticism, which is franker about
confronting the historical interests and responsibilities of the Church in society,
the problem of temporality has been redressed, largely thanks to its
appropriation of new philosophical traditions that conceive temporality richly
(Hegel and Heidegger). Yet the perspicacious observer would note that the
Church has really had no choice in the matter; in the age of air and space travel
and with the dominance of scientific representation, there is no longer a
possibility of thinking of God as “up there.” He and his heavenly kingdom have
been banished to the unobservable and untestable realm of the not-yet by those
who haven’t already confined him to the has-been. It is for this reason that a
displacement of the reign of God into the future needs to be handled carefully, as
it always presents itself as an opportunity to evade the challenges posed to
Christianity in modern times. Insofar as the deferral of God to the future offers
an intellectual escape route, it obstructs opportunities to enrich our conceptions.

Medieval scholasticism, for its part, despite its reception of Christian
eschatology, failed to progress beyond two limitations: a fundamentally
Aristotelian notion of temporality, in which all things are teleologically oriented
toward God as the One who contains the perfection of their being, and the Proclean-Dionysian notion, itself only quasi-temporal, of exit-and-return. Both of these conceptualities proved weak with respect to their capacity to depict an eschatology. (Even until the present, strong eschatologies have been more the domain of sectarian movements.) But a strong eschatology is exactly what the calling requires; not only a restoration, a return to a beginning, but a radical transformation as a result of the return. The circularity of time ought to be dominated by its linearity. The calling is not only a calling-back, but a creative act, a calling into being (Rom 4:17) and heavenward (Phil 3:14), to a state in which the source of our existence lies, but in which we ourselves have never been. God’s transcendence in its temporal representation is an end toward which all things move, and in this respect it is also their source. This formula is and historically has been the foundation of all genuine Christian teleology; if it holds, it provides validation for the metaphor of the calling, in that a call can originate motion as a response to the call (motion toward), while a response “from” a call (motion from) is nonsensical. A call is always a call toward a future, and this holds true even if the call is a calling-back. The priority of futurity in the calling implies an irreversible change, even though this change takes place in the process of a
return to an origin. The circular movement of exit-and-return is dominated by a linear movement that is proper to the Christian conception of time.49

What can be said, then, about the transcendence-structure in relation to the predominant historical notions of God’s transcendence? A few conclusions can be depended on: (1) It is to be remarked that there had been no clear discussion of a transcendence-structure as such until modern times; among the first modern attempts to articulate such a structure were transcendental theologies such as Rahner’s, which do not necessarily coincide in their methods and assumptions with the project being attempted here. Yet the notion of a transcendence-structure can validly be used as a tool for reading the historical forms of the doctrine of transcendence, since a transcendence-structure has been implied by Christian conceptions of transcendence from the beginning.

A second result: (2) The transcendence-structure is of such a nature that it expresses itself through both auditory and visual metaphor; it consequently manifests in temporal as well as spatial representations. The received tradition, however, has usually overemphasized the visual-spatial to the neglect of the auditory-temporal. In order more accurately to characterize the transcendence-

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49 Dionysius, in one of his best moments, goes beyond the notion of circular motion, and posits that beings move with respect to the Godhead in the form of a helix—both circularly and linearly.
structure, it will be necessary to be more attentive to its auditory-temporal form than classical theology has been.

Finally: (3) Divine transcendence is not a philosophical invention, even if scholastic theology has explained it by relying on philosophical concepts from external sources since the early centuries of the Church. The earliest extensively articulated philosophical doctrine of a transcendent divinity, that of Plato, is plainly dependent on religious antecedents for its inspiration. Divine transcendence is a philosophical formulation of a religious idea. This fact must not be forgotten or painted over: it means that the transcendence-structure is in essence a religious idea prior to being a philosophical one. Part of the strength of Girard’s theory lies in his locating the secrets of the transcendence-structure within concrete religious phenomena, not abstracted metaphysical speculation.

The structural phenomenology of Christian religious experience described in this chapter constitutes the first assumption of my method. This hypothesis will later be combined with my second hypothesis, namely, the principle of sacrificial exchange. These hypotheses, as I will be able to demonstrate by the end of this work, allow us to bring MT into conversation with redemption history and traditional theories of redemption with a unique dynamism. The reinsertion of the results of this procedure back into redemption theory can
decisively enrich Christian theology in a way that is of the utmost relevance today.
CHAPTER 2
REDEMPTION AS SACRIFICIAL EXCHANGE

In this chapter, I first situate redemption at the epistemological center of a
general cosmological framework, allowing me to take redemption as my starting
point for understanding the totality of soteriological meaning; I next move to a
discussion of what redemption is, taking an exegetical lead from Girard to
characterize the form of redemption as consisting in a sacrificial exchange.

The assertion that redemption is to be understood as a sacrificial exchange
calls for some qualification by way of prolegomena in light of current directions
in systematic theology. While well within the bounds of traditional theology, my
assertion goes against the grain of much current work on the doctrine of the
atonement, where the preference is to qualify or disavow redemption’s sacrificial
and transactional character.\(^{50}\) Indeed, since Gustaf Aulén in his classic study

\[^{50}\text{One might broadly characterize liberationist theologies (as well as orthodox theologies that}
\text{attempt to respond to their challenge) as qualifying the meaning of Christian sacrifice, among}
\text{which many feminist theologians are the firmest in rejecting the notions of sacrifice and}
\text{transaction altogether. Further, many of the most influential liberationist theologies, without}
\text{disavowing sacrificial-transactional models, show little interest in them, since these theologies}
\text{problematize the suffering of Jesus as such, and concede any possibility of rationalizing it. One}
\text{might see these three ways of disowning the orthodox idea of substitutionary sacrifice}
\text{respectively in Jürgen Moltmann (The Crucified God), who essentially disregards it; in Jon Sobrino}
\text{(Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis,}
\text{1993], esp. at 223–24, 254 ff.), who affirms hieratic sacrificial language but radically reinterprets its}
\text{significance; and in James H. Cone (The Cross and the Lynching Tree [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis,}
\text{2013]), who identifies substitutionary atonement as an ideological support for white supremacy.}
\text{Consider also Ray, Deceiving the Devil. Many Girardians express similar attitudes: consider S.}
\text{Mark Heim’s thoroughly anti-sacrificial reading of Christ’s death, bordering on a moral influence}
advocated for a reconsideration of the pre-Anselmian Christus Victor idea of the atonement, a pluralistic approach to redemption theory has become a widely preferred method in the academy and beyond. The most recent literature accentuates this trend by its marked preference for multiple metaphors.

Half a century of rapid progress in deconstructionist philosophy has by now made it impossible to go back on this postmodern preference for plurality, and my assertion of sacrificial exchange, which could easily associate my position with reactive theologies, must not be taken as resistant to plurality. Nor do I wish to force the inconsistent multiplicity of images used in the New Testament and the Fathers into an implausible systematic unity.

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53 See Finlan, Options on Atonement, 88–102; Vanhoozer, “The Atonement in Postmodernity.”

54 One is hard pressed to find progressive ecclesiastical (as opposed to academic) theologies that reassert sacrifice, which is most often linked today with orthodox Protestant notions of substitutionary atonement, and especially with conservative Evangelicalism.

What I do wish to assert is that the characterization of the saving death of Jesus Christ as a sacrificial exchange is decisively warranted by the New Testament witness on the grounds of its pervasiveness and coherent development within this body of texts; the New Testament witness therefore legitimates a focus on this composite image.

To make my way to this conclusion, I determine redemption to be the starting point for any knowledge we have about the creation and consummation of the world (§ 7), proceed to an investigation of a scriptural link (with Girard as my lead) between the beginning of the world and sacrifice (§ 8), and conclude with an exegetical argument for assuming that redemption must take the form of a sacrificial exchange (§ 9).

§ 7. Redemption in the Cosmic Work of Salvation

If salvation is the end of the Christian life, redemption is the means to this end; correspondingly, redemption is the means executed by God through which he brings about salvation. Any understanding of salvation, then, that lacks an understanding of redemption is like a day-dream about a place one can never see for oneself. Redemption is the means of God’s purpose; that purpose is the salvation of the human race.
Humanity’s salvation is treated in the Christian imaginary, including in Scripture, as coinciding with (a) the salvation of the whole of creation (Rom 8:22) and (b) the consummation of the world (or “age”; 2 Pet 3:10–13). A means falls between two extremes. Between the consummation of the world and what other extreme does redemption mediate? The extremes are necessarily commensurate. Redemption mediates between the beginning of the world and its end. The doctrine of redemption therefore relies on the doctrine of creation.

But the act of creation, like the consummation, is concealed from view. Our knowledge about it can derive only from our knowledge of our present phase of existence. Since this phase corresponds to the historical means between the beginning and end of the world, it corresponds also to God’s redemptive activity. Redemption is our means of access to knowledge about the beginning and the end.

How does one begin to theorize redemption, then? In traditional theologies, beginning even as early as Irenaeus and Athanasius, one does not necessarily take redemption as the starting-point of one’s explanation, but proceeds rather from the chronological beginning, onward through the work of redemption, finally to arrive at the eschaton (if one indeed gets so far).\(^{56}\) The

\(^{56}\) Cf. Irenaeus’ *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* and Athanasius’ two-part work *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*. It should be noted that the eschaton appears to be missing from
choice of this order is not only a matter of artful storytelling, of portraying the grand scheme of cosmic history in the form of a drama. It is, rather, a consequence of the logic of redemption itself: redemption presupposes a repair, or an improvement, or a fulfillment of some deficit; redemption requires a problem. The problem is the condition that determines what redemption can be and must be. Next, creation and redemption relate to the consummation of the world by, again, a causality that conforms to their chronological order. The beginning and the middle make the possibilities for the end. The restoration or fulfillment that constitutes the end is brought about by redemption, and by nothing else; and since redemption addresses a problem that existed since the beginning (provided the “beginning” includes the fall), the protological conditions that it addresses are carried over into the determination of the end.

Following the logic that organizes this chronological scheme, however, it turns out nonetheless to be the case—unavoidably so—that knowledge of redemption is the condition of possibility for knowledge about creation and the consummation. Nothing bears out this point so obviously as the qualitative differences in narrative form when it comes to how we tell the history of each of these three events. Redemption is a historical event, centered around an

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Irenaeus’ and Athanasius’ cosmic narratives. Presumably this is because they considered the coming of Christ to be the beginning of the eschaton itself; their narrative of redemption is their eschatology.
empirically verifiable act known as crucifixion, and involving other events which, though often unverifiable and unnatural, are nonetheless historical in character, e.g. the virgin birth, the resurrection, the spread of the Church, etc. By contrast, religious narratives of the beginning and the end of the world rely entirely on metaphor and obvious fiction. These narratives are of such a peculiar character that, consider it a closed case that the universe we know had its origin in some determinable event like the Big Bang, this would throw no direct light on the veracity or falsity of our religious creation stories. Nothing is clearer than the fact that the contents of our creation- and consummation narratives are contrived totally independently of the essence of scientific historicality. Why so? Because, one might naively respond, when these stories took form, no one had any empirically founded knowledge about the world’s origin or end. Sure enough. But provided they had, their (our) knowledge about the beginning and end of the world could never overpower the brute fact that no one can ever encounter the extremes of existence; human existence is always historical, always between a past and a future, a beginning and an end. So, the limits of past and future, the beginning and the end, must always remain hidden from view. Our accounts of them must be “filled in” based on extrapolations from the historical situation that we already have an account of; the accounts that we fill in will, moreover, be of a different quality from a naturalistic scientific account, for the
simple reason that physical science does not extrapolate from existence, but from mathematical principles. An account of creation and consummation will necessarily be of a purely ideological character, such that it cannot be directly informed by mathematical considerations. Now, historical existence is the domain of redemption, the means between beginning and end. Historical existence thus includes both the work of redemption and its dialectical contrary, the problem that redemption addresses. A theologian can work only from these, either backward towards an understanding of the beginning or forward towards an understanding of the end, on the basis of what is implied in the concept of redemption itself. In doing so, he or she has the aid of the human, especially historical, sciences: history, anthropology, linguistics, psychology, etc. But the theologian can only make mediated use, on the other hand, of the “hard” or purely physical sciences, except when they can confirm or deny the reality of the physical bases of the former sciences. The “pure” sciences are otherwise excluded by their fundamentally a-historical construction.

All this said, grand theological narratives generally tend not to start from the middle, but order their story “from Genesis to Revelation.” The burden of proof, then, lies on us. What more convincing way to address this concern than to see whether the chronological scheme of the Bible can furnish, out of itself, a prioritization of redemption over the beginning of history, such that redemption
is formally constitutive of these? And what better avenue to this task could be found than Scripture’s placement of redemptive sacrifice at “the foundation of the world”? It is with an investigation of this connection in the New Testament that I begin my characterization of redemption as a sacrificial exchange.

§ 8. Sacrifice and the «καταβολὴ κόσμου»

The creation of the world is hidden from the creature.

According to the report of the First Evangelist, however, Jesus is able to make its secret known, albeit under the form of enigmas: “And without a parable he did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world (ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου)” (Matt 13:34–35). Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, “the foundation of the world” is a locution that emphasizes the concealment—but in the light of the Gospel revelation, now unconcealment—of the world’s beginning. The phrase “the foundation of the world” is pertinent to our line of inquiry. Might it include a hint about the nature of redemption?
«Καταβολή κόσμου» is a phrase virtually unique to New Testament, and occurs across several of its authors, placing it in a privileged class of terms alongside such others as “the Kingdom of God.” This phrase “the foundation of the world,” as Girard keenly perceived, turns out to contain a revelation about creation—veiled, as always, in the vocabulary of an imagined religious cosmology, but with an important disclosure about history lying beneath its surface. A small amount of exegetical work will make clear the relevance of this phrase for both cosmology and soteriology.

The variety of contexts in which the phrase “the foundation of the world” is used in the New Testament is quite restricted in proportion to the breadth of its distribution across authors. Most frequently, and across the greatest number of authors, the phrase is connected with either the eternal election of the Messiah or the election of the saints.

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57 This Greek phrase does not occur anywhere in the LXX; the calcified form of the expression across the New Testament warns against a lazy identification of the phrase with the mere occurrence of «καταβολή» in e.g. 2 Macc 2:29. The exact phrase «ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου» occurs only once in the Apostolic Fathers (Ep. Barn. 5:5) and is attested further in the Testament of Moses 1:14, a work of uncertain date (see the introduction by J. Priest to T. Mos. in James H. Charlesworth, The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, vol. 1 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983], 919–26, at 920–21). See also David E. Aune’s references for the phrase in Word Biblical Commentary: Revelation 6–16 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 748.

58 Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World (Des Choses Cachées Depuis la Fondation du Monde) is, of course, the title of one of Girard’s chief works. Girard’s passing discussion of this phrase is, despite the proportions promised by such a title, limited to Matthew 13:35 and Luke 11:50–51 (Girard, Things Hidden, 153). The detailed exegetical connections I draw between “the foundation of the world” and sacrifice are my own.

59 10 occurrences across 7 authors.
The first of these two usages most commonly appears in the later New Testament writings, and occurs in the Gospels only in John. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus states that his Father’s love for him was “before (πρό) the foundation of the world”; this happens to be the sole instance in which the phrase is headed by a preposition other than ἀπό—an exception that reinforces the regular status the phrase with ἀπό must have enjoyed in the early Christian community. In John, “the foundation of the world” has to do primarily with Jesus’ centrality in the Father’s redemptive plan from eternity (cf. John 1:1), but is also secondarily linked with the mission of the Son through the theme of the Father’s love for the Son that is the common subject of both the divine mission and the eternal plan (John 17:23: “that the world may know that you have sent (ἀπέστειλας) me, and have loved them, and have loved me”). John 17:23b implies a further connection between the mission of the Son and that of the Apostles, who will experience the same love that pre-exists the world: “that the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them as you have loved me.” John 17:24 elaborates this connection: “Father, I will that they also whom you have given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which you have given me; for you loved me before the foundation of the world.” The mission of the Apostles, their ἀποστολή, is to be in the place of Jesus, who is about to fulfill his own mission on the Cross (cf. John 21:18–19). On the Cross,
Jesus’ glory, given to him before the world came into being, will be manifest. Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus’ death is the locus of his exaltation and glorification. The Fourth Gospel’s single use of the phrase “the foundation of the world” is connected, then, with Jesus’ death-as-his-mission, as well as with the mission of his Apostles—and, one might infer by symmetry, with the Apostles’ deaths. The Father’s eternal love for Jesus and his disciples—which is itself the subject of the eternal secret—and the relationship of their deaths to Christ’s glorification constitute further significant data in this complex of ideas.

A second, though less rich, passage connecting “the foundation of the world” to the election of Jesus is found in 1 Pet 1:20, which declares Jesus to have been “foreknown (προεγνωσμένου) before the foundation of the world.” The blood of Christ who is the subject of such foreknowledge is the instrument of redemption (1:19) from the vain way of life received by tradition from the audience’s ancestors (1:18). “The foundation of the world” is again, as in John, connected with Jesus’ death, and is associated by 1 Peter with a divine secret, which has finally been revealed “in these last times (ἐπὶ ἐσχάτων τῶν χρόνων)” (1:20b).
A pair of closely related uses of the phrase occurs in Revelation. Rev 13:8 says of the Beast: “All who dwell on the earth shall worship him, whose names\textsuperscript{60} are not written in the book of life of the lamb [that was] slain from the foundation of the world.” Here, the phrase “from the foundation of the world” is a crux. Does this temporal clause modify “slain” (cf. 1 Pet 1:19–20) or “written”? An argument from parallelism can be made for the latter possibility by appealing to Revelation’s other occurrence of the phrase, in Rev 17:8: “And those who dwell upon the earth shall wonder [at the Beast], whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world. …” Revelation’s use of the phrase would then refer to the election of the faithful by virtue of their negative relationship with the worshipers of the Beast (if the latter’s names are excluded from the book of life, then clearly the believers in Christ are those whose names are included in it). But the security of this reading in the case of Rev 13:8 is undercut by the fact that we are not altogether warranted in assuming such consistency of use on the part of Revelation’s author, nor in assuming simplicity of authorial intent. The two previously discussed passages that connect Jesus’ death with “the foundation of the world” hold open the door for the possibility that Rev 13:8 is predicated on a similar connection.

\textsuperscript{60} The UBS text prefers the variant reading that contains the singular (οὐ τὸ ὄνομα), but the difference is inconsequential for my line of argument; the received reading presumably reflects the sense of the awkward singular.
The one remaining occurrence of “the foundation of the world” in its usage referring to the election of Jesus is found in Hebrews; it is anomalous in that the significance of the phrase is negative:

[Christ entered into the heavenly sanctuary] not that he should offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters into the Holy of Holies every year with alien blood; for [then] he would have had to suffer repeatedly since (ἀπό) the foundation of the world; but now once, at the end of the ages (ἐπὶ συντελεία τῶν αἰωνῶν), he has appeared, to put aside sin through the sacrifice of himself (διὰ τῆς θυσίας αὐτοῦ) (Heb 9:25–26).

No positive connection can be made on the basis of this passage between Christ’s election and “the foundation of the world”; but the mere fact of the occurrence of this special phrase nonetheless begs that some connection be drawn. The phrase is a non sequitur: the author could have simply written, “he would have had to suffer repeatedly”; alternatively, he could have used a different locution for the archaic past such as «ἀπὸ αἰῶνος» (Gen 6:4; Ps 118:52; cf. Luke 1:70) or «ἀπὸ ἀρχῆς» (Ps 77:2; Mic 5:1), both of which are very frequent in the Septuagint. The exact phrase «ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου» could have come only from within Christian discourse, since the phrase is unknown in the Septuagint but, as noted above, occurs across the New Testament in its exact given form (with the slight exception of John 17:24). Either Hebrews’ use of the phrase is related positively

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61 Compare Harold W. Attridge’s difficulty in explaining why this phrase is included in this verse: “The note that such a multiple offering would have to have taken place ‘from the foundation of the world’ (ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου) simply emphasizes the absurdity of the proposition” (Attridge, The Epistle to the Hebrews 9:26 [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 264).
to its use in other New Testament texts, or Hebrews marks an intentional shift in its signification. No evident features of Hebrews, however, appear to support the latter possibility. Jesus’ death is being contrasted with traditional sacrifices, which, like his own slaughter as characterized in John, 1 Peter, and possibly Revelation, have taken place “from the foundation of the world.” Thus the apparent contradiction between Hebrews and the aforementioned texts can be settled by the supposition that for Hebrews, Jesus’ death is a sacrifice that is at once of a piece with yet radically different from those many sacrifices offered from the beginning of the world. Moreover, the theology of Hebrews clearly holds that all sacrifices before Christ’s have some association with “the foundation of the world.” These assertions require us to look further in order to confirm or deny their plausibility as hermeneutic assumptions for reading other New Testament theology.

These passages exhaust the occurrences of «καταβολή κόσμου» in its usage referring to Christ’s election. To complete the picture, and to find data that may buttress our interpretation of Heb 9:26, let us now consider the class of occurrences referring to the election of the saints. One, possibly two, of the occurrences of this second usage group have already been covered in Rev 13:8 and Rev 17:8. Another such occurrence is to be found in Heb 4:3:
For we who have believed are entering into that rest, as he said: I swore in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest, even though the works had been completed since the foundation of the world (τῶν ἐγγυών γενηθέντων ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου).

The works, that is, were completed before the seventh day of creation, as the text goes on to clarify (v 4). The author extends the protological theme of the week of creation to his audience’s present-day life in the end times, so that the “works” here become the precondition of the “rest” into which the faithful will enter (vv 6–11). A similar use of καταβολὴ κόσμου is found in Matt 25:34, where the “kingdom” is the eternally prepared inheritance of the elect. To this usage group may finally be added Eph 1:4, which speaks of the election of the faithful from the beginning of time.

The two remaining occurrences of «ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου» in the New Testament resist easy classification within the two identified usage groups. Matt 13:35 uses «ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου» in a quotation of Ps 77:2: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world.”

Here, significantly, Matthew changes the LXX’s «ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου», a much more literal rendering of the Hebrew يְזַפ יְצָר. Matthew’s quotation is meant to explain

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62 The reading followed here is that of the majority text. Certain manuscripts of Origen and Jerome omit «κόσμου», but if their reading is to be recommended, it is of little consequence for my argument. The fact that Matthew’s use of ἀπὸ καταβολῆς (κόσμου) occurs in a quotation from a Psalm similar in theme to Ps 94:11, quoted in Heb 4:3 and connected by the writer of Hebrews to the καταβολή κόσμου, is remarkable.
Jesus’ use of parables, with the upshot that eternal secrets are being revealed only to a select group of listeners while remaining concealed from the crowds (Matt 13:34).

The final and most peculiar use of this phrase is in Luke 11:49–51. The present generation, Jesus declares to a legal scholar or nomikos, will have to answer for all the blood of the apostles and prophets sent by God’s wisdom (who is God’s wisdom other than Jesus himself?) “from the foundation of the world,” beginning from Abel. Here a similarity with Heb 9:26 is apparent: both passages use “from the foundation of the world” to characterize the holy bloodshed that has gone on from eternity. The difference is that in Hebrews, it is only goats and rams that are being killed; in Luke, it is the messengers of God. Has the killing been religious sacrifice, or religious murder?63 And how is a legal scholar implicated in the killing, if we are to take seriously the insinuations of Jesus’ tirade? Do we make anything of the fact that in Revelation the names that are written in the book of life are the names of the saints who suffer persecution and death like the Lamb (Rev 20:12)?

We can sketch the following conclusions. The New Testament passages that we have considered paint a picture in which the killing of the saints is linked

with their divine mission (Luke 11:49–51; John 17:23); the associations between Luke 11:49–51, Heb 9:25–26, and the martyrdom theme in Revelation hint that a connection is presumed to exist between the killing of the saints and ritual sacrifice. Finally, the cases of the first usage group discussed attest that the trifecta of mission–death–sacrifice applies also to Jesus himself, and that he is moreover the true, eternal archegos (Heb 2:10) of this way of the saints. The election of the saints, then, is rooted in a circumstance which occurred at the world’s foundation, and which continued up to and beyond the time of Jesus (Luke 11:51). We may infer additionally from the fact that the first usage group is attested only in the later New Testament writings (John, 1 Peter, Hebrews, and possibly Revelation) that the Christian community’s application of the mission–death–sacrifice trifecta to Jesus was more likely than not secondary to their application of them to the saints. If this should be the case, then there is a reciprocal relationship between Jesus’ mission/persecution and the mission/persecution of the saints: Jesus is the eternal prototype of the latter, but his own persecution—what is now customarily called his “saving work”—is intelligible only in light of the persecution of the saints. And, to bring this reciprocity full circle, the intelligibility of the persecution of the saints is made accessible to us only by Jesus’ own words in the Gospels. Jesus’ death is patterned after those of the saints; but, paradoxically, the mission that ends in
such a death proceeds from him alone. This consideration must weigh heavily in our own propositions about redemption.

The foregoing exegetical road trip has provided a blueprint for constructing a soteriology. What emerges from the foundation of the world, from our origin which is ever out of sight, is the Lamb sent on his mission from the Father to be slaughtered. And not only the Lamb, but also his saints, who bring the occluded time of the world’s foundation into the time of history, even past the time of Jesus and into our present. This mission is the saving, redemptive act.

If such is the content of the redemptive mission, an urgent question is raised for us: What is the essential principle behind these violent deaths? If the mission is about these violent deaths for their own sakes, have we not led ourselves to a very absurd conclusion? And a second question: Should we discover, or should the sacred writers discover for us, an essential principle behind the redemptive mission, will this not also reveal to us the principle of creation, of our origin, of the world’s foundation, and thus lead us into the contradiction of knowing that which we as creatures cannot know? Will our inquiry be exposed as an act of hubris, a quest for impossible or forbidden knowledge? And what about the consummation? Will we presume to attain knowledge of it, too? What is the profit of such knowledge?
These frightened questions, masquerading under the guise of prudence, strike me as resistant to the progress of knowledge into mystery that marks the New Testament revelation. The New Testament passages we have examined declare that just such a revelation of knowledge is happening. It would be foolish to piously dismiss the possibility of revitalizing our understanding of revealed tradition. Knowledge, according to Saint Paul, ought to be subservient to faith, hope, and love; but those who would therefore cast knowledge aside as of little value ought to heed the Scripture:

Receive my instruction rather than silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold (Prov 8:10).

§ 9. Sacrifice and Redemption

Earlier, we reached the conclusion that “the foundation of the world” involves the shedding of blood, referring variously to the killing of the saints or of Christ himself. We assigned these religiously significant deaths to the category of sacrifice on the contextual warrant provided by the New Testament sources themselves. We now find ourselves confronted by questions that had been lurking nearby the whole time: Why and how is sacrifice implicated in the foundation of the world? Is sacrifice implicated in creation broadly speaking? These questions require first a more complete characterization of Christ’s sacrificial death, to be carried out presently. A lead can be obtained on the basis
of certain ready-given interpretations of Christ’s death in the New Testament. These fall under two major headings, namely, the interpretation of his death as a sacrifice on the one hand, and as redemption or an exchange on the other. I wish to show that these two dominant images in New Testament redemption theology are intimately related, and that their content is inseparable.

My tacit equation of sacred killing with sacrifice—which one might protest is overdrawn—is, in fact, ready to hand in the New Testament’s vocabulary: θυω retains its more basic meaning of “kill” (e.g. John 10:10; Acts 10:13) alongside its cultic meaning of “sacrifice” (Mark 14:12; 1 Cor 5:7; 10:20). It should come as something of a surprise, then, that it is rare in the early New Testament texts for Christ’s death, already interpreted along cultic lines in the earliest report of the eucharistic ritual (1 Cor 11:25), to be called θυσία; the only appearance of such a use of θυω or cognates in the authentic Pauline corpus is in 1 Cor 5:7: “For Christ our Passover has been slaughtered (ἐτύθη).” All of this notwithstanding the obvious juxtaposition of the Crucifixion with the Passover sacrifice in the Gospels! Sacrificial metaphors do appear, however, under other terms of expression in a handful of locations in the early texts. The “shedding of

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64 One should also consider the complex interplay between generic animal slaughter and sacrifice in certain Old Testament laws, sometimes implying an identity of the two, as in Lev 17:2–5; cf. Deut 12:20–21.
65 Paul is prone to speak of θυσία rather as a work done by the Christian believer than as something Christ did; consider Rom 12:1; Phil 2:17.
blood” (configurations of ἐκχυννέω + αἷμα) is connected with the eucharistic Cup in all three Evangelical institution narratives (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20), the word ἐκχυννόμενον surely being meant to evoke the paschal sacrifice (cf. Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7). Within authentic Paul, the Gospels, and Acts, the only remaining references to Christ’s death in explicitly sacrificial terms are restricted to Romans. Christ’s blood has atoning (Rom 3:25) and justifying (Rom 5:9) functions.66

Within some of the later New Testament writings, characterizations of Christ’s death in sacrificial terms proliferate to an extreme, most famously but by no means exclusively in the Letter to the Hebrews. Christ is a θυσία (Heb 9:26) as well as the offerer of a θυσία (Heb 10:12); he offers (ἀναφέρει) himself (Heb 7:27), and offers up (ἀναφέρει) our sins (Heb 9:28) in his own body («τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν ἀνήνεγκεν ἐν τῷ σῶματι αὐτοῦ», 1 Pet 2:24), removing our sins so that we may live in righteousness/justification («ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ἀπαγόμενοι, τῇ δικαιοσύνη ζησόμεθα», 1 Pet 2:24). In contrast to the Levitical priests (Heb 5:1, 3; 9:7, 9), Christ makes a perfect offering (προσφορά,

66 The meaning of the key word in Rom 3:25, ἱλαστήριον, conventionally rendered by “atonement” or some similar term, is unfortunately quite beyond ascertaining in Paul’s use; were it not, this passage might settle a whole host of disputes relating to the doctrine of redemption. What can safely be asserted is that (a) Paul does not feel the need to explain his anomalous use of ἱλαστήριον, which translates the name of the cultic object παράθυρον in the LXX, and (b) the object of the implied act of ἱλασκεῖσθαι is sins, not God. See G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), «ἱλαστήριον»; cf. 4 Macc 17:22.
προσφέρω) of his prayers (Heb 5:7) and of himself, that we ourselves might in turn render service (λατρεύειν) to the living God (Heb 9:14); he offers his own body (Heb 10:10, 14). His hieratic ministry achieves the expiation (ιλάσκομαι) of the sins of the people (Heb 2:17), and he himself is the expiation (ιλασμός) for the sins of the faithful (1 John 4:10) and of the whole world (1 John 2:2). As Christ’s blood serves an atoning and justifying function in Romans, so in the later writings does it serve the cultic or quasi-cultic functions of redeeming (Eph 1:7; 1 Pet 1:18–20), making peace (Col 1:20), sanctifying (Heb 13:12), washing from sins (Rev 1:5), and mediating the purchase through which God acquires his people (Rev 5:9).

A sacrificial interpretation of Christ’s death is made unavoidable by these texts for anyone who takes a holistic view of the Bible; but one has a right to demand a stronger demonstration of its existence in the early books. Does not the virtual absence of sacrificial characterizations of Jesus’ death in authentic Paul, the Synoptics, and Acts effectively undermine any claim that his death is, at the heart of it, sacrificial? Is there not a question of whether the handful of sacrificial references in the early texts have been interpreted by tradition too literally? Can his death be considered sacrificial only in virtue of a rather distant metaphorical link, whose importance is historically relative and can be buttressed only by
excessive theologizing. The notion of redemption, which we have already discovered in the cultic contexts of Eph 1:7 and 1 Pet 1:18–20, provides the decisive lead that can extricate us from this quandary.

Redemption in the Hebrew Scriptures (גאל, פדה) derives its principal sense from a class of economic functions. These are acts of “buying back” land (Lev 25:23–28), houses (Lev 25:29–34), or Israelite bondservants, who may be “bought back” by their relatives (Lev 25:47–55). Since the act of redemption involves in each case the restoration of possessions or persons to their rightful state of belonging, these economic transactions make a suitable metaphor for liberation and deliverance; Lev 25 repeatedly ties the redemption laws to the liberation of Israel from Egypt (25:23, 38, 42, 55). Alongside this economic practice, there existed also a cultic practice of redeeming sacrificial animals and

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67 I have particularly in mind the “thin” doctrine of Christ’s death found in early Girard: “If we can rid ourselves of the vestiges of the sacrificial mentality that soil and darken the recesses of our minds, we shall see that we now have all the elements at hand for understanding that the death of Jesus takes place for reasons that have nothing to do with sacrifice” (Girard, Things Hidden, 197). The sacrificial reading of the Passion represented, for early Girard, a characteristically medieval trajectory that has now been superseded. It is this position I am refuting.

68 For examples demonstrating the synonymity of these terms, compare: Ruth 4:4, where the terms are used interchangeably; Exod 6:6 with Ps 25:22 and Ps 130:8; and Ps 49:15 with Ps 69:18 and Ps 72:14 (all references to MT). It should be noted that in spite of the general equivalence of these words, the books of the Torah use פדה only for the redemption of animals and firstborn sons, and גאל only for the redemption-price of slaves and non-living possessions; see the illustrative examples in Lev 27:13, 15, 19, 20, 31 versus Lev 27:27. There does not, in any event, appear to be any difference in the functions these terms stand for in the Torah books, but only in the circumstances of their use.
children, which can be understood by analogy with the economic practice. In a passage directly following the institution of Passover, God commands the sanctification of all male firstborn of any living creature in Israel (Exod 13:1). The dedication of these creatures to God unfortunately requires their slaughter (זְבַח = θυσία) (Exod 13:15; cf. Num 18:17), and so a means of “redeeming” children and economically indispensable beasts of burden (asses) was instituted (Exod 13:13, 15; cf. Exod 34:20; Num 18:15–17). The etiology given for God’s possession of the firstborn and the possibility of substituting an animal for a son’s life is the slaying of the firstborn of Egypt, from man unto beast (Exod 13:15), together with the success of the apotropaic blood of the paschal lamb. One was therefore able to exchange either a lamb (for an ass, Exod 13:13) or a sum of money (Num 18:16) for the victim’s life. The presumed logic of this whole situation, then, in light of its homonymous economic institution, appears to have been as follows: God buys (redeems) Israel out of Egypt by inflicting the price of the blood of the firstborn on Egypt; therefore, by reciprocity, the firstborn of Israel are owed to God, but they may nonetheless be bought back with a symbolic equivalent.

(Dizzingly, this practice amounts to an allowance for redemption from

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70 The etiology is, of course, obviously fictive in light of passages such as the Akedah; see Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 43–45 and passim.
redemption! The connection of redemption with sacrifice as two forms of transaction is clear in an instance such as this one. The debt of the firstborn and their subsequent redemption constitutes a sacrificial economy of exchange.

Can a similar logic be appealed to in order to explain the sacrificial significance of redemption in the New Testament?

Unlike the explicitly cultic language of sacrifice, the language of redemption (λύτρωσις and cognates) is common in both the early and late New Testament books; a term with substantial overlap of meaning with redemption, (ἐξαγοράζω), also occurs in a relevant context. Neither term’s New Testament usage in relation to the redemptive work of Christ always conveys evident sacrificial significations, but both terms are sometimes wedded directly to sacrificial imagery. A survey of the important textual loci will illustrate. Luke and Acts employ λυτρῶ in such a way that any difference in its meaning from “deliverance” cannot be demonstrated (Luke 24:21; Acts 7:35). Paul, with at best weak shades of sacrificial meaning, speaks of Christ “buying” («ἐξηγόρασεν») the faithful out of the curse of the Law (Gal 3:13; cf. Gal 4:5), and reminds the Corinthians twice that they were “bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23); neither of these examples displays any self-evident connection with either sacrificial
institutions or Old Testament redemption laws. Different, however, is Paul’s use of ἀπολύτρωσις in the later Romans. In this letter, whose theology represents the most mature developments in Paul’s thinking, the free gift of justification results directly from ἀπολύτρωσις through the conjoined causes of Christ himself and God’s putting forth of Christ as an ἴλαστήριον:

For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God, [but] are justified (δικαιοῦμενοι) freely by his grace through the redemption (ἀπολυτρωσίως) that is in Christ Jesus, whom God presented (προέθετο) as an ἴλαστήριον [means of effacing sins? see n. 66] through faith in his blood as a demonstration of his righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) … that he may be righteous (δίκαιος) and be the justifier (δικαιοῦντα) of one who is of the faith of Jesus. (Rom 3:24–26)

The demonstration of God’s righteousness is presented here by Paul as something that takes place on account of Christ’s sacrificial death, and thus is explicitly joined to the justification of the faithful; that is to say, it is clear that the justifying function of Christ’s death as an act of redemption (readily interpretable as a development of the theology of “buying” in Gal 3:4) is now thoroughly interwoven with a sacrificial theology. For Paul, Christ’s death as a redemptive act is now equivalent to Christ’s death as a sacrifice.

Paul invokes the metaphor of redemption again in Romans 8. The subjection of flesh to spirit and the quickening of the body, achieved by the death

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71 It is noteworthy that Paul’s choice of the term ἐξαγοράζω has no precedent in the LXX.
of Christ and forming the basis of Paul’s ontological doctrine of sin (Rom 8:1–11), is the condition of the awaited “redemption of our body” (Rom 8:23) and deliverance of the whole material creation from suffering (Rom 8:18–23). In 1 Corinthians, the same eschatological transformation is described in terms of an exchange:

We all shall be changed (ἀλλαγησόμεθα) in an instant … and the dead shall rise incorrupt, and we shall be changed (1 Cor 15:51b–52).

The verb ἄλασσω that is used here does not mean change in the sense of a transformation (μεταβολή) or alternation (ἀλλοίωσις), but of an exchange (ἀλλαγή): the corruptible state of our bodies is to be (ex)changed for an incorruptible state.\(^\text{72}\)

An oblique but unmistakable hint of a connection between redemption and sacrifice can be found in Matthew and Mark. These Gospels report in parallel the phrase «λύτρον αντὶ πολλῶν» in the mouth of Jesus to express the purpose of his impending death (Matt 20:28 = Mark 10:45). The phrase evokes the “for many” (ὑπὲρ πολλῶν; Matt: περὶ πολλῶν) that characterizes the blood of the New Covenant in the narrative of the Mystical Supper (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke is missing all of the preceding phrases, a fact which reinforces the

\(^{72}\) For an additional data point in support of this rendering of ἄλασσω, compare its use in the different context of Rom 1:23; cf. Ps 105:20 (LXX). One may think of the German Wechsel, or the English “change” for returned cash.
The link between them); the cultic significance of the blood of the Cup in relation to the Passover sacrifice is clear.\(^73\) Christ’s death, the slaughter of the new Pascha, is a redemptive work.

There is, then, an explicit presence of sacrifice in the early New Testament books’ characterizations of Jesus’ death, often connected with or embedded in some notion of redemption; additionally, the notion of redemption often retains its literal sense as an exchange.

What, on the other hand, do the later New Testament books have to say about redemption and sacrifice? We find that several of the later books—initiating a two-millennium trajectory of theorizing on the subject—acknowledge, fortify, and explicitly integrate these themes, reading Jesus’ death as a sacrifice and a redemption-payment all in one. According to Hebrews 9:12, Jesus the High Priest procures eternal redemption (\(\alphaιωνιαν\ \lambdaυτρωσιν\ \epsilonυραμενος\)) by his blood. Elsewhere, redemption (\(\alphaπολυτρωσις\)) through his blood is the means of forgiveness of sins (Eph 1:7 = Col 1:14). Again, Christ is the sacrificial lamb whose blood is the instrument of our redemption from a vain way of life (1 Pet 1:18–19); the same passage directly contrasts redemption through his blood with redemption through money, reinforcing the literal

\(^{73}\) See above, p. 78.
transactional meaning of redemption. The explicitness with which these passages combine these themes renders a detailed explanation of each case unnecessary.

To summarize, the New Testament bears witness to: (a) the characterization of Jesus’ death as either redemption or sacrifice separately; (b) the (usually later) unification of the concepts of redemption and sacrifice as inseparable characterizations of his death. Each of the two characterizations, then, is able to stand on its own, without direct reference to the other, while, at the same time, a theology of redemption ought to be able to integrate them in some manner; this integration, which is delivered to us by the New Testament books both early and late, nonetheless calls for interpretation, as testified by the fact that the relation between sacrifice and redemption perceptibly intensifies over the chronological course of the New Testament’s development. This trajectory is made yet more complicated by the fact that it continues well beyond the New Testament and into the history of Christian theology as a whole. Finding ourselves confronted with such complexity of material, we ought to remind ourselves to approach the topic of redemption with humility. We have, however, won the right to add a basic second hypothesis alongside that of the transcendence-structure: Christ’s sacrificial death is, as sacrifice, a redemptive exchange. And an important corollary to this statement: A sacrificial interpretation of the death of Christ can further interpret his death as an exchange.
CHAPTER 3
THE GENESIS OF STRUCTURE AND THE END OF THE AGE

The transcendence-structure is coeval with creation; it is found always and only alongside that which is not God. This axiom offers the first clue as to the meaning of the “foundation of the world” for the concept of sacrifice. The transcendence-structure has an ancient relationship with something sacrificial. What is the nature of that relationship? One can tackle this question by re-problematizing systematic atonement theology in the Girardian terms of transcendence and sacrifice.

The twin hypotheses I have presented, namely, the structure of conversion as a re-orientation toward authentic transcendence, and the form of sacrificial redemption as an exchange, bear on each other in their very essence. Conversion is itself the (ex)changing of one thing for another: of a false transcendence for God’s transcendence, of a way of life determined by the former for one determined by the latter. Redemption is, conversely, a means toward effecting this (ex)change. The taxonomic system organizing most “textbook” systematic theologies overlooks this essential connection: redemption and conversion are usually presented as separate phases of the salutary process, the redemptive work being considered strictly objective and preceding conversion, while conversion is considered strictly subjective, and is made possible by the prior
redemptive act. One does not confuse redemption with the realities of one’s personal conversion, lest the boundary between faith and works become blurred.

The objectivity and subjectivity of redemption and conversion do hold, as does their distinction in logical priority; but while distinct, redemption and conversion are not separate, and the distinction between their respective objectivity and subjectivity, as well as in their priority, is not as strict as popular and textbook atonement theory would impress on us. In order to understand redemption—and therefore conversion as well—one must be able to appreciate the redemptive exchange as a sacrifice, an objective event, as most traditional (especially Protestant) theories of redemption take pains to emphasize. But to appreciate the redemptive work as a sacrifice, one must grasp its relation to the transcendence-structure and the believer’s turn toward it, for the sake of which redemption has taken place. The same traditional theories of redemption, particularly the “objective” theories, tend to give only a weak treatment of this connection.

The connection between the transcendence-structure and sacrifice will be explained and investigated in this chapter. Girard’s early work Violence and the Sacred will provide the main lead into the problem.
Girard’s theory of sacrifice constitutes an integral part of MT. Its salient points, each of which will be expanded upon in this chapter as necessary, may be summarized briefly. The most important claim of Girard’s theory of sacrifice is that sacrifice provides the material conditions needed to generate ideational structure on the level of human language and cognition—the rudiments of symbolic thinking. Sacrifice is therefore both a creative and a destructive force. It is this aspect of Girard’s thinking on sacrifice that I wish to emphasize and extend. In its creative aspect, sacrifice produces structure by generating binaries that can be mapped onto the difference between better and worse (and hence include a power relation). The resulting system of structure, besides forming the basis of social distinctions as emphasized by Girard, underlies value, and allows for judgment to take place, i.e. the act of dividing between the better and the worse. The system of divisions may also act recursively, such that the sacrificial system and all it entails may exalt or condemn itself. This latter possibility, of a self-subversion of the sacrificial system, gradually realizes itself in the biblical writings.

In order to fully appreciate Girard’s theory of sacrifice in all its originality, however, we must introduce a process that Girard believes underlies sacrifice

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(and which is central to his view of Christianity). Girard’s Mimetic Theory posits a hypothetical process called “scapegoating” or, more technically, the “surrogate victim mechanism,” that underlies sacrifice and precedes its institutionalized ritual form. A single victim is singled out by the community, blamed for all the community’s woes, and probably killed. Only on the basis of scapegoating does sacrifice function for Girard as the generative event at the origin of symbolic thinking.

One final element of the Girardian theory of sacrifice needs to be mentioned. For Girard, the surrogate victim mechanism and sacrifice lie at the heart of the experience of religious transcendence. In the view of the Girardian biblical scholar Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, whose conclusions I will discuss below, this sacrificial transcendence is expressed primordially as a transcendence of place (spatial transcendence) and is an outgrowth of sacrifice’s structural generativity.

Over the course of time, growing consciousness of the generative process can lead to its subversion or dismissal. The most complete instance of such a subversion takes place, according to Girard, in the biblical revelation, culminating in the total denuding of the surrogate victim mechanism in the pages of the four Gospels. I will systematize, bolster, and somewhat revise Girard’s view on this point.
Once, however, the aforenamed process of self-subversion through the ongoing, binary-generating creativity of sacrifice is set in motion, a shift of the form of transcendence functional in the system begins to take place. Here Hamerton-Kelly’s interpretation of Mark’s eschatology makes a decisive contribution to Girard’s analysis of the Gospel phenomenon. The victim, for Hamerton-Kelly as for Girard, functions in the sacrificial system as a “transcendental signifier,” an originally derisive term employed by Derridean deconstructionists to designate what functions for traditional philosophies and theologies as a signifier of that presumed ultimate signified which all other signifiers imply (God, being, consciousness, etc.). The sacrificial system, with its victim serving as a transcendental signifier, makes the place (and secondarily the time also) of the victim’s sacrifice the center of the structural system, the controlling point of its web of significations and system of references. Once the system has subverted itself, however, it is set in an unstable and therefore free motion. This free motion is authentic time. The control over the system no longer comes from a point, and ceases really to be any control at all; the “control” comes from an undetermined future. Only God’s promise assures this future, not any deterministic historical process.

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The elements of MT that the argument of the present chapter fundamentally relies on thus fall into four parts: the scapegoating- or surrogate victim mechanism and the institution of sacrifice (§ 10); the generation of structure through these, as well as of the transcendence of place (§ 11); the possible means by which the generative process can be subverted (§ 12); and the transformation of spatial into temporal transcendence resulting from the sacrificial system’s subversion (§ 13).

§ 10. Girard’s Surrogate Victim Mechanism

Sacrifice is a substitute for murder, and murder is a substitute for sacrifice. This, Girard’s thesis in its most basic expression, already gives us a glimpse of the transactional structure of redemption. By a symbolic substitution, one thing is put in place of another. These items are fully fungible, like money and goods.

Girard’s proposition of the interchangeability of murder and sacrifice has from the start a Christian direction in his work. As in the New Testament, sacrifice is for Girard the “foundation of the world”—of the symbolic, linguistic, and cultural phenomena that make up the world as we humans can know it. This claim of Girard’s is the basis of a social-scientifically inflected religious philosophy, not, as has sometimes been alleged, a wrongheaded subordination of

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76 Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 1.
theology to social science. The evidence for this is that Girard approached Christianity again and again over his career from the viewpoints of different methodologies, be they those of the social sciences as in *Violence and the Sacred*, the human sciences as in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, or theology as in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Girard did not, conversely, employ explicitly theological assumptions in his methodological approaches to non-religious subjects. It is Christianity, and more broadly religion in general, which interests Girard. There is therefore no a priori reason to doubt that Girard’s view and the New Testament are sufficiently homologous in their basic interests and outlook to justify experimenting with MT as a hermeneutical tool to leverage meaning from the Bible and the Christian theological tradition.

Sacrifice’s most basic function, according to Girard’s theory, is to keep violence at bay within a community. The precondition for internecine violence as well as for the sacrificial response to it is what Girard terms “mimetic rivalry.” Members of a community enter into mutual conflict because they appropriate one another’s desires; if member A desires or appears to desire object X, then member B, his neighbor, will readily fall into the snare of desiring X as well. This

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77 As objected inaccurately by John Milbank in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 392–98. Milbank’s objection is worth noting, since it has so often been paraphrased in dismissals of Girard.

kind of imitation is termed “mimesis” by Girard. Such a highly developed propensity to mimesis distinguishes humans from other primates, and is an attribute to be prized, since it enables culture and creativity. But once “mimetic desire” for some object spreads to enough members of the community, the potential of mimesis to lead to uncontrolled violence may begin to realize itself spontaneously (Girard calls this propensity toward violent mimesis “mimetism”). As members imitate each other’s desires more and more, they enter into competition for the same objects, and thus become “mimetic rivals.”

A locus Girard likes to point to so as to underscore the gravity of runaway mimesis is the Tenth Commandment: “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s goods.” It is not the taking of another’s goods that is prohibited (this was already dealt with under the Seventh Commandment), but the desire for them. In concluding with a

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79 Brian Robinette interprets Girard’s notion of mimesis along Levinasian lines: “As my desires are formed by mirroring those of the Other, I find myself inextricably connected with this Other. Though we retain our unique identities … still our respective senses of “mineness” (ipseity) is [sic] connected at the most fundamental level with the “non-mineness” (alterity) of the Other. A person’s identity is an identity-in-relation, where “relation” is not something subsequent to identity, as if I come into relation with the Other only after self-constitution, but logically prior and ontologically constitutive of identity” (Brian Robinette, Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence [New York: Crossroad, 2009], 260). The capacity of mimesis to induce imitation, however, as well as its proneness to conflict, support an interpretation of mimesis in parallel with Lacan-Žižek’s notion of drive: the face of the Other is not something that calls me into relational being, but is experienced by me as a mask that conceals the ever-unattainable object a, the essence or being that Girard posits is perceived to exist within the Other. Whatever desires (or other metaphysical attributes) I perceive the Other to possess, these I seek to appropriate for myself. The ultimate object of mimesis, the Big Other, is the scapegoat, the common Other of all who, in his divinized form, is identical with the symbolic order.

80 See e.g. Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 7–12.
prohibition against desiring what belongs to another, the Mosaic Law attacks the root of evil in the Israelite community.

The relationship of mimetic desire—let us be intentionally Patristic and call it envy—to the conversion-hypothesis is easy to deduce. Envy orients one toward the apparent transcendence of one’s neighbor, the proprietor of the desired object, who thus becomes one’s god. The Tenth Commandment, then, can be obeyed only by wholeheartedly obeying the First: it is impossible to renounce the appeal of another’s false transcendence (i.e. not to covet) without re-orienting one’s whole mind toward the authentic and infinite transcendence of God. To desire what God desires is in no way a transgression, but rather the condition for saintliness.

Mimetic rivals are easily identifiable, since through their reciprocal mimicry they become doubles of one another. Once the whole community is

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81 Here Girard holds a transparent debt to Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of mauvaise foi.
82 It is from Girard’s concept of “doubles,” individuals whose mutual mimesis causes the distinction between them to erode, that the French psychiatrist Jean-Michel Oughourlian developed, in coordination with Girard, the concept of interindividuality that is part of the common jargon of mimetic theorists today (cf. Girard, Things Hidden, 287–92, where Girard and Oughourlian lay out these concepts in parallel without recourse to so many words). For Oughourlian, interindividuality is the notion that psychological actuality takes place in the space between “holons,” Oughourlian’s term that roughly corresponds to the individual (J. M. Oughourlian, The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991], 15–17). While Girard claimed the term “interindividual psychology” as his own, he credited Oughourlian with the fundamental contribution to the concept (Girard, Evolution and Conversion, 30). Interindividuality then goes through a second iteration in the work of James Alison, who appropriates Oughourlian’s psychological concept to ground his theological anthropology: one’s very self, one’s identity, one’s “I,” is constituted at
caught up in contagious mimesis, each member seems more or less identical to every other. When the violence engendered by envy becomes itself the object of reciprocal imitation, the situation is primed to erupt into chaos. Each advance, each blow struck by a member of the community against his neighbor, must be answered. Everyone becomes an antagonist.

Sacrifice is a braking mechanism for this uncontrolled animosity, which would obviously otherwise be unsurvivable for the community. Girard locates the origin of the bloody institution of sacrifice in a collective killing that spontaneously results from the community’s universal antagonism. (In the event that the collective killing fails to materialize, the community simply remains in breakdown.) Through the killing of a single community member, or, where obtainable, of a small minority group, the all-engulfing violence is quenched.

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every moment by the desires of one’s model (Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong, 15–18). Finally, the term “interindividual” is sometimes picked up by Girard himself. If one inattentively reads these developments back into Girard’s work indiscriminately, one misses the essential role structural anthropology plays in allowing Girard to articulate the steps of his thesis on scapegoating and culture as in Violence and the Sacred. In order to address the socially constitutive structural implications of Girard’s scapegoating hypothesis, I have hewn closely to Girard’s terminology as used in the latter work.

83 The view that the collective victim may be a minority group rather than an individual is particular to Girard’s middle and later work. See the discussion of this question in the early “Discussion avec René Girard,” Esprit 429 (November 1973): 528–63. The single victim certainly retains an at least implicit priority in Girard’s system throughout his work, however. As Girard points out in a late interview, minority groups cannot be presumed to have existed within the earliest societies (“Mimesis, Sacrifice, and the Bible: A Conversation with Sandor Goodhart,” pages 39–69 in Sacrifice, Scripture, and Substitution: Readings in Ancient Judaism and Christianity, eds. Ann W. Astell and Sandor Goodhart [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2011], 62–64).
Institutional sacrifice gradually arises as a non-spontaneous means of perpetuating the pacifying effect of the original killing.

The effectiveness of the procedure of killing a single victim, as well as the possibility of this procedure’s replacement by sacrifice, lies in the efficacy of a certain mechanism of substitution. Because mutual antagonists have lost their differences and have become doubles of one another, either individual in a given pair of antagonists can be substituted for the other. On a larger scale, any single member of a community pervaded by mimetism can be substituted for every other member of the community. All are interchangeable. The violence that results from reciprocal envy can thus be transferred, in a manner that is both pure appearance and yet very real, onto a single member; he or she now serves as a substitute for all the rivals, and for the envy and violence itself that attaches to them. The single antagonist, having been substituted for all the others, is either banished, or executed on the spot. This chosen individual is the community’s surrogate victim; Girard goes on after his early work to refer to him more famously as the “scapegoat.”

There is, then, a pair of substitutions on which the edifice of sacrifice is founded. In the first place, the surrogate victim, a single member of the

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84 Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 159.
85 Ibid., 79.
community, is substituted for all members as well as for each individually. This is the procedure of the surrogate victim-/scapegoating mechanism. In the second place, a ceremonial sacrificial victim is substituted for the original surrogate victim. Girard conjectures that the sacrificial victim, while necessarily an outsider, or even an animal or plant, so as not to be capable of reinciting internecine violence within the sacrificing community, needs also to be able to function as a symbolic equivalent to the original surrogate victim in order to be able to take his place. The victim must therefore be similar to and different from the original scapegoat. If these two substitutions cannot be carried out with powerful enough symbolic efficacy, the whole process of sacrifice (and with it surrogate victimage) loses its reconciliatory power. Should the substitutions fail as such, the killing of the victim will amount to nothing but a transparently gratuitous killing, at best ineffective, and at worst sparking a new wave of violence (think of the botched offering of Iphigeneia). The logical demands of the sacrificial system must be taken seriously.

Sacrifice sanctions these lawful, unanimous substitutions in order to prevent random substitutions from getting out of hand. Each member of the community, being a double of his neighbors, could be a viable substitute for any

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86 Ibid., 102.
and all other persons; there is no a priori reason why substitutions should not proceed indefinitely. Only a unanimous substitution can check the process. “The role of sacrifice,” explains Girard, “is to stem the rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into ‘proper’ channels.”

This is not, of course, the way any practitioner of sacrifice would explain what he is doing. The institution of sacrifice has been subjected to a multitude of divergent interpretations by both its practitioners and its scientific observers, the ethnologists. All these interpretations may be significant, but only one interpretation, Girard insists, gets to the heart of this institution; the secondary interpretations that may arise in societies possessed of new and more efficient mechanisms to restrain violence, such as law and the judiciary, may land especially wide of the mark, seeing that these societies are no longer well served by archaic sacrifice. Sacrifice may decay in such societies even to the point that it is no longer an obvious feature of that society’s life, carrying on an ostensible existence only in the harmless and unbloody procedures of Church ceremony, or as a metaphor without necessarily any religious significance. But despite its capacity to acquire new secondary meanings or lose meaning altogether, sacrifice’s most basic and original function remains the same: sacrifice effects the

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87 Ibid., 10.
polarization of a community in a coordinated manner against a single, vicarious victim so as to control vengeance. We need not expect those societies that still rely on this archaic sacrificial mechanism to evince a lucid understanding of sacrifice: on the contrary, the act of substitution of the unanimous victim for the community, the transference of violence onto him, and the substitution of the sacrificial victim for the original surrogate victim can succeed only as long as they remain unacknowledged. Girard’s interpretation of sacrificial rites is thus akin to the interpretation of the repressed material in a dream, an extended form of psychoanalysis.

With this theory of sacrifice, Girard breaks from the once-popular school of thought that considered the essence of primitive sacrifice to be the presentation of a gift to a deity, a notion which all-too-suspiciously evokes Christian theologies of the Eucharist. For Girard, such an interpretation is precisely the kind of misunderstanding that the mechanism of sacrifice requires in order for it to function. Amidst the plurality of views on the meaning of sacrifice that have been entertained by ethnologists, Girard prefers to follow Godfrey Lienhard’s and Victor Turner’s analyses, interpreting sacrifice as a

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88 Ibid., 18.
“deliberate act of collective substitution” in which the victim absorbs “all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries pent up within the community.”

The validity of Girard’s theory of sacrifice, as far as my purpose is concerned, lies in its usefulness for interpreting not the opaque behaviors of archaic societies, but the Christian doctrine of redemption (which, to the occasional embarrassment of Christians, is no less opaque!). I grant readily that a Girardian interpretation of the redemptive work is far from unproblematic. How could it plausibly be asserted that the sacrificial death of Christ, realized perpetually in the Church through the performance of the holy Mysteries, brings a purely negative benefit, namely, that it restrains violence, a function in which we should in any event expect it to have been pre-empted by the institution of biblical law? This obvious objection against Girard and the Christian use of his Mimetic Theory can be addressed by directing due attention to the creative potential of sacrifice. If anything in my approach differs from the previously ventured Christian appropriations of MT, it is the stress I wish to lay on sacrificial creativity, an insistence that is not as far out of proportion with the emphasis of Girard’s own writings as the literature on him might lead one to believe.

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90 This is Girard’s summary of Turner, in Violence and the Sacred, 7.
think. Integral to the significance of sacrifice are its creative effects; this holds true in the case of Christ’s sacrifice a fortiori.

§ 11. The Generation of Structure and the Transcendence of Place

The sacrificial victim, who holds in his power (if unwillingly) the life and death of the community, is the center of religious attention and the generator of the sacred. This truth is one, but the ways of misrecognizing it are many. “There is only one generative event,” says Girard, “only one way to grasp its truth: by means of my hypothesis. On the other hand, there are innumerable ways of missing it.” There exists, consequently, a “multiplicity of religious systems,” each of which somehow provides the misdirection needed to cover up the reality behind the substitution of the sacred victim and the transference onto him.\footnote{Ibid., 316.} The excessiveness of Girard’s statement should not stop us from taking seriously the truth of his underlying hypothesis: religious misapprehension is precisely what allows the victim to become an all-powerful generator of things good and bad. It is to the strength of ritual—and of its accomplice, myth—that they can so well obscure their own significance, the truth that lies beneath them. Ritual and myth have as their original and most basic function the perpetuation of the beneficial effects of the surrogate victim mechanism.\footnote{Ibid., 92.}
But ritual and myth signify more than just an archaic safety system. Here Girard’s thesis can lead to an underappreciation of ritual and myth as carriers and producers of culture. Ritual and myth are, for one thing, complex and evolving symbolic worlds; they fall among the manifestations of symbolic thought that are responsible for cultural creativity. Ritual and myth are made possible by the surrogate victim; and it is from the surrogate victim that they and all other symbolic worlds can arise.\(^93\) Social structures and even language itself are not excluded from the scope of the victim’s generativity.\(^94\)

One might think of the function of the victim, then, by comparison with the rite of the sacrificial king made famous by Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. The king has in him supernatural powers for good and evil, i.e. he is held responsible for the order and discord of the community, and is thus subjected to the alternating lots of high honor and death.\(^95\) The same ambivalence inheres in the surrogate victim. He or she is deemed responsible for the violent reciprocity that wracks

\(^93\) On this point I find it necessary to hedge Girard’s claim, though his position as restated here is perfectly suitable for my thesis. The surrogate victim mechanism does indeed provide a possible origin for all symbolic thinking. This possibility does not, of course, force one to concede any chance of according symbolic thinking a second or even third origin. The adjudication of the various possibilities must wait until MT finds broad enough acceptance that it can be synthesized with other existing anthropological and philosophical views. The possibility of multiple origins of symbolic thinking need not, in any event, impede my effort to make a retrieval of certain elements from within Christian theology through MT; Girard’s hypothesis is robust enough to be relied upon, provided one uses it with control and precision.


the community; the victim is thus the embodiment of discord and destruction.

But through the victim’s death, peace, order, and all forms of cultural creativity are obtained. These opposite results of the victim’s slaughter become the victim’s opposite faces through what Girard calls the “double transference.” Both the beneficent peace and the turbid disorder that mark the two phases of the sacrificial crisis are “absorbed” by the victim in the double transference.96

Should the strength of the victim’s beneficial effects wane over time (as it inevitably must), the threat of a new outbreak of violence can be assuaged through the performance of sacrificial rites or, should these fail, through a complete repetition of the surrogate victim mechanism by the selection of a fresh scapegoat. In this case, the death of the new surrogate victim initiates a grand renewal, strengthening structure and causing culture to flourish again.

The victim occupies a place of transcendent power, lying as he does at the center of this cycle of decay and renewal, of destructuring and restructuring. “If the surrogate victim can interrupt the destructuring process,” Girard infers, then the victim “must be at the origin of structure.” The “origin” Girard speaks of here, the center of the circle of meaning, should first be understood crudely literally, as the actual place of the body of the victim in the midst of his

96 See James G. Williams’ definition of this term, as well as others used in this chapter, in his glossary in James G. Williams, ed., The Girard Reader (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996), 293.
executioners; only afterwards should it be taken in a metaphorical sense. Among the members of the community, “everything beneficial and nutritive is said to take root in the body of the primordial victim.” The victim, in his position as the executed or exiled scapegoat, functions as a transcendental signifier; all structure, or at least nearly all, refers back to him. His transcendence is primordially one of place: it is the dead body, an object that is conspicuously positioned within space, that is the origin of the whole system of significations. Truly the violence against the surrogate victim can be called “radically generative”!

At this juncture, it would not be prudent to elide the steps of Girard’s reasoning. We find ourselves faced with a crucial question that demands a precise and plausible answer: How is it that the structures emergent from the surrogate victim come to be? What is the possible mechanism of their generation, if such a thing can be described?

Girard initially explains the generation of structure by following the structuralist route (a preference reflected in his vocabulary), positing the priority of arbitrary differences within the system as a whole. Girard defies the structural anthropology of such formative figures for him as Lévi-Strauss, however, on two levels. First, Girard refers elemental differences to real phenomena. Second, he

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introduces *undifference* as a feature of the generative mechanism. The latter departure calls for detailed elaboration.

Girard proposes two phases in which difference and undifference emerge. The first phase is the transformation of the community members into doubles as their reciprocal desire and antagonism become acute. The community members become “twins,” “matching images of violence.” The twins are all but indistinguishable; in this chaotic environment, all becomes a soup of undifference. The only way to reestablish differences out of this scenario is for one of the doubles to triumph over the other. Such a triumph would then mark the difference between victor and vanquished.

But this difference-making triumph cannot possibly take place on a large scale, lest the community end up destroying itself. No more than a fraction of the members could be expected to survive this method of resolving internecine conflict. The will to triumph is therefore directed instead against the common perceived rival, everyone’s double: the surrogate victim, the scapegoat. What could have been the all-destroying disorder of every member against his neighbor is transformed into the polarization of all against a single victim. This

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is the second phase of the manifestation of difference and undifference, and in actuality it coincides with the first. The scapegoat, as the universal double, becomes the symbol and bearer of all the violent reciprocity, that is, the undifference, that afflicts the community. In assuming this burden, the scapegoat becomes the ultimate transgressor of differences, the one responsible for breaking the order that formerly kept the community at peace. He is the ultimate sinner. Yet in being vanquished, the now dead or expelled scapegoat becomes the ground on which difference can be reestablished in the community. He is dead; the others are alive. He is cast out; the others remain inside. He, as the presumed transgressor, becomes the next lawgiver. The community’s scapegoat becomes the symbolization of difference and order as well as of undifference and chaos. The scapegoat, like the sacrificial victims who will come to replace him in religious ceremony, is thoroughly ambivalent, the object of abuse and cause of ills, yet the bringer of peace and fruitfulness through his death.

All difference, every “significant element,” seems for Girard “to have its outline in the sacred”; the victim would “seem to constitute a universal signifier.” Put differently, the contrasts arising from the victim lie at the origin of all elemental binaries—inside/outside, before/after, life/death, peace/violence,

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101 Ibid., 77.
good/evil, and to these we may add the binary of place that arises from the position of the victim: here/there—making the victim the first generator of meanings.\textsuperscript{102} (The victim, it follows, is responsible even for the binary of meaning/meaninglessness that makes possible Girard’s own reflection.) This odd, maybe perverse, way of thinking about meaning resonates with the deconstructive enterprise with a subtle irony. The victim is, indeed, a transcendental signifier of sorts; but, as Girard is aware, this is an entirely false “transcendental signifier,”\textsuperscript{103} one which carries ambivalent connotations, and quite deserves to be exposed and cast from the center. This signifier is not true God, but an idol, lacking in genuine simplicity and, since there are many victims who can never all be quite the same, subtly multiple. Nor need we heed Girard’s superfluous hint that there may be a “true” transcendental signifier elsewhere; we need follow Girard only in positing the surrogate victim as a transcendental signifier “for us.”\textsuperscript{104}

Having absorbed within himself the overwhelming and unconstrainable force of contagious violence, the victim, the physical embodiment of evil and of its resolution, becomes equal to a god, holding the power of weal and woe. Of the natural forces that constitute the most primitive form of the sacred, the

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\textsuperscript{102} Girard, \textit{Things Hidden}, 96.  \\
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 97.  \\
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
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violence that has been transferred onto the scapegoat is the most awesome, if not also the most threatening. His sacrality, which is the same thing as violent rivalry, is exteriorized by the community, cast “out there” through its removal onto him. The violent sacrality attributed to the scapegoat becomes just as exteriorized, just as divinized, as the forces of plague, flood, earthquake, and death.105 The safety and sustenance of the whole community depend on this exteriorization, which is yet another manifestation of the binary of place. “Because of the victim, in so far as it [sc. the victim] seems to emerge from the community and the community seems to emerge from it, for the first time there can be something like an inside and an outside, a before and after, a community and the sacred.”106

What differences are projected onto the scapegoat by the community is immaterial. All differences are homologous on the most basic level, since all are founded upon the arbitrary distinction between doubles that the scapegoat takes upon himself. There is no difference between differences, not even between natural and conventional ones. Nor ought we to expect to find any material cause differentiating differences in a strong sense; all these projected differences lend themselves to the same function, namely, to uphold society through the

106 Girard, Things Hidden, 96.
creation of barriers that, on the one hand, minimize the possibility for internal rivalry (through the imposition of e.g. class hierarchy) and, on the other, make possible the symbolic equivalence that is necessary for the sacrificial substitution. Any difference—again, whether ascribed to nature or culture—may be able to serve these ends, because any difference can be superimposed on the difference between the community and its collective double, the victim.

The erosion of differences, as happens in the event of runaway mimesis, invariably leads to the implosion of the sacrificial system and the decohesion of society as a whole—an event Girard terms a “sacrificial crisis.”107 The sacrificial crisis can be resolved only by the reinstatement of old differences, or the founding of new ones, through the repetition of the surrogate victim mechanism and the initiation of a new sacrificial cycle. All of society’s welfare thus depends on the differences that flow from the victim.

Out of the arbitrary differences between doubles that are embodied by the victim, symbolic thinking emerges by a certain reflexive action. These primordial differences are, paradoxically, the difference between difference and undifference. Undifference is strictly unsignifiable, yet undifference itself becomes a new—*the* new—difference as the surrogate victim mechanism plays

out. As the situation is resolved and order is restored, this difference of undifference provides the structure for its own transformation and elaboration into language (myth), much as a bone gives way to the mineral matter that assumes its form to create a fossil. The difference between difference and undifference becomes the basis of the new symbolic order. The fixed meanings that myth invents for this difference that is undifference are nothing more than arbitrary substitutions that can serve to distinguish doubles; true to the disordered and threatening quality of undifference, these meanings tend to exhibit a monstrous character: “plague,” “patricide,” “incest,” are the crimes of the scapegoat; while each of these is distinct in language, all are as one in the violent chaos. “Cultural significations,” Girard explains, “naturally include an arbitrary element, for they establish differences where formerly the symmetry of the doubles prevailed and substitute the stability of fixed meanings for the vertiginous alternation of violent reciprocity.” The surrogate victim mechanism is thus able to be the first object of language, and, in proportion to the scope of the mechanism’s generative power with respect to all symbolic thinking, sets the boundaries on the possibilities of language. All differences flow from the

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108 Ibid., 67.
109 Ibid., 236.
“infinite quality of the sacred” that attaches to the victim, the “inexhaustible reservoir” from which differences emerge and to which they return.\(^{110}\)

The ambivalence of the scapegoat, this god, gives rise to the basic logical modes of language: the conjunction of better/worse, of superior/inferior; and, following these, the basic symbolic functions of discrimination, conjunction, and exclusion.\(^{111}\) These are the elements of logos; they emerge from the statement of the scapegoat’s divine epiphany and its attending commemorative rites and recollective myths.\(^{112}\)

It is no coincidence that the logical operators Girard names, those of discrimination, conjunction, and exclusion, are spatial metaphors. By means of them terms are divided from one another (discrimination), or set next to each other (conjunction), or one term is banished to the “outside” while another term remains “inside” (exclusion). Of equal significance is the fact that the binaries that emerge from the surrogate victim mechanism can be related to the spatial metaphor of superior/inferior, since one element as a rule occupies a higher, central, privileged, normative, or more valued position relative to the other: good/bad, true/false, inside/outside, health/sickness, etc. Even the basic temporal

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 242.
\(^{111}\) Ibid., 236.
\(^{112}\) Ibid., 235–6.
binaries of before/after (literally signifying in front/behind) and now/then
(derivative of here/there) conform to the structure of spatial metaphor. The
transcendence of the victim, the god, is originally always a transcendence of
place, whether the god’s abode be heaven, the wilderness, or the archaic past.

The binary and spatial character of symbolic thinking is often
accompanied by inherent assignments of value. One term of a given binary will,
as a general tendency, be better than (superior to) the other, reflecting the
asymmetry of value attaching to the opposite states of order and chaos and to the
triumph of one double over another. The surrogate victim mechanism thus gives
rise to value and to the possibility of value judgments; values are in turn
thoroughly reinforced and rigidly upheld by the sacrificial system, which, in
Girard’s view, must use them to divide between suitable and unsuitable victims
as well as to maintain the social distinctions and hierarchies that buffer
individuals, protecting them from mimetic rivalry.113 These value assignments
are by no means necessarily untrue, but are nonetheless ineluctably products of
the system they presuppose.114 This is the case even for a society that has
transcended archaic sacrifice in favor of a judiciary. Justice, the institutional
distinction between right and wrong, requires value judgments; Girard remarks

113 Ibid., 11. The importance for Girard of the distinction between suitable and unsuitable victims
is discussed below, p. 118.
114 Ibid.
that the essence of justice consists not in the balancing of scales as we popularly imagine it, but in the *imbalance* of good and evil. The erosion of imbalances, i.e. of the basic differences between good and evil, right and wrong, higher and lower, is the cause of the disintegration of social organization and of the decay of the sacrificial (or judicial) system, and is thus the forerunner of a sacrificial crisis.\footnote{Ibid., 51.} The imbalance of value must be maintained at all costs.

The surrogate victim mechanism, then, together with the sacrificial practices that perpetuate its effects, functions for Girard as a *highly creative* generator of meaning as well as an *all-encompassing source* that determines the totality of symbolic thinking. In other words, there can be no facile escape from the sacrificial system. Any undoing of this system’s nefarious aspects must work from within the system itself, using its own internal logic.

§ 12. The Possibilities for the Subversion of the Generative Process

The scapegoating process requires the abuse of some marginal individual or group. The procedure is therefore not only a good, but an injustice as well, an evil.

The ability to communicate the recognition that scapegoating is unjust requires, however, the selfsame symbolic distinctions that arise out of
scapegoating itself. The desire to eliminate the unjust and nefarious factors in the
scapegoating process thus presents a dilemma: to preserve peace without victims
is to have one’s cake and still eat it.\footnote{116}

The dissolution of the scapegoating process is desirable for a second
reason, however. Not only does the victim mechanism require that an evil be
done, but it is also unable to keep chaos permanently at bay; sacrifice and the
cultural institutions that are founded upon it feed upon periodic decay and the
repetition of the scapegoating process, perpetuating good and evil together in a
cycle of eternal recurrence. There is good reason to desire an escape from the
sacrificial cycle: it is a nihilistic process.

There are two evident possibilities for how such an escape might be
possible. Each possibility is the object of attention in a different phase of Girard’s
work. In his early work, Girard vouches for empathy for the victim as the
decisive factor that neutralizes the efficacy, meaning, and possibility of the
scapegoating mechanism and the sacrificial cycle. This is the position that has
been followed most broadly in theological interpretations of MT to date.\footnote{117} The

\footnote{116} Slavoj Žižek aptly employs this phrase in a similar vein in Sophie Fiennes (dir.), The Pervert’s
Guide to Ideology (2012; Zeitgeist Films). Žižek considers the desire to possess conflicting goods to
be the “goal … of every ideology,” a critique which applies well to the promises made by one-
dimensionally non-sacrificial readings of the atonement.

\footnote{117} This position is characteristic of the work of Raymund Schwager, and is most forcefully
represented by S. Mark Heim.
second possibility, espoused by Girard in his late work but never fully
developed, renounces any attempt to see the sacrificial system plainly and
simply “for what it is,” but supposes rather that the sacrificial system might
somehow be susceptible to being undermined through the means of sacrificial
logic itself.

If the Christian Gospel really is a means of escape from the sacrificial
system, as Girard asserts that it is, then it stands to reason that it accomplishes its
work through the realization of some combination of these two possibilities.
Judging by surface appearances, both would seem to occupy a central place in
the Christian system. As I have already hinted, however, it is the second
possibility which deserves more of our attention than it has heretofore received.

The possibility of a simple “unveiling” of the victim’s true innocence,
which we will consider first, seemed evident to Girard on the basis of a broad
shift he observed taking place in general attitudes toward victims from the
beginning of the Axial Age to modern times. Our modern civilization possesses
an ever-increasing ability to perceive the reality of scapegoating, a trend for
which he holds Judaism and Christianity responsible in the West; the reality of
this trend is vouched for by the collapse of mythologies and their replacement by
semi-transparent “texts of persecution,” whose transparency tends to increase as
their date of composition approaches the present. These texts, which include, for example, early modern narratives of witch trials and medieval accounts of persecutions of Jews, do not fully obscure the fact that the persecuted victims, the scapegoats in these episodes, are not really responsible in any way for the crisis that precipitated the violence against them, and in this way they are differentiated from myths.

The sacrificial system and its mythologies, in contrast to texts of persecution, depends on the complete absence of this transparency. Sacrificial substitution cannot succeed unless the displacement of the identity of the scapegoat (the original victim) onto the sacrificial victim is concealed. Yet, at the same time, in order for the identification of the two to transpire, the sacrificers must maintain an unacknowledged knowledge of the connection, be it only an unconscious recognition. The identity of the substitute is simultaneously a known and an unknown. Perhaps a hint at the duplicitousness of the sacrificial substitution is to be gathered from the biblical story of Jacob’s theft of his father’s blessing. The book of Genesis, Girard observes, deploys an explicit substitution (Jacob for Esau) only to half-conceal a second substitution, that of the slaughtered goat for Jacob; the second substitution must remain obscured —

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118 Girard, Things Hidden, 119.
119 For analysis of the phenomenon of texts of persecution, see René Girard, The Scapegoat (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
recognizable, but not as such—in order for it to function as protection for
Jacob.¹²⁰ Given, then, that the community can and must implicitly recognize the
sacrificial substitution, one might hold out hope that a revelation of the identity
of the sacrificial victim could take place, an event which could well succeed in
rousing the community to recognize that the original victim is, after all, only a
victim, neither a criminal nor a deity. Were such an event to occur fortuitously
outside the timeframe of an acute sacrificial crisis, it might result in the
realization of the first possibility for escape.

The erosion of differences that periodically reinitiates the sacrificial cycle
is nothing other than the wearing away of the difference between surrogate
victim and sacrificial victim, on which the sustenance of differences originally
depends. This difference is again nothing other than that between the substitute
and the reality. As the force of repetition leads gradually to the identification of
the substitute with the reality, says Girard, the hierarchical distinction between
suitable sacrificial victims (e.g. animals, slaves, prisoners) and unsuitable victims
(e.g. valued persons) rarifies, and sacrifice loses its ability to conceal the victim as
such. The substitute, in this case, has manifestly become the real victim. A
sacrificial crisis may then erupt.¹²¹ Is it not eminently possible that a crisis thus

¹²¹ Ibid., 39 f.
precipitated may eventually bring about the full and irreversible exposure of sacrifice’s own inner workings? Would the people not learn to value the victim as they value things of higher worth? These conjectures allow Girard to assert that the “cause of the dynamic animating us” in the process of demythologization is none other than religion itself.

Nowhere, in the view of Girard, is archaic sacrificial religion more completely undermined via the exposure of the reality of the victim than in the case of the scapegoating of Jesus. For Girard, the Passion narratives of the Gospels bear the structure of a myth, but there is a radically subversive feature of their content: the scapegoat, Jesus, who plays the role of the sacrificial victim in this “myth,” cannot possibly be responsible for any of the evils of which he is accused. The Gospels realistically narrate the process by which a scapegoat is collectively killed, while bringing to the fore the salient features of the scapegoating process: the isolation of the victim (the disciples flee), the gathering of all against one, the reconciliation of rivals in the process of the event (Pilate and Herod become friends), the mimetic motive of Jesus’ opponents (his accusers envy him). All the while, Jesus’ passivity serves to ironically highlight how little of a threat he really deserves to be treated as. Jesus’ manifest innocence reveals the

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122 Girard, Things Hidden, 131.
arbitrariness of the scapegoat.\textsuperscript{123} In presenting his death as absolutely unjust, the Gospels hold the potential to undermine the efficacy of scapegoating, since these depend precisely on a false consciousness that presumes the guilt of the victim. Once scapegoating begins to fail as a mechanism for controlling violence, the sacrificial system and its institutions begin gradually to erode as well.\textsuperscript{124, 125}

\textsuperscript{123} One must insistently ask, however, from which perspective Jesus is revealed to be innocent. Jesus’ innocence is not neutral: in cleansing the Temple, he engages in liberative violence.

\textsuperscript{124} Girard’s reading of the Gospels is developed throughout his corpus from \textit{Things Hidden} onward (see \textit{ibid.}, 160–64).

\textsuperscript{125} The gradual recession of animal sacrifice in predominantly Christian societies should not be confused with the often unstated theological assumption—to which Girard is seemingly prone—that Christianity as such proclaims an end to animal sacrifice. Robert Daly, who has written an enormous historical study on the evolution of the Christian concept of sacrifice, observes that “the Christ event did away with sacrifice in the history-of-religions sense of the word” (Robert Daly, “Sacrifice Unveiled or Sacrifice Revisited: Trinitarian and Liturgical Perspectives,” \textit{Theological Studies} 64, no. 1 (2003): 24–42, at 26–27). The reality of Christian understandings and practices of animal sacrifice is more complex than the impression both authors give. The practice of animal sacrifice is well attested in late antique and medieval Latin, Greek, Armenian, and Coptic Christianity. An eighth- or ninth-century Byzantine document, the \textit{Διήγησις περὶ τῆς Ικοδομῆς τοῦ ναοῦ τῆς Μεγάλης Ἐκκλησίας, τῆς ἐπονομαζομένης Ἁγίας Σοφίας}, details that at the consecration of Hagia Sophia, Justinian sacrificed 1000 bulls, 6000 sheep, 600 deer, 1000 pigs, 10,000 birds, and 10,000 roosters, and distributed the meat to the poor. The account is not believable, but, as Ekaterina Kovalchuk convincingly argues, was at least palatable to the Byzantine imagination. See Ekaterina Kovalchuk, “The Encaenia of St Sophia: Animal Sacrifice in a Christian Context,” \textit{Scrinium} 4 (2008): 161–203. While animal sacrifices were eventually suppressed in the West, they continued to be an integral part of Christian village practice in Anatolia and Greece up till modernization, and are still practiced in some villages. These sacrifices in honor of saints (\textit{kourbania}) cannot be easily dismissed as vestiges of ancient Greek rituals. They are living Christian sacrificial rites, as Stella Georgoudi demonstrates, accompanied by their own distinctive myth: God (or the saint) used to send a deer (or a ram) to be sacrificed each year; but the villagers, driven by gluttony, killed the animal mercilessly before it could catch its breath. This excess of violence incurred God’s wrath upon the village, and now the villagers must slaughter an animal from their own flocks. See Stella Georgoudi, “Sanctified Slaughter in Modern Greece: The ‘Kourbánia’ of the Saints,” pages 183–203 in Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, \textit{The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks}, trans. Paula Wissing (London: University of Chicago Press, 1989). This myth is obviously susceptible of a Girardian interpretation as a displacement of a mob killing, yet it is rife with Christian thematic elements: the thirsting soul represented by the stag, or the ram offered in place of Isaac, the sin of failing to show mercy, the
Within the biblical Scriptures, this process of undermining is by no means particular to the New Testament. The whole Bible strings together a long sequence of stories of conflict in which the victim, the weaker party, is exonerated, vindicated, declared a victim as such. This tendency is clearest in many if the Bible’s foundation-myths—perhaps, then, they should be called “antimyths”—from Cain and Abel onward.126

The gradually increasing awareness of the scapegoating mechanism that is exhibited in the pattern of the oppression and exoneration of successive major figures in the Bible (Abel, Joseph, the suffering servant in Isaiah, Jesus, and, not least, the Israelite people collectively) is, in Girard’s reading, both the cause and the effect of a great sacrificial crisis that had (has) the potential to put an end to the cycle that produced it. To this crisis, Girard argues in the closing lines of *Violence and the Sacred*, does Western civilization today, the heirs of the biblical tradition, owe its spectacularly violent history, the dizzying breakdown of its traditional modes of interpretation, and its profound willingness to engage reflectively in the study of culture.127 Peace, meaning, and culture are, after all,

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126 *Ibid.*, 143. See also Girard’s study in *Job, the Victim of his People* (London: Athlone, 1987), in which he reads much of the Old Testament as a witness to the transition from myth to clarity.

the products of the sacrificial system; and what one is able to call “culture” can be only what one no longer sincerely believes in. ¹²\(^8\)

Let us turn, then, to the second possibility, a self-subversion of the sacrificial cycle by means of sacrificial logic. The key to this possibility is the sacrificial system’s capacity to symbolize itself and thus become able to exalt or condemn itself in binary opposition to some other term, which necessarily remains undetermined. This depends, paradoxically, on the symbolization of that which cannot be symbolized, not only with regard to the undetermined second term, but with regard to the scapegoating mechanism itself, whose inclusion of chaotic undifferentiation within its own essence _should_ preclude its self-transcendence. This paradox should not flabbergast us: the symbolization of the undifferentiated was already part of the scapegoating process from the beginning. The mimetic crisis that initiates the sacrificial cycle produces the symbolization (in the person of the scapegoat) of its own undifferentiated condition, a state which is paradoxically the exemplar of _desymbolization_ as already-existing symbolic differences break down. The symbolic differences in question would be the difference between the symbolic (society’s conventional order) and the concrete (the subterranean reality that is always threatening to

¹²\(^8\) Slavoj Žižek, citation unknown.
break in from below as radical undifferentiation, but which is restrained by sacrifice). Scapegoating permits the symbolization of this undifferentiated reality as “everything evil,” which may then be efficiently disposed of by transference onto the victim under the form of the sacred.

An important qualification needs to be emphasized here. The symbolization of the sacrificial system can never take place purely in the abstract. The sacred, the whole experience of the sacrificial event in its totality, is symbolized in the person of the victim. Seen from this perspective, the subversion of sacrifice is the same thing as the inversion of its constituent binaries: the victim is vindicated and triumphs, while his persecutors are declared to have been in the wrong.

At the same time, the loss of difference that characterizes the sacred may be symbolized more or less as such, with only indirect reference to the person of the scapegoat. Such is the case with the symbol of twin brothers, who represent all undifferentiated rivals. The significance of the fact that undifferentiation is thematically included in such symbols cannot be overlooked. It means that the symbolization of reality in the sacrificial crisis, i.e. the becoming-like of reality to symbols of undifferentiated rivalry such as enemy brothers, is simultaneously a desymbolization of reality, as the difference between the symbolic and the
concrete approaches nil. 129 “Symbolized reality,” in Girard’s words, “becomes the loss of all symbolism.” 130 Symbolism and desymbolism are thus rendered symmetrical. What is crucial to observe next about the double nature of this symbolization (i.e. its inherence in the scapegoat as well as in the more properly symbolic themes of twins, monsters, etc.) is that the scapegoat assumes the entire symmetry of undifferentiated rivals, of which he is only the losing party, into himself. As the symbol of both good and evil, peace and disorder, the scapegoat is the node through which all symbolization and desymbolization runs. The entirety of values at play in the sacrificial system passes through the victim and inheres in him; he is the hub of all circulation of value, the fulcrum of the whole sacrificial economy. The victim—whether the original surrogate or his sacrificial substitute—contains within himself total power over the system qua system.

Here, the possibility of a symbolic self-subversion of the scapegoating mechanism and of all the binaries that it engenders lies within reach.

We can observe such a subversion in a pair of biblical stories that we have already mentioned and on which Girard frequently comments, though he never pushes his interpretation of them all the way. Each of these stories, namely,

129 Concrete instances of undifferentiation can be more than arbitrary “signs” of the sacrificial crisis, but even proper symbols of it, since they include (to borrow yet more psychoanalytic language) a representative element of the crisis in the fact of their quality of undifferentiation. Twin brothers are a strong example of such a case. See Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 63.

130 Ibid., 65.
Cain’s murder of Abel and Jacob’s usurpation of Esau, displays an inversion of the sacred.

Let us cast a glance at Cain and Abel first. Whereas the whole sacrificial economy contains within itself a division between the better and the worse, the whole sacrificial economy is in turn contained within the better (the god as good) and the worse (the god as evil). The capacity to exalt or condemn the sacrificial economy as such—which is the same as to say, the whole sacrificial system—thus lies within the power of the sacrificial economy itself, or, in other terms, within the power of the divinized victim. Girard’s interpretation of the story of Cain and Abel illustrates the hypothetical inversion nicely. Abel, the offerer of animals, is the more effective sacrificer between the two brothers; Cain, the offerer of vegetables, has an inadequate sacrificial outlet, hence he murders his rival Abel. The story, Girard observes, places God on the side of the better sacrificer. “To say that God accedes to Abel’s sacrificial offerings but rejects the offerings of Cain is simply another way of saying—from the viewpoint of the divinity—that Cain is a murderer, whereas his brother is not.”131 This story is not far along in the historical demythification process; God still stands for the sacred, he is still the embodiment of the sacrificial system, and he has not yet been

131 Ibid., 4.
recognized in his proper transcendence. Girard’s interpretation can be taken further, however. In judging between the brothers, the sacred divides in favor of the sacrificial economy (Abel); but in doing so, it ends up judging against precisely the kind of murder on which the sacrificial economy is based and which lies at its center!

But it would not be right to permit oneself to feel fully convinced yet. Should a total self-subversion of the sort we have been talking about really be in play in the book of Genesis, we ought to see a certain telltale further result. Specifically, we should expect to see an inversion of the ontological power relation in the binary, that of killer and killed, exalted and humbled, better and worse. This inversion can be observed quite plainly in the episode of Jacob and Esau. The substitution of one brother for another translates to the taking of the better’s place by the worse, the usurping of the firstborn by the younger. Do not Cain and Abel also undergo a similar inversion, with Abel’s justification and Cain’s banishment? The sacrificial system, which depends on the survival of the stronger or more fortunate against the weaker or unfortunate, and which gives form to all our thinking through its production of this distinction as a logical principle, can be leveraged against its own original tendency so as to bring about the vindication of the lesser against the greater. The possibility of such an
inversion, and the probability of my proposed mechanism through which the inversion can be actualized, are sustained by these initial data.

The proposed mechanism lacks one indispensable element, however. A motive for the inversion is missing from the explanation. It is not enough to demonstrate only that the inversion is a possibility. Why should the inversion bother to actually occur?

A pair of plausible answers to this question present themselves. They are mutually compatible, and both may be provisionally accepted.

The first appeals to the material realities underlying binaries as possible sources of instability that can disrupt the symmetry of the binary terms. Suppose that binaries arise from material symmetries, and that they continually imply symmetry between their terms; they also nonetheless contain an asymmetry, an irreducible qualitative difference between their terms. Good and evil may imply each other’s existence as ideas, but they are not equivalent, either ideally or materially. Nor is truth equivalent to falsehood, right equivalent to left, up to down, or before to after. Just as the symmetry of paired terms can be accounted for by the undifference of rivals, so their asymmetry refers back to the real material difference between the scapegoat and the survivors. MT thus does not posit some kind of idealism or pure structuralism, but an interpretation of the
genesis of structure from material conditions that are in turn interpretable only within said structure, constituting a variation on the hermeneutic circle. It is only within this circle that the workings of the sacred can be recognized and understood; MT does not posit some foundational principle from which one is bound to proceed in one’s reasoning. Much to the contrary, MT pronounces the “foundational principle” (the collective murder) to be altogether a falsity. Now, as with all cases where knowledge is attained through a circle of interpretation, the discovery of the innocence of the victim is by no means a necessary outcome; and as with all processes determined by circular chains of causation, no reason can be given why the sacrificial cycle should disrupt its own functioning, other than to appeal to instabilities inherent to the system. It is these instabilities, then, that we may fall back on for an explanation. To assert the existence of these instabilities a little differently, the recognition of the truth about the sacrificial system depends on a reality transcending the structures that interpret that reality; without a reality that feeds into the hermeneutic circle, there would certainly be no way out.

The second explanation is the one invoked by Girard. The transcendent source of disruption for the sacrificial cycle may be God himself, the transcendent par excellence. The chief historical instance of such an act of interference on the part of the transcendent is to be located, according to Girard,
in the Gospels. Jesus’ innocence and supreme goodness are made manifest in his very act of being sacrificed. In this case, the two possibilities for the disruption of the sacrificial cycle, i.e. the revelation of the arbitrariness of the victim, and the symbolic self-subversion of the sacrificial system by means of its own economy, are both included in the same act. The inversion of what is presumed to be better and worse can take place only through the revelation of the truth of the victim, while the revelation of the truth of the victim can work its effect only through an inversion of the symbolic structures that the (disguised) victim generates. Both phases of this deconstructive process need to be taken into account at every turn in the explication of the founding murder and its relevance for interpreting the sacrifice of Christ.

Christ, by becoming a victim of the scapegoating mechanism, reveals the mechanism for what it is, thus subverting it. But if this is so, then Christianity, and especially the redemption it proclaims, can operate only from within the sacrificial matrix of religion; Christianity will have an essential homology with myth, despite the fact that its professed interest in truth stands at odds with myth’s obscurant nature. No wonder, then, that Christianity has proven so susceptible to the criticism that it is merely another iteration of the mythological

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type of religion it claims to supersede! This charge, which has been leveled from Celsus to Frazer, is one which Girard goes to great lengths to refute. Christianity ends up being denigrated for its mythic character, especially since this character is violent and unjust—*as we know because of the Christian revelation itself.* As Girard succinctly puts it: “Christian revelation is the paradoxical victim of the knowledge that it provides.”¹³⁴

It is precisely at this point that one must oppose the temptation—to which Girard himself often succumbs—to boil the Passion narratives down to a fetishistically indulgent display of the victim’s innocence. Recognition of Jesus’ innocence does not necessarily lead to a lucid awareness of scapegoating as a general phenomenon, and can even lead rather to an intensification of scapegoating (think of Christians blaming Jews for persecuting Christ). Nor is biblical revelation needed in order to attain consciousness of victimization. The Gospels therefore are not simply unveiling the truth about scapegoating. The key to counter this poor reading is to insist strongly on Girard’s thesis that culture is generated from sacrifice. It is Jesus’ death *as a generative sacrifice* that should be regarded as radically transformative. *Christ takes the place of the sacrificial victim, and thus intervenes directly in the heart of the sacrificial order.* It is with respect to the

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¹³⁴ René Girard, *Battling to the End*, xv.
locus of sacrificial generativity, taken over by Christ, that the consciousness of his innocence as a victim is effective. Christ’s usurpation of the locus of generativity is, moreover, necessarily historical, grounded in his temporal assumption of sacrificial structures as a really divine being, permeating them with the power of his divine virtues, in light of which his manifest innocence is to be understood. It is in this way that one may distinguish between the perfect revelation of Christ and the shadows and types revealed in Scripture. If it were merely the appearance of Christ’s innocence that sufficed for revelation, then the innocence of Abel or Joseph would suffice for revelation as well.

The death of Christ, in short, overthrows, or rather takes over and transforms, the false transcendence of the divinized victim, replacing the idol with the true God. The transcendence of place, we shall see, gives way to another, more dynamic form of transcendence.

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135 The formulation given here is mine. Girard’s own varying interpretations of the death of Christ are sometimes susceptible of my formulation; at other points in his work, he is best read against himself. I have already referred to Scott Cowdell’s superb study The Nonviolent God, which rigorously treats Girard’s intellectual development on the question of the sacrificial interpretation of Christ’s death.

136 Moreover, the reality of Christ’s innocent suffering would be inconsequential, but only the perception (whether true of false) of it. Such a situation would give rise to a peculiar docetic Christology: God would display the innocence of the victim through Christ, but it would be up to us to guess whether his suffering were real or a ruse; the success of the revelation would depend on the Church keeping it a secret that it might never have really happened.
§ 13. The Transcendence of Time

The transcendence of place is the primitive form of transcendence that arises from the sacrificial system. This is the transcendence of heaven over earth, the temple over the surrounding land, paradise over the inhabited world, the mountaintop over the plain, the center over the periphery, the above over the below. Transcendence of this kind cannot survive the destabilization that results from the self-subversion of the sacrificial system. Once the process of self-subversion is set in motion, the spatial transcendence that is functional in the system necessarily begins to undergo a radical transformation. It is transmuted into a temporal transcendence.

The transformation of spatial transcendence into temporal transcendence opens up the possibility for one of the central features of the Christian understanding of transcendence, namely, the eschatological character of the transcendence-structure. A study on the temporal dimension of redemption and its derivation from the priority of place has been written from the viewpoint of MT by Hamerton-Kelly, whose conclusions on the themes of spatiality and temporality in the Gospel of Mark I will critically appropriate. My use of

137 Refer to § 6.
Hamerton-Kelly’s analysis of Mark will require, however, a more detailed return to Girard’s thesis that the surrogate victim functions as a transcendental signifier.

The surrogate victim is the single original sign. The multiplication of signs takes place through their substitution for the original sign of the reconciliatory victim, starting with sacrificial victims who are substituted for the scapegoat.

Girard explains:

Since we understand that human beings wish to remain reconciled after the conclusion of the crisis, we can also understand their penchant for reproducing the sign, or in other words for reproducing the language of the sacred by substituting, in ritual, new victims for the original victim, in order to assure the maintenance of that miraculous peace.

Though Girard balks at identifying the reconciliatory victim as the “true” transcendental signifier, he acknowledges the victim’s status as a functional transcendental signifier, as he goes on to say expressly.139

The sign, then, Girard concludes, is the reconciliatory victim; the signifier is the victim’s body; and the signified is all meaning that is conferred on the victim’s body.140 The multiplication of signs occurs through the taking of the place of the body, initially by new victims. The fact of the body must again be emphasized. The victim becomes the em-bodi-ment of order and chaos, and

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139 Girard, *Things Hidden*, 97; see above, p. 108.
140 Girard, *ibid.*
therefore capable of generating meaning, only once he is dead, a body. He is of no importance in the abstract, but only as a physical deposit at the center (or as expelled to the perimeter) of the community. He is sacred in his place. The later sacrificial substitutes, the derivative signs, “take place” in a quite literal sense: they take his place.

The taking of place cannot be achieved within the old structuralist systems of the Lévi-Straussian variety, where difference was conceived purely in the abstract. The difference achieved by Girard’s surrogate victim is, by contrast, basically material, and radically conflates the universal with the particular.

The victim’s difference is that he is marked out from the mass, the unique “opposite” who stands out from the crowd, from the soup of “nothing,” as a monistic creator of signification. Girard aptly likens this type of signification to that found in games of chance. One person (the victim) is singled out, distinguished, the first difference; all other participants are indeterminate, the same, a grand total of nothing as if they had never participated in the first place. Only once the winner is distinguished can the indeterminacy of the losers be symbolized, and this only by virtue of the difference of that which is distinguished from them. One thinks again of the even more precise example of the French Epiphany cake or the Greek Saint Basil’s bread; the bean or coin is the only difference in the whole bread, while the rest is an undifferentiated mass of
dough.\textsuperscript{141} (To extend the mnemonic utility of this comparison further, it is the *placement* of the bean or coin that matters, not merely its existence.)

The awe that attaches to the victim, the stupor which he induces, constitutes a new type of attention for the early human being. It is an attention that lies beyond that for “the purely instinctual object, the alimentary or sexual object or the dominant individual.” This attention is held by the victim’s dead body. Prior even to being a sign, the victim must first be the exceptional center of attention. His corpse holds the power of the sacred, and is the foundation of the original sign, upon which subsequent signs shall be laid.\textsuperscript{142}

Hamerton-Kelly’s expansion of this thesis transfers Girard’s general scheme of the transcendental signifier to the particular situation of Mark’s Gospel. The overcoming of the priority of the center is, for Hamerton-Kelly, a principal achievement of the redemptive work. Jesus, the decisive victim who fatally subverts the system of significations, proceeds to the earthly center of sacrificial signification, the Jerusalem Temple, and enters it en route to his sacrificial death. “Thus, the victim is in the temple and is positioned to interact with the sacrificial system in all its manifestations.”\textsuperscript{143} In order to take control of

\textsuperscript{141} *Ibid.*, 95. The game of chance and the Epiphany cake are Girard’s examples.
\textsuperscript{142} *Ibid.*, 94.
\textsuperscript{143} Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred*, 17.
the sacred, Jesus must occupy its center. Being in position to direct all of the sacrificial system’s channels into himself, Jesus is ready to alter the system.

The sacred always has a center. Even when spoken of with reference to time, the sacred has some focal point, whether it lie in the past, present, or future of linear time, or be the axis around which circular time revolves. The sacred therefore is always conceivable in a radically spatial manner, such that even time possesses a “center” from which the victim works his effects. In the view of Hamerton-Kelly, whose thinking on this point is clearly indebted to the deconstructionist enterprise, the present marks the center of time in the order of the sacred: “In the order of sacred violence, the present is primary; the past and the future depend on it because they are the memory and expectation respectively of the person at the center.” Just as Jesus removes the geographic center of worship in dissolving the primacy of the Temple, he likewise removes himself as a presence after his death and resurrection, resulting in a radical de-centering of the sacred: “The ‘hero’ of the Gospel is crucified and thus removed as a sacred presence.”

In contrast to the primacy of the present in sacred time, the future is primary in the Gospel, according to Hamerton-Kelly’s view. The primacy of the

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144 Ibid., 115. Hamerton-Kelly had, unsurprisingly, an acute anti-Fundamentalist bent.
future is such that the future becomes characteristic of a qualitatively different kind of time, rather than merely a refuge for a new center. Thus, to restate Hamerton-Kelly’s position succinctly, there are two qualitatively different kinds of time: a sacred time which privileges the center, and a new, authentically temporal time, one not reliant on spatiality, which is opened up by the Gospel and is determined by futurity. “In gospel, the future is primary, and the present is a disappearing moment through which anticipation passes on its way to memory.” In the narrative world of Mark, “the movement away from the sacred center is a movement from the present to the future, from the Sacred in the temple to the hope for the advent of the Son of Man.”

The transferal of primacy to the future and the radicalization of time make up the temporal aspect of the de-centering brought on by Jesus, the subversive victim. The spatiality and temporality of the Gospel are thus ec-centric in character. The place of the victim is the original place and original time, the center of all, from which all meaning presents itself and takes place; while the Son of Man, the suffering servant, in following the eccentric way, reveals the emptiness of the center. “To demythify the world,” concludes Hamerton-Kelly, “we must move with the scapegoat, away from the center to the new noncoercive

145 Ibid.; “gospel” is Hamerton-Kelly’s term for the antithesis to the Sacred that is proffered in Christian revelation and exemplified in the poetics of Mark’s Gospel.
meaning of gospel, in whose realm the signifiers are not secured by sacred violence.”

Transcendence is thus subject to a certain bidimensionality: it is spatial and temporal. Hamerton-Kelly sees this in Mark, just as it can be seen in the development of the historical notions of divine transcendence. The two dimensions are not interchangeable: either space or time will take priority depending on conditions in the system that really differ in value. Yet time depends on space within the order of our modes of expression; space obviously cannot be “tossed out” as a sacrificial relic that we are capable of moving on from. Perhaps this is why—as Hamerton-Kelly notes—the apocalyptic genre can symbolize transcendence in either spatial or temporal terms in spite of the obvious tendency to prioritize temporality that is constitutive of this type of literature.

The inexorable persistence of space as an organizing principle notwithstanding, the reconfiguration of space results in a certain fundamental breakdown of order. With the displacement of the source of meaning from the center, the entire system of significations, conditioned as it is by a spatially arranged binary difference, is cast into disarray. The god at the center may be a

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146 Ibid.
phantasm, but he is a phantasm that controls all meanings; and when his most
important form of control, namely, the ability to differentiate between lawful and
unlawful violence,\footnote{Girard, \textit{Violence and the Sacred}, 24.} is lost, the way to the downfall of any and all distinctions is
thrown wide open. The demolition of the idol at the center, brought to pass
definitively by Christ, removes the transcendence that distinguished good from
bad violence, introducing in its stead the undifferentiated violence that destroys
transcendence. This \textit{Entgötterung} thus opens the way to two possible futures, a
pair of options which make up the “Girardian apocalypse”: either disorder
grows unchecked to the extreme, or a new and unforeseeable order emerges
from the disorder.\footnote{Apocalyptic is usually regarded as the fourth leg of Girard’s theology, alongside mimesis,
sacrifice, and biblical interpretation.} The possibility of the second option is vouchsafed by the
fact that the removal of the center does not amount to an absolute abolition of
transcendence, but only to its radical reconfiguration in the mode of temporality.
There is an authentic transcendence, a higher transcendence that is not a new
costume worn by the scapegoat, but the revealer of the truth about the scapegoat.
This transcendence, to paraphrase Hamerton-Kelly’s conclusion, works from the
future, and the form of its engagement with humans is the transcendence-
structure.
The hope for this new order rests on no more than faith; no conditions guarantee the emergence of anything constructive from the fundamental disorder. To the contrary, in the notion of temporality on which this possibility rests there is no place for certainty, there being no guarantee of the things to come by virtue of the constitutive contingency of an authentic future.

The sacrificial order follows circular time: from the restoration of order, to the sacrificial crisis, and back to order again. There is no real uncertainty in this cycle, except for the prospect of total destruction resulting from the eventual failure of sacrifice. Circular, sacrificial time is stable, bound to the endless pattern of generation and destruction, birth, death, and rebirth, a cosmic cycle of reincarnation, as it were.

The subverted system, by contrast, breaks off on an unstable trajectory in free motion. Its time is linear, not circular. This free motion is the sufficient condition of radical change. Any appearance from within the sacrificial order of a linear progression of history, on the other hand, is the result of limitations on our scale of perception; we spontaneously perceive only our local timeframe, as if we had zoomed in on a small enough segment of the circle not to notice its curved geometry. By contrast, in the case of the linear time that results from the displacement of the center, the small scale reveals the truth as clearly as the large
scale. A permanent change has taken place; the before is irrecoverable, the after is truly uncertain. We are confronted by an open future.150

The great paradox of this future, the mystery that gives it its special apocalyptic flavor, is that the faithful’s assurance of the triumph of the true God over his adversaries is delivered within the sheer indeterminacy of this outcome. In authentic time, I repeat, there can be no guarantee of a new order; all that is guaranteed in this suspension of determinacy is the defeat of the powers and principalities that rule the present age. But because there is no new center, neither is there any new point from which God exerts control over the system. God is not pulling history toward some conclusion that is already laid up in his reserves, but moving it by the sole power of his word; the future is not an eternal present. Indeed, there is nothing determinate in the progression of history ever since the revelation and vindication of the scapegoat. God, the authentic transcendent, can only exert a form of control over history that we cannot grasp from within our symbolic structures. The assurance of ultimate deliverance, that sheer destruction as a natural outcome will be averted, and that a remnant will be saved, rests on God’s promise alone.

150 Compare the similar conclusions of Alison in The Joy of Being Wrong, 162–85.
The subversion of sacrifice, and the promise of a new peace constructed out of its elements, thus heralds the end of the present age, and sets before our eyes the hope of the age to come.
CHAPTER 4
THE REDEMPTIVE DIVISION AND EXCHANGE IN SALVATION HISTORY

We have already considered the biblical warrant for the assumption—a highly privileged one in Christian theories of redemption—that the redemptive work is in some way a sacrificial exchange. The previous chapter’s thesis on the generation of the transcendence-structure through the scapegoating process and its transformation through the redemptive work can now be developed further through an engagement with biblical texts and traditions.

We can define redemption as the self-subversive creative process through which God, in rejecting the sacrificial order, inaugurates the transformation of spatial transcendence into temporal transcendence. This transformation, as I will show, is accomplished by a process of division and inversion that is the operation of the divine economy. This process is itself both the product of sacrificial creativity and the subversive means of overcoming the sacrificial order, as already described. Conversion is the corresponding process through which believers in God engage in this transformative work; by removing the object of the transcendence-structure from the creature to the place-less transcendent God, the believer is emancipated from the sacrificial order. The believer is thus “called” to the promise of the future.
These redemptive movements and transformations take place according to what I will call the historical dialectic of sacrifice, which may be considered the key idea I wish to advance in this chapter: *the categories generated by sacrifice are the formal cause through which sacrifice can be diminished, and, eventually, dispensed with.* If we limit our scope to the context of the Bible and Christian theology, this thesis can be restated with more detail: *in the historical process of emancipation from the sacrificial system, the need for sacrifice is circumvented by the very means of sacrificial exchange, and is suppressed by the unification of all saving power within a radically transcendent Deity, the apprehension of whom is nonetheless rooted in a sacrificial structure.*

The role of redemption and conversion in the subversive process will be introduced first (§ 14). The pattern of exchange in the divine economy will then be given a mechanistic explanation on the basis of MT (§ 15). Biblical material will be adduced to illustrate the dialectical presence of these systems and processes in the Bible’s underlying traditions (§ 16), source-history (§§ 17, 18), and pervasive narrative themes (§ 19). The data will yield a picture of redemption that incorporates sacrifice in a much more complex way than proponents of MT have usually recognized, thanks to its accommodation of the principle of exchange (§ 20).
In the New Testament, God’s saving power is made effective by means of a calling, a phenomenon of auditory nature that summons one to a future and therefore partakes of authentic time.\textsuperscript{151} Is this calling identical with the divine saving activity that manifests itself in the accomplishment of redemption and conversion? In effect, yes: if redemption is the opening up of an authentic future, and conversion is one’s turning toward that future, then the calling is nothing more than a name for how one experiences the inbreaking of the redemptive work into one’s life and historical situation.

With the answering of this question, an important relationship between the characterization of divine transcendence and Girard’s sacrificial theory of culture and signification emerges into daylight. God, in his transcendence, brings about in history the work of redemption; redemption is sacrificial in character, according to the biblical witness; and sacrifice is the event through which culture and signification are generated and sustained. Moreover, if there is anything to be said for Girard’s reading of the Gospels, then the events which Christianity identifies as the central elements of the redemptive work, namely the Passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, effect a subversion of the sacrificial system,

\textsuperscript{151} Refer to § 6.
bringing about a transformation that yields a similar linearity of time and
orientation toward the future to that implied in the biblical notion of the calling.
God, in his surpassing transcendence, is the object by which and to which
believers are called, and the object with reference to which the future is opened
up, following upon the disruption of the sacrificial cycle. All of this provokes a
further question: Does the Christian doctrine of redemption point to the same
transformation as the subversion of sacrifice posited by MT?

The vitalizing appositeness of Girard’s work for Christian soteriology will,
I hope, be made clearer through my efforts to paint an affirmative answer to this
last question in the course of this chapter. Is MT a radically new interpretation of
the Christian kerygma? Or does it rather present a new opportunity to think
through the belief that has long been borne in the Church’s bosom? And what
useful thing can MT contribute to our consciousness, if it is only a new way to
think the same things?

These questions serve as waymarks on our path of inquiry. Let us return
to the step at which the problem currently rests, namely, the question of the self-
subversive potentiality of the sacrificial system and its relationship to the
emergence of an authentic future.
The consequences of asserting that the sacrificial system can subvert itself only by means of its own economy can hardly be overstated. Unless one duly acknowledges this inescapable material dependence on sacrificial logic, one cannot fully appreciate the Girardian apocalypse or the nature of redemption as an exchange. Girard’s nuanced concession that redemption is by no means an escape from sacrificial logic is developed explicitly only in the late phases of his work, and then only in an unsystematic manner. Consequently, this concession has not always been heeded in Girardian studies. Redemption can work, and continue to work, only from within the sacrificial system. Girard comes to terms with this truth most openly in a work which, though edited not by his own hand, leaves no room to mistake his emphatic view:

You cannot view [history] from above or get an eagle-eye view of the events. I myself thought that was possible when I was writing Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World, in which I imagined Christianity provided the point of view from which we could judge violence. However, there is neither non-sacrificial space nor “true history.”

152 See discussion in Cowdell, The Nonviolent God, 60 f. Cowdell locates the beginning of this development in Girard’s thinking at When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014; French original: 1996), and finds it first explicit in Battling to the End (French original: 2007). Compare also Girard, Evolution and Conversion, 154–56. These developments in Girard will be discussed in detail in Ch. 6. In Girardian theology, some authors whose position approximates a subjective view of redemption, and who usually depend on Girard’s early materials, correspondingly underappreciate the permanence of sacrifice as a systematic determinant in the redemptive work. Some examples will be brought into the discussion in the next two chapters.

153 Girard, Battling to the End, 35.
When it comes to the transformation of the sacrificial system, what are the coordinates of the sacrificial space in which the transformation is operating? What, specifically, is the higher and the lower, the center and the periphery? What is banished, what is victorious? The exposure of the founding violence constitutes the higher term; this is the truth, the Gospel. The effect of the truth is to expose the lie of the founding violence. The lower term is the repression of the truth, that which the Gospel exposes, makes manifest, and rejects; this repression is the effect of the founding violence, since sacrificial violence cannot assure the safety of the community without performing this repression. Truth and collective violence are thus engaged in a perpetual struggle—even a properly mimetic struggle—between contraries. To put this proposition into explicitly religious language, there is an ongoing conflict between the Gospel and the Lie that is animated by God’s redemptive activity. “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt 10:34). The Gospel, like the sacrificial society, cannot exist without conflict. But this conflict, this violence of sorts, is not equivalent to the violence of mimetic conflict; the Gospel is not a permutation of the violent sacred. The Gospel, unlike the founding violence, initiates an ongoing and unpredictable conflict for the sake of contingent possibility rather than a periodic, scripted violence for the sake of absolute stability. “Truth is in a defensive position. … It is thus the one that wants war. Violence reacts to truth, and it is thus the one that
wants peace.” 154 This two-sided conflict, this difference, which seems like symmetrical antagonism from the viewpoint of the sacred, yet appears as asymmetrical and liberating from the viewpoint of the Gospel, is the unveiling of the sacrificial mechanism. It is what Girard identifies as the effect of the Gospel, the process through which redemption is worked out in history.

If liberation from the sacrificial cycle is the same thing as the redemptive work, might it be possible to describe this event using more traditional Christian vocabulary? Conversely, might one not be able to render the essence of the Christian proclamation more intelligible by recourse to the vocabulary of MT? It is not enough to say that the redemptive work of Christ is the exposure of the scapegoating mechanism, à la Girard. If Girard’s view of Christianity is approximately on the mark, then it should be strictly unnecessary to resort to the language and concepts of MT in order to articulate the aspects of redemption that MT identifies, since what MT is saying overlaps with the Christian proclamation. The task is rather to retrace the logic of redemption, using MT as a guide, and thereby to arrive at something that is both new and equivalent to what was said before. This is the true meaning of bringing theology up to date. To adapt a Heideggerian adage, the task of systematic theology is to keep saying

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154 Ibid., 81.
the same things over again, a process which ensures that the old and the new
will flow into each other.

The most immediate available possibility for this retracing lies in the
theme of exchange that is common to MT and to the classic theories of
redemption. The classic theories all display the same fascination with
mechanistic explanations of the redemptive work: an action by God is the
condition for an inverse reaction from man—which can only mean an exchange.
One thing is given for another, and a beneficial reciprocal action transpires
between God and the human race as Christ takes on our flesh, penalty, passivity,
whatever affliction a given theory singles out, while we come into possession of
Christ’s immortality, righteousness, and/or divinity. Seen from below, the
exchange—a mutual mimesis—never originates in an intentional moral effort,
hence the need for mechanism. God’s action must produce a reaction.

This action and reaction takes place within the logic of the sacred. The
sacrificial economy is thoroughly embedded in it: the binary divisions between
divine and human natures, God’s righteousness and men’s sinfulness, the divine
bliss and human suffering, are necessary for the resulting unification to take
place. The mimetic reading of the Incarnation, then, leads us to the same place as
the New Testament: the redemptive work is a sacrificial exchange.
What, then, are we to make of conversion, the subjective correlate of redemption? What exchange takes place in the act of conversion? The answer to this question lies at hand. In the process of conversion, with the restructuring of relationality that it entails, the idolatrous object of orientation is discarded in favor of the true object; one’s life changes from being governed by a deviated transcendence-structure to being governed by an authentic one. This exchange, like the one that constitutes redemption, bears the outlines of the sacrificial economy. Does not conversion depend on the dichotomies of true and false, good and bad, higher and earthly, which are in effect traded with Christ in an act of mimesis? He becomes sin, the bad, the earthly, and in doing so makes it possible for us to appropriate the divine graces: his own truth, righteousness, and supra-heavenly nature. And as most theories of redemption recognize explicitly, this exchange is dependent on his death above all else. Conversion depends upon his act of sacrifice.

The redemptive work, to repeat, operates through a de-centering of the sacrificial order that nonetheless does not eradicate this order as such. This can be restated in terms of transcendence and orientation. The sacrificial order depends on, and in turn produces, the structures of relationality by which one normally lives. I have objects of orientation, and my relationship to them is governed by mimesis; they are my idols, and they reproduce not only the pattern
of doubles characteristic of the mimetic crisis, but the very relationship of the community to its substitute-double-made-a-god. In converting, I remove my orientation from these idolatrous objects to the object that is no object, the place-less, time-less transcendent God. Insofar as I have done this, I have faith—belief, fidelity, trust in the true God—and my life is governed by divine transcendence. Owing to God’s absolute transcendence over the erstwhile necessary spatial, temporal, and other categorical parameters of the sacrificial order, I have escaped the grip of the sacrificial system, whatever residual attachments and habits may remain in me. Nonetheless, because I can experience God’s transcendence only as higher, greater, and central, I must relate to him in terms of sacrificially generated binaries. The subversion of the sacrificial system, as always, leads not to an escape from itself, but to its own transformation.

The reality of the persistence of the sacrificial system does not in any way diminish the force of the redemptive work. Abraham was called to a place; he was brought to the hilltop to offer up Isaac at the location lore identifies as the world’s center. Israel was called out of Egypt to the land of Canaan to build a Temple on that same place. The Christian, by contrast, though just as much called, is called to no place: the source and destination of the Christian’s summons is the heavenly Kingdom. One does not embark on a journey or a process of discovery that ends in a homecoming to an ultimate source, as
prominently as this metaphor figures in the parable of the prodigal son. The Christian is admonished rather to be ever ready; the return to the divine Source, that is, repentance, is nothing but a preparation for the impending coming (or return) of the Messiah (Matt 3:2; 24:42–44; 1 Thes 5:6–8). The believer is called to a future, to become heir to a promise; being deprived for a time of the things to come, the Christian knows these transcendents only through faith, by the hearing of the ear (John 20:29; Heb 11:1; 1 John 1:1–3).

The restructuring of human relationality that takes place through the redemptive sacrifice, the removal of the center, and the summons to an authentic future display this apocalyptic dynamic starkly. The destabilization of meanings and their dependent social institutions leads to the destruction and, one hopes, rebirth of the world. This destruction and regeneration is not part of the circular movement of sacred time; what is reborn is different from what went before, and the change is not repeatable or reversible. This alteration in the constitution of the world, as it were, is a transformation of time itself, a radical substitution of the new for the old that is at the same time the harmonious marriage of the two, marked by the rivalry of opposites no less than by their reconciliation.

The imprint of this pattern upon the biblical imagination will be explored after a brief discussion of the exchange-mechanism.
§ 15. The Mimetic Exchange and the Mechanism of Redemption

Exchange is an indispensable thematic feature of nearly all Christian ideas of redemption. How, though, can such a saving exchange be expressed in terms of MT? Or can MT provide a way of thinking about the saving exchange that is not already part of Christianity’s accepted ideas of redemption? MT to date has not provided any robust theological theory of exchange. In what follows, I construct a tentative model of exchange on the basis of MT that provides a plausible framework for interpreting the traditional Christian ideas of the redemptive exchange.

Girard visited and frequently revisited the theme of exchange in his writings, but did not bequeath to us a synthetic account of his thought on the subject. We may nonetheless identify a number of distinct forms of exchange posited in Girard’s work that are relevant to mimetic processes. First, there is the exchange of blows between doubles in mimetic conflict. The doubles, having succumbed to runaway mimesis, appropriate one another’s desire for supremacy, and subsequently imitate one another’s actions and attributes that seem to them to grant access to the desired superiority. When one twin strikes to gain the upper hand, the other imitates by striking back; when one appears more

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155 For my critique of Girard’s own efforts to grasp redemption in sacrificial terms, as well as the efforts of Raymund Schwager to do the same, see § 24 below.
intelligent or wealthier, the other seeks the semblance of intelligence or wealth. This is the first type of exchange, what can be called conflictual mimesis.  

A second type of exchange is involved in the sacrificial cycle beyond that of conflictual mimesis: the double substitution. In the redirection of mimetic conflict onto the scapegoat, the scapegoat takes the place of a mimetic double; one is traded for the other. Later, in the second substitution, a sacrificial victim may again exchange places with a proper scapegoat.

A third type completes this elemental list of exchanges posited by MT. It is economic exchange, or trade. Girard’s understanding of trade rests upon his theory of the origin of prohibitions. Prohibitions emerge in the wake of mimetic conflict as a means of preventing competition for goods. I may not take another’s things, wife, land, and so forth, such that I may as well give up desiring and competing for these. The transgressions most internal to the transgressor’s personal sphere, such as incest, are the most strictly prohibited, since they symbolize the undifferentiated chaos of the mimetic crisis to the highest degree. The scapegoat, for this very reason, is accused of exactly these worst acts, and so becomes the ultimate transgressor, an Oedipus. Once the crisis has subsided and

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156 On conflictual mimesis, see Girard’s discussion of Clausewitz throughout Battling to the End, as well as the chapters “Men Become Gods in Each Other’s Eyes,” pages 53–82 in Deceit, Desire and the Novel, and “From Mimetic Desire to the Monstrous Double,” pages 143–68 in Violence and the Sacred.
the apotheosis of the victim is underway, the victim, in a reversal of the logical order of the crisis, becomes the divine lawgiver, the initiator of the prohibitions against the conflict-inducing acts of which he is purportedly guilty.\textsuperscript{157}

Of course, if one must prohibit the use of certain objects, why not make things easy on oneself by just putting them out of sight? Alternatively, in the absence of a way to conveniently get rid of valuable objects that are produced by the community, the threat of competition for these objects necessitates the prohibition of their use—a most impractical arrangement. The acquisition of goods from a neighboring group, on the other hand, does not pose a substantial risk; these goods are “not ours.” Girard is thus led to his speculative hypothesis on the origin of trade: we get rid of the objects we produce an abundance of by giving them away to the next tribe, since these goods produce an intolerable situation so long as they remain among us.

A special class of objects would seem specially to lend itself to a form of trade: human beings (and here there is some obvious empirical support for Girard’s speculation). While internally produced goods must be expelled to prevent outbreaks of mimetic competition, sacrificial victims must be acquired from outside for similar reasons. Internal sources of victims are prohibitively

\textsuperscript{157} Girard, \textit{ibid.}, 68–88; see also 193–222; compare Freud’s position in \textit{Totem and Taboo}. Girard’s psychoanalytic debt is more transparent here than anywhere.
dangerous; one may not safely avert conflict by sacrificing someone’s uncle. Trade—or, alternatively, ritual war—is a viable option for acquiring victims whose deaths will not incite acts of vengeance.

Girard supposes that trade may have originated in the exchange of surplus goods for human victims. “It is thus reasonable to suppose,” he concludes, “that the imperative of ritual led groups to search for victims outside the group at the very moment when the imperative of prohibition made any vital interaction among members of the group impossible.” Economic exchange thus originates in the need for groups to expel objects that could incite a new crisis (young women, certain internally available goods, the totem animal), while acquiring other goods (including sacrificial victims) from outside. Without going outside the group for these goods, members of the group would be restrained from doing almost anything for each other by prohibitions, since they could not use their own most abundant products.158

Do conflictual mimesis, the substitution of the victim, and trade represent three distinct meanings of exchange, rendering this term equivocal? It would seem so. But only seem—a more careful consideration of the mimetic root of these three kinds of exchange requires us to posit an underlying homogeneity,

158 Girard, Things Hidden, 73–75. I have emended a typographical error in the quotation.
albeit one which Girard never formulated. All three exchanges require two asymmetrical parties: conflictual mimesis, while tending toward symmetry by nature, is rendered asymmetrical once the substitution of the scapegoat takes place; the rivalry of doubles is then subsumed into the polarization between the community and the victim, which retains the asymmetry. The choice of sacrificial victim is next made possible by the distinctions and classifications arising from the original scapegoat. Finally, these very same distinctions are at work in primitive trade; there is an inside and an outside, and these determine both the dangerous quality of surplus goods and the suitability of aliens as victims. *All three exchanges are ultimately determined and structured by the binary oppositions arising from the collective victim.*

The three types of exchange are homogeneous. They therefore admit of certain recombinations; they permeate each other, and more than one of them is detectable at a time. The blows exchanged between doubles are transferred onto the collective victim, who then acquires the perceived properties of the double, taking on his or her loathsomeness, guiltiness, and transcendent superiority, while the rivalry of the doubles sinks away into the unitary passivity of the victim. The victim thus effectively becomes a “mimic” of the ones he substitutes for; they, in turn, being drawn into the victim’s unifying peace, become imitators of him. Beyond this, the exchange of victims in trade is of a piece with the
substitution of scapegoats for doubles. Finally, we might question, without needing to give a definite answer, to what degree one should draw a qualitative distinction between the mutual expulsion of goods and the alternation of blows between doubles. These are the most direct ways in which the kinds of exchange may interpenetrate and recombine.

We must not allow the implications of these interpenetrations for redemption theory to pass by us unnoticed. From the interpenetration of the three kinds of exchange emerges a quasi-metaphysics, a sacrificial dialectic of the one and the many that seems to determine all real possibilities. Out of the community’s differences, the all-unifying victim is spawned, who again is the source of the differences he presupposes. Power, meaning, and value move like a substance, an essence, or a fluid through the victim. The exchange between double and victim almost amounts to a template for substitutionary atonement, since the nature of the exchange rises above the level of nominal convention and approximates that of a physical law. In substitutionary atonement, the double (the Christian) and the victim (Christ) are engaged in a mutual mimesis whose ultimate character is not one of rivalry, but of beneficial exchange, one party receiving the other’s death and guilt, the other receiving life and absolution as he or she appropriates the victim’s properties.
Perhaps this quasi-metaphysical permanence of exchange can help us begin to make sense of the apparent inherence of exchange in the biblical ideas of substitutionary sacrifice and atonement we have already examined. God does not extend forgiveness in the Old Testament without exacting a cost. (Whether he does in the New Testament can remain an open question.) Nor does forgiveness take place in the Old Testament through a gratuitous mitigation of the penalty for sin: the Israelite firstborn need not be sacrificed, but only because an animal or a payment can be given up instead; the people will not be slain immediately for rebelling against Moses, but will receive a delayed death penalty before entering the promised land (Num 14:11–23); David shall not die for his twofold sin, but his child shall (2 Sam 12:13–14). What appears in these cases to be the mitigation of the implacable Deity’s penalty is in fact an exchange of one penalty for a symbolic or legal equivalent, which may be more bearable than the original penalty, but nonetheless counts equally by virtue of the substitution function. There is no escape from the necessity of exchange that is left

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159 See § 9.
160 Cf. Jay Sklar, “Sin and Impurity: Atoned or Purified? Yes!,” pages 18–31 in Perspectives on Purity and Purification in the Bible, ed. Baruch J. Schwartz (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2008), 21. For Sklar, in contrast to my own view, atonement or kopher is a mitigated penalty administered in place of the penalty deserved. This partial remission and atonement are what Sklar believes is meant by forgiveness (šāḥ).
uncomplicated by exchange itself. The power of the sacred is ubiquitous in law and in nature.

God’s redemptive work cannot, of course, be a perpetuation of this inescapable law; it does, however, operate by taking advantage of it. The divine purpose is to extend forgiveness and reunite fallen nature to God; redemption is God’s entry into a radical conflict with the inimical divisions and inescapable cycles that characterize the sacrificial order. In making this entry, in becoming subject to this order in the person of the Son, the Divinity explodes the curse of sacrifice and ushers in a regeneration that is not balanced out by any corresponding threat of destruction.

Yet this need not lead us to posit an absurdity, that God is bound by his nature to act within the limits of the sacrificial order. Far from being subject to a higher necessity that compels him to save by exchange, God’s action is a free act of grace arising from the utterly transcendent power of his unity, taking the form to which the servants are subject only for the sake of those servants, since they could meet him in no other way.

The problem of forgiveness and necessity will return to us when we consider traditional theories of redemption. 161 For now, it is time to turn our

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161 See Ch. 5, esp. the discussion of Anselm in § 22.
attention to the biblical themes that illustrate the redemptive exchange, its boundedness to the collective victim, and its creative operation on the binaries of the sacrificial order. These data will clarify the operation of sacrificial exchange laid out in the preceding theoretical explanations.

§ 16. The Biblical History and the Sacrificial Dialectic

If my reading of Girard is on the mark, then we can expect to observe the pattern of liberation from sacrifice through the mechanism of sacrifice in the biblical history itself, as we already detected in the stories of Cain and Abel and Jacob and Esau. The pattern ought to be evident at the generative level of the construction of the biblical narratives, and possibly also at the thematic level insofar as the biblical traditions manifest an awareness of the truth about the scapegoat at any given point in their development.

Moreover, the transformative process can be expected to include a process of conversion, an increasing consciousness of and response to the sacrificial system as such and the true God’s transcendence over it. Such a conversion will

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162 Refer to § 12.
163 On the generative and thematic levels of a text, see Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred*, 13. The generative level is “where the power that produces the text is located,” while the thematic level is the manifest content of the text, “where the traces of that generative activity are present.”
inevitably dictate the manifest form taken by the biblical account of the redemptive division and judgment.\textsuperscript{164}

Can we find in the biblical history the data needed to flesh out the operation of sacrifice in its (pre-)Christian setting? Can we observe a pattern of development that would corroborate the existence of the redemptive process as we have described it, perhaps correlated with a process of conversion on the part of the sacred writers over the course of their historical timeframe? The order and circumstances of the development of the biblical texts and the traditions in which they are enmeshed are too complex, and our knowledge of them too imprecise, to warrant a fully conclusive reading of these texts. But a certain minimal yet significant correspondence of the biblical data with MT’s predictions is nonetheless unmistakable upon examination.

An excursus into the biblical data, which will occupy the rest of the present chapter, is warranted for two reasons. First, a discussion that failed to engage biblical material would lack persuasive grounding. Second, in the biblical texts and traditions one may directly observe the traces of the unfolding of the saving exchange, with all its nuance and complexity. Redemption is a historical process; observation of the historical development of texts and traditions will

\textsuperscript{164} Refer to § 4.
deliver to us a more reliable picture of the exchange mechanism than abstract discussion could.

Where to begin? The Bible is home, of course, to the namesake scapegoat, and it is all too tempting to take this sacrificial animal as the launch point for a Girardian reading of biblical sacrifice. The traditionally ascribed Christological significance of the biblical scapegoat only increases this temptation. Alas, the scapegoat of the Bible is not of a kind with what Girard designates by the same term (though the biblical scapegoat, as we shall soon discover, has a special relevance of its own). Girard is careful to distinguish three meanings of “scapegoat”: the biblical, referring to the animal that was expelled into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement according to the book of Leviticus; the anthropological, referring to the whole class of ritually expelled or sacrificed animals or persons found in many cultures, such as the Greek pharmakos; and the psychosocial, the person or persons blamed for the woes of others through a psychological act of transference. It is only the third meaning that is directly relevant for Girard:

[T]he victim or victims of unjust violence or discrimination are called scapegoats, especially when they are blamed or punished not merely for

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165 The anthropological meaning of the term “scapegoat” would be the one employed, for example, by James Frazer in The Golden Bough (Macmillan, 1890).
the “sins” of others … but for tensions, conflicts, and difficulties of all kinds.  

There is no obvious reason to assume that the biblical scapegoat is an example of the psychosocial scapegoat of which Girard speaks. The biblical scapegoat is, then, off the table as an entry point for a Girardian interpretation of the phenomenon of sacrifice in the Bible. Where might we begin?

Another potentially suitable case is likely to spring to one’s mind. The Old Testament’s most famous sacrifice of all is frequently understood by homiletic interpreters of the Bible as the quintessential rejection of human sacrifice—a reading which can easily perceive this story as falling in line with a presumed general anti-sacrificial sentiment that waxes ever stronger over the course of the biblical history. This is, of course, the binding of Isaac, the Akedah.

The Akedah appears on its surface to represent an unmistakable move away from child sacrifice. Abraham, having been summoned to offer up his firstborn son, is then not only ordered not to slay him, but is even provided instead with an animal victim, a substitution that readily evokes the law of the

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167 An early example: Gregory Nazianzen, Hom. 45.22. Gregory uses this passage as proof that Jesus’ death could not have been demanded by the Father.
redemption of the firstborn (Exod 13:11–13), and might, therefore, spur one
toward the now clichéd interpretation of this episode as an etiology of the
Israelite God’s rejection of child sacrifice.

But this flat anti-sacrificial interpretation is not at all evident from a close
reading of the Akedah, at least not as the story is told in Genesis 22. To the
contrary—God really does ask for the offering of the son, a time-honored point of
scandal for Christian and Jewish interpreters; and while Isaac is ultimately
spared, no obvious insinuation is made that the substitution of the ram for the
child is to be emulated. Nor could the substitution of the ram become a
requirement on the grounds of this story; as an etiology, the Akedah would
suggest only that an animal may be substituted electively for a child. The
Akedah does not by any means rule out the legality of child sacrifice.168

I do not go so far as to agree with Jon Levenson’s view that this story is
most fairly read as one iteration among many of an archetypal idea of child-
sacrifice. The Akedah seems to me intentionally to suppress the sacrifice of Isaac,
warranting the anti-sacrificial reading. My point is that the total content of the
story is not that simple: the pointed elimination of the sacrifice ensures that the
sacrifice lingers as a spectral presence. It may also be wrong to suppose that

168 This is, of course, Levenson’s view; see The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, 111 ff.
passages which, like the Akedah, imply the archaic practice of child-sacrifice actually have such a practice within their historical horizon; they may well. My point holds regardless of whether the sacrifice of the first born presents itself as a memory of an actual practice or only as a typological form or legal fiction within the biblical traditions. From a phenomenological standpoint, the sacrifice of Isaac is present in the Akedah either way.\footnote{Thanks to Bruce Beck for assistance on these points.} This presence is the first suggestion of what I would term a dialectical relationship that holds between sacrifice and the historical transcendence and erasure of sacrifice.

As with all passages of the Torah, the text of the Akedah coordinates with a multitude of layered Midrashic traditions, and these, too, need to be considered alongside the biblical text if we are to attain an adequate understanding of this episode. Midrashic traditions are fluid, and it is perilously difficult to assign them a date that would establish a given midrash’s priority or posterity relative to the biblical texts. Midrashim could represent: (1) remnants of antecedent traditions that underlie the Torah text, (2) later fabulations that were developed on the basis of the Torah text, or (3) a combination of both. Child sacrifice nonetheless meets with such categorical condemnation in the rabbinic tradition that any hint that Isaac was a genuine blood-sacrifice can plausibly
represent only the first or third cases. Do such traditions exist? If so, the possibility of a sacrificial reading of the Akedah receives strong support.

Levenson’s now classic study on child sacrifice in the Bible locates four Midrashic texts that satisfy our need: three texts that speak of the “blood” of Isaac,\(^\text{170}\) and one more that speaks of his “ashes” (!).\(^\text{171, 172}\) Since such traditions implying Isaac’s slaughter could not plausibly have been fabricated out of nothing by the rabbinic imagination, Levenson is able to conclude that these traditions are of authentic antiquity, antedating the midrashim that conveyed them to us.

Another tradition about the binding of Isaac is clearly of the third type. According to a fifth Midrashic source adduced by Levenson,\(^\text{173}\) Abraham’s offering of Isaac merited God’s promise to bring about the resurrection of the dead (cf. Heb 11:19). Levenson conjecturally reads this midrash as a product of the context of Jewish martyrdom.\(^\text{174}\) Despite this midrash’s sublimation of the motif of human sacrifice, the actual slaughter of Isaac is unavoidably presupposed; since this tradition directs attention away from the presumed fact

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\(^{170}\) Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha 7; Mekilta de-Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, Wa’era’; Pseudo-Philo, Biblical Antiquities 18:5.

\(^{171}\) b. Ber. 16b.


\(^{173}\) Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, zo’t habberaka.

\(^{174}\) Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 197.
of Isaac’s death onto the nobler subject of the resurrection of the righteous, one must infer once again that the tradition of Isaac’s death considerably antedates this midrash. The Christians, Levenson points out, seem quite justified in referring to the binding of Isaac unbiblically as his “sacrifice.”

If an extra-scriptural tradition of great antiquity would have us believe that Isaac was slaughtered, can but our interest be piqued as to the meaning of the biblical version of the story? A concept of dialectic is needed here if one is to avert an irresolvable contradiction between two meanings of the biblical story. Levenson points out that “to say the opposite of scripture is often precisely what midrash does.” In order to get beyond this unsatisfying judgment, must one not assert that Scripture can subsume even the opposite of what it says?

This is plainly the case with the Akedah. The episode resolves—no reader misses it—with the pointed elimination of the expected sacrifice. And if the sacrifice really is a part of the story of the binding of Isaac, as the sources attest, then surely the departure from this expectation in Genesis 22 should be read as nothing other than a suppression of the background, if not the underground, of this text—not as just a literary feature. When viewed diachronically, the Akedah is perceived to bear its own photographic negative within its positive form.

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175 Ibid., 131.
176 Ibid., 196.
Here the shades of a historical dialectic between sacrifice and the overcoming of sacrifice are faintly in evidence. (We might call this simply a “historical dialectic of sacrifice” for short. When referring to this dialectic without specific reference to its historical character, I will use the shorthand term “sacrificial dialectic.”) As I will show, the overcoming of the sacrificial system in history depends on a new assimilation of the structures generated by sacrifice rather than a straight-up rejection of sacrifice. A more deepgoing alignment of evidence on the form of this dialectic is needed, however, before these assertions can be found coherent and complete.

How and when does the overcoming of the sacrificial system in the biblical tradition function? Sacrifice can be subverted only in a situation of sacrificial crisis, never, by virtue of sacrifice’s own way of operating, during a period of stability. The majority of the Old Testament books originated during just such a major crisis in Israel’s history, beginning from the first historically verifiable instance of a foreign invader threatening Israel’s existence (witnessed by first Isaiah), continuing through the period of Israelite infighting and degeneration during the late monarchy, and lasting at least through the Jewish state’s restoration period (witnessed by Nehemiah and the later prophets). The localized, sacrificial God of archaic Israelite religion had become implausible as a result of this sequence of political events. In Girard’s view, the Old Testament
prophetic literature represents a transformative response to this crisis, parallel to the response he imputes to Greek tragedy in answer to Greece’s contemporaneous sacrificial crisis.\(^\text{177}\) Greek civilization emerged from its crisis with law, philosophy, and a neutered mythical tradition that was never again to be sincerely cared for by the literate class. Did the transformative epoch of Israelite society yield similar results?

Much to the contrary, the Israelite religion became possessed of a new vitality. Its revitalization was made possible by a twofold evolutionary leap among the worshippers of Jehovah: the potentially destructive clarity of consciousness brought about by the sacrificial crisis was dissolved by the absorption of this new insight back into the still-sacrificial religion; and the hierarchical differences inherent to the binaries of the sacrificial order began to undergo an inversion, which took place through (and required) the sacrificial system itself. The victim—with whom Israel as a nation is sometimes identified in the prophetic writings—became manifest as such, and was therefore vindicated by the community, while this vindication nonetheless depended entirely upon sacrificial thinking. Thus Joseph, the lesser among his brethren, holds the status of “shepherd” (Gen 37:2), a designation that conveys the menial

\(^{177}\) Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 66.
character of his role as caretaker of the flocks of the sons of Jacob’s two slave-wives, but also carries divine connotations.\textsuperscript{178} Joseph’s story, like that of king David later in the biblical history, presents a paradigm of the inversion of sacrificers and sacrificed as Joseph, the scapegoat, is elevated above his superiors. This inversion should not be mistaken for an intuitive moral principle, natural though it may seem; its non-intuitiveness is made supremely apparent by one of Jesus’ most frequently recorded and patently offensive sayings: “The first shall be last, and the last first.”\textsuperscript{179}

The biblical history does not by any means present a rejection of the effects of sacrifice; it offers only a crucial modification of them. For example, the primeval history explains the origins of civilization and religion through sometimes transparent, sometimes thinly veiled sacrificial events, hinting at sacrifice’s culture-founding effects (see Table); the Akedah is presented by its biblical redactor as the act upon which God’s promise to Abraham is founded (Gen 22:16–18);\textsuperscript{180} and the Evangelist Matthew, far from doing away with the notion of sacrificial foundation, has Jesus declaring Peter to be the foundation

\textsuperscript{178} Levenson, \textit{The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son}, 144. Levenson considers pastorship to have had a royal (rather than divine) denotation, but it must be pointed out that no king is explicitly referred to as a shepherd in the Hebrew Bible except king David and the Messiah! This fact is noted by Michel Foucault, in \textit{Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978} (New York: Picador, 2007), 124, and I was able to verify it from the biblical sources.

\textsuperscript{179} This logion occurs four times across the Synoptic Gospels.

\textsuperscript{180} Levenson, \textit{The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son}, 174.
stone upon which the new Temple, the Church, is to be built (Matt 16:18).\textsuperscript{181}

“There can be no doubt,” says Girard, “that the first books of the Bible rest upon myths that are very close to those found all over the world”;\textsuperscript{182} perhaps also the essence of sacrifice inheres deeper in the tradition than Girard himself observed.

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\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Things Hidden}, 138.
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Table. *Moments of the founding mechanism in the Pentateuchal narratives*


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<td>nature put in order</td>
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<tr>
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<td>primal sin</td>
<td>expulsion</td>
<td>coats of skins; curses?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cain &amp; Abel</td>
<td>warring brothers</td>
<td>Abel</td>
<td>Cain builds a city; law against murder; mark on Cain (= differential system)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Great flood</td>
<td>violence, flood</td>
<td>Noah (survival by inversion); Ham?</td>
<td>prototypes of species in ark; covenant &amp; sacrifice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tower of Babel</td>
<td>unity of peoples/confusion of tongues</td>
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<td>nations put in order</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sodom &amp; Gomorrah</td>
<td>mad mob</td>
<td>Lot’s wife; Lot (survival by inversion)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Binding of Isaac</td>
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<td>Isaac</td>
<td>substitution of ram; covenant promise to Abraham; re-naming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jacob &amp; Esau</td>
<td>warring brothers</td>
<td>one brother is denied blessing</td>
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<td>Jacob at Jabbok</td>
<td>struggle with man (double)</td>
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<td>Joseph’s coat</td>
<td>warring brothers</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
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<td>Moses/Hebrews</td>
<td>covenant?</td>
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§ 17. The Sacrificial Dialectic in the Temple Ideologies of P and the D-work

As founding narratives, the biblical stories carry ideological significance. The interplay of the ideologies of their respective sources furnishes some of the clearest evidence of the historical dialectic of sacrifice in the biblical content.

The ideological tendencies of the early biblical tales are invariably national or dynastic. The histories of Isaac and Jacob, for instance, serve not only to provide a mythic foundation for the Israelite nation, but to legitimate their free existence in Canaan. The Joseph story, as Levenson suggests with strong support from other scholars of Israelite ritual,\textsuperscript{183} plausibly serves the purpose of legitimating an early Josephite hegemony, perhaps over or against the Davidic dynasty; or, alternatively, Joseph’s birth from a barren woman and his two “resurrections” from underground imprisonments may be read as analogies for the messianic expectation of the rebirth of the Davidic dynasty.\textsuperscript{184}

These ideological tendencies, moreover, as well as the role of the sacrificial cult that underpins much of biblical ideology, can be seen at work in the texts’ editorial histories as much as in the received texts themselves. While much about the editorial development of the Old Testament books remains uncertain, the long-standing consensus in biblical research is that two traditions dominate the

\textsuperscript{183} Compare the views of Calum Carmichael and Mary Douglas, discussed below (p. 206).

\textsuperscript{184} See Levenson, \textit{The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son}, 205.
redaction of the central Old Testament books, namely, a Priestly tradition, and aDeuteronomistic tradition; the composition of each tradition is complex and convoluted, such that contemporary scholarship speaks less often of such sources as the Priestly writer (P) and the Deuteronomist (D), as postulated originally by Wellhausen (though D is still sometimes used to refer to the author of the original kernel of Deuteronomy), than of the P-material, the Deuteronomistic material (Dtr) (which exists in several layers across multiple biblical books, and is sometimes virtually Priestly in character), and a “D-work,” a conceptual synthesis of D, DtrH (the Deuteronomistic History comprising Joshua–Kings), and all Dtr editorship.\(^{185}\) The two broad strands of tradition are distinguished by, among other things, their respective revisions of the ideology surrounding the First Temple—and, by extension, their views on the sacrificial cult and political life of Israel. The topic’s relevance to the sacrificial dialectic merits some discussion.

Tryggve Mettinger, in his seminal study on Old Testament conceptions of divine power and the emergence of these conceptions from the Jewish experience

\(^{185}\) Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin, 1866). In today’s scholarship, the precise meanings of these terms and abbreviations are quite fluid, and my use of them consequently cannot claim to be normative. Dtr, for example, sometimes is used to emphasize Deuteronomistic editorship rather than Deuteronomistic material broadly. I have tried to stay within the range of accepted usages of each term, and have taken care to use them consistently.
of the Babylonian exile, broadly associates the P-material and Dtr with two
distinct theologies of God’s transcendence.\textsuperscript{186} While P is preoccupied with the
divine glory, the \textit{kavod}, as the theophanic mediator of the Divinity, the D-work
minimizes allusions to divine appearances, focusing instead on the divine name,
the \textit{shem}, as the locus of the divine presence (cf. Ex 24:9–11; Deut 4:12, 15).
Mettinger concludes that these “Kavod” and “Shem” theologies are exilic
developments that appropriated pre-exilic traditions in ways that allowed Jewish
institutions to cope with the loss of the Temple.

The Kavod theology copes by drawing on the traditions of the Tabernacle
and the Tent of Meeting in order to play up the mobility of God’s presence. It is
all right if God’s people are carried away to a new country, because God can go
with them.\textsuperscript{187} Ezekiel, whose theology is similar to that of P, opts for the even
greater mobility of the divine chariot; although, unlike P, he envisions a future
return to the Temple, Ezekiel’s divine chariot allows God’s presence to survive
the interim period unharmed. One might conclude on the basis of Mettinger’s
hypothesis that the Kavod theology indulges in a fantasy of the archaic
Tabernacle so as not only to render the divine presence geographically moveable,
but to retroactively revise the very meaning of the Temple: the Temple is no

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\item \textsuperscript{186} Tryggve Mettinger, \textit{The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kavod Theologies} (CWK
Gleerup, 1982).
\item \textsuperscript{187} \textit{Ibid.}, 81–83.
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longer ideologically tethered to the royal capital. P’s Tabernacle-fantasy thus serves as a locus in which the ideology of the Temple can be altered.

The D-work, on the other hand, displays an even more radically revised Temple theology, though one which strikes monotheistic sensibilities much more favorably. For Dtr, God resides in heaven, and the Temple is merely the place on which his Name rests. Dtr accomplishes this transformation by subtly reworking the surviving pre-exilic traditions of the Temple as God’s dwelling-place.\(^{188}\) Thus the surviving pre-exilic traditions describe the ark of the Solomonic Temple as bare-topped, its lid (the kapporet) serving as God’s footstool, while the Cherubim on either side of it, facing out toward the court, mark the presence of his throne (1 Kgs 6:27; 8:6–8).\(^{189}\) But in the D-work’s portrayal of the ark as it imagines it in the Tabernacle period, the Cherubim do not appear to exist at all (Deut 10:1–5)! God’s throne has been altogether removed from the earth, and his power is communicated entirely through the presence of his Name in the Temple. P, by contrast, reduces the Cherubim without eliminating them, placing them on top of the kapporet (contrast 1 Kings), now facing inward toward the place of

\(^{188}\) Ibid., 46–50.

\(^{189}\) Ibid., 19–24.
manifestation of the divine presence (the *kavod*) in the portable sanctuary (Exod 25:18–20; 37:7–9).¹⁹⁰

Dtr’s imageless, supra-heavenly God, tied to earth only by his arbitrary and nominal designation of a place of worship through the invocation of his Name upon it, accords reasonably with monotheistic instincts about what makes for a properly transcendent deity. But the D-work’s tendency toward extreme transcendence has its limits. Corresponding to the D-work’s repudiation of the enthroned presence of God in the Temple is its insistence on Jerusalem as the only legal place of worship. Indeed, the election of Zion is a—if not the only—central creedal element of the book of Deuteronomy in its original form (cf. Deut 12:1–28). Deuteronomy is presumed to have originated, after all, in the Josianic reform that sought to radically centralize all cultic power (2 Kgs 22–23). The link between the sacrificial cult, religious ideology, and political organization is here strongly apparent; the D-work’s doctrine of divine transcendence, though perhaps weakening the place-bounded quality of the sacrificial system, has as its goal the strengthening of the system. The D-work transcends the sacrificial order only by recourse to the same.

The same can be said of the Kavod theology of P and Ezekiel. On the one hand, the Kavod theology, in contrast to the Shem theology of Dtr, has rejected the localization of God’s power. Nonetheless, P and especially Ezekiel retain the visual and spatial character of God’s presence, a mark of the functioning of the sacrificial order. (The auditory emphasis of the D-work implied in the privilege it grants to the Name stands in contrast to this as a mark of Dtr’s partial transcending of the sacrificial order.) Ezekiel’s Kavod theology, however, includes a singular feature which, while it is no indication of a transcending of sacrifice, provides a suitable receptacle for just such a transcending: Ezekiel’s Temple theology is strongly apocalyptic, envisioning a future re-entry of the divine kavod into the eschatological Temple (Ezek 40–48). Thus Ezekiel furnishes the rudiments of two essential correlates of the reordering of sacrifice: linear history and an authentic future. The D-work, not for lack of chances given all its genetic complexity, does not betray more than the faintest hint of an eschatological conception.191

In short, the Old Testament’s source-construction bears witness to contrary attempts to rationalize and adapt to the crisis of exile, which was, from an Israelite theologian’s perspective, first and foremost a crisis of the Temple,

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191 The miniature apocalypse of Deut 32:15–43 is the chief counterexample to this trend; but this text is archaic, and its status as an exception therefore carries little weight.
and consequently of the sacrificial organism on which the nation depended. We see in these texts a response to the older sacrificial order. This interpretation of the Old Testament’s developmental history would be most unsatisfactory, however, if it could not be brought to bear on these traditions’ concern with institutional sacrifice itself, not just with the more abstract meanings of the Temple. Can we find in the Israelite theology of sacrifice a corresponding revision, attesting to the hypothesized historical dialectic of sacrifice?

§ 18. The Sacrificial Cult in P and the D-work

The Priestly texts work out their Temple theology through the medium of fantasy-constructions about the archaic Tabernacle. These constructions are interwoven with a presumably equally fantastic set of ritual prescriptions, largely dealing with the institution of sacrifice.

The D-work, on the other hand, conspicuously avoids discussing sacrifice, except when it has in mind the restriction of sacrificial offerings to the locality of the Jerusalem Temple, as in Deut 12. If the Temple theologies of P and the D-work are responses to a crisis in sacrifice, how is one to interpret the minimal thematic presence of sacrifice in the D-work? Could sacrifice’s conspicuous absence be significant in itself, a presence-in-absence?
The Akedah, as Levenson infers, conceals and thereby reveals the phenomenological presence of a specific kind of sacrifice, that of the firstborn son. The D-work is similar in how it keeps aloof from sacrifice altogether: the death of Isaac is conspicuous by its absence, in fact, far more conspicuous than if the text stated outright that the sacrifice had been completed; just the same, the unimportance of sacrifice in the D-work is oddly out of place. Could the D-work, like the Akedah, be suppressing the presence of child sacrifice?

This guess finds strong justification close at hand in the source-texts. One notices in the P tradition the vestiges of the law of the sacrifice of the first manchild (Exod 12–13):¹⁹²

And when he sees the blood upon the lintel and on the two side-posts, the LORD will pass over the door, and will not allow the destroyer to come into your houses to smite you (Exod 12:23).

Sanctify to me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb, among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast; it is mine (Exod 13:2).

You shall set apart to the LORD all that opens the womb, ... the males shall be the LORD’s. And every firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, then you shall break its neck; but all the firstborn of man among your children you shall redeem (Exod 13:12–13).

The LORD slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt. ... Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD every male that opens the womb; but all the firstborn of my children I redeem (Exod 13:15).

¹⁹² I build off of Levenson’s research again here. Refer also to § 9.
Contrast Deut 15:19–23, which begins:

All the firstling males that come of your herd and of your flock you shall sanctify to the LORD your God. …

followed by not the least mention of human firstborn. Deut 15:19–23 “accords no special status at all to the oldest manchild,” a peculiarity which holds good throughout Deuteronomy.\textsuperscript{193} Deuteronomy, that is, completely suppresses the tradition that the first manchild belongs to God, and is joined by Jeremiah, the sometimes-called Holiness Code of Lev 17–26, and even Ezekiel, a source which otherwise aligns with P. All these sources participate in the same revolution, expunging and rebutting all hints of God’s claim upon firstborn sons; all omit reference to the death of the Egyptian firstborn, all omit reference to the apotropaic blood of the paschal lamb.\textsuperscript{194}

Deuteronomy, the D-work, and all sources promulgating the Shem theology (including Jeremiah) show a common set of theological tendencies. God is extremely transcendent; the cult is as centralized as possible; the anthropomorphic visibility of God and the possibility of his bodily attachment to a place are suppressed; any presence of human sacrifice whatsoever is eliminated, while the stature of sacrifice in general is reduced. These sources

\textsuperscript{193} Levenson, The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, 44.

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 44–45.
have traits consistent with a transcending of sacrifice, dissociating God from the bloody institution as much as historical circumstances permitted.

Only one major element of the sacrificial order remains strong in the Shem theology—it is, in fact, magnified substantially. Consistent with its atemporal outlook, the Shem theology, especially in the D-work, upholds and absolutizes the division between heaven and earth, between God’s realm and the lower realm. The lower and the upper have an absolute and static difference between them, one which the mimetic viewpoint must interpret as generated by the Divinity himself, the knowledge of whom is still conditioned by the system of binaries arising from sacrifice. Could the knowledge of him have been by any other means?

The D-work and the Shem theology thus follow a historical progression of the kind that MT might lead one to predict: as a culture’s sacrificial structures and institutions rapidly crumble, it adapts by further sublimating the sacrificial structures on which it rests. Yet there is a too easily unappreciated complexity to this development. The distancing from sacrifice that pervades these sources goes hand in hand with, and requires the strengthening of, the mode of thinking generated by sacrifice, rather than weakening it. If God is so far up there, so universally powerful, what pleasure can he really take in the blood of goats and rams (Ps 49), let alone that of a human being? As “simple” as the transcendence-
theology of the D-work may seem, there is a dialectical relationship of thesis and antithesis at play within it: the categories generated by sacrifice are the formal cause through which sacrifice can be minimized, and, in much later times, forgotten.

The strong assertion of divine transcendence that characterizes the Shem theology appears, then, to be an analogous development to that of the primacy of law and justice in ancient Athens. As justice depends on the ultimately theological principles of right and wrong, innocence and guilt, that arise from the generative scapegoating mechanism, so God’s absolute transcendence over the earth depends on the same mechanism. On this difference between God and the earthly depend, for Dtr, the truth of the Law of Moses, Dtr’s understanding of the institutions of sacrifice insofar as the D-work retains them, and the political power that the D-work seeks to solidify.

Now, what about the other theological tradition, whose characteristic feature is the manifestation of the divine kavod, and which is principally associated with the P-material? Here the means of transcending human sacrifice is more complex; with the exception of Ezekiel, the Kavod theology does not

extirpate the thematic presence of human sacrifice from the divine Law, but only rearranges it such that the slaughter of a human is never actually performed.

Here, in P, is the best approximation of the model of Christian redemption properly speaking. With the redemption of the firstborn by means of a sheep, the moral substance of the sacrificial system, its subterranean nefariousness, is overcome by internal means, without damage to its essential structure. God prescribes the redemption of the firstborn by means of a sacrificial exchange, just as Christian atonement doctrines say he does with regard to his firstborn Son.

Here another level of dialectical relationship crops up. The reliance of P on sacrifice as the means of saving life has a dialectical relationship with the D-work’s strategy of suppressing murderous sacrifice altogether (again, regardless of whether the sacrifice of the firstborn existed for the editors as a historical memory or simply as a phenomenological counterpoint). The relationship is both historical and ideal; whereas the two editorial traditions in question are revising similar source materials, shared traditions, and, very likely, at times each other’s work, their mutual process of revision is also motivated by factors that are of a trans-historical nature. With respect to sacrifice, P, on the one hand, is driven by the desire to achieve the characteristic feature of the D-work’s approach, namely, the demotion and limitation of the institution of sacrifice. P nonetheless remains pervasively sacrificial; it is dependent on an other whose character it does not
share, and is so dependent by virtue of its own constitutive features. The D-work, on the other hand, while promulgating a theology of transcendence that (perhaps even self-consciously) demotes sacrifice, is dependent on a veiled sacrificial logic that comes to the fore only in P; without this sacrificial logic, the Deuteronomistic theology of transcendence would not be possible in the first place. These two traditions of response to Israel’s sacrificial crisis did not develop together out of the same prolonged crisis by mere chance; they are each other’s obverse.

The historical dialectic of sacrifice and the overcoming of sacrifice takes the following form in these biblical traditions: sacrifice is circumvented by means of sacrificial exchange on the one hand, and is suppressed by the unification of all saving power within a radically transcendent Deity, the apprehension of whom is nonetheless rooted in sacrificially generated structure, on the other hand. This dialectic, as I will now show before moving on to Christian theories of redemption and their continued operation within the same sacrificial logic, persists throughout a very great portion of the biblical narrative and its ancillary traditions. It is, one might say, the architecture of salvation history.
§ 19. Patterns of Sacrificial Division and Exchange in the Biblical History of the Creative and Redemptive Work: A Girardian Salvation History

When God begins to create the world in the book of Genesis, his surpassing transcendence consumes the scene. This transcendence performs its creative work in an unsettling manner. The creation out of a primordial undifferentiated chaos—we could justifiably call it creatio ex nihilo—takes place not, in its first stages, by causing things to pop into existence as out of a vacuum, as the popular theistic imagination would have it, but by dividing and differentiating (Gen 1:1–3). The division of light from darkness is the most fundamental and significant of these separations; light is a symbol of all that has to do with God; darkness is a pure negativity, not said in Genesis to have been created by God. The darkness comes into being, rather, through the creation and isolation of the light. This division illustrates the sacrificial character of the creative work in such a manner as to portray what it signifies virtually on the thematic level. The good providence of God does not create evil, ignorance, or absence; yet his manner of creativity does not exclude these significands of darkness from the total system. The darkness is, one may tacitly presume, consubstantial with the non-created primordial chaos in the mythos of Genesis 1. The primordial chaos, which is reflected in (or a reflection of) the disorder of the absolute sacrificial crisis, is subsumed into the binary pair resulting from the creative act as its lesser term.
The subsequent divisions of heaven from earth and earth from sea likewise have the nature of sacrificial classifications, though they do not betray the same depth of significance as the first division in creation.

The story of Cain and Abel again portrays the process of division, and indicates its sacrificial nature at the thematic level. This story also presents us with the first typological instance of inversion in the biblical account of the redemptive process. In Girard’s reading, which we have already touched on, Cain, the tiller of the ground, has only a weak sacrificial outlet; Abel, who can offer blood sacrifices from his flock, is able to conduct himself peaceably toward his fraternal rival. Cain’s constraints leave him with a single outlet for his mimetic impulses: violence toward his brother. In this society of two, Cain’s killing of his “scapegoat” Abel results in the enactment of the first social prohibition by God (the limitation on revenge) and the founding of a city—in short, the genesis of culture.\(^{196}\) So goes Girard’s reading: Abel is the scapegoat. Does the biblical text really point toward this conclusion? I here have a doubt that Girard’s reading is complete. Is not Cain, through the narrative’s recognition of his crime, also a scapegoat, expelled from the original godly community into the land of Wandering, while Abel, by contrast, is transformed from a scapegoat

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\(^{196}\) Girard, *Things Hidden*, 140.
into the first martyr, an offering of blood well-pleasing to the Lord not for his
death, but for the innocence of his life? Does not this story, in other words, invert
the mythological roles of the two brothers by means of the sacrifice of one of
them, vindicating and exalting the victim while banishing (albeit with mercy) the
victorious perpetrator, consigned to wear forever the telltale “mark” of the
Girardian scapegoat? Girard acknowledges that this story, in vindicating Abel,
is anti-mythological, if we understand myth in Girard’s sense as the narrative
correlate of archaic sacrificial ritual. Girard’s interpretation of Cain and Abel is
not sensitive enough to the story’s complexity: the Bible’s judgment of the two
brothers depends entirely on the sacrificial mechanism, whose constraints it
overcomes.

This recursive turning-back-in of the process of binary division onto its
own generative mechanism has this peculiar effect of “splitting” the scapegoat
entity into two figures. In the biblical narratives, one of these figures is usually
exalted and vindicated, while one is cast down and condemned, corresponding
to the original unitary victim’s benign and malevolent aspects resulting from the
double transference. The Enochic myth of the Watchers, recorded in the
extracanonical book 1 Enoch thematizes this pattern using the narrative materials

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197 The scapegoat is typically selected for some distinguishing characteristic of his person, such as
198 Girard, Things Hidden, 140–41.
provided by the biblical primeval history.\textsuperscript{199} 1 Enoch’s erasure of the traces of moral ambiguity in sacrificial generativity, in contrast to the biblical texts, renders it a true myth. Enoch, the righteous prophet, is exalted to the heavens, while his wicked counterpart, the rebellious angel Asael, is cast down a deep pit and buried under a heap of stones, never again to see light (1 En 6–13). Asael’s execution, imaged by a combination of stoning and being thrown off a cliff, associates him with the Levitical scapegoat of the Day of Atonement ceremony, a detail whose relevance we will soon uncover. Reinforcing this connection between the Girardian and Levitical scapegoats, Asael and the Levitical scapegoat are pushed off the same cliff,\textsuperscript{200} while the Qumran text of 1 Enoch actually alters this angel’s name to ‘azaz’el, the Hebrew designation for the scapegoat (cf. Lev 16:8).\textsuperscript{201} Asael’s punishment, like that of the Girardian psychosocial scapegoat, brings fruitfulness and renewal to the earth (1 En 10:7, 17 ff.). Another manifest element of the Watchers myth oddly adumbrates the redemptive substitution, as Enoch takes on the priestly role that had belonged to

\textsuperscript{199} Upon seeing my use of extracanonical texts, someone has pressed me to define a norm for discerning true from false revelation. Since in the Orthodox Church there is no notion of a canon of Scripture per se, I can respond only with the scriptural criteria: a false prophet is one whose prophecies do not come true (Deut 18:22), but a true spirit confesses Jesus Christ come in the flesh (1 John 4:2).


the fallen angels (1 En 12–13). The splitting of the figure of the Girardian scapegoat into equal and opposite mirror images in this myth is thus imbued with pronounced shades of the redemptive exchange; the myth represents the substitution of victim for double, but confounds the ordinary power relation of Enoch and the fallen angels so as to produce an inversion of the qualities the scapegoat acquires in the double transference—a second substitution that inserts Enoch in the angels’ place. The elements of the redemptive operation are present in 1 Enoch, but the text remains oblivious to its own sacrificial character, so that it stays in the realm of the properly mythological. 1 Enoch’s agenda is sectarian, and its ends are better served by reaffirming the category divisions between “good” and “bad” groups of people than in exploding the possibility of victimizing the Other. The reason why the pattern of the redemptive inversion may be found at all in 1 Enoch is presumably that the community wished to see itself as an oppressed victim, as attested by this text’s abundant jeremiads about the persecutions of the saints.

A later rabbinic elaboration of the Watchers myth renders the division of the victim even more explicit. In this rabbinic version, the two leaders of the angelic rebellion are said to be the origin of the two goats of Yom Kippur. The

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angel Shemihazah, who is executed by being suspended between heaven and earth, is the predecessor to the sacrificial goat, whereas Azazel (Asael) is the prototype of the Levitical scapegoat (*m. Yoma* 67b; cf. Lev 16). The rabbinic telling is worth mentioning not only because it brings the Girardian scapegoat of the Enochic myth into explicit identification with the Levitical scapegoat, but also because it renders the pairing of the victims fully explicit.

Abraham and Lot are the next pair in the biblical history to cast the shadow of the split victim. Abraham takes possession of the barren highland, where he is blessed and builds an altar; Lot chooses the fertile and populous regions of the lowland for his portion, coming to dwell by Sodom (Gen 13:5–18). They are divided and inverted.

The covenant sacrifice of Abraham (Gen 15) receives a stunning synthetic interpretation in another extracanonical work, dating from possibly the 1st Century of the Christian era, titled in one manuscript “The Book of the Apocalypse of Abraham.”\(^\text{203}\) In this work, the themes of atoning sacrifice, the emergence of the Law, the apocalyptic loss of the Temple, and personal conversion are all treated together as one. Abraham, whose viewpoint is presented with an uncanny attention to his subjectivity (notably

uncharacteristically of this work’s historical epoch), turns his attention away from the wooden and stone idols made in his father Terah’s house and toward the one true God, who surpasses all created material. God then calls Abraham in response to Abraham’s acknowledgment of him. Abraham’s conversion precipitates an episode that echoes the sacrifice on mount Moriah (Apoc. Ab. 9:8; Gen 22:2), but with Isaac entirely erased from the story. The sacrificial theme in the Apocalypse of Abraham presents once again the Day of Atonement motif found in the Enochic myth, as Yahoel, the priestly angel who bears the divine Name, raises up Abraham from the mountain top in a consuming burst of heavenly fire, while the demonic bird Azazel is imprecated and banished to the hellish wilderness (cf. Gen 15:11; Jub 11:11), his garment of incorruption passing over to the righteous Abraham in exchange for the saintly patriarch’s earthly, corruptible nature (Apoc. Ab. 10–15; cf. 1 Cor 15:53). The Apocalypse of Abraham thus exemplifies not only the splitting of the victim, but the recursive judgment against the power of the sacrificial and the saving exchange between better and worse entailed in the redemptive process, all by means of a fully thematized sacrificial mechanism. The sublimation of sacrifice into law is represented in this work by the transference of the scene of Abraham’s offering from Moriah to Horeb (Apoc. Ab. 9:8; 12:3), a medley of intertextual references into which Abraham’s covenant-sacrifice is combined (Apoc. Ab. 9:1–5). The
purifying as well as community-constituting nature of sacrifice are in this way transmuted into a foundation for justice and redemption.

The Temple theology of the Apocalypse of Abraham is starkly transcendent, mapped out in a strongly sacralized space. The earthly Temple, which, in any case, is insinuated to have been idolatrous, is burned up (Apoc. Ab. 8), and the anthropomorphic tendencies of the Kavod theology are rejected with mockery in favor of a fully transcendent God known only through his angelic mediator (Terah’s idol falls into the fire, and, like Ezekiel’s Deity, burns from his legs; Apoc. Ab. 5:9; Ezek 1:27). But with the repudiation of the Temple, the Apocalypse of Abraham does not create a de-centered universe; the Temple is instead spiritualized, and expanded to cosmic dimensions: if one envisions the Temple tilted on one side, then the highest heaven, a region well above the veil of our terrestrial sky (cf. Ps 103:2), coincides with the Holy of Holies; it is God’s cosmic throne-room. The lower infernal realm, on the other hand, corresponds to the court of the Gentiles.

The Apocalypse of Abraham’s eschatology and theology of conversion similarly exhibit a very developed synthesis, but without the full dynamism of

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204 I owe this insight to Andrei Orlov. Cf. also Isa 44 as a source of elements of this image.  
the sacrificial dialectic that occurs in the canonical Old Testament. Like its twin

text, the Ladder of Jacob, the Apocalypse of Abraham presents a spatialized
eschatology, the end of things being stored up as a predestined mystery in a
heavenly ultima; through Abraham’s calling and his re-orientation toward the
authentic Transcendent, the heavenly future meets the earthly present in the field
of Abraham’s subjectivity. There is not quite an authentic futurity here; the brute
spatialization of time spoils the possibility for realizing historical contingency.

And while the Apocalypse of Abraham assigns a prominent place to Abraham’s
conversion from idolatry toward a recognition of authentic divine transcendence
(Apoc. Ab. 1–7), and even situates God’s attendant judgment on good and evil in
the Moriah scene within a bifurcating scapegoating event, good and evil remain
ensconced in static categories, a dualism typical of apocalyptic ideologies, but at
odds with the dialectical dynamic of redemption in the Bible, which tends
instead toward unification and forgiveness even in the act of dividing and
judging. The Apocalypse of Abraham therefore construes the subject’s
conversion toward the good only as the result of divine election (Apoc. Ab. 20,
22).

206 In the Ladder (or Stairway) of Jacob, a work whose stylistic, thematic, and ideological
similarity to the Apocalypse of Abraham suggest to me identical authorship (cf. H. G. Lunt’s
remarks in Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, vol. 2 [1985], 406), the successive future ages of history
are arranged in sequence on the steps of the stairway to heaven Jacob sees at Bethel.
To return to the canonical biblical history: Ishmael, the elder son of Abraham, is persecuted by his kin and banished to the wilderness; Isaac, the younger, assumes primogeniture (Gen 21:1–21). With hardly any delay, Isaac is then offered up (Gen 22:1–18). The figure of the victim is again divided between the two brothers, as in the tale of the first fratricide.

Esau, the elder, is proven unworthy, and supplanted by the rule of Jacob. Though the brothers are of one origin, Jacob is blessed and exalted before God through the acquisition of Esau’s goat-like features, while Esau, the goat-man, is exiled to the wilderness, consigned to a benignly second-rate prosperity, much like Ishmael (Gen 27).

A peculiar episode later in the Jacob cycle bears remarking. The rivalry between Jacob and Laban is visibly mimetic: Laban’s deceit of Jacob by the changing of his brides is redirected back at him by Jacob’s changing of his sheep through a reciprocal act of trickery. Once Jacob flees, the rivalry escalates to the point of violence, as Laban is prompted to pursue and apprehend him (Gen 29–31). The parties reconcile, amassing a pile of stones to mark a permanent boundary between them. On top of this pile, they eat a meal together (Gen 31:46), cementing their peace. The indications of an underlying dynamic of scapegoating are readily apparent to a Girardian reader: the heap of stones is the site of the killing of the victim, the meal is the founding parties’ participation in the
sacrifice, and the result of the procedure is peace and the creation of a difference. The only erased element is the victim itself. Can this episode be said to represent a positive step in the redemptive history? Or is it an instance of relapse into mythic misapprehension? Should the elimination of the putative object of violence be taken as an indication of a preference to resist the evil aspect of sacrifice? Could such a resistance then be taken as reinforcing the sacrificial system by maintaining the reader’s blindness to its processes, or as a step on the way to enlightenment? All these possibilities are fair; the uniqueness of the episode leaves us with too few points of reference to propose any definite conclusion.

The Joseph cycle displays a whole row of reversals of primogeniture, each possibly playing a part in an etiology of Davidic or Ephraimite hegemony.207 In the Joseph narrative, the vindication of the scapegoat figure takes center stage, serving as the mechanism driving the reversal.208 Joseph is twice cast into a pit, both times for envy’s sake, and once with a false accusation; twice he is vindicated by the Deity, who, were it an archaic myth, ought to have sanctioned his penalty; twice he is resurrected, and exalted above all his brethren, in the end using his power to work reconciliation. The vindication of the victim seems

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207 See above, p. 175.
logically to require the abasement of the persecutors, in accordance with the sacrificial dialectic’s operation of division; but Joseph’s extension of forgiveness manifests rather a principle of unification, a pure overcoming of sacrifice that is embedded within sacrificial division. Sacrificial division here serves the end of evangelical unity.

The scene in which Joseph is cast into the well (Gen 37) is from yet another text that displays rich symbolic connections with the Levitical scapegoat ceremony. Like the Apocalypse of Abraham, this first major episode of the Joseph cycle centers around a transaction carried out through the changing of a garment. Joseph is stripped of his glorious coat before being cast down the well, while a kid is slain for the purpose of deceiving Isaac. These two events have a mutually causal relationship: the slaughter of the kid effects the symbolic transfer of death onto Joseph, and Joseph is correspondingly deprived of his garment of glory.\(^{209}\)

The sequence of Genesis 38, embedded within the narrative of Joseph’s banishment and vindication, contains further inversions of sacrificial divisions, though in every case lacking the ethical overtones of the Joseph cycle. Firstborn

sons in this sequence are displaced almost as if by divine predestination, each successively incurring God’s half-arbitrary displeasure.\footnote{See comments by Robert Alter, in *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004), Gen 38.} Er, the firstborn of Judah, is killed by God quickly with no explanation as to the nature of his wrongdoing (Gen 38:7); Zarah and Pharez trade places in order of birth (Gen 38:28–30). In the latter case, Day of Atonement imagery surfaces again, as Zarah, the “first” firstborn, is tied by the wrist with a garment of corruption, a scarlet band reminiscent of the one tied to the Levitical scapegoat’s horns according to a widespread extrabiblical tradition.\footnote{See *m. Yoma* 4:2; 6:6, 8; *m. Shabbat* 9:3; *Barnabas* 6:7–11; see also Orlov, *Divine Scapegoats*, 14–24.} Zarah then withdraws back into the womb, yielding primogeniture to Pharez, the forebear of the Davidic line. The trickery of Tamar against the patriarch Judah is the final episode in this sequence that evokes the themes of sacrificial exchange and inversion. Judah, sending a kid away to nowhere, is deprived by ruse of his symbols of status and identity, which pass into the possession of Tamar; she is subsequently sentenced to be offered up by fire, though the fortunate revelation that she is in the right saves her life.

As the Genesis narrative shifts back to Egypt, the sacred history witnesses a final series of inversions that caps off the primordial history. Joseph is exalted above his elder brethren; and Jacob, giving his deathbed blessings, lifts Joseph’s
sons above the delinquent eldest brothers, Reuben and Simeon (Gen 48:5; 49:3–7), blessing Judah likewise above the elder sons of his mother (Gen 49:3–12)\textsuperscript{212} and reversing the respective privileges of Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen 48:13–14, 17–20).

Nadab and Abihu, the elder sons of Aaron, are ironically consumed by the divine fire in the sanctuary after presenting a parody of the lawful offering; their bodies are expelled from the camp as scapegoats in the Levitical sense, and they are supplanted by the younger Ithamar and Eleazar, who offer rightly (Lev 10:1–7).

We find the pattern of an elevated victim and an expelled victim reflected again in the ritual of the two birds, prescribed for the cleansing of various impurities (Lev 12, 14–15). One version of the ritual, used for the cleansing of a leper, has attracted particular attention from modern scholarship for its similarity to the scapegoat ceremony, described in the subsequent chapter of Leviticus.\textsuperscript{213} In the case of leprosy, instead of sacrificing the two birds as a sin offering and a burnt offering respectively as in the other versions of the ritual,

\textsuperscript{212} While Judah is only the fourth of the six sons of Leah, he is, significantly, the least of four in the first batch of four sons named in Gen 29:32–35.

one bird is killed, while the living bird is dipped in the other’s blood and released into the wilderness (Lev 14:4–7). (One thinks at once of Joseph’s coat dipped in the blood of the slaughtered kid.) This ceremony of the “scapebird,” 214 alas, lacks the transparency for us to be able to indicate anything more than its phenomenological homology with the split sacrificial victim. The birds of cleansing only circumstantially reinforce the recurring presence of the split victim’s underlying structure.

The Day of Atonement ceremony presents a much more detailed case study. Nearly every instance of the sacrificial subversion we have adduced falls within this ceremony’s nexus of significations—hence, perhaps, the ubiquitous references to it. In the Levitical scapegoat ceremony, the phenomenon of the splitting of the victim is so much foregrounded in the persons of the two goats that the difficulty faced by commentators in explaining the need for two goats rather than simply one has left the entire ceremony half-veiled to most modern interpreters. This despite the relentless attempts to analyze the ritual from the

214 Douglas’ term; see ibid., 193.
diverse perspectives of its philology, genetics, ideology, phenomenology, and even its construction as fantasy. Girard, who spent little time on the Levitical scapegoat ritual in any event, himself stands among those who have not managed to address the curious feature of the two goats.

Yet it is one of the most remarkable elements of this ritual that an asymmetrical offering of two goats is performed. The significance of the twoness of the offered animals cannot be dismissed, given the recurrence of the same asymmetrical pattern and some slight transmutations of it throughout the book of Genesis and beyond. The scapegoat ceremony cannot be understood parsimoniously as a pharmakos ritual with a second offering coincidentally tacked on, as most commentators mistakenly read it.

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217 See Douglas, Jacob’s Tears; Carmichael, Illuminating Leviticus.
218 See Wright, The Disposal of Impurity.
220 One of the few references in which Girard acknowledges the relevance of the Levitical scapegoat to his thesis is contained in but a single page of The Scapegoat (p. 120).
221 Citations would be of little use here, as the tendency of scientific interpreters to fixate on the single most salient element of the ritual, namely the expelled goat, at the expense of all other elements such as the immolated goat, is nearly universal. Some modern commentaries that have been composed with a more religious bent, such as those of Baruch Levine (Leviticus: The
Much is made of the bare fact of two atoning goats in the Levitical account itself, which presupposes the pair of goats as such through its regulation that lots shall be cast to determine their respective roles (Lev 16:8), as well as in the extrabiblical traditions. Among the latter, the most important rabbinic work on the ceremony, *Mishnah Yoma*, attests that the goats are to be identical in size and appearance (*m. Yoma* 6:1), implying that they have an intrinsic, and not merely circumstantial, connection. Moreover, the Levitical text introduces the goats with morphologically parallel designations: the one whose blood will cleanse the adytum and whose carcass will be burned is *lYHWH*, while the one who will bear the community’s sins into the wilderness is *l’z’zl*. Does the combined weight of this evidence not imply that juxtaposed, and not merely complementary, functions for the goats are to be imagined?

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*Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 150–53), Jacob Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, in *The Anchor Bible* [New York: Doubleday, 1991]), and Baruch Schwarz (“The Bearing of Sin in the Priestly Literature,” pages 3–21 in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Honour of Jacob Milgrom* [Eisenbrauns, 1995]), manage to keep clear of this tendency altogether, yet without offering any rationalization of the fact that two goats were required. All the named commentaries construe the two goats as complementing each other by addition: there are two kinds of impurity, so two animals are needed, or some such thing. Wright, who is sensitive to the problem of the two goats, settles for such a solution, concluding that each goat removes a different type of impurity (*The Disposal of Impurity*, 16–21). Nothing is to be said against the fact that the two goats evidently remove different impurities; yet that the Levitical text unavoidably lays significance by the fact that the two animals are *twins*, and not merely that there are two of them, is a fact to which these commentators do not, in my view, give adequate attention. Wright’s comparative study of the Israelite Day of Atonement ceremony and its Ancient Near Eastern analogues furnishes enough examples to prove that the use of two animals instead of one is significant.
Recent scholarly interpretations of the scapegoat ritual can be classified into five approaches, with some researchers straddling more than one of them. (1) In the work of a great many researchers, especially those who wrote in the final phase of the 20th Century, the influence of *Religionsgeschichte* can be distinctly felt. These scholars treat the Levitical ceremony as a historical artifact, a point on the line of human religious development, but now evacuated of palpable significance; they seek to explain the ceremony genetically by deriving it from Near Eastern antecedents,222 or phenomenologically, by positing magical223 or metaphysical224 categories that allow these scholars to ascribe a primitive rationality to the ceremony.225 The pairing of the goats tends on the whole to be a matter of indifference to these writers. (2) Other researchers look for a static, ahistorical meaning in the scapegoat ceremony, interpreting it as an

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222 David P. Wright traces the ceremony’s elements to parallels in numerous adjacent cultures; Görg controversially derives the ceremony from Egypt; see references in n. 213 and n. 215 above.


225 Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2005), theorized that this ceremony was constructed with reference to a system of categories that, when considered from a total structural standpoint, could be considered to represent a primitively scientific universal rationality (51–71). Douglas later repudiated much of this view, but a parallel to Girard in her original reading is worth pointing out. Dirt notably functions in Douglas’ structuralist anthropology in an analogous manner to the scapegoat in Girard’s anthropology: dirt is the excluded element that holds the key to destabilizing and reorganizing the social system. Douglas originally mistakenly identified unclean animals as the “dirt” of the Levitical worldview; but what if the “dirt” is actually symbolized by the Levitical scapegoat?
aggregate of metaphors\textsuperscript{226} or symbols (a favorite option among Christians),\textsuperscript{227} a liturgical parable,\textsuperscript{228} or an analogical demonstration of Priestly cosmology.\textsuperscript{229} The tendency of those who take this approach has been, with some exceptions, to underplay or ignore the slaughtered goat. (3) We owe thanks to Daniel Stökl ben Ezra, whose Saussurean approach brings before us the possibility of interpreting the Levitical account with reference to the play of significations in a greater field of ideas and practices traceable in its reception history.\textsuperscript{230} (4) The approach of Günter Stemberger is, to my knowledge, unique. Stemberger alerts us to the hermeneutical fact that the scapegoat ceremony exists in a complex of received texts, not as a physically enacted performance. The ritual is, historically at least in part and, as we know it today, entirely, a textual (re)construction, not an event that can be subjected to scientific observation.\textsuperscript{231} (5) Finally, Mary Douglas, in her late work, capitalizes on Calum Carmichael’s ideological interpretation of the ceremony.\textsuperscript{232} This approach clears the way for the reading I advance here, if the

\textsuperscript{228} See Carmichael, \textit{Illuminating Leviticus}, 37–52.
\textsuperscript{229} See Douglas, \textit{Leviticus as Literature}, 241–51.
\textsuperscript{230} This field of ideas and practices is termed by Stökl the “imaginaire.” See Daniel Stökl ben Ezra, \textit{The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century} (Mohr Siebeck, 2003). To this approach add also much of the work of Andrei Orlov; see all references to him in the bibliography.
\textsuperscript{231} Stemberger, “Yom Kippur in Mishnah Yoma.”
\textsuperscript{232} See Douglas, \textit{Jacob’s Tears}, 38–60; see also idem, “The Go-away Goat,” pages 121–41 in Rolf Rendtorff, Robert A. Kugler, and Sarah S. Bartel, \textit{The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception
former is taken in conjunction with the historical relativization of the Levitical
text accomplished by approaches (3) and (4).

Douglas’ ideological interpretation, the culmination of a lifelong evolution
of her views on this text, deserves its own expanded summary. The ceremony
described in Leviticus 16 is, for Douglas, a political parable of the Priestly writer.
The purpose of the ceremony is to foster the wholeness of the community and to
prevent harmful divisions from emerging, both internally, within the Judahite
nation, and externally, with its neighbors. The internally oriented aspect of the
ceremony, Douglas notes, functions unusually compared with typical
purification ceremonies from around the world. “Religious purity generally
emerges as an ordering principle which a community has spontaneously evolved
to sort and sanction its social relations”;
but, Douglas observes, the internal
class divisions that are typically reinforced by purity laws are entirely absent
from Leviticus. The Levitical laws, including the ordinances for the removal of
the impurities of Israel and the sanctuary on the Day of Atonement by means of
the goats, effectually suppress class divisions, since Leviticus makes no class-
related distinctions when it comes to deeming persons clean or unclean. Douglas

(Leiden: Brill, 2003); Calum Carmichael, “The Origin of the Scapegoat Ritual” (Vetus Testamentum

234 Ibid., 112–14.
infers that this Priestly egalitarian theology is directed against Ezra’s exclusivist resettlement project.\textsuperscript{235} As for the community’s external relations, Douglas characterizes P’s agenda as “liberal” and “universalistic” (in contrast to Ezra, P sees the Josephites to the north as brothers rather than apostates);\textsuperscript{236} she follows Carmichael in identifying the goat $\text{LYHWH}$ as the representative of Judah and the “Go-Away Goat” (her rendering of “goat $l’z’zl’$”) as the representative of Judah’s brothers (the Josephites) and cousins (Edom).\textsuperscript{237} Even these outcasts have a place in the locality of Judahite dominion; they are not rejected altogether. Hence, Douglas emphasizes, the Go-Away Goat is left unharmed after its expulsion.\textsuperscript{238}

One can discern clearly, on Douglas’ reading, the conciliatory feeling of Leviticus’ version of the day of Atonement ceremony. And never were it more crucial to keep at the front of our consciousness that the Levitical ceremony is a text, nothing more or less. We can readily contrast its features with the numerous indications that the scapegoat was abused and killed, or with the simpler Day of Atonement sacrifice prescribed by Jubilees 34:18–19, which calls for only a single goat and aligns with the more archaic ordering functions of sacrifice and purity, as exhibited in this text’s exclusionary attitude toward the Northern tribes.\textsuperscript{239}

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., 129–30, and eadem, Jacob’s Tears, 63–87.
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{237} Douglas, Jacob’s Tears, 54–58.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid., 58–59.
\textsuperscript{239} The contrast between Leviticus and Jubilees is discussed by Douglas in ibid., 39–40.
Now, is not the crucial piece of evidence for Douglas’ reading—which I do not disagree with as far as it goes—the peaceful treatment of the second goat? And is it not at this very point that the fantastic construction of the text becomes most obvious? Allowing that the scapegoat, contra all the extrabiblical accounts, was not executed, must it not still have been abused most horrendously, lest it retain the will to make its way back to civilization?

Moreover, does not the interpretation presented by Douglas, convincing as it is, imply that the Levitical account conceals its contrary, a threat of disunity, the division of brother against brother? And is there no irony in Leviticus’ use of priestly, Judahite hegemony as the means of bringing about this unity, soothing Israel’s internal and external divisions with precisely the effect of maintaining them? The openly divisive tactics of apocalyptic texts such as the Apocalypse of Abraham and Jubilees, by contrast, undermine such hegemony, allowing for the generation of change and the overturning of norms through sacrificial division and inversion, while P, like Deuteronomy in this case, puts sacrifice directly to anti-sacrificial ends, suppressing dialectically requisite divisions, and supplying the principles of reconciliation and unity. Both halves of this ideological struggle, in the fashion once again of the historical dialectic of sacrifice, contribute necessary components to the complex historical unfolding of redemption; both also realize the transcendence of sacrifice only very incompletely.
The inclusion of extrabiblical, especially apocalyptic, texts within our data is of crucial importance for illuminating the Day of Atonement ceremony; a Biblicist approach would mislead us. The motif of the two goats shows up in certain of these texts, such as 1 Enoch, as the signifier of a division between good and evil, light and darkness, the infernal side mirroring its heavenly counterpart with a thoroughgoing yet false symmetry. The latent ideological features of the earliest major Day of Atonement texts (viz. Leviticus, 1 Enoch, and Jubilees) favors a reading of the scapegoat ceremony as a privileged witness to a greater process, situated within the redemptive arc of biblical history. While attempts to flatten the text-ritual of the Day of Atonement into a frozen system of signification (à la approaches (1) and (2) above) prove unable to explain the motif of the two goats, by expanding the field of play to include the full range of applicable texts (à la (4)) one can discern a pattern in the various narrative analogs of the two goats. The goats must be two in number because they signify an irreducible complexity, a division of better from worse, of elect from reprobate, yet within a total systematic order. They form an image of the redemptive dialectic at work in the dualities in creation (beginning from the division of light from darkness) as well as in the theological and political monism.

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that informs Isaiah (“I make weal and I make woe”), the Deuteronomistic materials, and the Priestly texts. It is these two tendencies which, though contrary, necessarily coexist in the biblical history. They constitute together, and contain within themselves severally, the historical dialectic of sacrifice. This dialectic is the scheme of the redemptive work as we are able to experience it.

Let us bring this illustrative excursion into the scapegoat ceremony to a close, so as now to complete our tour of redemptive inversions in the biblical history.

Gideon, the smallest in his house, is appointed by divine grace to smite the Midianites (Judg 6).

David, though the least among his brethren, is put before them through divine election (1 Sam 16).

Solomon, like his father, becomes king instead of his elder brother, Adonijah (1 Kgs 1).

The high priest Joshua, though clothed with filthy garments, is stripped of these upon the rebuke of Satan who stands against him; the removal of Joshua’s raiment is the passing of his iniquity from him, and is followed by his receiving
new clothes and a fair miter (Zech 3:1–5). Joshua and Satan are the twin figures in this exchange of garments.241

Jesus of Nazareth, in an evident Day of Atonement typology, is stripped of his garments, and clothed in a royal robe (a scarlet one according to Matthew, like the “garment” tied to the scapegoat’s horns); his elevation on the Cross is a counterpoint to the release of his homonymous twin, the criminal Jesus Barabbas, whose surname means in Aramaic “son of the father” (Matt 27:15–31).242 Christian interpreters, it should be pointed out, have never missed the opportunity to apply the scapegoat typology to Christ, Origen having done it as presented here, while the Epistle of Barnabas, Justin, and Tertullian identify the two goats with the two parousiai, one signifying Christ’s ignominious expulsion from the people, the other his exaltation in glory.243

We may adduce one further occurrence of the motif of the redemptive exchange in the New Testament. The episode marks off the transition from the sufferings of Christ to the witness of the martyrs. Stephen is accused and stoned,

241 I have already noted that the motif of a changing of garments occurs in the Apocalypse of Abraham and in the birth of Zarah, and reflects the crimson band said by tradition to have been tied to the scapegoat’s horns. A deeper exploration of this important detail would be excessive here, but one may refer to the references in n. 211 above, as well as to Orlov, The Atoning Dyad, 43–48, 95–106, for a deeper analysis of this connection, and for further examples of it.
like the rebel angel Asael; but in contrast to his mythological prototype, whose vision is forever darkened by a heap of rocks (1 En 10:5a), Stephen is vouchsafed a vision of God, and is transformed with a bright appearance, “like the countenance of an angel” (Acts 6:15; 7:55–56). While Stephen is clothed in this glorious light,244 his persecutors are stripped of their garments (Acts 7:58), a clear reversal of the mythological motifs that manifest in this episode’s Enochic antecedent.245 The redemptive process has reached the point of breaking through and breaking out; the vindication of the scapegoat—the Girardian and the Levitical ones coincide here—has been rendered explicit in the persecution of the expanding Church, and, with the paradoxical result of a non-divisive forgiveness (Acts 7:60), the positions of persecutor and persecuted have been wonderfully inverted.


For Girard, the Bible is a progressive reversal of myth, beginning from the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, and culminating in the Passion narratives of the Gospels. “Throughout the Old Testament,” Girard comments, “a work of

244 Compare the findings on Adam’s luminous garment in Silviu Bunta, “One Man (φῶς) in Heaven: Adam-Moses Polemics in the Romanian Versions of The Testament of Abraham and Ezekiel the Tragedian’s Exagoge” (Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha 16 [2007]: 139–65).

exegesis is in progress, operating in precisely the opposite direction to the usual dynamics of mythology and culture.” The Bible’s inverted myths represent an ongoing, reflexive act of interpretation leading toward a demonstration of the innocence of the surrogate victim. The progress in today’s moral consciousness of persecution, to which this hermeneutic process is both cause and witness, is not, Girard emphasizes, brought about by any seminal thinkers; it is an uncontrolled process on which MT merely comments. Jesus’ execution is the pivotal event wherein the dominance of the sacred, signified by the Temple and the occlusive function of its inner veil, is irreversibly overcome:

The veil of the Temple conceals the mystery of sacrifice—it makes material and concrete the misrecognition at the basis of the sacrificial system. For the veil to be rent, therefore, is tantamount to saying that by his death Jesus has triumphed over this misrecognition.

The view Girard presents here is, like those of many of his interpreters, monistic. A simple truth is revealed by a transcendent revelation. As previously mentioned, this type of view was overcome by Girard in his late phase. Against Girard’s early position, but as a logical extension of his later views, I am arguing for an internally complex account of the redemptive operation. The

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249 See § 12 above, pp. 115–16.
redemptive process manifests itself as having both a monistic and a dyadic structure at once; it is involved in an overarching transcendent good that exceeds the possibility of totalization within the limits of historical possibility, yet it operates in history on the basis of sacrificial divisions. It is the monistic element that saves this theory from falling into a merely *idealist* dialectical conception, which could allow for such infelicitous results as a division in the nature of the Godhead.\(^{250}\) The dyadic principle, on the other hand, allows us to go beyond an only weakly trinitarian idea of the redemptive work as a “pure excess of gift”; it furthermore provides insurance against the relativization of all rational and physicalistic theories of redemption as metaphors to be appropriated on the basis of their convenience for whosoever’s arbitrary ideological needs. The redemptive work is, as dyadic, a work of economy; though it exceeds the capacity of reason and resists any reduction to immanent concepts, it at the same time impinges upon us from within the domain of the real. This theory of redemption models a hard reality. It is firmer than materialist approaches to atonement that can accept, modify, or dispense with theories depending only on their aesthetics, the desirability of their consequences, and their sanction by tradition.

Redemption is, of course, strictly impossible within the limits of economy, and it requires the “impossible gift,” so much sought after by today’s religious phenomenologists, that exceeds economy’s bounds. The sacrificial order admits of no escape from its power, yet it is through this power of the enemy that the Power on high acts to save his creatures. This duplicitousness of redemption, together with the possibility for sacrificial binaries to operate recursively through the redemptive process’s duality, is what I have termed the sacrificial dialectic throughout this chapter. The notion of the sacrificial dialectic reaffirms the economic side of the problematic of redemption, which has fallen today into neglect, but is an obvious and essential feature of the most prominent traditional theories of redemption. Because the redemptive work operates according to economy and materiality, it is both absolutely contingent and, paradoxically, bound by necessity.

It is at this point, having laid down the theoretical foundations of my mimetic approach to redemption, that I will proceed into the proper sphere of Christian doctrine, critically rereading the paradigmatic theories of redemption that have long provided the Church with the coordinates for its thinking on the subject. I do this not for the sake of novelty or doctrinal innovation, but with the aim of retrieving certain elements latent in these theories. Such an effort can, I think, greatly enrich our understanding of them.
CHAPTER 5
THE TRANSCENDENCE-STRUCTURE, THE SACRIFICIAL EXCHANGE,
AND CHRISTIAN PARADIGMS OF REDEMPTION

As I discussed in Chapter 1, one who has received the saving gift of divine grace also holds an implicit soteriology. Additionally, I asserted that soteriology is knowledge that is in part constitutive for one’s salvation. Redemption is the means of salvation, and without it salvation could not happen. An understanding of redemption, then, will (or at the very least may) be included within this (implicit) knowledge. Understandings of redemption are formalized in Christian theology as theories. It is to these theories of redemption that I now turn.

Christian redemption theory is not uniform, and has never undergone a process of official creedal formulation in many of the largest Christian bodies. It thus remains a realm for freedom of expression within the latitude granted by communal consent. In spite of the freedom and diversity to be observed in this area of theology, most theories of redemption may be found to conform to one of three general types: first, “subjective” theories, which locate the efficacy of the redemptive work primarily in the spiritual and moral conversion of the sinner; then two types of “objective” theory, which attribute the efficacy of the redemptive work to a transaction between Christ and God the Father, or to a
transaction between God and the devil, respectively, Christ’s death being the
price paid to redeem humanity in either case.\footnote{This is approximately Aulén’s typology given in \textit{Christus Victor}, whose view has been followed in many manuals on atonement theology since its publication.} To the first type belong so-called
moral influence and exemplarist theories, as well as numerous riffs on these that
stress the morally transformative power of the Second Person’s participation in
human suffering. To the second type belong the satisfaction theory of Anselm of
Canterbury and the widely believed penal substitution theory. Broadly speaking,
these theories and others of their class hold the status of orthodoxy within
Western Christian traditions today, while theories of the first type are often
demarcated as innovative or radical. The third kind of theory, suggesting a
ransom agreement in which God allowed the devil to take Christ’s life in
exchange for the liberation of humanity, is widely attested across Christendom
prior to the middle ages. Today it is discredited in Western traditions. The theory
has been resuscitated with some success, however, by such widely read figures
in contemporary Western theology as Gustav Aulén and J. Denny Weaver, in the
form of a dramatic theory known as \textit{Christus Victor} that emphasizes Christ’s
triumph over evil as the centerpiece of redemption.\footnote{See \textit{ibid.}, 143–59, and Weaver, \textit{The Nonviolent Atonement}, 13–128, 306–320.} In the Eastern traditions,
the ransom theory has sometimes been rejected,\footnote{Refer to n. 167: Gregory Nazianzen rejected at once the ransom view and the proto-Anselmian view that Christ was a propitiatory offering to the Father.} sometimes repeated, but most
often benignly ignored. Since the fourth century, the East has shown relatively little interest in theories of redemption, opting instead for the philosophically agreeable language of deification.\textsuperscript{254}

In what follows, I will examine representatives of each of the three types of theory. Without taking any of these theories at literal face value, I will demonstrate that what I called in Chapter 4 the sacrificial dialectic is strongly present in each of them. Each example, that is to say, serves as a paradigm for how sacrifice and the structures it generates are utilized by God to constitute the destruction of the sacrificial system, and the transcending of it toward the possibility of a new order. Further, each theory considered clearly displays the operation of the sacrificial exchange and the conversion of the believer that frame

\textsuperscript{254} One has a good right to ask why deification ought not to be considered a fourth type of theory of redemption alongside the others. Indeed, Stephen Finlan seems to imply that deification can function in place of traditional (from his Western perspective) notions of atonement, a position which raises the possibility of counting it among them; see Finlan, \textit{Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy About, the Atonement Doctrine} (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005). Furthermore, deification posits an exchange (in the form of a transfer of natural properties) of the sort that I have insisted is characteristic of the New Testament language of redemption (see Ch. 2). I nonetheless find this extended typology inadvisable. As is widely recognized by now, proponents of all three major types of redemption theory, ancient and modern, have embraced or implied deification as part of their teaching. Moreover, in the Greek-speaking tradition by which deification has been made famous, deification and redemption do not compete with each other at the level of doctrine, as different theories of redemption always do in some fashion. The ransom theory exists frictionlessly alongside deification in Gregory of Nyssa; the Anselmian theory incorporates organically into the deification-centered doctrine of Nicholas Cabasilas. The language of deification may substitute rhetorically for theories of redemption and in this sense compete with them, but it never displaces them in the system of doctrine. It thus seems best to consider deification a feature of Christian teaching that overlaps and intersects with theories of redemption, without being of a kind with them. In circumstantial support of this conclusion, deification lacks two important features typical of theories of redemption: it is not in itself violent or sacrificial, and it is not intrinsically mechanistic.
the sacrificial dialectic. So, rather than treating the three types of redemption theory as mutually contradictory, or playing them against each other in creative tension, I will be effecting a common retrieval from all three. While it is not my intention to recommend any or all of these theories on their own terms, my procedure will surely have the collateral effect of rehabilitating each example I examine.

As representative specimens of each type, I have chosen figures and texts that are widely considered common points of reference for redemption theorists. For the first two types of theory, the choices were obvious. Peter Abelard’s theory of redemption, displayed in the infamous quaestio on Romans 3:26 in his *Commentary on Romans*, has been received as the prototype of subjective theories, and will be examined in conjunction with some illuminating passages in his *Ethics* (§ 21). Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*, with its closely related work *Meditation on Human Redemption*, is the common point of reference, and probably the historical high point, for theories of the second type. I have chosen to focus on the briefer *Meditation* for reasons that will be explained (§ 22). For the third type, the choice was more delicate. No one figure stands apart as the favored representative of the ransom theory, while the many great minds who have applied themselves to it make for a variety of worthy options to choose from. I have selected Gregory of Nyssa’s version of the ransom theory, articulated in the *Great Catechism* and *On
the Three-Day Interval between the Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and featuring his influential metaphor of the fishhook, because of its elegance and elaboration (§ 23). In all three cases, other choices could have been made. Nor is it the case that any theory of redemption would have served as a suitable subject. Doubtless many theories of redemption fail to display any sensitivity to the sacrificial dialectic whatsoever. Many others, such as popular versions of the penal substitution theory, are aberrant with respect to norms of Christian teaching, despite being widespread. But through the narrow selection of theories I present, the possibility and fact of sensitivity to the sacrificial dialectic in each of the three main phenotypes of redemption theory can be demonstrated. The whole breadth of Christian redemption theory can thus be shown susceptible of the retrieval to which I wish to direct attention.

§ 21. Peter Abelard: Commentary on Romans

Peter Abelard’s Commentary on Romans seems at first glance a difficult launch point for a demonstration of the sacrificial dialectic’s relevance to redemption theory. On a cursory reading, Abelard appears to totally ignore the notion of sacrificial exchange. On top of this, he has been received as the arch-opponent of sacrificial-substitutionary theories.255 It was largely because of Abelard’s putative

255 Two of the most widely read and cited scholars on atonement theory, Hastings Rashdall and Aulén, interpreted Abelard this way. Rashdall championed him for it. In Rashdall’s view,
rejection of vicarious sacrifice, apparently voiced by him in an excursus (or “quaestio”) on redemption following his commentary on Romans 3:26, that he was denounced by Bernard of Clairvaux, condemned at the Council of Sens in 1140, and revived in later times as the diametric alternative to Anselm. Since the great Protestant debates between liberal and orthodox viewpoints on atonement that took place in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, relatively little substantive literature has been produced on Abelard.

Abelard is indeed a proponent of what is now termed the moral influence theory of redemption. But Abelard’s texts are studied far less often than they are refuted, and an attentive reading of them reveals an understanding of redemption that, while coinciding with some elements of his caricature as a proto-liberal, displays the sacrificial exchange and the sacrificial dialectic with high resolution. What we shall find is that, far from proposing a non-sacrificial theory of redemption, Abelard does retain the element of vicarious sacrifice within his soteriology; but, as if repeating the redemptive operation within his own ideas, Abelard banishes the sacrificial element to the margins, sacrificing the

Abelard “sees that God can only be supposed to forgive by making the sinner better, and thereby removing any demand for punishment” (Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology, being the Bampton Lectures for 1915* [London: Macmillan, 1919], 359). As I shall demonstrate, this view has not much to be said for it, and is the result of superficial reading.
sacrificial for the sake of the ethical. The sacrificial thus uncannily conserves itself in his theory, not unlike how it does for the Deuteronomist.

The theory presented in the aforementioned *quaestio* will be my focal point. The *Commentary on Romans* is interspersed with numerous such excursus on doctrinal problems, each presented as a question followed by Abelard’s answer. The text of Romans 3:23–26, on the last verse of which the concerned *quaestio* comments, reads as follows:

[23] For all sinned, and fall short of the glory of God, [24] being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; [25] whom God put forth as an atonement through faith in his blood, to be a demonstration of his righteousness, because God in his forbearance passed over the sins of the past [26] for the demonstration of his righteousness in the present time, that he might be just and the justifier of those who are of the faith of Jesus.

Before tackling Abelard’s dense commentary on this verse, it will be necessary to backtrack in order to give some context to his usually misrepresented position.

Thanks to waning interest in Abelard over the last century, the most complete study of his theological works is still J. G. Sikes’ 1932 publication. Sikes reads Abelard as basically an exemplarist: Christ’s Passion saves people by

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256 The text of the *quaestio* may be found in *Petri Abaelardi Commentaria in Epistulam Pauli ad Romanos*, in *Petri Abaelardi Opera theologica*, Corpus Christianorum 11 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1969), 113.124–118.274.

demonstrating to them God’s goodness, and so turning them away from their sins. Without going so far as to endorse Abelard’s view, he legitimizes his exemplarism by indicating its antecedents in both Augustine and Anselm. Sikes additionally claims to locate inspiration for Abelard’s exemplarism in a citation from Isidore of Seville, quoted directly in Abelard’s writings, stating that “the divine Wisdom became man so that wisdom should lighten the world.”

Richard Weingart’s full-length study on Abelard’s soteriology departs somewhat from this exemplarist reading. Weingart reads Abelard as proposing a soteriology of moral influence with a significant objective inflection. Refuting the usual assessment of Abelard’s theory as subjective, Weingart demonstrates how, for Abelard, salvation depends entirely on an act of grace on God’s part that brings about a change in the Christian. Commenting specifically on the quaestio on Romans 3:26, Weingart asserts that “the whole tone of the passage is set by the theme that God is moved by love to take the initiative in transforming men.” Abelard nonetheless makes frequent use of transactional and hieratic metaphors in his sermons and in the Commentary on Romans itself. Weingart

259 Sikes, Peter Abailard, 207; the original citation is found in Abelard’s Theologia Christiana, Book IV. (PL 178:1278C).
resolves this tension between Abelard’s moral influence theory and the literal language of redemption by deducing that the Cross is for Abelard “the symbol of the painful cost borne by God to redeem men,” and that this “cost” is represented by metaphors such as redemption in Abelard’s homiletic rhetoric. Moral influence thus assumes the role of the prime motive according to Weingart, as exemplarism does for Sikes. J. Patout Burns, on the other hand, gives a concise but undeveloped summary of Abelard’s position that takes seriously his frequent language of vicarious punishment, which is all too often overlooked.261

What, then, is Abelard’s real understanding of redemption? Despite the notoriety he achieved when it came to this point of doctrine, Abelard, unlike his recent predecessor Anselm, never laid out a thorough and comprehensive explanation of his view. The assumption that Abelard held a coherent and systematic view of redemption is nonetheless warranted by some statements he

makes in his treatises. Specifically, the occasional statements about redemption in Abelard’s *Commentary on Romans* that have generated most of the controversy can be systematized quite easily when taken in conjunction with passages in his *Ethics*, a work to which he refers the reader of the *Commentary on Romans* on several occasions for more detailed discussion of complex topics.\(^{262}\) Though the *Ethics* is a later work and, at points, reflects a more mature development of some of Abelard’s ideas, the *Ethics* clearly cannot postdate the final version of the *Commentary on Romans*, which must have been revised over an ongoing period of time.\(^{263}\) The *Ethics* can, then, be read together with the controversial *quaestio* in the latter work. It is to the theology of sin and redemption expressed in the *Ethics* that I now turn.

Abelard’s *Ethics* bears the alternate title *Know Thyself* (*Scito Seipsum*), and these two names indicate the double spirit in which the work is written. On the one hand, the treatise is dry and academic, defined by Abelard’s preoccupation

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\(^{262}\) Consider, e.g., the typical citation at the end of *Comm. Rom.* 4:8 (141).

\(^{263}\) There is general agreement that while *Comm. Rom.* and *Ethics* both represent Abelard’s mature thought, *Ethics* is the later work. The chronological relation between them, however, is clearly more complicated, as attested not only by the mentioned references to *Ethics* in *Comm. Rom.*, but by manuscript evidence indicating that portions of *Ethics* predate its writing in the form of oral teaching. Between the options that present themselves from this evidence, it is sounder to conclude that *Comm. Rom.* was revised to include ideas from *Ethics* than that *Ethics*’ ideas date from the time of *Comm. Rom.* and were incorporated into the latter’s original version. For example, the notion of consent is a development in Abelard’s teaching that appears only in *Ethics* and other very late works, never in *Comm. Rom.* See John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 68, 259–60.
with the question of culpability that runs through much of his corpus; on the other hand, the *Ethics* reads like a spiritual guidebook, concerned always with existential religious questions, and specifically with the discernment of virtue and vice. One cannot quite decide which of these two tones predominates, but religious concerns appear to be what frame the work as a whole. Book I, comprising most of what survives of the *Ethics,* is concerned chiefly with the definition of sin and the conditions for its remission. It is here that Abelard lays out most explicitly his understanding of sin, conversion, and the purpose of the sufferings of Christ.

Sin, for Abelard, has no necessary correlation with bad will, nor does it consist in a bad act or in pleasure. Abelard gives instead the following two definitions of sin: sin is scorn for God, and sin is one’s consent to do what ought not to be done or to omit to do what ought to be done. The factor of consent, though articulated only very late in Abelard’s thinking, is crucial for

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264 It is for this reason that I reject Paul Kemeny’s interpretation that *Ethics* pitches the virtuous life as something in which all people are meant to share, without respect to faith. Abelard’s emphasis is more definitely Christian than that, notwithstanding his consistent academic tone and display of pagan learning. See Paul C. Kemeny, “Peter Abelard: An Examination of His Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Journal of Religious History* 16, no. 4 (1991): 374–86, at 380.

265 *Ethics* I.10 f., in Peter Abelard, *Ethical Writings: His Ethics or “Know Yourself” and His Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 3. Page references in this edition will be given in parentheses.

266 *Ethics* I.35 f. (8).

267 *Ethics* I.8 (3).

268 *Ethics* I.7 (3–4).
understanding his theory of redemption, as it means that sin is defined not by one’s relation to things or to acts per se, but by one’s relation to God. This distinction will assist us in making sense of Abelard’s understanding of conversion, which is the crux of his soteriology. A similar kind of distinction is drawn by Abelard in his definition of right and wrong: right and wrong reside only in intentions, not in acts. This distinction, too, will prove relevant.

The antidote for sin is what Abelard terms penitence, a concept that he configures as the counterpart to sinful consent and the essential condition for a true change in intent. True penitence is motivated by love for God rather than by fear of punishment, and therefore wipes out even conditional consent to evil; a true penitent would not do wrong again, even if there were no penalty. True penitence draws God’s charity, and the penitent then receives reconciliation for his or her penitence.

So far, Abelard’s soteriology fits well with his putative exemplarist or moral-influence doctrine of redemption. The usual readings of him hit a major snag, however, once brought up against his clear statements on the punishment (poena) due for sin, which are to be found in the Ethics as well as in the

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269 Though consensus appears late in Abelard’s terminology, the concept it designates may be applied retrospectively to his earlier thinking. Consent serves for him only to differentiate the various senses of voluntas/velle in his earlier works. See n. 263 above.

Commentary on Romans. Right intention and refraining from sinning are not sufficient conditions for salvation in Abelard’s view; those who never hear the Gospel preached but live without fault (i.e. without wrong intent), for instance, will be damned regardless.\textsuperscript{271} If we assume the least modicum of consistency in his thinking, Abelard cannot have construed salvation as resulting solely from moral influence or exemplification, since salvation is not strictly the result of what these achieve, viz. a change in intention.

Abelard does not directly state any reasons for this divergence between salvation and faultless living in the Ethics. To the contrary, he seems to contradict his position when he asserts that penitence will necessarily result in the remission of the eternal penalty of damnation.\textsuperscript{272} These tensions are left untreated, but can be explained by a distinction running through both the Ethics and the Commentary on Romans between salvation as the direct result of penitence—what Abelard precisely terms justificatio/justification in the Commentary on Romans—and forgiveness, i.e. the remission of eternal punishments. The latter always coincides with penitence by virtue of God’s predestination, but is not formally tethered to it.\textsuperscript{273} It is because of God’s predestination that Abelard can say, for example, that someone who lives with

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{271} Ethics I.126–128 (28–29).
\item \textsuperscript{272} Ethics I.169 (39).
\item \textsuperscript{273} Ethics I.171 (40).
\end{itemize}
penitence but dies without baptism is deprived of salvation. This person inevitably will not persevere in penitence, and so will die in sin.²⁷⁴ The strong doctrine of baptism implied by this reasoning again precludes the charge that Abelard is a plain and simple exemplarist.

One further indication that Abelard operates with an understanding of forgiveness as autonomous from penitence and justification is to be found in his discussion of the senses of the word “sin.” In a passage of the Ethics, Abelard distinguishes four such senses: sin is properly understood to mean scorn for God or consent to evil, but it can refer also to a sacrifice for, the penalty or punishment (poena) for, or the deeds that follow from sin proper.²⁷⁵ Abelard surmises that when we say Christ bore our sins, we speak of sin in the third sense: he took the punishment for our sins so that the punishment could be excused. Moreover, adds Abelard, when we speak of original sin, we do not mean any fault (since this is impossible in the case of children), but only a hereditary punishment for Adam’s sin.²⁷⁶ Clearly Abelard does not view forgiveness and justification as coinciding either conceptually or in fact; clearly also, then, sin proper and punishment do not always coincide. This is even more emphatically the case if Abelard intends by the above statements a distinction

²⁷⁴ Comm. Rom. 3:27 (120.334–121.344).
²⁷⁶ Ethics I.115 (25).
between Christ bearing our punishment and Christ taking away our sin proper.

Since sin proper is a matter of intention or consent, Abelard cannot possibly advocate for salvation by exemplification or moral influence except insofar as salvation does not subsume forgiveness. The bearing of sin by Christ is not a metaphor for the change of heart instilled in the faithful by his Passion; he believes that Christ literally suffered the punishment due us for our sins.

A few passages in the Commentary on Romans confirm and elaborate on Abelard’s position just discussed from the Ethics. Abelard maintains that the term “sin” has a distinct sense in which it really means only “punishment.” Since iniquity cannot be imputed to infants, but they are damned nonetheless, he reasons that original sin must mean the punishment for Adam’s sin. Though “sins are forgiven through the sigh of penitence,” a distinction between justificatio, brought about through penitence, and the remission of punishment is operative in the Commentary as in the Ethics, and is even made explicit: justificatio and justitia depend on the acquisition of charity, but only after justification does baptism effect the total remission of punishment, i.e. forgiveness (though in

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278 Comm. Rom. 4:7 (124.73–75). Quotations in English are adapted from Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, trans. Steven R. Cartwright (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011). I have modified the translation for intelligibility, when necessary, after comparison with Corpus Christianorum’s Latin text.
children the chronological sequence is reversed). Hence, no one who has lived since the institution of baptism can be saved without it, barring martyrdom. Again, the reason penitence guarantees forgiveness is that God assures, through his predestination, that one will receive neither or both. Only for this reason is penitence said by Abelard to blot out eternal punishments. Temporal punishments for sin, those to be inflicted on earth and in purgatory, remain in any event, and require *satisfactio*. As for the relationship between temporal and eternal punishments as they pertain to the suffering of Christ, this question remains unexplored by Abelard.

The distinction between justification and forgiveness plays a central role in structuring Abelard’s understanding of the Passion. Each of these components of salvation is effected separately. Justification is effected—that is, penitence is brought about—through God’s “demonstration of his righteousness,” and it is this aspect of the saving work alone that is the subject of the controversial *quaestio* on Romans 3:26. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is bestowed by reason of Christ’s assumption of the penalty for sin. Abelard shows my interpretation

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283 *Ethics* I.166 (38–39).
285 Abelard does not seem to have any explanation for why this vicarious suffering was necessary in the first place, nor does he explain how Christ’s suffering is adequate to the penalty sinners owe; see Burns, *ibid.*
is correct when he pairs these two components of salvation together in his commentary on Romans 4:25. Here, he explicitly distinguishes Christ’s “bearing of our penalty” from the metaphorical “cost” of redemption that Weingart erroneously concludes is the real meaning of Abelard’s penal language. The relevant lines on Romans 4:25 are here quoted in full:

[Christ] is said to have died “on account of our transgressions (propter delicta nostra)” in two ways: on the one hand because we transgressed, on account of which he died, and we committed sin, the penalty of which he bore (cujus ille poenam sustinuit); on the other hand, that he might take away (tolleret) our sins by dying, that is, he swept away the penalty of our sins by the price (pretio) of his death, leading us into paradise …

Next, having spoken of the penalty borne by Christ, Abelard adds at once the aspect of redemption that he previously called justification:

… and through the demonstration of so much grace—by which, he says, “No one has greater love” [John 15:13]—he drew back our souls from the will to sin (voluntate peccandi) and kindled the highest love of himself (summam sui dilectionem).286

The “demonstration of grace” that results in penitence and justification is precisely distinguished from the penalty borne by Christ. Moreover, the order in which these ideas are introduced in the quoted passage suggests that for Abelard, the former is dependent on the latter. The “demonstration of grace” that brings about the subjective change in the sinner is presumably the demonstration

286 Comm. Rom. 4:25 (153.992–1000). Abelard goes on to define justificatio as the perseverance in justitia, in which Christ’s resurrection is meant to confirm the believer (ibid. [153.1001-6]).
of Christ’s willingness to bear our penalty! Abelard’s theory is a moral influence theory, but it clearly cannot be boiled down to exemplarism or subjective influence alone; the relation between exemplification and the vicarious bearing of punishment is more complex than that.

We are now in a position to approach the *quaestio* on Romans 3:26. Abelard seeks to address in this *quaestio* the problem of what exactly is meant when Christ’s death is called a redemption. He makes room for his new view by demonstrating the incoherence of the ancient ransom theory. God can forgive without honoring any rights supposedly held by the devil;287 God could free mankind from the devil by the power of his command alone (*cum sola jussione*).288 The ransom payment made in Christ’s blood could therefore have been due to God alone, since he is the rightful proprietor of all creatures at all times.289 Indications in Abelard’s text suggest also a subtle refutation of the new satisfaction theory.290

What, then, could the meaning of the blood ransom be? Abelard answers that the blood ransom should be understood as the cause of justification;

289 Ibid. (117.227–30).
Justification is defined by Abelard in this passage as the acquisition of love for God.\textsuperscript{291} Justification is said to be “through the blood of Christ” (cf. Rom 3:25) in that Christ offered a demonstration of God’s love by his perseverance to the point of death:

Nevertheless it seems to us that in this we are justified through the blood of Christ and reconciled to God, that it was through this matchless grace shown to us that his Son received our nature, and in that nature, teaching us both by word and by example, persevered unto death and bound us to himself even more through love (amor), so that when we have been set aflame by so great a benefit of divine grace, true charity might fear to endure nothing for his sake [i.e. we be made just].\textsuperscript{292}

Justification is thus achieved by a grace that is realized in the fact of its manifestation, its “demonstration” (Rom 3:26), marking Abelard’s doctrine of justification as decidedly exemplarist and, in my Girardian terminology, centered on conversion. Abelard goes so far as to identify conversion, this enkindling of love for God and forsaking of desire for the earthly, with redemption itself. Thus:

… our redemption is that supreme love in us through the Passion of Christ, which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but gains for us the true liberty of the sons of God, so that we may accomplish all things by his love rather than by fear.

\textsuperscript{291} Comm. Rom. 3:26 (117.242–43; 118.253; and vicinity).
\textsuperscript{292} Ibid. (117.243–48).
The central work toward the imparting of such love is the Passion and Crucifixion:

He showed us such grace, than which no greater can be found, by his own word: “No one,” he says, “has greater love than this: that he lay down his life for his friends” [John 15:13]. … He witnesses, therefore, that he has come to increase this true liberty and charity among men.293

Thus, the *quaestio* on Romans 3:26, the only location where Abelard inquires about the meaning of redemption as such, identifies redemption with the demonstration of grace in the Passion and on the Cross, which turns the believer toward God by infusing a just and justifying love.

What are we to make of the *quaestio*’s account of redemption, which appears quite incomplete when placed in the context of Abelard’s whole soteriology? And in what ways does it manifest the logic of sacrificial exchange?

These two questions deliver their answer into our lap if we ask both of them together. The theory of the transcending of the sacrificial economy that has been worked out over the preceding chapters can efficiently explain the striking absence from this passage of Abelard’s teaching that Christ assumed the penalty for sin.

The absence of the punitive aspect of Abelard’s soteriology is not a peculiarity of the *quaestio* on Romans 3:26. A complete reading of the *Commentary on Romans* as well as the *Ethics* shows that Abelard’s ethical preoccupation, that is, theologically speaking, the theme which he calls “justification” in the *Commentary on Romans*, predominates almost absolutely in these works. This is undoubtedly the reason why secondary accounts of Abelard’s soteriology have so often marginalized or missed his inclusion of vicarious punishment in his system. Abelard himself marginalizes this part of his thinking in his major theoretical treatments of sin and redemption. It turns out that there is something to be said for the propensity to treat him as a proto-liberal. Being himself an ethicist, Abelard is far more interested in the ethics of salvation than in anything else having to do with it.

It is in this marginalization, this striking separation of the subjective and objective dynamics of salvation, not only in the form in which Abelard presents his ideas, but in the very structure of his soteriology, that one perceives the double aspect of the transcending of the sacrificial system, which manifested itself in certain biblical texts in the form of a historical dialectic. The overcoming of sacrifice is itself irrevocably dependent upon sacrifice. In Abelard, the thesis and antithesis of this dialectic are posed side by side, each represented fully independently of the other, such that their relationship appears ruptured. The
unifying re-orientation toward the Divinity and away from the multiplicity of created being stands out at the heart of Abelard’s soteriology, while the sacrificial element, the vicarious victim, is peeled off and left to the side; the two components of the dialectic have almost no interaction with one another. The sacrificial exchange and the unifying process of conversion are split apart by Abelard in his texts.

Conversion takes center stage in Abelard’s theory. In this aspect of his soteriology—for which alone, in contrast to Anselm and to Abelard’s critics, Abelard reserves the term “redemption”—there is no trace of the sacrificial. The sacrificial exchange, the vicarious suffering of the scapegoat, has been expelled to the margins of his system of thinking. At its expense, Abelard emphasizes love for the Creator and the intention of the redeemed to do right, the ensigns, as it were, of the turn of the Christian toward the singularity that is God. Reciprocity, substitution, division, all the features of the sacrificial economy, have no place in the conversion of the Christian for Abelard. For him, redemption possesses singularly the character of such a conversion purified from sacrifice, defined only by an orientation toward God’s transcendence over earthly goods.

Then, on the obverse side of Abelard’s soteriology, lies his teaching that Christ accounted for the penalty due for sin through his suffering. This accounts for the sacrificial dimension of salvation. The sacrificial exchange is similar to a
bank transaction: Christ accepted the punishment that was due the sinner, and that punishment may therefore now be lifted. The bifurcations generated in the symbolic order by the scapegoating event leave their mark in the transaction between Christ and the sinner, the transfer of punishment from one to the other. In contrast to the workings of conversion, the assumption of the sinner’s penalty by Christ is thoroughly economic, redolent of the unloading of evils onto the scapegoat and the inescapable order of necessity that follows from that archaic victim.

Separated as these two sides of Abelard’s soteriology may be in his manner of presenting them, they nonetheless conjoin logically. The assumption of sin’s penalty by Christ changes nothing until the sinner merits it through penitence and is washed clean in the Sacrament. Only then is the sinner’s debt forgiven, and all restored. The economic transaction serves only as the means for bringing the sinner back into the simplicity of the love for God.

God’s use of the sacrificial economy in order to subvert the sacrificial order thus finds representation in Abelard’s theory, obliquely, inelegantly, perhaps unconvincingly, but with great clarity. He repeats the redemptive operation in his own ideas. Rejecting the purely economic model of redemption
that claimed Christ was a payment to the devil,\textsuperscript{294} Abelard preserves the ethical integrity of his theory of redemption by banishing (sacrificing) the unethical and therefore undesirable sacrificial exchange. He repeats the mechanism of redemption, in an awkwardly Christian manner, by scapegoating scapegoating. By doing so, he forges a soteriology that respects God’s transcendent goodness, which cannot be bound by the necessity of economy,\textsuperscript{295} while retaining the transcendened sacrificial act, which makes this transcending possible in the first place, at the margins of his soteriology.

Abelard goes so far as to eliminate the sacrificial from his definition of the term “redemption.”\textsuperscript{296} But despite this, Abelard does not, and cannot, extinguish the presence and functioning of the sacrificial in his ideas; to the contrary, he renders the sacrificial aspect of redemption explicit on several occasions, without ever stating outright the dependence of redemption and conversion upon it. The sacrificial can never be kicked out of soteriology.

The sacrificial dialectic thus achieves representation in Abelard’s theory of redemption in the broken form of a near-total splitting apart of the two contrary aspects of the redemptive operation, viz. sacrifice and the transcending of

\textsuperscript{294} The rejection of the devil’s \textit{jus}, it should be noted, is a typical premise of theories of redemption in the century following Anselm. See Weingart, \textit{Logic of Divine Love}, 84, n. 3.

\textsuperscript{295} Comm. Rom. 3:26 (116.200–204).

\textsuperscript{296} A reading of the full \textit{quaestio} at Comm. Rom. 3:26 bears this out.
sacrifice. The two aspects nonetheless remain logically dependent on one another in Abelard’s theory, just as they do in the Girardian mechanism of redemption developed in this dissertation. All this is true in spite of Abelard’s preference to treat the two aspects separately and without any explicit indication of their mutual dependence. His effort to separate them and suppress the sacrificial aspect can be understood as a sign of the functioning of the dialectic itself, a presentation of the antagonism inherent in it.

It would be neither reasonable nor pertinent to venture historical or psychological explanations about what led Peter Abelard, and not anyone else, to produce this peculiar manifestation of the sacrificial dialectic, or why its traces appear in his texts in precisely the configuration that they do. Such is not my concern. Nor can the operation of this dialectic in Abelard’s theory be considered much compelling or interesting until one sees the pattern repeated, in different configurations but with all the same elements and dynamics, in very different theories. It is to the best known of all theorists of redemption, then, that I now turn for a second demonstration.

§ 22. Anselm: Meditation on Human Redemption

Anselm of Canterbury’s satisfaction theory of redemption is famously deduced in his major work *Cur Deus Homo* and recapitulated in summary form in his
**Meditation on Human Redemption.** I will take the lesser known Meditation as the primary point of reference for discussing Anselm’s theory for two reasons. First, the Meditation exactly repeats the essential steps of the argument made in the earlier *Cur Deus Homo*, with no apparent development of ideas in the interval between the two works. Second, the Meditation sets Anselm’s satisfaction theory directly in the context of conversion. This latter reason for preferring the Meditation is strongly reinforced when one considers the relation of Anselm’s total thought to meditation and prayer, activities that pertain to the subjective orientation of the Christian toward God that I have designated as conversion. As Dániel Deme observes in his study on Anselm’s Christology, the literary form of meditatio is of central importance to Anselm’s whole dialectical method. Anselm’s series of Meditations resemble prayers, albeit innovative ones with respect to the rigor of their theologizing; for Anselm, prayer is “the theological method itself, the hermeneutic framework, to which any subsequent point will have to refer.” Meditation is the intellectual and affective activity whose goal is to attain God, an act of orientation toward the supreme Transcendence.²⁹⁷ One will see that in Anselm’s Meditation on Human Redemption, the orientation toward God considers God precisely in his attribute of transcendence.

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²⁹⁷ Dániel Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003); quotation at p. 4. The word meditatio, Deme notes, occurs right in the prologue to the *Monologion*. 
Anselm’s argument has been thoroughly studied, and does not bear full repetition and analysis here.\(^{288}\) I will only follow the major steps of Anselm’s

\(^{288}\) Anselm’s complex argument has been analyzed in a number of ways, but the most convenient breakdown that sticks to Anselm’s assertions concisely and completely is the twenty-one-step analysis by David Brown, in “Anselm on Atonement,” pages 279–302 in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge Companions Online: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 281–82. Brown’s analysis is given here for convenient reference, quoted verbatim, with references to the relevant loci in *Cur Deus Homo* included:

1. All human beings have sinned: *passim*.
2. Eternal salvation and reconciliation with God is not possible without freedom from the effects of sin.
3. These effects cannot be eliminated by an act of divine forgiveness: I.11 (cf. also I.15; I.24; II.5).
4. So either punishment must follow, or else compensation/satisfaction be paid: I.13.
5. But God does wish some human beings to be saved: I.16–18.
6. So compensation must sometimes be the chosen alternative.
7. But “to sin is nothing other than not to render God his due”: I.11.
8. So, compensation must consist in giving to God what is not his due: I.11.
9. But, “if in justice I owe to God myself and all my powers even when I do not sin, I have nothing left to render to him for my sin”: I.20.
10. Therefore, compensation must be paid by an act, not owed to God, performed by a person other than one of whom (9) is true.
11. But, given what we owe to God, any sin is of infinite extent: I.21.
12. So compensation “cannot be achieved, except the compensation paid to God for human sin be something greater than all that is beside God … Therefore, none but God can make this satisfaction”: II.6.
13. But it is necessary that the person paying the compensation be also a man: II.8 (“Otherwise, neither Adam nor his race would make satisfaction for themselves”).
14. “If, as is certain, it is therefore necessary that the heavenly community be made up of human beings and this cannot be effected unless the aforesaid satisfaction be made, which none but God can make and none but a human being ought to make, it is necessary for a God-man to make it”: II.6.
15. But it is not fitting for the Father or the Holy Spirit to be incarnated: II.9.
16. Therefore, the requisite compensation must be achieved by the incarnation of God the Son, and, from (8), such compensation will involve that “he somehow gives up himself, or something of his, to the honor of God, which he does not owe as a debtor”: II.11.
17. But “every reasonable being owes his obedience to God”: II.11, cf. (9).
18. “Therefore, it must be in some other way that he give himself, or something belonging to him, to God”: II.11.
19. But mortality is not an essential attribute of human nature “since, had man never sinned, and had his immortality been unchangeably confirmed, he would have been as really man”: II.11.
argument that are relevant to my purposes. The chief point to focus on is Anselm’s concept of *debitum*, on which hang both the sacrificial and sacrifice-transcending aspects of Anselm’s theory. The two contraries of the sacrificial dialectic are to be found in Anselm’s use of this word. But, unlike with the case of Abelard, the contraries are not resolved into distinct phases of the redemptive work, but are instead interwoven and undivided. In this sense Anselm is a more successful theologian than Abelard; his theology of redemption is more integrated.

*Debitum* is what every creature owes to God. In some common interpretations of Anselm’s thought, this term has been understood to mean a debt, in the financial or feudal sense. It is this reductive and imprecise understanding that accounts for Anselm’s oft-presumed connection with the historically subsequent penal substitution theory. For Richard Campbell as well as Lisa Cahill, Anselm’s concept of *debitum* is “deeply rooted” in a “Christianized teleology,” to be understood not just in terms of feudal obligations, but as a metaphysical concept.299 Others have identified the nature of *debitum* as the cohering force in a social cosmology; God’s *justitia* is the right ordering or right

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(20) “Therefore, one who wishes to make atonement/satisfaction for human sin should be such a one who can die if he chooses”: II.11.

(21) So compensation/satisfaction/atonement will be made by the innocent death of God the Son.

299 See Lisa Cahill’s systematic theological paper, “The Atonement Paradigm.”
relationships of creatures. Both of these interpretations are valid. From the metaphysical standpoint, things do what they “ought” insofar as they are fulfilling the end of their created nature; and justitia, a concept that is too easily associated with retribution, is to do what one debet for the sake of that debitum alone (hence for God’s sake). One should therefore read the feudal undertones in Anselm’s use of this medieval Latin concept as grounded in a medieval-Platonic feeling of the order and harmony of the universe, not as an aberrant “Germanicization” of redemption theory.

Our relationship to God, insofar as sin and redemption are concerned, is defined by this metaphysical-cosmic debitum, which is in the first instance an economic, sacrificially grounded idea. Since one’s whole existence is thanks to (debitum) God, one ought (debet) to render back to God one’s whole will.

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302 Campbell cites Paul Fiddes and G. R. Evans as representatives of the reading of Anselm as a feudalist; see Campbell, ibid., 256–57, n. 2, 3. “Feudalist Anselm” can be discovered quickly by a perusal of the scholarly or popular literature on his satisfaction theory.

The sacrificial and sacrifice-transcending dynamics in Anselm’s theory intersect at the point of sinful humankind’s breached *debitum* toward God. *Debitum* functions, on the one hand, as an economic principle: creatures must render to God his due in reciprocation for his creative beneficence. But because sin cannot be repaid given our finite means, some surplus, a gift in excess of economy, must be offered to God. This surplus restitution paradoxically gets away from the reciprocity generated by sacrifice, while being necessary precisely because of it. Once this redemption-payment has been given—and here the refined metaphysical sense of *debitum* is crucial—Anselm finds himself freed from the impossible obligation imposed on him by his sin, yet still subject to a *debitum* toward his Creator on account of the redemptive sufferings undergone by Christ on his behalf. He who ought to have fulfilled his end as a creature by praising and glorifying God is now restored to such a state where he can do just that, unconstrained by the inequalities constituted by sin. So goes the calculus of Anselm’s *Meditation on Human Redemption*.

*Debitum*, then, is the precondition of what I have called, in my Girardian terminology, the sacrificial exchange, as well as of conversion. The sacrificial economy is operative in both the objective and subjective aspects of Anselm’s
theory of redemption. Yet the concept of debitum is utilized, in all its economic force, for the purpose of exceeding this very economy.304

This point can be demonstrated through an examination of the Meditation in detail. Anselm begins, like Abelard, with a refutation of the pure economy of justice embodied in the ransom theory.305 According to the then-widely followed version of this theory that had been inherited from Augustine, God used Jesus’ divinity as a concealed weapon, duping the devil into accepting Christ’s flesh in return for captive humanity, only for the devil to discover that this flesh was a Trojan horse; Jesus’ divine blamelessness meant that the devil had overstepped his rights by slaying him, and his contractual right over humanity was now forfeit.306 Anselm rejects this view, explicitly on the grounds that it supposes the existence of an economy of reciprocal justice that God could not overcome:

Did the devil justly have against God or against man some claim which obliged God to act against him on man’s behalf [by concealing Jesus’ divinity] before acting by open force, so that, when the devil unjustly killed a just man, he would justly lose the power he held over unjust men? But surely God did not owe the devil anything except punishment. Nor

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304 Anselm, on this reading, evades the common objection, raised by Fiddes, that the satisfaction theory is overly objective because it lacks a strong doctrine of exemplification; see Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, 96–104.


306 Augustine, De Trinitate, Books IV and XIII. This obviously muddled view was a conflation of several ancient motifs used to portray the redemptive work: the descent into hell, the devil’s ransom, the Messianic secret, and a penal metaphor; see Schwager, Der Wunderbare Tausch, 32–53.
did man [owe the devil anything] except requital. ... But even this [viz. requiting the devil] man owed only to God. ...\textsuperscript{307}

The economy of justice is, therefore, entirely subordinated to God, and not something which God is bound to respect by any antecedent obligation. His jurisdiction is infinite, not governed by any higher necessity, a point which Anselm had already developed in detail in \textit{Cur Deus Homo}.\textsuperscript{308}

Anselm relativizes economy by referring the totality of it to God. Necessity, in this case the need to uphold justice, is not a constraint on God, but is subject to his will, since all things are altogether transcended by him in every way, as Anselm makes explicit with his ontological argument in the \textit{Proslogion}. Thus, “all necessity and possibility are subject to his will.”\textsuperscript{309}

Yet the subjection of all necessary reciprocity to God’s unbounded will implies equally the persistence of the sacrificial economy within this unipolar cosmos. The default on debt by sinners must be set aright; it is just that this necessity serves God’s ends, rather than constraining him:

\textsuperscript{307} \textit{Meditatio redemptionis humanae}, 85–86; translated passages of this text are adapted from \textit{Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury}, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Minneapolis, MN: Banning, 2000), and have been revised for accuracy and readability after comparison with the Latin text in \textit{Opera omnia}.


\textsuperscript{309} \textit{Meditatio redemptionis humanae}, 86.
Man is not restored to the end for which he was created unless he attains to the likeness of those angels in whom there is no sin. This cannot possibly be done unless the remission of all sins is obtained, which does not occur without an antecedent complete satisfaction (integra satisfactione).\(^{310}\)

The adjective *integra* bespeaks the economy-transcending wholeness that is obtained by satisfaction for sins; at the same time, this wholeness, qua wholeness, is the symptom of a closed system, a circular economy. *Satisfactio* indicates the reciprocal act necessitated by the economy of justice; but since humankind has not the means to offer an adequate satisfaction for its sins, the restitutive act must come as a free gift that the Father did not ask for,\(^{311}\) a gift that transcends the logic of the sacrificial system. This free gift is Christ’s own life, the undemanded offering of which on the Cross subsumes, yet rises above, the economy of retaliation.

Girardian analysts of Anselm’s theory are divided into those who see him as privileging economy and mimetic reciprocity, and those who consider Anselm to have taken a basically anti-sacrificial, economy-transcending stance.\(^{312}\) Anselm

\(^{310}\) *Ibid.*, 86.


\(^{312}\) Schwager, taking a lead from Michel Corbin’s commentary on Anselm (Michel Corbin, ed., *L’Oeuvre de S. Anselme de Cantorbéry* [2 vols.; Paris, Cerf, 1986]), excessively characterizes Anselm as escaping the bounds of economic thinking, particularly (and Schwager is right on this point) with regard to his ontological argument; see Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation*, 197–201; Girard and Schwager, *Correspondence*, 168, 171. Cowdell, drawing on Lisa Cahill’s reading, tries to partially rehabilitate Anselm by contrasting the “later” reading of him that is tinged with the false sacred with Anselm’s original emphasis on cosmic and social harmony; see Cowdell, *The
is a more subtle interpreter of redemption than his critics are willing to concede. For Anselm, sacrificial economy is subsumed into the goal of referring all things back to God’s unbounded power, while in this very act of referral, carried out by Christ in his self-offering, economic necessity returns with unmistakable bluntness.

_Cur Deus Homo_ argues for the preservation of economy in the form of necessity, while maintaining at once God’s absolute superiority over any necessity. Does God need to punish sinners? Can he not simply forgive them? Why not? These questions are answered in the following way: God is not constrained by the necessity of punishing sinners; this necessity exists, rather, to serve him, by subjecting all things to his domain. God is not subject to the limits imposed by economy, because he is, approximately speaking, identified with them; God is both economy’s source and its limit, transcending necessity while equated with it. The deep pervasiveness of economy in Anselm’s text becomes even broader as his discussion of necessity continues. The purpose of redemption is that humankind may fill the perfect number of the elect, most of

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_Nonviolent God_, 223 f. What Cowdell crucially fails to recognize is that cosmic order and the violent sacred go hand in hand. Bartlett, coming down on the other side of the matter, correctly sees Anselm’s satisfaction theory as a representation of mimesis, but reduces the concept of satisfaction to a mere “deferral of violence”; see Bartlett, _Cross Purposes_, 73–89. Bartlett thus misses the economy-breaking nature of Christ’s satisfaction-offering.

313 _Cur Deus Homo_ I.12–15 (69–74); see also the tangential argument in _Cur Deus Homo_ II.17 (122–26).
whose seats have been waiting vacant in the heavenly kingdom since the fall of the angels; as far as the divine response to sin is concerned, sin must be punished with a just reciprocity, but salvation is impossible, Anselm reasons, so long as man is unable to give more than all he possesses. This is a system that does not compromise on the mystical need to restore exactly what was taken away. The strictness of the economic principle of reciprocal exchange is borne out by the following passage:

If man sinned through pleasure, is it not fitting that he should give recompense through pain? And if it was in the easiest possible way that man was defeated by the devil, so as to dishonor God by his sinning, is it not justice that man, in giving recompense for sin, should, for the honor of God, defeat the devil with the greatest possible difficulty? Is it not fitting that man, who, by sinning, removed himself as far as he possibly could away from God, should, as recompense to God, make a gift of himself in an act of the greatest possible self-giving?

In such passages, the Deity is to be identified unequivocally with the god at the center of the sacrificial economy, the transformed scapegoat. God’s government of the universe is absolutely conservative, just like the absolutely conservative metaphysics of the sacrificial victim, from whom meaning flows and to whom it

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314 Cur Deus Homo I.16–18 (74–84). Katherine Sonderegger frames Cur Deus Homo such that the need to replace the fallen angels, so as to restore the original state of creation, becomes its basic premise; see Katherine Sonderegger, “Anselm, Defensor Fidei,” International Journal of Systematic Theology 9, no. 3 (2007): 342–59.

315 Cur Deus Homo I.19 (84–86).


always refers back in a Platonic circuit of exit and return; all good and evil that had been attributed to the victim’s powers will then descend from him again, he being perceived as their source by the act of transference. Anselm’s God likewise gets back everything he gives, and has given everything he gets, yielding a balance of zero in the total system subordinated to him. In the closed economy of the scapegoat’s binary generativity, a symbolic give-and-take amounting to perfect justice is the only possible outcome. Sin must be made up for.

Yet it is within and through this economy of perfect justice that Anselm reasons an escape from its constraints must be sought. Only a gift in excess of all that man owes to God can suffice as satisfaction for man’s sins. This unowed gift can only be Christ’s life. To give it was necessary insofar as it was the only means to man’s salvation; it was gratuitous in that it was never required by divine justice.\(^{318}\) This pure gift is made in the service of economy, and economy is the cause of the pure gift.

Thus, that man redeemed all other men when he freely gave to God the debt that they owed. Through this payment (*pretio*), a man is redeemed from his faults not once only; rather, he is received as often as he returns again in worthy penitence.\(^{319}\)

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\(^{319}\) *Meditatio redemptionis humanae*, 88.
Thus, the price of redemption answers to the finite conditions of economy, while
the fruit of redemption is infinite.

The fruit is not distributed automatically, however. The benefit of the
offering is not secured by algebraic fact, but by the Christian’s conversion toward
God for whose sake the gift was given:

Therefore, those who will come to this grace with worthy (digno) affection
are saved; but those who despise this grace are justly condemned, because
they do not pay the debt they owe (debitum quod debent non reddunt).³²⁰

The redemption payment, then, is actualized through faith, the collection of the
Christian’s whole being and the rendering of it to God, to whom it ought to be
given back. The unity of God, as opposed to the multiplicity of binaries that
organize the sacrificial economy, is the final object of the believer’s orientation,
restored by the redemptive offering of Christ’s life.

The double aspect of the redemptive movement, its inability to decide
absolutely between the one and the many, must be held accountable for the
difficulty Anselm’s evaluators have had in assigning priority to the transaction
or to the free gift.

³²⁰ Ibid.
This tension resurfaces toward the end of the *Meditation*, where Anselm gives a first-person account of his turn toward the Creator. Anselm’s conversion operates according to the same dialectical principle as the objective dimension of his theory of redemption, which finds its content in Christ’s necessary yet excessive gift to the Godhead. Anselm’s faith is no less a matter of *debitum* than is Christ’s satisfaction payment, encompassing both the constraints of reciprocity and the freedom of Anselm’s pure self-givenness to his Redeemer. Anselm owes himself to God insofar as he owes more than himself to God.

Conversion in its double aspect is not only the offshoot of the twofold nature of the redemptive work, but its precondition. The prolonged discourse on conversion that concludes the *Meditation*, narrated in real time and in the first person, drives Anselm’s whole meditation on redemption as well as the structure of his theory. This is a meditation on *human* redemption, and the human subjective perspective is duly emphasized.

Stooped over as I was, you set me upright to face you, saying: “Be confident, I have redeemed you, and given my life for you. …” You cast aside the leaden weight, the heavy burden, and the impelling foes who drove me onward; for you removed the sin in which I had been conceived and born; you removed also the condemnation for this sin; and you forbade the evil spirits to constrain my soul. You caused me to be called “Christian” from your own name, by which I confess, and you acknowledge, that I am among your redeemed. You set me upright, and lifted me to the knowledge and love of you. 321

Anselm’s entire discourse on redemption is finally revealed in this passage to have been an act of prayer all along, a turning of his whole mind upon his Benefactor.

Just as the Deuteronomist uses the localization of sacrifice at Jerusalem to refer the whole debt of Israel to their absolutely supreme God, so Anselm’s meditation on Christ’s sacrifice culminates in a self-conscious referral of his whole being, formerly scattered by the impelling force of demons and by original sin, back to the unity of God. To God alone Anselm offers up his whole self, as he only ought: “Yea, Lord, because you created me, I owe (debeo) my entire self to your love; because you redeemed me, I owe my entire self; because you promise such great things, I owe my entire self.” But Anselm quickly corrects this needful yet inadequate statement of his moral boundedness by the justice of economy, turning it into an acknowledgment of God’s surpassing transcendence: “Indeed, I owe to your love much more than myself—as much more as you are greater than I, for whom you gave yourself, and to whom you promise yourself.”

Anselm still owes an infinite debt, and it is this infinity which marks a total escape from the limits of economy. The infinity of debt is the sine qua non of a re-orientation toward the transcendent oneness of God. All the while, Anselm reinstates economy, insofar as the entirety of his conversion, including his
unending reaching toward transcendence, materializes as a debt. “I owe more than my entire self, but I have no more to give. ...”\textsuperscript{322}

Anselm’s sophisticated emphasis on conversion redeems his theory from charges that it is implausibly objective or obsessed with economy. It is, at the same time, important to point out that the theory valorizes economy and sacrifice. The inherence of the sacrificial economy within the redemptive act is not always benign, with Anselm’s theory being a case in point. Notably writing near the time of the First Crusade,\textsuperscript{323} Anselm wonders in the \textit{Meditation} whether his debt to God obliges him to grieve for the cruelty of Christ’s sufferings at the hands of his persecutors. The passage gently elides the implication that he is weighing the value of revenge on Jews and Saracens. No, he decides, their cruelty ought to be left to the judgment of God. Instead, he will fulfill the debt incurred on him by the redemptive work by grieving over Christ’s persecutors in imitation of his Passion, detesting their cruelty, and meditating on what he

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid., 91. The subjective turn toward God in Anselm’s theology has sometimes been connected with the role of exemplification in his theory of redemption. In Sonderegger’s reading, against which I have nothing to say, redemption consists in both satisfaction and exemplification. Christ’s self-offering is the model for that of the Christian. It is no wonder, says Sonderegger, that Anselm spends so much time in \textit{Cur Deus Homo} arguing that there is a sense in which Christ’s death was unnecessary, and that this discussion seems preoccupied with problems relating to Christ’s will; his free-will offering is the prototype for the conversion of the believer. So important is exemplification for Anselm, that the desire for God and the ability to recognize and follow him are the critical human powers in his view. See Sonderegger, “Anselm, \textit{Defensor Fidei},” 347, 352–59.

\textsuperscript{323} \textit{Cur Deus Homo} was completed in 1098; \textit{Meditation on Human Redemption} was written a few years later.
himself owes to his Savior.\textsuperscript{324} The passage’s unsettling undertones serve as a reminder that theories of redemption should not be presumed to be equivalent, even when they exhibit felicitous structural homologies. While Anselm’s satisfaction theory displays substantial insight into the operation of the redemptive work, the fundamental attitudes and assumptions he draws on to construct this operation are prone to this deviancy, if not to others as well. Such is the fine line one walks when one embraces the sacrificial.

In conclusion, we may assert that Anselm’s satisfaction theory consists of the same essential sacrificial and sacrifice-transcending elements as Abelard’s, only with some differences as to these elements’ configuration. Like Abelard, Anselm refutes the existence of an overarching necessary justice by referring all things to God’s uniquely and absolutely transcendent power. God cannot be bound unwillingly by any principle, or by a contract with any being. Yet the sacrificial economy represented by the idea of necessity resurfaces in both of their theories. But whereas Abelard, the ethicist, banishes the sacrificial to the perimeter of his doctrine—despite its indispensability for his system—and denies it any explicit interaction with what he terms redemption, Anselm melds the sacrificial directly into the core of his theory. The sacrificial and the sacrifice-

\textsuperscript{324} Meditatio redemptionis humanae, 89.
transcending can be distinguished in Anselm’s thought only by attentive reading.

In constructing his theory this way, Anselm instantiates in it the recursive binary structure of the redemptive operation. God, in demonstrating that the sacrificial economy is subject to his will, subjects the whole sacrificial system, as it were, beneath his surpassing transcendence. The same arrangement structures God’s solution to the problem of sin, as Christ’s free gift to the Trinity proves adequate to the need to make satisfaction to the offended Deity.\textsuperscript{325} The free gift, given in excess, negates the reciprocity of economy that required the punishment of sinners, while nevertheless maintaining economy as the lower term of a binary; the upper term is the free gift. The same can be said for Anselm’s account of conversion, whereby Anselm, collecting his whole being into one as an offering for his debt, brings himself into correspondence with God’s transcendent unity, and thereby comes to understand the excess demanded of him by that very transcendence and uniqueness. The satisfaction theory thus reflects the vindication of Christ, the scapegoat, and the manifest subjugation of the sacrificial system to him, in these sacrificial yet sacrifice-transcending binaries of freedom/necessity, gift/economy.

\textsuperscript{325} That Christ’s sacrifice is made to the whole Trinity, see \textit{Cur Deus Homo} II.18 (129).
The mutual dependence of both terms of these binaries is built into Anselm’s theory, illustrating the manner in which God, seeking to set his creatures free from the conditions of the sacrificial, works from the sacrificial for this very end. The redemptive work of Christ and the conversion of the believer mark an escape from the sacrificial system, while reinstating its economy in the need for satisfaction and in the redeemed believer’s debt to God. Yet it is through these same economic principles that Anselm establishes God’s freedom and the believer’s reestablishment in the authentic transcendence-structure.

So much, then, for these two representatives of the archetypal atonement theories of the Western tradition. Let us now turn toward a prominent theorist of redemption from the Christian East.

§ 23. Gregory of Nyssa: The Fishhook

Gregory of Nyssa’s influential metaphor of the fishhook represents an instance of the ransom theory that, in its later forms, was to be refuted in the West by the likes of Anselm and Abelard.326 Gregory’s iteration of this theory is

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326 The fishhook metaphor appears also in Rufinus, Commentarius in Symbolum Apostolorum 16, in Gregory the Great, Moralia 33.7, and in John of Damascus, de Fidei 3.27; see James Herbert Srawley, ed., The Catechetical Oration of Gregory of Nyssa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 93, n. 2. Srawley’s Greek text will be referred to throughout. The fishhook is still sung about in the Greek hymnography for the Feast of the Cross. The heirmos of the fifth ode of the canon for the feast reads: «Ὡς τρισμακάριστον ἐξύλον, ἐν ὧ ἐτάθη Χριστός, ὁ Βασιλεὺς καὶ Κύριος· δι’ οὐ πέπτωκεν ὁ ἐξύλῳ ἀπατήσας, τῷ ἐν σοὶ δεδεισθεὶς, Θέω τῷ προσπαγέντι σαρκὶ, τῷ παρέχοντι, τὴν εἰρήνην ταῖς ψυχαῖς ἡμῶν». “O thrice-blessed Tree, upon which was
recommended for its wide dissemination and relative simplicity. Gregory fuses the primitive Christian motifs of the descent into hell and the deceit of the devil with the motif of a payment to the devil, yielding a theory that is made up of a complicated array of subordinate images and ideas. Yet, this complexity notwithstanding, Gregory’s version of the ransom theory remains unencumbered by the legalistic and moralistic considerations introduced into it by Augustine and Gregory the Great. For Augustine, Christ’s blamelessness is the active reagent that causes the forfeiture of the devil’s rights; Augustine leaves unclear why the bargain with the devil was necessary in the first place, or what role Christ’s divine nature plays in relation to his innocence. For Gregory of Nyssa, the transaction between God and the devil is a straightforward quid pro quo, the Trojan horse of Christ’s divinity serving to break the power of the devil, namely death (cf. Heb 2:14), after he has accepted the exchange. Gregory’s theory, by involving fewer moving parts, is easier to systematize, though Gregory’s narrative admittedly still leaves questions of internal consistency.

Gregory’s ransom theory, presented most systematically in the *Great Catechism*, is multi-layered and eclectic. The fishhook metaphor, which would appear to be Gregory’s original contribution to the general family of ransom

stretched Christ, the King and Lord; through which fell he who deceived through a tree, baited by the God who was nailed to you in the flesh, who grants peace to our souls!”
theories, is treated only very briefly in the aforementioned work. As elsewhere in Gregory’s corpus, the fishhook is motivated in part by an apologetic purpose, as Nicholas Constas has noted. The metaphor is simple and elegant. God offered Jesus as a ransom to buy the freedom of the human race, who, since Adam, had been sold under the devil’s power by means of a deceitful contract. Since the miracle-working Messiah seemed a greater prize than all that the devil already possessed, the devil accepted him as a redemption payment, and granted humanity its freedom. But beneath the veil of Christ’s flesh lay his divine power, concealed from the devil’s perception as a hook is concealed under a worm. When the devil swallowed the divine bait by slaying Christ, the power of death that he held was exploded, since his nature could not withstand the presence of Christ’s deity. God thus broke the devil’s power by means of a ruse, ensnaring him in his own lust. As apologetics, the fishhook turns the shame and folly of the Cross into a vindication of God’s intelligence. As systematic theology, it helps Gregory justify the rationality of the ransom theory. The ransom motif was not original to Gregory—he seems to have imported it from Origen—and the idea may not have completely satisfied him. That the ransom

328 Great Catechism 22 (Srawley, Catechetical Oration, 84.16–85.19).
329 Great Catechism 23 (85.20–90.14).
330 Great Catechism 24 (92.16–93.6).
331 Origen, Commentary on Romans 2.19.29.
theory causes Gregory some anxiety is made clear by the great lengths he goes to in order to obfuscate the question of how a deceitful God can possess the divine quality of justice. Nonetheless, as Rashdall notes, the ransom theory seems to have been for Gregory more than just rhetoric. And Gregory’s use of the fishhook metaphor elsewhere in his corpus—without direct reference to the ransom payment—suggests that he took his contribution to the ransom theory fully seriously.

In total, the fishhook metaphor occupies a mere two lines of text in the *Great Catechism*, the work from which it is chiefly known. But the comprehensive breadth of this treatise, which covers the entire circuit of foundational Christian doctrine, allows a great amount of determination to be ascribed to the fishhook by way of contextualization. When taken in conjunction with Gregory’s use of the same metaphor in his homily *On the Three-Day Interval between the Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ*, its determination becomes even richer. As I will demonstrate, the metaphor presents the essential features of the redemptive work that I have already argued for on the basis of MT: the sacrificial exchange,

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332 See *Great Catechism* 26 (96.10–101.9) and throughout.
in the form of a scapegoating event, that subverts rather than reinforces the
circulation of meaning, and the re-orientation of the believer toward God’s
absolute transcendence that is made possible by the exchange.

The context needed in order to properly appreciate the fishhook metaphor
comes in three levels. First there is the social-political context in which Gregory is
writing the Great Catechism. The whole treatise serves an apologetic purpose. As
noted by Constas, Gregory lived in a time of tremendous religious, intellectual,
and political upheaval, a liminal zone between two epochs of history. Gregory,
fully conscious of the transformation that is occurring around him, is occupied in
the Great Catechism with the task of rationalizing Christian belief in its new
setting. Doctrine had to establish a stable relationship with its Hellenic
intellectual milieu and, more unsettlingly, find its role within a political order
that had persecuted the Church shortly before.335 The fishhook metaphor allows
Gregory to defend God’s goodness, wisdom, and justice, and so make a
compelling case for that which the Greeks derided as the “folly of the Cross” (1

335 In illustration of how acutely self-conscious the Christian community must have been of the
societal transformation taking place around it, consider the following widely circulated
Byzantine saints’ tale, a Rip van Winkle story recounted in the liturgical synaxarion for August 4.
Seven Christian boys fleeing the persecution of Decius take refuge in a cave. After a miraculous
sleep, they awaken during the reign of Theodosius. The boys encounter their new, Christianized
world with astonishment and perplexity. See the Μηναίον τοῦ Αὐγούστου (Αθήναι, Φέξη, 1904), 24–25.
Cor 2:7).\textsuperscript{336} We might say that Gregory performs the trick of the fishhook in the act of writing it: he introduces the subversive principle of the Cross into the stream of Greek political rationality. In Girardian terms, his metaphor destabilizes the sacrificial order from within. It appears rational, it acts rationally, but it undoes the rationality that accepts it. So much meaning we might surmise the fishhook to carry with respect to its social-political context.

The second level of context is the theological cosmic scheme outlined in the \textit{Great Catechism}. Gregory’s account of redemption is situated within his understanding of creation and the fall. His teaching on creation and fall is framed, in turn, by the notion of conversion, which he forefronts as a major theme: the \textit{Great Catechism} is ostensively addressed to the needs of the evangelist, the custodian of baptism, who must be able to persuade others to turn from their many gods and from their sins.\textsuperscript{337} Thus the treatise opens with a declaration of its purpose as the turning of minds from many gods to the One, and closes with a lengthy discussion of baptism and an exhortation on the need of the baptizand to change his/her way of life.\textsuperscript{338} Within this anthropological framing of his subject

\textsuperscript{336} See Constas, “The Last Temptation of Satan,” 237–40. In the \textit{Great Catechism}, the concern over God’s goodness, wisdom, justice, and power is articulated first in the prologue (12.13–14), and recurs throughout as a principal theme, especially in the discussion of redemption in 20–24 (78.11–94.21). On the fishhook as a direct response to the “folly of the Cross,” see \textit{Great Catechism} 24 (90.15–94.24) and throughout.

\textsuperscript{337} \textit{Great Catechism}, prologue (1.1–5).

\textsuperscript{338} Ibid. (1.1–6.11), \textit{Great Catechism} 33–36 (123.1–140.13), 40 (159.6–164.8).
matter, Gregory introduces a strongly unipolar cosmology depicting man’s original orientation within the transcendence-structure. Evil is the insubstantial negation of good; all of the world’s original goodness has its source in God. God, Gregory argues using a primitive form of the ontological argument, absolutely transcends all visible being, and is a totally unitary principle; there is no difference (διαφορά) between the Persons of the Godhead. Sin, then, is not a turn towards a second principle, but the negation of one’s natural apprehension of the good. “Thus, if the light shines from a clear sky, and someone willingly covers his sight with his eyelids, the sun is not responsible for him who does not see.” Sin and evil result from dis-orientation before the divine presence.

Alongside this doctrine of original orientation, Gregory introduces a depiction of the primordial sacrificial principle that structures the universe. Creation is fundamentally divided into the noetic and the sensible, which function together as a binary opposition. The noetic has greater affinity with God, and it is by diverting his attention to the sensible that man becomes dis-oriented. Man’s original dis-orientation—his “original sin”—is a cosmic crisis, because man was created to be that which stands at the junction of the noetic and the sensible, and, from that fulcrum, to keep the whole sensory world in order.

339 *Great Catechism*, prologue (5.10–6.11).
340 *Great Catechism* 7 (37.11–41.2).
341 *Great Catechism* 6 (29.12–37.10).
We find, then, a strong sacrificial organization undergirding Gregory’s creation, which becomes disorganized (i.e. falls into a sacrificial crisis) through the fall.

The third level of context is given by Gregory’s whole theory of redemption, in which the fishhook metaphor is proximally situated. The immediate occasion for Gregory’s discussion of redemption is the pressing question, Why did God become incarnate and die on a Cross when he presumably could have saved his creatures without humiliating himself? After making an apology for the Incarnation, Gregory defends God’s choice to undergo crucifixion as a manifestation of his wisdom and justice (τὸ σοφόν, τὸ δίκαιον). A problem arises here, since the ransom theory can be impugned precisely on the grounds that it portrays God as dealing unjustly, perpetrating an act of deceit. Gregory, however, will cleverly utilize the ransom theory to the opposite effect, using it to illustrate how supremely just and wise God really was in choosing death as his method of redemption. To this end, Gregory adopts and adapts the tradition of the Messianic secret. Here enters the fishhook, Gregory’s inventive metaphor for the concealment of Christ’s divinity.

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342 Great Catechism 18–19 (74.8–78.10).
343 Great Catechism 26 (96.10–101.9).
344 Cf. Mark 1:25; 8:30; Ignatius’ Ephesians; Ascension of Isaiah.
Through this complexly laden metaphor, Gregory will be able to respond to the problems occasioned by all three levels of context, to each in a way that is readily interpretable by the Girardian theory of sacrifice. First, Gregory’s deployment of the metaphor will cast the ransom mechanism as a mimetic reciprocation of the devil’s work; since it is reciprocal, it is quintessentially just. Second, the fishhook metaphor allows Gregory to situate the redemptive work within his doctrine of sin and conversion, explaining through it how God undoes original dis-orientation. Finally, the fishhook makes an effective apology for the folly of the Cross, able to vindicate God’s wisdom and justice, and thus reconcile the Christian narrative of the redemptive work with its new, post-Constantinian political order; at the same time, the metaphor serves to destabilize values and power relations, and so retains the Cross’s potential to undermine the sacrificial social order. All of this now needs detailed examination.

Gregory’s understanding of salvation is tied to a metaphysical hamartiology that forms the backdrop of his presentation of redemption. God has absolute and true being; he is the Ὄν of Exodus 3:14 and, in Gregory’s Platonizing metaphysics, the ultimate real (ὄντως Ὄν). Being, for Greek thought, implies stability, and is therefore reserved to the uncreated nature; all that is created, on the other hand, is subject to perpetual change (ἀλλοίωσις, τροπή), since it came into being by a change, namely, that from non-being into being. The
fact of being created thus subjects any entity, including the human one, to perpetual change. In these metaphysical terms, Gregory explains baptism, the sacrament of conversion, as the entry into affinity with the uncreated and unchanging nature. In ethical terms, Gregory explains the human subjection to perpetual change as the conversion of the will. We perpetually change in that our will is always in motion, either toward the good, or toward the bad under the semblance of the good. There is no end to this change, situated as it is within the transcendence-structure. The absolute good is absolutely transcendent, unattainable, while the bad is likewise unattainable, because it is non-being. The motion of the will is thus without limit in either moral direction.

It is in the context of this anthropological ontology, this metaphysical ethics, that Gregory first mentions the fishhook. Since man’s will is motivated by the good, the devil had to use the illusory appearance of good to bring about man’s fall:

Since, then, the mind was cheated by the desire for the truly good (ὁντως ἀγαθόν) and led aside toward that which has no being (το μη ὄν), having been persuaded through deceit by the counsellor and inventor of vice that the opposite of the good (το κακόν) was good—for the deceit would not have worked, had not the sheen (φαντασία) of the good been spread like bait over the hook of vice—man having willingly come into this condition of his own accord, then, subjecting himself through pleasure to the yoke of the enemy of life—

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345 Great Catechism 39 (154.3–159.5).
346 Great Catechism 21 (81.3–84.15).
The devil’s fishhook trick will be reciprocated by God as he mirrors the devil’s deception in the redemptive work, using a trick to undo the devil’s trick, and thereby displaying God’s own justice:

... seek for me in all this the qualities belonging to our notion of God, namely goodness, wisdom, justice, power, incorruptibility, and whatsoever else has the mark of superiority. For as good, he takes pity on him who had fallen; as wise, he knows the means of his recovery. And the judgment of the just is wise; for no one would ascribe true justice to folly.\textsuperscript{347}

It is by means of this judgment (κρίσις), this division of right from wrong, and the decision between them, that God will turn the sacrificial operation of division on its head, utilizing mimetic reciprocity against its own architect so as to turn the sacrificial system against itself, and toward God’s own ends. God will make Christ into his own deceptive fishhook in order to repay the author of vice by his own devices.

Here we are confronted with a potential pitfall in the theory. The mimetic reciprocity of God’s saving work raises the problem of whether Gregory has, in effect, implicated God in mimetic rivalry with the devil, making him the devil’s moral equivalent. A close and sensitive reading shows decisively that he does

\textsuperscript{347} Ibid. (84.1–15). The suspended sentences in my translation retain the halting and elliptical construction of the original text.
not. Gregory interprets God’s deceptive act as God’s refusal to use violence; by
offering Christ as a ransom, God liberates humanity with the devil’s consent. “In
the same way that we had sold ourselves, so was it needful that the one who for
goodness’ sake delivered us back to freedom should devise not a tyrannical, but
a just means of recovery.”348 Gregory thus avoids implicating God in mimetic
rivalry. The devil envies God and man, and for this reason he tries to usurp their
honor; God, by contrast, acts lawfully, and solely out of virtue. Furthermore, God
cannot possibly be acting out of competitiveness, because he profits nothing from
the redemptive work. God is motivated by eleos and philanthropia, not by honor.
Finally, God cannot be acting acquisitively, because—and here Gregory is much
more radical than his Western counterparts, Anselm and Abelard—he is not
purchasing back his human bondservants, but restoring them to their original
freedom. (There is, therefore, no problem for Gregory of how the devil could
have justly obtained rights over humanity, since Adam and Eve were free beings
who sold themselves willingly, not property of God who could not be purchased
without the Master’s consent.)349 The embrace of mimesis and sacrifice on God’s
part thus does not imply that God perpetuates the violence of sacrifice. To the

348 Great Catechism 22 (84.16–85.19).
349 Ibid. (85.4–17).
contrary, he turns the vicious aspects of the sacrificial system to good, using them non-violently.

Another difficult question arises. Is the ransom paid to the devil to be considered a sacrifice, and not just a market transaction? It is the mimetic reciprocity inhering in the transaction and the cosmic centrality of the Christ-signifier that make the payment a sacrifice. Without these, no sacrificial quality would be apparent. This assertion requires that we walk a fine line. Gregory does not speak of Christ’s death as a sacrifice to the devil, nor to anything else, in this text. The metaphor of ransom is purely legal and political, free of explicit cultic meaning. But given the mimetic reciprocity of the exchange (ἀντάλλαγμα) with the devil, the transaction can and should be interpreted as the thematization of a scapegoating substitution. Gregory’s own interpretation of the exchange as a work of justice (τὸ δίκαιον) is only a step removed from the scapegoating interpretation, and falls squarely within the logic of the sacrificial system, since justice is a form assumed by the sacrificial order, constructed from the material of sacrificial binaries.\footnote{Great Catechism 23 (90.11–13): «τὸ δὲ συναλλαγματικήν ποιήσασθαι τὴν τοῦ κρατουμένου Λύτρωσιν τὸ δίκαιον δείκνυσι.» “The performance of the transaction refers one to the attribute of justice belonging to him who had the ability to redeem.”}
The justice of the transaction, for Gregory, is twofold. On the one hand, Gregory emphasizes that the exchange of Christ for captive humankind is a valid economic transaction, since the devil willingly agreed to the trade. On the other hand, since the transaction took advantage of the devil’s envy, by which he had originally induced Adam to sin, it is also just as an act of reciprocity:

He who ... for envy of the blessed [Adam] shut his eyes to the good, and in doing so begot in himself the murk of vice, becoming sick with the desire to be chief (φιλαρχίαν), that principle and foundation of the inclination toward the worse, and mother, as it were, of all other vice—in return for what might he be willing to exchange (ἀντηλλάξατο) that which he possessed, if not a higher and better ransom (ἀνταλλάγματος), that he might further feed his own vain passion, profiting by the trade of the lesser for the greater?

God thus reciprocates the devil’s deceit, while it is the devil’s envy and rivalrous temper that account for the mechanics of the process the whole way through.\(^{351}\)

Once the devil swallows the pharmakon, the scapegoated entity who is both a poison and a cure, he discovers beneath the flesh of Christ the divine power that he is unable to resist:

For since ... the opposing power did not have such a nature as to mingle with the undiluted presence of God, and to withstand his naked manifestation, in order that our ransom might be easily accepted by him who required it, the Deity (τὸ θεῖον) was concealed beneath the veil of our nature, that, as with greedy fish, the hook of the Godhead (θεότητος) might be gulped down because of the bait of the flesh, and so life might

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\(^{351}\) Ibid. (85.20–90.14).
enter into the house of death and light shine in darkness, causing that which is understood to be contrary to light and life to vanish.\textsuperscript{352}

And so the saving dispensation is accomplished.

One can see from these summaries just how overdetermined the symbol of the fishhook really is. It can now be related back to each of the three levels of context in which it was introduced, in each case in a way that is efficiently interpretable through my assumptions about redemption that are founded on MT. The relationship of the fishhook to the problem of justice posed by the ransom theory has already been addressed. We are now prepared to give a mimetic interpretation of the fishhook within the theology of the \textit{Great Catechism} as a whole, as well as within Gregory’s social-political context.

The whole content of the \textit{Great Catechism} is framed, as I have alluded to, by an anthropology of dis-orientation and re-orientation, serving Gregory’s exhortation to conversion to the divine faith. One may tentatively presume that each part of this work refers back to its overall stated purpose and framing. In the case of the redemption narrative, Gregory draws no such connection explicitly. A close reading, however, proves that Gregory does have conversion in mind. For as Adam—always named by Gregory using the generic title Ὅ

\textsuperscript{352} \textit{Great Catechism} 24 (92.16–93.6).
ἄνθρωπος—sinned through lust, desiring what appeared to his senses to the neglect of what was accessible to the intellect, so was the devil deceived by what he saw, and overthrown by what was invisible to him. Both went astray after bodily appearances; both overlooked the presence of the Divinity.

The protological error of the devil and the first man portrays the workings of mimetic desire with nuance. Mimetic desire operates in a deviated transcendence-structure, looking for fulfillment in the creature, whose form becomes a matter of obsession. The substance that one vainly wishes to appropriate from one’s mimetic object is not really there; the object is a surrogate for the truly Transcendent, God. The divine nature can never be correctly apprehended until one acknowledges its radical invisibility; one can never intelligently relate to the appearance of the flesh until one acknowledges that it cannot be identified with the divinity one wishes to acquire. Only behind the sign of Christ’s body does true Divinity become accessible through the medium of a created nature.

No wonder, then, that Gregory identifies the primeval fall into a deviated transcendence-structure with the sin of envy (φθόνος), which passed from the devil to humanity:

There was a certain power that was appointed to govern and command the earthly region, given power for this very purpose by the Power that
administers the universe. Then was fashioned the earthly creature, a copy of the higher Power. This living creature was man. ... He who administers the earthly realm takes it as something terrible and outrageous if any essence from the nature that is subject to him should be shown to be like the transcendent dignity. ... Since [the aforementioned power] closed his eye to the good and ungrudging (ἀφθονον), just as one who covers his sight with his eyelids before the sun sees darkness, so did he, by the very act of not desiring (θελῆσαι) to apprehend (νοῆσαι) the good, fix his vision (κατενόησε) on the opposite of the good. Now this is envy. ... As, then, dispassion is the principle and foundation of the life according to virtue, so is the inclination to vice, which comes to pass through envy, the sure way to all known evils that follow from it. ...  

The devil’s instigation of envy, a negative act performed by closing his eyes to the solar radiance of the good, is repeated by man, as shown in one of the citations given above (p. 265).  

The work of redemption, then, taking advantage of the devil’s rivalrous lusts, not only reciprocates his deed in kind, but mirrors the mimetic character of the primal sin itself.  

Gregory is less elliptical in On the Three-Day Interval between the Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this homily, the relation between conversion and redemption is expressed directly. The devil is a great “wicked mind” (πονηρὸς νοῦς) that rebelled against God through envy of his divine status. The wicked mind’s thoughts (νοηματα) are of pride, the wish to rival God. Gregory addresses him:

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353 Great Catechism 6 (28.12–37.10).
354 Refer to Great Catechism 7 (40.15–41.2).
You said in your heart: I will go up to heaven, I will set my throne above the stars, I will sit upon a high mountain, I will go above the clouds, and be like the Most High.\textsuperscript{355}

The devil is a master of wisdom ($\sigma\varphi\iota\alpha$). But Christ, concealing his divinity under the bait of his flesh,\textsuperscript{356} uses his own wisdom against the wicked mind:

> The all-powerful Wisdom, having entered into the heart of the earth, was able to make foolish the great mind that dwelt therein; for so the prophet [Isaiah] names him, calling him “great mind” and “Assyrian.”

$\mathrm{No\upsilon\varsigma}$, mind, apprehends $\sigma\varphi\iota\alpha$, the knowledge of the referentiality of beings (what was called τὸ σοφὸν among the pre-Socrates).\textsuperscript{357} Wisdom, that is to say, is here the ordering of beings within the sacrificial economy. Christ used economy’s workings ($τ\alpha \sigma\varphi\alpha$) against itself, redeeming by outsmarting the great mind, using wisdom to overthrow wisdom:

> Since, then, the heart is the seat of the mind, as it were (for this is where the governing faculty is thought to reside), the Lord entered into the heart of the earth, which is the dwelling place of that wicked mind, so that he might render his counsel foolish, as the prophecy says, and catch the wise

\textsuperscript{355} De Tridui spatio, 282.1–4; Isa 14:13–14.

\textsuperscript{356} Ibid., 281.6–19.

\textsuperscript{357} See Martin Heidegger’s essay, Was ist das—die Philosophie? (Pfullingen: Günther Neske, 1956). Girard’s distinction between the Heraclitean Logos and the Johannine Logos is germane here. In Girard’s perceptive reading of Heidegger, Heraclitus’ Logos is the generative sacrificial center on which all cultures depend. The Johannine Logos, argues Girard contra Heidegger, is the true absent center of culture, the forever expelled (in Jesus’ case, a literal victim), which discloses the truth by its very expulsion (Girard, Things Hidden, 252–65). Gregory’s theory nicely illustrates the kinship between the two Logoi that is overlooked by Girard: the Johannine Logos can work his truth-revealing expulsion only from the generative center of the sacrificial system. The identity-in-difference of the two Logoi is analogous to the identity-in-difference of Christian and archaic sacrifice that Girard comes to acknowledge in his late work.
one by his own machinations, and turn his own wise devices against him.\textsuperscript{358} 

For Gregory, as for the whole line of Patristic thought stemming from Origen, the end of Christian ascesis is the contemplation of the divine through the νοῦς. The Christian life is correspondingly an exercise in the purification of this faculty.\textsuperscript{359} Christ’s entry into the great νοῦς in the heart of the earth cannot but invoke the ascetic practice of the purification of the mind, which resides in the heart. Even within the limited field of references given by Gregory in this passage, Christ’s use of divine wisdom to usurp the wisdom of the “great mind” inescapably connotes the redemption of the Christian’s mind. Christ’s redemptive operation against the devil corresponds analogically to the conversion of the believer’s mind, which, in putting away its orientation toward created things, acquired through the passion of envy and diabolical deceit, now begins instead a return to the singular contemplation of the uncreated nature.

Turning to the final layer of context in which Gregory’s fishhook metaphor is embedded, we find the double role of wisdom to be the key to unlocking the significance of his theory within its social-political context. The subversive use of wisdom against wisdom, the utilization of the referentiality of

\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., 280.16–281.6. 
\textsuperscript{359} The significance of noetic contemplation for Gregory is brought out most dramatically in his \textit{Life of Moses}. 
beings against itself, is a subtle declaration that Christ’s death has disrupted the sacrificial order. Since God has refused to act tyrannically, he has, in overcoming the Tyrant over our nature through ingenuity rather than strength, inverted the elementary binaries that lay at the heart of the sacrificial economy (that is to say, in Gregory’s way of thinking, in the seat of the mind). A non-violent wisdom has proven superior to the wisdom that enforces order through threat and violence. This inversion in Gregory’s theory corresponds to Paul’s declaration that God triumphed over the wisdom of this world through what was folly in the world’s sight, strength through weakness. Gregory’s shift of emphasis from the folly and weakness of the Cross to its justice and ingenuity renders Paul’s inversion more able to function in an Imperial political order, without robbing it of any of its subversive energy. The Empire within which the fishhook metaphor is meant to function is also that which the metaphor is best suited to undermine.

Most commentators on theories of atonement treat Gregory’s ransom theory as a grotesque and incongruous stepping-stone on the way to the more sophisticated atonement theories of medieval and modern times. I believe this is because they take Gregory’s theory too much as if it were a product of dialogical reasoning like the Scholastic theories. It is not. The theory is a textualization of the unravelling of the order of things that Girard links to archaic sacrifice, replete
with representations of the mimetic processes that undergird scapegoating.\textsuperscript{360}

Any dialogical argumentation that plays a part in Gregory’s theory, such as the proofs of God’s justice, is built on top of this textualization, and saves its plausibility post hoc. The same, in fact, should be said for the Scholastic theories of Anselm and Abelard: despite their stronger emphasis on dialogical method, they, too, are textualizations of the overcoming of sacrifice. All three theories construct a symbolic universe that allows one to navigate the processes described by Girard in an analogical fashion.\textsuperscript{361} Even Raymund Schwager, who evaluates Gregory’s ransom theory from the standpoint of MT, misses the opportunity to appreciate it properly, because he fails to consider the contextual factors that make its analogical nature obvious.\textsuperscript{362}

Positive modern evaluations of the ransom theory have generally argued for its favorability on the basis of the image of \textit{Christus Victor}, Christ victorious over the devil. The favorable reviews have sometimes come from those concerned about the role played by Anselmian-type models of redemption in upholding oppressive power relations.\textsuperscript{363} The search for a liberative model in the

\textsuperscript{360} Cf. Ray’s appraisal of the ransom theory: “Its narrative character opens rather than closes discussion, invites rather than discourages participation, question, and innovation” (Ray, \textit{Deceiving the Devil}, 130).

\textsuperscript{361} One might compare ch. 2 of Douglas, \textit{Leviticus as Literature.}


ransom theory is, I think, more than sensible. But the transformative power of redemption that is encoded in this theory, or at least in Gregory’s version of it, is accessed only by appreciating its effect of representing the sacrificial dialectic.

Constas, to whose sensitivity as a reader of Gregory’s texts I owe the basis for these insights, makes headway in the direction of the analysis I have given. He is properly sensitive to the play of signs. The shame and folly of the Cross, ungraspable to the Imperial order and its semi-official Stoic philosophy, turns out to be the hidden wisdom of God. Christ’s body is the sign under which their destabilization takes place; to him attaches all the duplicity and more of Plato’s pharmakos. The deception wrought by the sign of Christ’s body serves, in Constas’ language, to destabilize its theological referent, and in doing so exploits the categories constructed by desire and power.364

Constas’ unorthodox reading of Gregory, which shows obvious parallels to deconstructive philosophy that he himself acknowledges,365 is grounded in a reading of Gregory’s hamartiology that parallels the interpretation of mimetic desire I have advanced:

[T]he mind can fail to grasp the true nature of the world, fall prey to deception, and mistake the appearance of the sign for that which it seeks to render present. In response, the deity transgresses the divisions of

365 Ibid., 240.
created being, incarnating itself within matter in order to seduce humanity away from its obsession with sensuous signs.\textsuperscript{366}

The destabilization of signs and transgression of binary divisions become the means of the redemptive work:

As a conspiracy of signs, divine deception entails the loss of fixed referential principles, collapsing the world into a symbolic, lucid universe which is perhaps best interpreted in terms of play, challenges, duels, and the strategy of appearances. It is a universe that can no longer be interpreted in terms of dominant structures or stable binary oppositions, but rather through seductive reversibility. ... To seduce is to appear weak. To seduce is to render weak.\textsuperscript{367}

Constas’ reading of Gregory’s redemption texts is, to my mind, insufficient. He is right to point out that there is a destabilization of signs at work in them. But Constas’ appraisal precludes the possibility of some constructive outcome of the redemptive work. The mimetic approach embraces the destructive destabilization caused by the redemptive operation, in accordance with the deconstructivist tendency. But the redemptive work, by installing Christ in the center, does not leave us with a dissolved order. Instead, as Darby Kathleen Ray picks up, the ransom theory opens us to a reconfigured, inside-out order, in which Christ rules through serving and exercises strength through weakness.\textsuperscript{368}

\textsuperscript{366} Ibid., 255.
\textsuperscript{367} Ibid., 260.
\textsuperscript{368} Ray, \textit{Deceiving the Devil}, 123–25. Similarly to Girard, Ray tries to construe redemption as Christ’s exposure of the moral bankruptcy of thisworldly power. She sees the ransom theory as a potent representation of evangelical subversiveness.
At the same time, this reconfigured order, whatever it might look like once fully formed, cannot be an order in the old sense. It preserves the power of sacrifice, while disrupting, subverting, and inverting the construction of that power. In breaking the curse of sacrifice, Christ redeems sacrifice from its violence. Were this not possible, nature could not be saved.
CHAPTER 6
THE REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE AND THE IMITATION OF GOD

This study has circled through the foundational significance of redemption theory, the unfolding of the redemptive work in the Scriptures, and the possibilities for modelling redemption afforded by the classical theories of the Christian tradition. It is now time to complete this circuit by returning to the two questions that motivated the inquiry: What is the use of a theoretical understanding of redemption today? and, Is there a positive role for sacrifice in redemption theory? To answer this pair of questions, I invoked Girard’s Mimetic Theory as a framework around which to construct my method.

The two questions are answered in this concluding chapter. I take them in the reverse order from which they were introduced, so as to finish off with the question that instigated the whole inquiry. First, I bring closure to the question of sacrifice by returning to the exchange-hypothesis, demonstrating how my argument about sacrifice flows logically from trends in Girard’s own thinking, and recapitulating how the redemptive work deserves to be understood as sacrificial in a strong sense (§ 24). I then end this study with a return to the conversion-hypothesis, raising again, and proposing an answer to, the question of what good a theoretical understanding of redemption does for anyone (§ 25).
§ 24. Turning Mimesis, Turning Sacrifice

If there is a single point I wish to make with this study, it is this: redemption theory is a natural and indispensable part of what makes it possible to live in the world in a redeeming way, and the sacrificial, transactional element in redemption theory, stumbling-block that it is, lies at the heart and center of the redeeming way of life. MT provides a way to understand how this can be so without simply falling back on a set of initial assumptions. I will carry out my closing discussion of the sacrificial nature of redemption by comparing my conclusions with Girard’s own soteriology. I have already mentioned Girard’s perspective on Christ’s death, including how his view shifted over the course of his life. I will now examine this shift in more detail, try to show what is at stake in the way Girard thinks about Christ’s death, and argue that my different attitude toward Girard’s own idea of sacrifice completes the shift he underwent in his thinking.

The earliest hints in Girard’s oeuvre that he has the life, death, and resurrection of Christ on his mind are found in his first major work, Deceit, Desire and the Novel. This book is not often taken into consideration in discussions of Girard’s mature theological views, as if it belonged strictly to younger Girard’s atheist phase. This presumption is misleading. Deceit, Desire and the Novel contains the seeds of nearly the full spectrum of Girard’s later thinking on
religion. The book is a literary analysis of the triangular (mimetic) structure of desire in great novels, but behind this veneer, one sees a work bursting with theological content. It begins with a comparison to Christ, and ends with a defense of the universal truth of Christian symbolism. The book’s “plot” parallels the arc of redemption history: beginning from the fall into mimetic rivalry, contrasted pointedly with the Christian saint’s imitation of Christ, the book proceeds to discuss the false apotheosis of mortals and the enslavement of souls, followed by several technical chapters, and finishing with the apocalypse and resurrection. Readers who overlook the centrality of these themes to *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* have committed the same fault that Girard complains about regarding literary critics who downplay Christian imagery in classic novels. In the case of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard’s Christian imagery will prove essential to what he wishes to say.

Two observations may be remarked about the theological tendency of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. First, its outlook is decidedly conservative. It bemoans the unwillingness of today’s literati to accept class differences as good, a complaint which continues throughout Girard’s corpus to the end of his life. He laments the stepwise fall of literary production from an aristocratic

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preoccupation, down to a middle-class ethic, and finally into the hands of the “proletarianized writer,” as Girard pooh-poohs his contemporaries. In a more firmly classist society, the novelist was able to become aware of his snobbish envy and the impossibility of fulfilling it. Nowadays, these Marxist writers are not able to muster the irony to acknowledge their envy of others, so constrained are they by their belief that everyone should be the same! The reasons why Girard finds this progression so unfortunate, even hyperbolically characterizing it as apocalyptic, can be discerned most clearly by reading the concerns of the later Violence and the Sacred back into Deceit, Desire and the Novel. People imitate each other by copying their desires. If one lives within a rigid class hierarchy, one will imitate the desires of those of higher classes, like Sancho Panza imitating Don Quixote, or a medieval mystic imitating Jesus Christ. Since the great strength of the class structure makes it a foregone conclusion that one can never become the equal of one’s model, this vertical imitation is benign, it cannot lead to rivalry. Girard terms this form of mimetic desire, in which the model is removed to an unreachable distance, “external mediation.” The mediator is the model, and the desired object that the mediator is perceived to possess is the thing mediated, the common object of desire shared by subject and model. But when class distinctions are weak, one believes one can really get what one’s

\[370\text{ Ibid., 262–63.}\]
model has, or one can try to get above one’s peers. The way is now open to “internal mediation,” in which the subject and model enter into real competition for the common object of desire. Internal mediation is an intensely metaphysical kind of desire. It presumes that if only one could appropriate the being of one’s model, one would find fulfillment. One therefore becomes sickened with a metaphysical obsession over the model, with a desire to possess the model, or to possess everything the model has. The social distinctions that Girard would later posit to be generated by sacrifice are what pre-empt this delusional obsession and ensure the stability of society, limiting mediation to the external variety. When the sacrificial order erodes too much, internal mediation becomes strong, leading to contagious rivalry and a sacrificial crisis. The social order is therefore beneficial, not just materially, in that it spares us from much violence, but spiritually, because it prevents us from falling into a delusional metaphysical obsession with others around us. Class differences keep mimetic desires weak, and prevent them from corrupting us too much. With these assertions, Girard affirms formal social hierarchy.

371 Ibid., 9.
372 Cf. Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 146: “Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires. … The reason is that he desires being, something that he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. … If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being” (emphasis original).
373 Girard, Deceit, Desire and the Novel, 53.
374 See also § 11.
The second feature of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*’s theological tendency to be remarked is its professed belief that an individual may become liberated from the sickness of internal mediation by some form of renunciation. Thus Girard dedicates his final chapter to the renunciation of metaphysical desire, and to the spiritual resurrection that accompanies renunciation.\(^375\) How exactly renunciation is to be done is not resolved. Girard lays in front of us only a pair of possibilities, each of which he would pursue in later phases of his work: once one recognizes the mimetic nature of one’s desire, one must renounce either one’s desire or one’s pride.\(^376\) Early Girard equivocates between these two possibilities, but tends in the direction of renunciation of desire. In his conclusion to *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, he emphasizes the freedom from triangular desire won by the novelist as the culmination of his or her lifework. Yet this is bad theology. The original sin is not desire, because desire can be natural, even mimetic desire. If all mimetic desire were sinful, then Christianity would need to take a nihilistic view of human action, since there would be no way to discern the better from the worse. Only when envy and pride are introduced does desire become sinful. The only option is to accept mediated desire, and renounce one’s pride. One must acknowledge that one is not the originator of one’s own wants, that one is not

\(^{375}\) Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 290–95.

\(^{376}\) Ibid., 272.
able to be autonomous in every respect. “We cannot escape mimetism,” reflects Girard toward the end of his life. “I had long tried to think of Christianity as in a higher position, but I have had to give up on that. I am now persuaded that we have to think from inside mimetism.”  

If we humans cannot exist outside mimetism—meaning, by implication, outside some form of the transcendence-structure—and if mimetism is a source of spiritual sickness and physical violence, then are we not caught between a rock and a hard place? Are we to attempt the impossible, or resign ourselves to sin? The way out of this dilemma, adumbrated in Deceit, Desire and the Novel but recognized fully only in Girard’s late work, is to find a stable and beneficial external mediator. “There is no solution for mimetism aside from a good model.” In the medieval world that Girard’s imagination inhabits in Deceit, Desire and the Novel, this mediator is the saint; in his later work, the focus turns to Christ himself. The turning point at which Girard first explicitly acknowledged the possibility of good mimetic desire came in his 1993 interview with Rebecca Adams, arguably inaugurating the late phase of his work. What

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377 Girard, Battling to the End, 82 (emphasis original).
378 Ibid., 101.
379 Girard’s first field of study was manuscript transmission of medieval texts; see Cynthia L. Haven, Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 33–34.
380 Girard, Deceit, Desire and the Novel, 60.
course of action did Girard advocate with respect to mimetic desire? “Not the renunciation of mimetic desire itself,” conceded Girard when pressed, “because what Jesus advocates is mimetic desire. Imitate me, and imitate the Father through me, he says. …” The imitation of Jesus is thus “twice mimetic.” The ascension of Christ into heaven in human form puts him at an infinite remove, making him an absolutely external mediator and therefore safe to imitate, while his human nature keeps him imitable. “In order to escape negative imitation, the reciprocity that brought people closer to the sacred,” Girard reflects, “we have to accept the idea that only positive imitation will place us at the correct distance from the divine.” Christ is put at this distance precisely so that he may be imitated to a good purpose, something which, as the Gospels bear out, was not yet possible for his fractious disciples when he lived among them in the flesh. For early Girard, “Following Christ means giving up mimetic desire.” For mature Girard, following Christ is about re-orienting mimetic desire. “Mimetic desire,” Girard concedes, “is intrinsically good.”

When it comes to the possibilities for a Christian conception of sacrifice, the impact of the shift in Girard’s valuing of mimetic desire is immense. For

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382 Girard, Battling to the End, 120.
383 Girard, Things Hidden, 410.
384 Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, 15.
much of early Girard, it would seem that detachment from the world is the way to escape the grips of mimesis. Conversely, freedom from mimesis would mean detachment from the world. This is because sacrifice is configured by mimesis, and the world is configured by sacrifice. These relations hold true not just of the human secular world but, in the Christian anthropological cosmos, of creation as such. Christ, by being a good, unegotistical model who is removed at a safe distance, completely alters the chain of signs by placing himself at the origin-point of the sacrificial system, that is, by becoming a sacrificial victim. He does this at the intersection of the arms of the Cross, which, Irenaeus tells us, point in each of the cardinal directions, gathering the universe into a single location. The surrogate rival of the whole community is replaced by someone with whom it is impossible to compete without misunderstanding his nature. If one recognizes Christ’s divinity, one recognizes also that his humanity inaugurates a new kind of human relationality.

But this is not a cancellation of the sacrificial system. The Gospel takes up the sacrificial as its own, though only to turn it on its head. Christ, in being recognized as the impeccable model and the new victim, makes sacrifice impossible for all who maintain full cognizance of him. But the decision against sacrifice is itself structurally sacrificial. It depends on the placement of Christ at the heart of the sacrificial order. The displacement of meaning from the center
likewise depends on the placement of Christ at the very origin-point. This is not a non-sacrificial religion; it is an anti-sacrificial one, and, as such, it opts to beat swords into plowshares rather than to cast ironwork aside altogether.

Christianity can only work through mimetism and the structural systems it engenders, even though it also refuses these in large part. Hence, it is no crime if the classic atonement theories we examined resort to sacrificial thinking. Rather than being a fault, this is a condition for their sophistication and potency.

Girard half-recognizes the need to work within sacrificial structures in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, a relatively early work in which he had not yet properly appreciated the good possibilities of mimesis:

Thanks to the sacrificial reading it has been possible for what we call Christendom to exist for fifteen or twenty centuries; that is to say, a culture has existed that is based, like all cultures (up to a certain point) on the mythological forms engendered by the founding mechanism. Paradoxically, in the sacrificial reading the Christian text itself provides the basis. Mankind relies upon a misunderstanding of the text that explicitly reveals the founding mechanism to re-establish cultural forms which remain sacrificial and to engender a society that, by virtue of this misunderstanding, takes its place in the sequence of all other cultures, still clinging to the sacrificial vision that the Gospel rejects.\footnote{Girard, *Things Hidden*, 174.}

Because redemption operates within the structures of the sacred, the only available escape from the viciousness inherent in the system is through the
system: a good model, at a proper distance, occupying the sacrificial center of meaning. Only he can break the system by means of the system, by putting weakness in the place of strength, and substituting love into the center of systemic violence.

This substitution is not a one-time event. It is unique, because only the God-man can do it; but because he has done it, his power enables his disciples to re-present it. Hence, the persecution of Christ is both the completion of the spilt blood of the Old Covenant saints, shed from Abel to Zechariah, and the beginning of the martyrdoms of the apostles of the New Covenant. Wherever the Gospel goes, the apostle who brings it may repeat its effects in a new place and for a new people. Martyrdom is not a method for attaining sanctity, nor is it a substitute for water baptism, except incidentally. It is a repetition of surrogate victimage that realizes again the inversion of meanings and exposure of sacred violence that were accomplished by Christ. In the early martyrologies, the great martyrs sometimes undergo a Christoform metamorphosis in the midst of their public execution. By so often repeating the motifs of public blaming and scapegoating, of all-against-one, the earliest hagiographies do not leave open the

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386 The Christological reading of the Psalms suggests that Christ and the saints undergo identification with scapegoats; cf. Girard, *Job, the Victim of his People*; cf. also *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 128.
387 See also § 9.
388 Two clear examples: the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and the *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity.*
possibility that martyrdom was about the virtue learnt through a purifying death.

Given the tight relation of the Girardian concept of sacrifice to mimesis, it is no surprise that the shift in how Girard thought about mimetic desire was accompanied by a shift in how he thought about Christ’s death. The change is in how he relates Christ’s death to his concept of sacrifice. In Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World, early Girard explains in systematic detail why Christ’s death is not a sacrifice. The Gospels, he asserts, do not present Christ’s death as a sacrifice; rather, by refusing to sacralize his death, the Gospels explode the surrogate victim mechanism, initiating a historical process whereby sacrifice and scapegoating gradually become impossible for humanity.\textsuperscript{389} To think of the Crucifixion as a sacrifice is precisely to miss the point. Early Girard thus advocates a total disengagement from the sacrificial system. The problem with this view is that disengagement from the workings of sacrifice means disengagement from the world altogether. But such disengagement is theoretically impossible and practically impotent.

In Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World, Girard could not express his position less frontally. “I think that it is necessary to rid ourselves of the

\textsuperscript{389} Girard, Things Hidden, 173 f.
sacred,” he says, “for the sacred plays no part in the death of Jesus.” Christ’s is a totally naturalistic death, and the moral consequences of it are commonsensical. The Gospel texts do not conceal the transference of violence from the crowd onto their surrogate victim, Jesus, and so they place responsibility “squarely on those who are responsible for it.” The death of Jesus is effective as a salvific event for a negative reason only, namely, that it has caused the victim mechanism to become “progressively less obscured by ignorance.”

One could say that outside our [Western] society the mechanism is invisible because it is constantly in retreat; it keeps a position behind human beings. In Judeo-Western [sic] society, on the other hand, it has gradually come forward again and is more and more visible. … In so far as light is shed on the victimage mechanism, concepts like violence and unjust persecution become thinkable and begin to play a larger role in cultural institutions.

Yet this perspective conflicts with Girard’s claim (cited previously) that Christendom is made possible by the misrecognition of the Crucifixion as a sacrificial event. If it is within a Christian framework that Girard can see the truth about the persecution of Jesus, or if Christianity has been a historical vehicle of this great movement toward a consciousness of victims as Girard asserts, how can it be an entirely bad thing that this framework is sacrificial?

When Girard’s friend, Jesuit theologian Raymund Schwager, pushed Girard to acknowledge positive possibilities for the notion of sacrifice, he was acting out of a desire to remain faithful to formal Catholic teaching. But Schwager was also responding sketchily to the contradiction in Girard’s commitments. “Are we really completely outside the mechanism?” Schwager asks Girard in an article of personal correspondence. “The people who come after us, won’t they find aspects of sacrificial thinking even in the way we use anti-sacrificial theory?” Of course they will, we must reply. One does not leave behind scapegoating; one may scapegoat scapegoating, like Abelard, or put it at the heart of a restorative spirituality, like Anselm, or invert it without eliminating it, like Gregory. Schwager and Girard have good reason to look for a positive way to acknowledge Christ’s death as a sacrifice.

Schwager and Girard both came up with inadequate solutions to the problem Schwager raised. For Schwager, the Crucifixion could be considered a sacrifice with respect to the actions of the persecutors, and, since Jesus consented to undergo death at their hands, his death could therefore be considered a kind of self-sacrifice:

The event by which Christ reveals a nonviolent and non-sacrificial God is a sacrificial event from the perspective of the people. Christ does not share this

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393 Girard, Correspondence, 99.
… but he accepts what the people are doing. He consents to being sacrificed.\footnote{Schwager in Girard, \textit{ibid.}, 64–65 (emphases original); compare Schwager, \textit{Must There Be Scapegoats?}, esp. 203–214, where Schwager exegetically justifies his view while stating it less strongly.}

Schwager is cautious in his works not to allow the sacrificial dynamic to penetrate what we might call the “interior” of the Crucifixion, the Father-Son relationship. The sacrificial dynamic resides instead for him in the “exterior,” in what he calls the “intention” of the crowd in the same piece of correspondence.\footnote{Girard, \textit{Correspondence}, 65.} Consequently, in his works Schwager is forced to look for the redemptive efficacy of the Crucifixion either in the forgiveness with which God reciprocates Jesus’ persecutors,\footnote{Schwager, \textit{Must There Be Scapegoats?}, 213–14.} or in Jesus’ total self-submission to the Father’s will as he is delivered into the hands of his enemies.\footnote{Schwager, \textit{Jesus in the Drama of Salvation}, 189.} The Crucifixion as a scapegoating event remains outside the proper soteriological relevance of the Cross until transformed with these “interior” supplements. All the content Schwager assigns to the Crucifixion is really there; but by formulating the problem as he does, Schwager narrowly misses the respect in which sacrifice is the very form of the redemptive operation. Jesus’ death was sacrificial only in the \textit{objective} sense that he actually became a scapegoat. In doing so, he took over the whole machinery of Satan.
Girard’s own solution, inspired by Schwager’s and not much different from it, hits only a little closer to the mark. But this little goes a long way. Late Girard, like Schwager, posits two diametrically opposed meanings of sacrifice, one archaic and violent, the other a Christian practice of non-violent self-sacrifice. In this view, Christ sacrificed himself in the sense that he gave himself up to the teeth of the surrogate victim mechanism for the good of others. This position is consistent, but it relies on manipulation of terminology without getting at the substance of the problem. What makes Girard’s solution worth a second look is the emphasis he places on the connection between the two senses of sacrifice. There is “a rift between the two meanings of sacrifice that, paradoxically, doesn’t preclude a continuity … yet without any indication of complicity with the religions of violence.”

It is this opposition in continuity that should be carried to its logical conclusion. It does us no good to assert that Christ’s death is a sacrifice in a different way from archaic sacrifice. In order for Christ’s death to be transformative at the level Girard is looking for, it must be a scapegoating event in the most objective way possible, and it must be capable of being truthfully represented after the fact in the form of a ritual sacrifice, as in the Christian

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398 Girard in Correspondence, 56.
liturgy. It must change scapegoating and sacrifice, and turn them in a way that makes them anti-scapegoating and anti-sacrificial. At the same time, it wouldn’t do any good to simply identify Christ’s sacrifice with archaic sacrifice, because the truth of the event would then remain concealed. It is, rather, an archaic sacrifice gone wrong in accordance with God’s own way of organizing things, his own economy. It is a sacrifice that bankrupts sacrifice by deconstructing it, showing the real nature of the violence involved, clearing the victim of responsibility and complicity, and radically re-orienting the sacrificial order around a new center, whose qualities of gentleness and humanity displace the qualities attributed to the victim by the transference. The god’s goodness, power, and ability to bring peace and war are not taken away, but they are fundamentally changed by their new relationship to the manifest qualities of Jesus. Understanding redemption as an objective scapegoating event thus opens the way to a certain Christology from below.

Girard sensed, acknowledged, and duly emphasized the radical continuity between Christ’s sacrifice and archaic sacrifice after his correspondence with Schwager. Yet he continued to cling to two radically disjunct senses of sacrifice at the same time, without rigorously resolving their tension. He refrained from making the leap of recognizing that Christ’s sacrifice is able to be different only because it is the same. Perhaps this difficulty on
Girard’s part owes to his failure to consider Christ’s installation in the sacrificial order as a positive presence. To lend substance to this critique, consider the following passage, in which Girard expresses his late, revised view of Christ’s death:

[Christ’s] Word revealed more and more of the hidden truth of human culture, which is to say the founding and ordering role of scapegoats. The accomplishment of his mission doomed Christ to a death that he scarcely desired, but one that he could not avoid without submitting to the law of the world, the law of scapegoats.

So great is the distance between the sacrifice of Christ in this sense and archaic sacrifice that a greater one cannot be imagined. …

Mimetic theory illustrates the basic opposition between archaic sacrifice and what is customarily called the sacrifice of Christ.

So fixated does Girard remain on the vicious qualities of sacrifice that he continues to define Christ’s work only in negative relation to it. This negative relation is real and indispensable to the evangelical work, but leaves no basis for asserting a strong continuity between Christian and archaic sacrifice. A positive relationship must exist as well. Without it, there is no way to assert the potential to redeem natural or artificial categories. Girard pushes tremendously close to asserting the appropriate positive relationship further along in the passage just cited, but cannot secure a rational basis on which to follow through with it:

The further [the two senses of sacrifice] are from each other, the more their union in a single word paradoxically hints at a going beyond the opposition between them. …
God himself reuses the scapegoat mechanism, at his own expense, in order to subvert it. ... The irony has to do in part with the structural similarity between the two kinds of sacrifice, which, at one extreme, exhibit odd mirror effects in relation to violence, and, at the other, a love that surpasses our understanding and our powers of expression.

Soon afterward, Girard hits directly on the idea of the sacrificial dialectic, noting that

the good prostitute sacrificed rivalry for the sake of her child, whereas the bad prostitute agreed to sacrifice the child for the sake of the rivalry.\footnote{Girard, The One by Whom Scandal Comes, 41, 43 (emphases original).}

Unfortunately, Girard never systematically elaborated this train of thought, which is what contains the whole practical power of his thinking.\footnote{Despite not having systematically elaborated this gem of his late thinking, Girard certainly did not fail to make the effort to express it or develop it. Battling to the End is Girard’s effort to finally bring the inescapable persistence of violence to the fore of this thinking. This surprising reversal of Girard’s early attitude has caused the book to meet with a mixed reception among acolytes.} Sacrifice must be turned back in on its own mechanisms if it is to be overcome. Girard nonetheless succeeds in getting beyond the terminology manipulation that was the substance of his earlier position. Girard now has the sketches of a substantive idea of self-sacrifice as a good. In order to bring Girard’s insight in these last lines to fulfillment, we should not ask with Schwager, “Must there be scapegoats?”\footnote{The translated title of Schwager’s first book on Girard: Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock? Gewalt und Erlösung in den biblischen Schriften (Munich: Kösel, 1978).} but should ask instead, “What good can come of scapegoats by getting rid of scapegoating?” Christ gets rid of scapegoating, but does so by turning scapegoats
into nodes of resistance and transformation. In a play on contraries that is not really a paradox, he keeps sacrifice in order to get rid of it. This is the sacrificial dialectic at work. We should embrace Scott Cowdell’s view that God “over-accepts” sacrifice in sending his Son. He neither blocks nor accepts sacrifice; to do the first would be to reject nature and culture, while to do the latter would be a compromise with evil. In Cowdell’s dramatic theory of the atonement, God “over-accepts” sacrifice by taking it up into his creative drama and making it part of the performance.\(^\text{402}\) Cowdell’s view needs only to be played to an extreme.

All this is to say that a preference is to be shown to an anti-sacrificial reading of Girard—and of the Gospels—over against a non-sacrificial one. Rather than disowning sacrifice so as to live without it, what both the logic of the Gospel and Girardian thinking enjoins us to do is to accept sacrifice against sacrifice.

This all may seem rather formalized. Does this approach not reduce sacrifice to a play of signs, rendering the concept so malleable as to make any conclusions based off it too broad, or even trivial? Not at all. The formalization I have made of sacrifice as an exchange is subsequent to the real violence it involves, the real subjective perceptions of communities, and the real effect sacrifice creates in social cohesion. The work of redemption likewise always

manifests politically at the locus of real scapegoats, in the perception of the public, and in the civil order. Nothing has been made overly abstract in my approach. Though sublimated forms of sacrifice exist and are useful, these all derive from the fountainhead of real victims who are scapegoated. And the transformative image of the scapegoat lies not just with Christ and the apostles and martyrs who mimicked his death, but extends to those who are scapegoated involuntarily in our own time and place. In the American context, James Cone labels the Crucifixion “a first-century lynching.” Similar comparisons, and on a broader scale, have been made by theologians working in Latin America.

“Scapegoating” of mere signs and symbols must be considered subordinate to flesh-and-blood scapegoating, and it is only through the latter that deepgoing societal change can be driven.

The point is not, of course, to preserve scapegoats in order to use them, or to conserve the sacrificial for some supposed essential good it contains. Nowhere in the New Testament is Jesus’ acquiescence to crucifixion called a good deed. Scapegoats are to be exposed in order to halt the repetition of their suffering.

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403 Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree, 30.
404 Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Crucified People,” pages 580–603 in Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Jon Sobrino, Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001). Nor is there any reason, as Sobrino is fond of hinting at, why the power of redemption should not also be worked through those who (voluntarily or involuntarily) become identified with the scapegoat without necessarily being it.
Only in exposing scapegoats for what they are does their position become transformative. The point is rather that as long as the katechon, the imperial order, continues to restrain violence (1 Thes 2:6–7), there will always be a sacrificial foundation beneath, there will be scapegoats. The order that restrains violence in the present age is an embodiment of power, and it works through its symbols of power and its classifications of beings. A straightforward disavowal of power, symbols of power, and classifications, in postmodern style, is completely useless in this situation. It leads nowhere except to general theoretical statements, because if it were actually applied the disorder it would cause would be intolerable.

Two concrete examples will illustrate my insistence on a redeemed sacrificial order more clearly. My first example is historical. If we are to consider the Roman adoption of Christianity as grounded in anything at all besides realistic interests or a desperate effort to sustain decaying Imperial institutions, then we ought to take the intersection of Imperial symbols and ecclesiastical symbols, of Roman power with Church power, seriously as a process of transformation, if also a profoundly tainted one. The transformation entailed for the most part the replacement of the signs and symbols of Imperial power with Christian ones: instead of a military dictator, a theocrat believed to rule on Christ’s behalf; the Cross as a new symbol in place of properly Imperial ones; the
substitution of Christian icons and priests for pagan ones. State sponsorship of monastic institutions often amounted to support for the critique of how Imperial society functioned, including its urban economic disparities, abuses of power, and failure to realize the natural equality of all people. The Christianized Empire did not stand on much higher moral ground than its predecessor, and it was certainly not a place I should like to have lived. But this is precisely the point. It was within the organization of the *katechon* that the Christian preaching was able to bring about an ideological revaluation to whatever extent it did. Ultimately, while Christianity may have assisted in the Empire’s preservation, it also ate the Empire from within. This could not have happened had the Church elected to bow out and watch history unfold from its pristine position.

While this first example concerns structures generated by sacrifice, my second example deals directly with sacrifice itself. The Eucharist is an assembly that uses ritual enactments, symbols, and sacred categorizations to render the redemptive inversion in the sacrificial order fully explicit. In the theology of the oldest Christian traditions (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and other Eastern traditions), the Eucharist is itself acknowledged to be a sacrifice, and it bears the complete form of one. It brings about the symbolic exchange in the change of the elements and in the purification and deification of those who receive them. It repeats an original scapegoating event, and does so doubly, in that the priest re-
presents the execution of Christ, while the ceremony is normally performed on top of a relic of a saint (usually embedded in the altar).405 The people who assemble around the Eucharist are constituted as a microcosmic society, replete with a hierarchical class system and differentiated functions. In all this, there is one substitution that changes the whole effect of the ritual when compared with archaic sacrifice: at the focal point of the gathering, where we should expect to find a repetitive representation of the scapegoat-god as perceived by the persecuting community, we find instead such a mode of presence of the God to reverse the powers and qualities formerly attributed to the original victim. The liturgical narrativization of the ritual in the Eucharistic prayer identifies the victim with a divine being, but also with a historical figure, whose historicity is explicitly and correctly recognized.406 The founding murder is narrated in place of a founding myth. The result is a celebration around blood that nonetheless delights in itself for being a bloodless sacrifice, a fellowship of peace enacting a

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405 The Eastern Orthodox rite of the proskomide, during which the priest prepares the elements of consecration prior to the oblation, is particularly instructive here: the mimicking of the Crucifixion by elevating (literally “killing,” «αἰρεῖν») the bread, the fracturing of it in the form of a cross, the piercing of its side with a miniature spear, the pouring of the wine and water, and the detailed arrangement of the crumbs to represent the saints, all give the rite the appearance of a theological reenactment of the Crucifixion upon an effigy.

406 The constitution of the Church upon an inverted immolation of a scapegoat is brought out clearly in the eucharistic prayer of the Didache, one of the earliest accounts of a Christian eucharistic ceremony: “Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Your kingdom” (Didache 9). The reassembly of the broken body of Jesus is the principle of the unity of the Church.
sacrifice of praise. To reject sacrifice in the abstract is one thing. To redeem creation from its blood, the sacrificial system must be utilized for good.

God, then, was not embarrassed to mimic archaic sacrifice. We, too, should not feel ashamed at the notion of sacrifice without first understanding how it is qualified. The basic structure of archaic sacrifice has been turned to redemptive use.

§ 25. A Method for Living

Scapegoating, sacrifice, and the symbolic realities they generate are integral to the constitution of the redemptive work; the notion of sacrifice is not to be cast aside as a mere scandal. The value and function of a theory of redemption will likewise be constituted positively by the principle of sacrifice. The same is true for the believer’s conversion, since a soteriology, including implicitly a theory of redemption, is integral to it.

What good, then, can we say a theory of redemption does for anyone? If the doctrine of redemption describes an objective event, theories of redemption, in providing for us the how of redemption, give us a map on which to enact that event and to navigate the reality it creates. Soteriologies are the rational component of the movement of conversion. They do not give redemption its meaning, but furnish us with an understanding of redemption, in accordance
with which understanding one may live a re-oriented life. They do not direct us what to do in any very specific or concrete manner, but lay out the paths for understanding relationality, and for expanding the prevalence of redeemed relationality in a group. The Abelardian theory marks out Christ’s example as the path to neighborly love, inviting the faithful to imitate Christ’s pity for his creatures, and strengthening their love for each other through their love for him. The preoccupation of the theory is horizontal relationships. The satisfaction theory constructs a path along the vertical dimension, indebting the redeemed to God, as it were, and redirecting all their desire toward him alone. This theory maps out a way to install oneself within a strictly vertical form of the transcendence-structure, unmarred by any deviation from orientation toward the Deity. The ransom theory provides a subversive element, a path whereby values and power relations between beings are destabilized and reconstituted. It offers a corrective to the individualism of Abelard’s theory, and to the tendency of Anselmian-type theories to slip into a purely economic conception.

Theories of redemption find their utility in their analogical nature; they tell us that redemption works like this. Dialogic truth is quite secondary in them, even if it is what often preoccupies theorists. Scot McKnight very rightly asks,
“Does atonement work?” This should not be taken as a question of the objective efficacy of the redemptive work. What is at stake in the question is rather how we can think about atonement so as to participate in historical movement and change. When theories of redemption make it their goal simply to know the truth, they do us no good, and are harmful rather for their tacit presumption to outthink Scripture. Theories of redemption have no business with moral utility, either; the criterion of a good theory is not that it induces good behavior. Good theories of redemption serve rather as textualizations of the game of overcoming evil and realizing the Kingdom. They are like boards on which the game can be played. The references of signifier to signifier are the spaces one is allowed to occupy, the assumptions of the theory delimit the paths one may move on. The best theories are the ones that mark out the clearest way to the finish.

Redemption theory is an expression of soteriology that provides the board on which the redemptive game is to be played. Depending on which theory one is following, the board will look different, but one will still be playing the same game. All the variations, each with its particular rules, derive from the same generative source, and tend toward similar destinations. Redemption theory

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possesses an underlying unity, even if it admits of a certain degree of variation, if not oftentimes aberration.

Conversion is playing the game. The gameplay can specialize in either the individual or the collective realm. Conversion as it pertains to the individual is more readily intelligible in terms of mimesis and the re-orientation of mimetic desire; with respect to the collective, conversion is more readily intelligible in terms of the transformation of sacrifice. Both of these hermeneutical approaches refer to and depend on each other. In closing this study, I will sketch the appearance and significance of each of these dimensions of conversion.

When taking a perspective on the individual, conversion and redemption must be thought of in terms of orientation, the transcendence-structure, and relationality. In Chapter 1, I invoked the Dionysian theology of divine names to justify my configuration of the Christian subject’s relation to God’s transcendence. God’s transcendence permeates each of his attributes, just as all of his attributes are contained within each other. He is wholly held in each of his names. When we relate to God as Transcendent, even Transcendent-as-such, we also relate to him who is Love and King and Good; when we relate to him as Good, we relate to him who is Transcendent and Love and King; and so forth. The language of transcendence is neither privileged nor exclusionary; the
inclusion of every name within each name only means that the language of transcendence is always available.\(^{408}\)

It follows, then, that when one recognizes God’s goodness rightly, one also recognizes his transcendent goodness; when one recognizes his kingship rightly, one also recognizes his transcendent kingship; when his love or power, also his transcendent love or power.

The way one will relate to God under any of his names will be determined, if we take the mimetic point of view, by the transcendent mode in which he possesses that attribute, provided the believer recognizes it. God is the absolute external mediator, and the way we can relate to him is, consequentially, by imitating his possession of his names, seeking to acquire them for ourselves. No wonder the Christian tradition makes so much of images. As a saint in an icon conforms to the image of Christ, so all the faithful desire to do the same. All the while, painted images serve an anagogical function, leading the Christian up toward the likeness of the divine.\(^{409}\) This is the outcome of re-orientation toward God.

\(^{408}\) While there is no speculative reason to privilege God’s transcendence over his other attributes, I have, of course, done just this for the sake of the Girardian argument I wished to make. This move is arbitrary, and does not stand for an absolute claim about God’s nature.

Since God is infinitely greater than any being, it is impossible to enter into mimetic rivalry with him, unless one falls into an idolatrous conception of his deity. The question arises, however, of why the imitation of God should not lead to rivalry among his worshipers. If they are all trying to acquire what God has and is, then they will end up trying to acquire what each other has gotten as well. A similar problem is sorely obvious in the case of Christ. Since he retains a human similarity to us, he cannot be an external mediator in an absolute degree. Why can’t one compete with him? Surely the Incarnation, rightly understood, must not induce people to sin.\footnote{These problems are discussed by Jim Grote in “The Imitation of Christ as Double-Bind: Toward a Girardian Spirituality,” Cistercian Studies 29, no. 4 (1994): 485–98.}

The solution, Girard recognizes, lies in the content of God’s desire. His desire is what is borrowed from him, as with all mimesis. But the object of his desire, his possession, is not a positive entity like what we might desire to acquire from a rival. The divine names are not beings. God’s desire is providential, he gives, he does not “hold on” to anything. His love is an unegotistical love, his goodness is toward his creation, his kingship is founded on these. His goodness toward all seems as though it had a certain negative quality to it, because it is so exceedingly superlative. God’s desire is more like a hole that can never be filled than a force to be reckoned with. With Jesus, this is
doubly the case. Not only does Jesus possess the divine will with his Father, but it is his will to do as he sees the Father doing (John 5:19). The Son’s mimetic will/mimetic desire is not a positive possession of Jesus’ that he or the saints can be rivaled for, since, insofar as the saint imitates Christ, his or her whole desire is to become the image of another. Girard’s way of explaining the difference between these two kinds of mimesis is worth quoting in full:

What Jesus invites us to imitate is his own desire, the spirit that directs him toward the goal on which his intention is fixed: to resemble God the Father as much as possible.

The invitation to imitate the desire of Jesus may seem paradoxical, for Jesus does not claim to possess a desire proper, a desire “of his very own.” Contrary to what we ourselves claim, he does not claim to “be himself”; he does not flatter himself that he obeys only his own desire. His goal is to become the perfect image of God. Therefore he commits all his powers to imitating his Father. In inviting us to imitate him, he invites us to imitate his own imitation.

Far from being a paradox, this invitation is more reasonable than that of our modern gurus, who ask their disciples to imitate them as the great man or woman who imitates no one. Jesus, by contrast, invites us to do what he himself does, to become like him a perfect imitator of God the Father.

Why does Jesus regard the Father and himself as the best model for all humans? Because neither the Father nor the Son desires greedily, egotistically. God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and he sends his rain on the just and on the unjust.” God gives to us without counting, without marking the least difference between us. He lets the weeds grow with the wheat until the time of harvest. If we imitate the detached generosity of God, then the trap of mimetic rivalries will never close over us. …”

411 Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, 13–14 (emphases original).
Everything Jesus does contributes to the subversion of the mimetic sickness. His life example and his teaching, just as much as his death and ascension, replace one mimesis with another that turns it on its head. When viewed in light of Christ’s subversive reuse of mimesis, subjective and objective theories of redemption turn out not to conflict. The Cross is precisely the symbolization of the giving desire, the inversion of mimetic egotism, that he models, and as such it is able to reorder sacrifice. Moral exemplification is not materially different from sacrificial atonement, provided that morality means not legalism, but a restructuring of desire. The two sides of the redemptive work need each other: Christ’s sacrifice changes the source of meaning and, therefore, the object of mimesis, while his word and example, not sufficient to save in themselves, point the way to an understanding of the Cross, the instrument by which these changes are brought about.

Turning our sights upon the collective, we find ourselves confronted with the pastoral and political aspects of the redemptive work. I am able to touch on these lands ripe for cultivation only very briefly without overstepping the bounds of my project, but they seem a suitable point at which to leave off. Mimesis and the potent generativity of sacrifice are a major foundation of the social order. The consequences for that order, whether we consider it from a
down-to-earth political perspective or through the utopian imagination of religious eschatology, will be great if a change is effected at the base of the sacrificial order. The leading questions become: What is a converting community’s relation to the social order? What constitutes the social transformation that is inseparable from the redemptive work?

The answers to these questions will depend largely on a community’s historical situation. The Gospel cannot be reduced; the Spirit will work from itself alone in every situation, adapting to circumstances as it pleases. An imperial autocracy built on top of an unenfranchised population will undergo change in a different way than a modern, democratic, capitalist society. Some political projects can be definitively ruled out as expressions of the redemptive operation. In a time when established political orders are the objects of deep distrust, I suppose it is worth mentioning some examples. Libertarian anarchy is off the table, because, if we take its ideology seriously, it lacks any sacrificial structure. A rigid hierarchicalism, perhaps like the Confucian paradise imagined by Milbank, in which “the subordinate are to obey freely, but masters are to rule generously and with care,” would be an incoherent outcome of the redemptive work, because it excludes the possibility of subversion a priori.412 To the contrary,

the redemptive operation tends toward a right instability, a perpetual disordering that is itself a principle of order. In football defense, this is referred to as “organized chaos.”

We can gain a sense of direction from looking at the categorization of atonement models into three classes. This categorization system, as often invoked by theologians as it may be, is far from a mere reflection of objective fact. There have been many ways of conceiving redemption, and they could have been arranged into classes in any number of ways. Yet, it is around the three general forms of moral influence, satisfaction, and ransom from the devil that all particular theories tend to coalesce for us. An example will demonstrate the peculiarity of these classifications. The penal substitution theory does not share much content with Anselm’s satisfaction theory. Anselm does not believe that Christ is taking the punishment for humanity’s sins. The penal substitution theory did not even evolve directly from Anselm’s view, as is often erroneously asserted. Yet the penal substitution theory and the satisfaction theory have been consistently grouped together in modern classification systems, even by sensitive historians like Aulén. Why is this so?

\[413\] On the development of the ideas of penal substitution and satisfaction in high medieval redemption theory, see again Burns, “The Concept of Satisfaction.”
One would be wise to consider whether something more contributes to the arbitrariness of our scholarly typologies than just old doctrinal controversies. If we take a step back and consider the political context within which modern redemption theory developed, the significance of our puzzling classification system becomes bluntly apparent. The three types of theory correspond to the three broad political traditions of Western capitalist democracy. The satisfaction theory is fundamentally conservative. So, for that matter, is the penal substitution theory. This similarity explains well why the two are grouped together. In the Anselmian and penal substitution views, a sacrifice is made of oneself (represented by Christ) to God, and the offering serves the end of upholding or restoring God’s established order. It is deemed right for everything to return to its proper place, power relations are respected, and subjectivity is oriented toward the generative source of those power relations, namely God. The Abelardian theory, on the other hand, stands for a kind of liberalism. While it cannot eliminate sacrifice, it can at least put it out of sight and downplay its necessity with its rhetoric, forefronting instead a rationalistic morality. Power relations are obfuscated by an individualistic emphasis on enlightenment, and subjectivity is oriented by a bourgeois conception of love as pity for suffering others. The ransom theory, finally, represents the radical position. Self-sacrifice is emphasized as in the satisfaction theory, but for the sake of liberation rather than
conservation. Structures are destabilized, power relations are inverted.

Consistently with the Gregory’s ascetic vision, subjectivity is oriented toward the virtues, the divine powers of right that are not of this age.

From the standpoint of MT, these differences between the three theories may be considered products of their common response to sacrifice. Each textualizes the sacrificial dialectic, but with different effects in each case. There cannot, therefore, be a question of rejecting two of these theories in favor one authentic representative of the mimetic perspective (nor can they be regarded as superseded by a new Girardian theory of redemption). The praxis of redemption requires all three, a soup of contraries that constitutes the “organized chaos” through which redemption takes effect. The existing order must not be conserved, because it is unjust. While ritual sacrifice is defunct in the modern West, scapegoating remains a living practice, and the sacrificial structures generated from it are as much a reality among modern Westerners as among those of other places and times. Moreover, the ritual act of sacrifice was never the problem in the first place. The problem was what it represented and what it sustained, and these are alive wherever one may be. The liberal perspective associated with Abelard provides a needed rational moral view on the situation, while the radical game brings about the appropriate disruptions and restructurings. The restructurings, however, inevitably produce their own new
excluded elements, and, while they may improve on the structures that preceded them, they are equally sacrificial. Like the second generation of Christians, who asserted the conservative ideology of the pastoral epistles in order to consolidate the partially realized, radical gains made by the first generation, the radical movement of redemption ends up needing to reaffirm an impure sacrificial structure if it is to be anything better than a source of trouble. So long as the present age lasts, one might surmise, the redemptive game will be impure and complex.

The Kingdom is not a utopian ideal. It is something that, like redemption itself, transcends finite possibilities. As I remarked already, its only guarantee is God’s promise.

The Kingdom, only dimly known in this time, is something we neither make for ourselves, nor passively allow to come upon us. Without human participation, the Kingdom is not on earth; but human agency does not cause it. We are not to “sit it out” in the face of history. The Kingdom nonetheless remains entirely a matter of hope and promise.

Christian conversion is future-oriented and eschatological. Its object cannot be grasped by sight, only by way of analogy. It is a response to the calling, which bespeaks a future, some performance that has not yet been
realized. If the Lord says, “Come,” this means that the coming is not complete; if someone says, “Lord, come,” then the Lord’s coming is not complete. The metaphor of the calling nicely reflects the substance-less nature of the end goal toward which one is called, its lack of a true center. The temporality of the metaphor reflects that there is nonetheless “something” toward which one moves in response to the call. It is not that God doesn’t really exist, it is rather that he defies our normal categories of being and substance.

Because the divine redemptive work utilizes and transforms sacrifice as a constructive force rather than blocking it, the historical movement toward transcendence is a movement into a next world, it is not an otherworldly movement. There is no rejection of creation, no Manichean dualism. The theology of sacrificial redemption is a theology of transformation, of the subject, of the human community, and of nature at large.
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