

The Victims of Totality:
Wholism and Totalism in Monotheistic Religion

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Introduction

The following paper is a reflection on the ethical and spiritual ambiguities of Monotheism. It proceeds through an examination of Thomas Aquinas' concept of desire and René Girard's notion of victimage. It is divided into two parts. In the first I examine Thomas' ideas of desire and goodness in order to develop some key terms and concepts. In the second I employ these terms and concepts in a critique of René Girard's victimage thesis, in an effort to shed light on the 'uses and abuses' of Judeo-Christian Monotheism.

I. Totalism and Wholism

Now we have said above that good is everything appetible; and thus, since every nature desires its own being and its own perfection, it must be said also that the being and perfection of any nature is good. Hence it cannot be that evil signifies being, or any form or nature. Therefore it must be that by the name of evil is signified the absence of good.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*¹

Every teleological process is bipolar. This, I think, is the first thing we need to recognize if we are to make sense of *desire*, its relation to *victimization*, and the relation of both to the religious *telos*. It was one of the great insights of Augustine, echoed by Thomas Aquinas (above), to observe that there is no need to cite two primordial principles, a principle of good and a principle of evil, to account for the appearance of both in human and natural affairs. The bipolarity of the teleological process itself suffices to explain this opposition. To the extent that one is driven toward an end one exists in a state of relative dissatisfaction, to be finally resolved only when

that end is achieved. The notion of 'good,' as Thomas so astutely points out, is intrinsic to the phenomenon of desire itself. Desire points to what, for it, is its own good. In the fact of desire the notion of good is already implicit. On the other hand, the inability to achieve or sustain the desirable is, by that fact, undesirable; in the mythico-ethical language of religion: 'evil.' Thus, 'good' and 'evil' may be regarded as simply the polar extremes of the teleological process itself; a process mediated by the drive toward the one and away from the other, a drive that, in the context of human and animal life, has the name 'desire.'

Let's pursue the Thomistic explication a little further. "Every nature," says Thomas, "desires its own being." This seems an odd statement on the face of it. Doesn't every nature already possess its own being? Isn't desire always a desire for some *other*, some beyond, something, precisely, that is not one's own? At this point, of course, we might drag in the Aristotelian metaphysical categories Thomas is working with, and begin to speak in terms of essences, potentialities, and actualities, but let's keep it simple for a moment. Quite apart from the viability of any grand-scale metaphysical architectonic, there is, I think, a simple insight expressed in the above statement. It is that, to desire at all, is to be related, by that very fact, to the object of desire. In terms of Thomistic metaphysics we would say that a 'nature' defines a desire, in that every nature desires its perfection; i.e., its fulfilled actualization, and is driven onward until it establishes it. But even from a more modest, and more modern, phenomenological approach, we can arrive at a similar conclusion, except stated from the other end up: every desire, we might say, defines a nature, insofar as desire entails some sense of lack in one's current state vis-à-vis some state of fulfillment or wholeness. In other words, we can only make sense of the concept 'lack' in terms of some drive toward wholeness that is, as long as there is lack, as yet unrealized. One can only lack to the extent that something is lacking. One lacks, and therefore desires, then, to the extent that one is not whole.

There is, then, a relationship between what we call goodness, badness, wholeness, and desire, which might be stated thus: Every teleological being desires a state of wholeness, which is, by that fact, characterized by the positive evaluative term good. Likewise, every teleological being

avers from a state of privation which is, by that fact, characterized by the negative evaluative term bad.

But I still don't think we have plumbed the full depths of Thomas' statement that "every nature desires its *own* being." In this statement, perhaps, the whole dilemma of inter-human ethical relations is contained. Precisely insofar as I *desire* something, I don't have it, it is not mine. Yet precisely insofar as I desire it, I feel I *should* have it, it is, in some sense, ideally mine. It *belongs* to me, even though it may be yours – even though it may be *you*. My good may, precisely, be your evil. The lion consumes the gazelle. Good for the lion. Bad for the gazelle. This is not relativism. This is conflict.

There is a way of reading nature, and the Cosmos at large, that simply accepts such conflict as irresolvable. Every nature desires its *own* being, which, as it turns out, entails the consumption of other beings. Success belongs to the 'fittest,' which, in this context, simply means, the successful. Beyond the life-struggle there is no good and evil. The projection of good and evil into an hypostatized beyond – Nietzsche tells us – is simply a ruse of the life-struggle itself, through which the weak seek to beguile the strong into respecting them, and even honoring them, in their weakness.

And yet there is still more, it seems to me, to be found in the statement, "every nature desires its own being." The possibility of making such a statement is uniquely human. Thomas does not say "my nature desires its own being," but "*every* nature." The statement itself is an implicit awareness of otherness *qua* otherness. This is something the lion, presumably, cannot know. For the lion all that exists is what is within reach and what is, as yet, beyond reach. All is an extension of *me*. There are no ethical dilemmas nor ethical decisions. One can easily sympathize with Nietzsche's nostalgia for the unambiguous lion-like life. But it is not Christian *resentment* that has catapulted us forever beyond the possibility of such a life. It is the structure of human knowing itself; which is 'cursed' with the knowledge of the otherness of the other, forcing upon us the ethical life, forever barring us from the Edenic simplicity of the life of pure instinct. This is the 'knowledge of good and evil' that has driven us outside the gates of Eden.

“Behold, the man has become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and live for ever...” Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the land from which he was taken.’ (Gen. 3:22)

Thus, the dilemma of humanity: to live with the needs of an animal and the mind of a god.

There is no way out but through. No way back to Edenic simplicity. Wholeness takes upon itself a new dimension outside the gates of Eden. Again, Thomas seems to get it right: "Now the created rational nature alone is immediately subordinate to God, since other creatures do not attain to the universal, but only to something particular...Consequently, the perfection of the rational creature consists not only in what belongs to it in respect of its nature, but also in that which it acquires through a supernatural participation in divine goodness"².

To “attain to the universal” is to see beyond oneself, and, hence, to see the otherness of the other. This is the god's-eye view, in which *every* nature is seen as “desiring its own being” and, hence, defining its proper good. No nature is privileged. Not even *mine*. But the god's must pity us our god-like perspective. For they, having eaten of the Tree of Life as well as the Tree of Knowledge, are situated in eternity, and are free of the life-needs that particularize desire. Thus, they can view the whole with equanimity and calm. Not so the animal-gods called human. We tasted of the Knowledge but not of the Life – and therefore live between the worlds, native to neither.

Let me define two Universalisms; the one I will call 'Wholism' and the other I will call 'Totalism.' I define Totalism as a system organized around a single principle, in which the principle itself is considered sacrosanct, and regarded as the supreme, if not the sole, good. In a Totalistic system, each member is for the sake of the Total. Only the Totalic principle is an end in itself.

I define Wholism as a system organized around the principle that *every* individual is sacrosanct; the whole is for the sake of each. Each member is an end in itself.

In a Totalistic system, each is in service to the principle. In a Wholistic system, the principle is in service to each.

Every organism, every 'nature,' is Totalistic in the pursuit of its own being. Every nature, pursuing its own good, is a little totalistic universe. But the gods, having eaten of both the Knowledge and the Life, are called to Wholism. The gods, let us say, do not have a nature, but a *supernature*. A supernature does not have a good peculiar to itself. *Its* good is the good of the whole – which is to say, the good of each. This is why the nature of the gods is *love*, not *desire*. Desire defines a nature. Love defines a supernature.

The animal-gods, the humans, having eaten of the Knowledge and not of the Life, are caught in between. And there is no way out but through. But neither is there a *simple* way through. The struggle of human life is to find the way through; somehow to transform desire into love. This is the human challenge, and, specifically, the challenge of religious wholism.

When the human nature becomes totalistic it moves toward the demonic, ethically and spiritually. It becomes ethically demonic insofar as it endeavors to subsume all otherness in its totality. It becomes spiritually demonic insofar as it continues to recognize the otherness of the other *as* it consumes it. It is this latter that defines the spiritual evil of the demonic. The demonic is *agential* privation. The demonic *creates* privation through its act of consumption. The demonic consumes the other, *knowing* the other's otherness and, hence, knowing the other's intrinsic good, which it destroys for itself.

When the human nature becomes wholistic it moves toward the holy, ethically and spiritually. It becomes ethically holy insofar as it endeavors to maximize the good of the other. It becomes spiritually holy insofar as it delights in the good of the other, and achieves its own good through such delight. Such is the spiritual good of the holy.

But the human nature is never finally holy, nor finally demonic. It is ambiguous. This ambiguity, it must be stressed again and again, against all totalistic moralism, is not its *sin*, but its nature. As a result, the human nature is called on to perform a trick that not even the gods need master. The Wholistic human being, in respecting all natures, must respect its own as well.

Total sacrifice can never be demanded, for only a Total being could demand a total sacrifice. But the God of the Whole demands that one love oneself as well as the other.

Monotheistic religion wavers between the totalistic and the wholistic. Nowhere is the ambiguity of human nature so apparent as in the image of the biblical God; a Wholistic ethic represented in the form of a Totalistic being. It is the danger of Totalism that underlies all prohibitions against imaging God. A Totalistic God would be supremely visible, and cast its shadow on all below it. But the Wholistic God is a pure transparency. Light goes through the Wholistic God, it is not trapped there. Thus, there can be no image of the Wholistic God. The face of the Whole shines in every particular.

II. René Girard and Victimhood

As much as I sympathize with many of René Girard's concerns, and acknowledge his often insightful analyses of human motivations, I find myself unpersuaded as to his fundamental claims. According to Girard, all human civilizations originate with what he calls a “founding murder” at the beginning of their history. To state Girard's thesis briefly: Human beings have a primal *mimetic instinct* which induces them to imitate each other's behavior. In primitive hominid clans, this leads to intensive rivalries, as individual hominids vie with each other for the same object, whose value becomes inflated due to the mimetic escalation of the desire attached to it. The conflict itself, subject to the same mimetic forces as the desire, escalates to the point of crisis. This leads finally to all the members of a given group focusing upon one member and murdering him or her. This murder has a unifying and calming effect on the clan, which then associates its new-found peace with the victim; who becomes sacralized and worshipped as the first 'god.' Now, in the name of this new god, rituals and prohibitions are established to control mimetic rivalry and preserve the peace of, what may now be called, 'the community.' The most important of these rituals is the reenactment of the 'founding murder,' now reinterpreted as a 'sacrifice' to the god through whom the peace is secured.

Girard claims to find voluminous confirmation for his theory in the anthropological literature concerning primitive ritual and myth. Although I am not in a position to do a comprehensive anthropological review in order to test this claim, it strikes me, on the face of it, that the polytheisms of primitive cultures, in which a *multitude* of diverse gods are honored and associated with a variety of specialized functions; i.e., the rain god, the sun god, the god of the hearth, the god of war, etc. implies that the emergence of gods has more to do with an attempt to commune with the *varied* forces of life and nature than with a single victimage event.

Even more difficult to accept is Girard's claim that language itself emerges from this founding murder³. In this, I think, is a profound failure to recognize the true significance of language, which, in my view, is the precondition (not the consequence) of the emergence of the gods and, for that matter, of any possibility of victimage in the Girardian sense. The human cognitive system is every bit as distinctive and complex a structure as the human respiratory or digestive systems. It is as unreasonable to suggest that this structure might have emerged suddenly from a particular historical event as it would be to suggest that *digestion* might have emerged from such an event. Girard speaks of the victim as the first 'signifier,' seeming to imply that all that is required to account for language is that we account for the emergence of signifiers. But the distinctive mark of the cognitive faculty, of which language is the outward expression, is not that it employs signs for things found in the empirical world but, quite the contrary, that it is able to experience the world in terms of *universals not* found there. For instance, the word 'tree' refers, not to some particular tree, but to the class of tree-like things. It is impossible to *point* to what the word 'tree' refers to because the meaning of the word, as a universal, transcends any particular instantiation of it. This is why language *must* employ signs and why there can be no mere 'pointing' language. That to which the sign refers has no material reality. Its *only* concreteness, thus, is in the sign itself.

The capacity to experience the world in terms of universals cannot have suddenly emerged one day as a consequence of some contingent, historical event. Although customs and rituals may spring forth from such an event, whole organic structures cannot. On the contrary, it is, I suggest,

the linguistic, or cognitive, faculty itself that gives rise to many of the phenomena that Girard attempts to explain through the victimage hypothesis; including the phenomenon of victimage (i.e., scapegoating) itself.

As noted above, every teleological structure is bipolar, including, of course, every living creature. Thus, every life-form lives within the context of the basic categories 'beneficial' and 'harmful.' For the vast majority of life-forms, these categories play themselves out through strictly organic processes. The amoeba absorbs what is beneficial and excretes what is harmful, with no capacity to think or even experience the distinction. As we climb the phylogenetic scale these categories enter more and more into the awareness of the organisms in question. At the level of the human being, this general awareness becomes conceptual; the organic distinction 'beneficial/harmful' becomes the conceptual distinction 'good/bad.' This, I would suggest, is the first binary distinction human beings make. It is a distinction that is implicitly value-laden; which serves to explain why, as Derrida notes, so many of our binary oppositions ('traces' of the original, one might say) tend to privilege one term above the other.

Human beings *live* within the context of the universal, and this goes a long way to explaining what might be called the 'metaphysicalizing' of human concern; which gives rise to the polytheistic gods. Many of these gods seem to be nothing other than personified universals; the personification of which is most likely primordial. That is, rather than suppose that personification was added as a gloss to universal notions originally abstract and 'pristine,' it seems more likely that many universals were conceived from the first in personified or spiritualized terms – such terms being naturally expressive of inter- and intrahuman experience. This would imply that the emergence of the gods simply accompanied the emergence of language, i.e., cognition, as such, in a perfectly natural way – requiring no primordial murder to account for it.

Among the most significant things that universal conceptualization does is to make human beings aware of death, both as a general and a personal possibility. This results, I would suggest, from the universalized conception of 'myself' as a coherent entity. Immediate experience does

not render 'myself' to me. The 'myself' that has a recollected history and an anticipated future, is involved in a variety of relationships and manifests a multitude of character traits, is never immediately available to me as a whole. I am always in this particular situation, engaged in this particular activity, driven by this particular desire. My capacity, nevertheless, to regard myself as a whole is associated, I would say, with the same universalizing capacity that gives rise to language and cognition in general. Insofar as humans are able to regard themselves as 'wholes,' they are, by that very fact, able to envision (and thus experience) the possibility of a *total* threat to their being – something, we might conjecture, that no other animal can experience in quite the same way. Thus, with the 'eating of the tree of knowledge,' i.e., the cognitive advance of human beings, 'death' truly does enter the world.

Insofar as it does, and insofar as it represents a *total* threat to the organism, it needs to be explicitly addressed. This propels human thought into mythological and metaphysical musing about the world of the beyond. The concept of death implies the concept of transcendence. That is, to the extent that one can think one's death, one, by that very fact, thinks beyond it and, hence, beyond the whole of the empirical world. Religious mythology endeavors to describe the world as *whole*, encompassing the 'here' and the 'beyond,' and thereby, to lend some definition to the threatening beyond. Ritualistic activities emerge, then, as ways of responding to and dealing with these comprehensive concerns of life and death. The cognitive capacity of human beings, coupled with the teleological character of all organic creatures, is itself enough to account for the emergence of primitive religion and culture; there is no need to posit a 'victimage mechanism.'

Cognition proceeds through unification and distinction. One must know that a maple and an oak are both trees, just as one must know that a maple is not an oak. Likewise, one must know that oneself is not an other. Thus, whatever else may be entailed in the mature experience of the other as other, it is, first of all, a cognitive distinction, and only possible for human beings because of their capacity to make such distinctions; i.e., to universalize. The possibility of seeing the other *as* other, as distinct from self, is the possibility of the ethical as such and, I would say,

of human civilization itself. Further, it is only to the extent that one can see the other as an other that one can *give* something to an other. The idea of the gift, in which one gives 'of oneself' to benefit another, is only possible in the context of a cognitive system in which self and other are discriminated. It strikes me that this is the original significance of *sacrifice*; it is an offering of a gift to the gods, either by way of honoring them, or, more primitively, by way of influencing them to bestow favors. The delineation of different *kinds* of sacrifices for different *kinds* of needs and occasions seems to strongly favor this interpretation over Girard's. If all one does, in primitive sacrifice, is symbolically reenact the 'founding murder,' why so many different sacrifices for different seasons and purposes?

As for the violence of animal sacrifice, this needs to be viewed from the perspective of societies that slaughtered animals daily for food. The sacrificial lamb is to be slaughtered anyway, if not as sacrifice then as food – what makes it *sacrificial*, then, is not that it is slaughtered, but that it is *given* to the god. It is not the violent, but the *gift-like*, character of the act that distinguishes it as sacrifice.

Of particular concern to Christianity is the idea of the expiatory sacrifice. Any theory of expiation would require the elaboration of a theory of sin, too ambitious for this short work. But a few brief points can be made. *Offense* is an ethical concept that can only have meaning to the extent that one is aware of the other *as* other; that is, of the other as a “nature that desires its own good.” The ethical makes a demand; i.e., that the other's good be respected as such. It is not to be offended against. Thus, the ethical imperative is *sacrificial* in its essence, for it requires that one *give up* one's claim to absolute value in acknowledgment of the equally legitimate claim of the other. The expiatory sacrifice may be seen as a symbolic gesture in which the penitent expresses his or her willingness to *give up* any claim to personal totality in deference to the Wholism represented by God. It would be specifically called for after *sin*, insofar as all sin involves an implicit totalistic claim on the part of the sinner who, in sinning, disregards the claim of the other.

But, as Paul Ricoeur notes in his *The Symbolism of Evil*, the notions of sin and expiation have a long development and can only be fully explicated in the context of that development. His notion of the primordial symbol of defilement, as “a quasi-physical infection that points toward a quasi-moral unworthiness”⁴, resonates well with what we have been saying. As the biological categories of 'beneficial/harmful' become universalized as good/bad, ethicized as right/wrong, and spiritualized as good/evil, there is an intermingling of the biological category of 'taint' with the ethical category of 'fault' and the spiritual category of 'guilt' – or rather, there is an original indifferentiation that is only slowly and imperfectly articulated into these distinct categories, such that, even in their fullest articulation, they each continue to retain traces of the others.

But as Ricoeur also notes, even at its earliest stages the symbol of defilement is never simply reducible to the immediacy of physical stain. It is always *symbol*, which is to say, it is always *universal*. It is not the physical stain itself that the symbol of defilement points to, but the *idea* of stain. This idea, precisely because it is an idea, abstracted from the physical and universalized as symbol, is now available to be applied to anything – one's body, one's household, one's 'soul,' one's society. It is the universalization process itself that makes for this possibility; that allows the organic sense of 'harmful' to become the cognitive category of 'evil' (or, to state it in non-reductionistic terms, that allows human beings to *see* the organic sense of harm as one instance of the more general category of evil).

This is the context in which, in my view, we can best understand the *scapegoating* mechanism of such concern to Girard. The totalistic community, acting upon symbols and concerns derived mainly from the realm of the organic, endeavors to purge itself of its polluting members so as to purify itself of defilement, which has become the predominant symbol through which the suffering and hardship of the community is understood. If the 'stain' can be effaced, the hardship will be brought to an end. The victim, thus, is symbolically linked to the 'taint' that has corrupted society and needs to be removed. The fact that this has a galvanizing effect upon the members of the community may be attributed to, first, the primordial power of the organic symbols themselves, deeply rooted in instinctual drives and fears, and secondly, the fact that any idea

becomes conceptually clear only in contradistinction to some opposing idea or ideas. Thus the idea of the community as Totality requires an opposing 'evil' or 'chaos' or 'stain' to define itself *against*.

It is precisely the scapegoat, however, who is *not* the sacrifice. The sacrifice is offered to the Lord, and must be without blemish to be accounted a worthy offering. The scapegoat is driven from the community, and is invested with all the blemish of the community in order to effectuate purgation. Although the two mechanisms serve a similar expiatory function, they nevertheless represent opposing expiatory movements – the one of driving sin away and the other of drawing holiness near. It is only in the Cross, where all symbols converge, that these two movements are conflated in the 'sacrificial lamb' who 'bears our iniquities.' Girard seems to project the Christian interpretation of sacrifice backward, onto pre-Christian practices, while, ironically, denying it to 'true' Christianity itself. But in the Hebrew Bible the sacrifice is neither scapegoat nor punishment; it is *offering*.

There is some sense in which it is appropriate that Christ's Passion, as the summation of all expiation, should also be the conflation of all symbols of expiation. Thus Christ is, at once, sacrificial offering, purgative scapegoat, and penitential sufferer. But beyond all this – and here I think Girard gets it absolutely right – he is victim (and this is *not* a symbol). I fully agree with Girard that this piling together of expiatory symbols, which he calls the 'sacrificial reading,' creates theological difficulties for Christianity. But at the same time this very piling together may itself be taken as having special symbolic significance. It makes the Cross, in a sense, the 'symbol to end all symbols'; and, as such, a transcendence of the totalistic distortion of ritualistic symbology itself.

Such symbology becomes distorted when its symbolic character is lost and the notion of service to God comes more and more to be taken in a literal sense; i.e., as subordination to a Total Being who is propelled by his own personal *telos* to demand submission from others. The notion of *what* such a God may want need not be clearly defined, but the very belief or suspicion that such a God wants *anything* (for himself), and thus issues commands from his own *desire*

rather than from Wholistic love, turns God into a Totalistic principle. The often abused language of reward and punishment in relation to God is a constant temptation to totalism; for rewards and punishments are extrinsic inducements offered for behavior that is, by that very fact, not engaged in for its own intrinsic merit. Such language may be necessary at a certain primitive level of ethical development, insofar as external inducements may be needed to motivate the person who is not yet moved by the ethical itself. But, ideally, the ethical speaks in the name of the good of the other; and one sufficiently mature with respect to it is moved by its own intrinsic goodness; not extrinsic inducements.

The 'sacrificial reading' of Jesus' death on the Cross is a paradox of totalism and wholism. The insistence that God *demand*s suffering as a punishment to *satisfy* his need for Justice is pure Totalism. Justice, *essentially*, has nothing to do with punishment and cannot *demand* it (what might this even *mean*?). The threat of punishment is employed to deter those who are not yet sufficiently motivated by the *intrinsic* value of Justice to show it proper respect. Beyond this, and a possible penitential efficacy, punishment has no function. The idea that Justice itself is somehow *satisfied* by exacting suffering is totalistic anthropomorphism at its worst (it appears to be a hypostatization of the human lust for revenge). On the other hand, the doctrine that such satisfaction can be made *substitutionally* seems, at first, an attempt to transcend Totalism; for it implies that satisfaction is not, in fact, required in a literal sense. But then, the insistence that this very substitutional act *is* required is totalism yet again. The question, in other words, is who is the sacrifice *for*? If it is for the *satisfaction* of God, we are in the domain of totalism. If it is for the *sanctification* of the penitent, we are in the domain of wholism. The sacrificial reading of the Passion seems to me like a totalistic doctrine forever trying to transcend itself toward wholism and never quite succeeding – as does much else in Christian doctrine.

“Man was not made for the Sabbath, the Sabbath was made for man.” In this statement from Mark we have the entire conflict between Totalistic and Wholistic religion expressed in miniature. I think it is possible to read the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, not as primarily a conflict between a 'law-based' and a 'faith-based' piety, nor even between an 'inner'

and an 'outer' spirituality, but between a Wholistic and a Totalistic interpretation of God. Both law and faith are subject to totalistic distortion, and have both been so distorted. Both, likewise, can be vehicles of wholistic expression, and have both been employed for such expression. Jesus' emphasis upon the intrinsic meaning and value of the law, as opposed to its extrinsic demands and inducements, is an implicit turn toward a wholistic ethic. The importance of the commandments is in what they mean for human welfare, not to what extent they 'serve' an extrinsic God. At his best, then, Jesus is a representative of a Wholistic Monotheism against the totalistic distortions of those who would argue that 'man was made for the Sabbath.' The questions at issue, and the ones Jesus raises, are the holiest of all questions: what is of real value? What is to be affirmed? What are the commandments *for*? What, finally, *matters*?

I find myself in agreement with Girard when he sees in the Old and New Testaments the unfolding of a progressive revelation. At first the Monotheistic God retains many of the features of the neighboring polytheistic gods, in whose 'image,' one might say, he is originally cast. There are, however, a few critical differences. This God, unlike the others, seems to have a particular interest in ethical concerns, he insists upon being recognized as the One and (at first supreme and finally only) God, and he has a peculiar dislike of being photographed (i.e., imaged in any way). He requires a refocusing of the attention away from the particularities of life, to the One from whom all particulars flow, and in terms of whom they are all sanctified. The Monotheistic God, in contrast to the polytheistic gods with their finite charges, sees with the eyes of the Whole itself. He does not see from one perspective, but from all perspectives (Ezekiel's vision of the chariot "full of eyes" is a remarkable expression of this). He is the Knowledge of the Whole.

As the eyes of the Whole he is the ideal in relation to which the universalizing capacity of human cognition is the imperfect 'image.' As such, he is, one might say, its metaphysical counterpart. Just as the polytheistic gods may be thought of as 'personified universals,' correspondent to an emerging human cognition of the universal forces of nature, so the Monotheistic God is the Universal of universals, correspondent to the further development of this cognitive capacity as it begins to comprehend the whole *as* whole. His ethical concern is no

accident. It follows directly from the idea of a Being who would see the Whole as such; who sees perfectly that “*every nature desires its own good*” (not just mine) and, therefore, *no* nature may violate another in the name of itself.

But to the extent that this God of the Whole becomes Totalistic (or simply *retains* the traces of finitude from its polytheistic past) it approaches the tyrannical. This is why the prohibition against graven images is so critical. The moment the God of the Whole is envisioned as a finite *nature* seeking to fulfill *itself*, as opposed to an infinite *supernature*, seeking the fulfillment of *all*, the moment it becomes opaque as opposed to transparent, visible as opposed to invisible, it begins to absorb the light of the Whole rather than disseminating it. Everyone becomes servant to a principle that is servant to no one. This is what Nietzsche calls ‘nihilism’; it is the perpetual danger of Monotheism.

But (Nietzsche notwithstanding) at first this danger must be risked, for the only way to elevate the human mind to the Whole is through the particular with which it is familiar. And the animal-god *must* be elevated, for its emergent cognitive capacity, wrapped in an animal nature, is a constant temptation for it to claim Totality for itself, to the destruction of everyone else. It is this Totalistic rivalry between individuals and cultures (and *not* mimetic rivalry) that is the supreme danger to the earth and everything in it. So the first value this God of the Whole must teach is humility. He is like the mother who says to her squabbling children, “If you can't share the toys among you I'm going to take them away and keep them for myself.” But the point isn't to take the toys away so that Mother can have them for herself – or so that *nobody* can have them out of some perverse regard for self-abnegation. The point is to teach the children to share, which requires that the children learn to give, and, thus, to give up, i.e., to *sacrifice*.

But Monotheism is a dangerous game. The Monotheistic God is always in danger of being turned into the *only* value, which – as Nietzsche so aptly points out – turns negation itself into a value. When the Hebrew prophets rail against sacrifice it is not Girardian victimage they are condemning, it is this: that honor to the supreme God has supplanted the very honoring this God cries out for: the honoring of the other. The prophets are not concerned with the victims of

sacrifice but the victims of neglect, the widows and orphans and indigent. These people are not persecuted in order to control mimetic rivalry – they are neglected and trampled upon as the powerful pursue their totalistic aims of wealth, power, and glory. They are victims of Totality, not mimetism.

Beyond this (or supplementary to it) the Monotheistic God is always in danger of being used as a Totalistic banner with which one culture can oppress another, or, for that matter, itself. Again, precisely to the extent that the Monotheistic God is opaque, precisely to the extent that it *absorbs* value rather than disseminating it, it can become a source of pride to the particular culture, nation, or institution, who *profess* to serve it, but who, in fact, *use* it for their own Totalistic ends. This pride can be extremely subtle for it involves, not a personal elevation, but a communal identification with the glory of the Supreme God, an identification that may appear as great *individual* humility and submission. But such identification is itself a distortion. No one can identify with the God of Wholism, for there is no Entity to identify with. The God of Wholism is a pure transparency. Light goes through and shines in the faces of the “least among you.” To identify with the God of Wholism is to identify with these.

This, then, is the battle that rages between Jesus and the Pharisees; the former representing a Wholistic ethic and the latter representing its totalistic distortion. (It needs to be said, however, that of all the cultures that have professed Monotheism, the Jews, on the whole, have been *least* abusive of it. One of the tragic ironies of the Gospel accounts is that they take what was originally an *intra*-religious conflict, indicative of the ethical and spiritual *vitality* of the Jewish religion, and turn it into an attack on the Jews themselves. But Jews have always been open to critical self-scrutiny – as should be apparent from the fact that, perhaps uniquely among all cultures, they *revere* texts in which they themselves are criticized. If not for the Jewish openness to critical self-evaluation, the texts of the Prophets would never have been preserved for later Christian exegetes to use as a bludgeon against them. Jesus' criticisms are very much in the tradition of Judaism itself.)

Be that as it may, in the context of the Gospels it is Jesus who represents the Wholistic ethic and the Pharisees its totalistic abuse. Jesus, at his best, reveals the true essence of the God of Wholism, whose essence is pure dissemination; i.e., *love*. “The Sabbath is for the sake of man”: The Whole is for the sake of each. In this context it is interesting to consider the two “great commandments” that Jesus cites: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” Left to itself, this commandment might seem the very embodiment of totalism. One is to give God everything, which leaves nothing over for anything else. But, properly considered, it is simply the first move of Wholistic sanctification, which lifts the mind *up* from the exclusive valuing of *oneself* to the valuing of the Wholistic God, in order to redirect it *down* again to the valuing of *all* selves. Thus this great commandment is immediately supplemented with: “And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” From a totalistic perspective these two commandments seem contradictory. If one is to give God *all* one's love how is one to have any left over for one's neighbor and oneself? The traditional way out is to suggest that one is to love others 'for the sake of' God – as if they are not *really* worth loving but should be loved nonetheless, as a kind of favor to God (who seems to have this peculiar penchant for loving the worthless).

A more satisfying exegesis, I think, is derived from Wholism. To love God *is* to love one's neighbor *and* oneself. There is no contradiction; on the contrary, there is mutual immanence. Totalism suggests that for God to have *all* worth, everyone else must have none. But this is a great distortion. Wholistically, God's infinite worth *is* the worth of all that derives from God; “of every nature pursuing its own being.” In Totalism God becomes the supreme negation. In Wholism the supreme affirmation. Totalism turns God into the supreme No. Wholism sees God as the supreme Yes.

Jesus is crucified by two totalisms, mutually opposed to each other (as all totalisms must be) but, in this instance, enjoying a marriage of convenience: Pharisaic religious Totalism and Roman political Totalism. He may be regarded, thus, as the paradigmatic 'victim of Totality.' Girard's emphasis upon Jesus as victim is, in my view, right on. But it is not some primordial

'mimetic victimage mechanism' that Jesus is victim of, it is the totalistic ethic itself and, more specifically, the distortions of monotheistic Totalism. As a *victim* of monotheistic Totalism, Jesus' crucifixion should expose it and *explode* it forevermore – in the name of a Wholism that overcomes all totalistic distortion (i.e., 'legalism'). This is the insight that Paul, it seems to me, *grasps at* as he tries to interpret Jesus' crucifixion as the expiatory rite to end all expiatory rites. But Paul never seems to find the language to move him finally beyond the juridical symbols that have become so oppressive, and so ends up interpreting Jesus' death in juridical terms – laying the foundation for the 'sacrificial reading' that Girard so pointedly condemns – and bequeathing to the world the great ambiguity that is the Christian religion.

But perhaps Girard is also right in suggesting that the world was unprepared for anything else. The double movement of the Wholistic revelation – up toward the whole and back down to *all* particulars – may require a totalistic phase to induce the gaze upward. Perhaps, even, (as Teilhard's work suggests) a certain globalization of human culture is required before Wholism can be introduced in a viable way. Thus, the ambiguity of the Christian religion may be the only reason there still *is* a Christian religion, whose ambiguity can now, perhaps, be exposed and corrected in the name of a message that, like a time-capsule, has been lying there in wait for us. Again, Girard seems to me to get it right when he suggests that there is something in the Christian kerygma itself that resists the very distortions in which it has so often been cast – and that this something is the victimage of Jesus, whose impotence on the Cross is a revelation of God's identification with the abused, oppressed, and persecuted; the victims, and critics, of Totality.

So, after disagreeing with so many of Girard's premises I find myself in close accord with many of his conclusions. The victimage of Jesus is key, and to the extent that the sacrificial reading of the Cross is employed to bolster a Totalistic Monotheism it needs to be seen, not only as counterproductive, but as diametrically opposed to the truly revolutionary aspect of Jesus' message. But, again, I differ with Girard's analysis as to the roots and meaning of victimage. I

don't think it has much to do with 'mimetic' tendencies on the part of human beings but, much closer to the traditional Christian doctrine of sin, with a temptation to totalism inherent in the nature of the animal-god ever since it became animal-god; i.e., ever since being 'cast from the garden' into the ambiguous world of ethical responsibility. Nor would I agree with Girard's belief that the New Testament in general, or the Gospels in particular, represent a pristine expression of the best in religion. On the contrary, I find in the New Testament the same ambiguity to be found in the rest of Christianity, and in all of Monotheism, and in humanity at large. If God intends to hand us the answer fully-formed he hasn't done so yet, as far as I can tell. Personally, though, I don't think that this is the Wholistic God's style.

Before concluding I would like to say just a word about the relevance of these ideas to trends in contemporary thought. It seems to me that much of modernism, and post-modernism, can be seen as a reaction against Totalism in all its forms. The epistemological caution of modern philosophy and modern science seems, in so many ways, to have emerged in reaction to the epistemic totalism implicit in the ideas of scriptural inerrancy and doctrinal infallibility propounded by the Church. The secular/political totalisms of Communism (a quintessential example of a wholistic ethic gone wrong), and Nazism (the quintessential revelation of Totalism's evil) has taken this reaction to a new level which, I think, we see in post-modernism. Through a critique of language and meaning as such, the post-modernists cast doubt on the possibility of *any* absolute truth-claim, and thereby permanently undermine the foundation for any totalistic ethic or ideology. Indeed, the pluralism celebrated by the post-modernists might well be seen as a wholism afraid to declare itself as such for fear of totalistic distortion. (The suspicion that Derrida may be an undeclared 'negative theologian' seems to me in line with this interpretation. And, of course, Levinas' protest against totalism is explicit.)

But post-modernism, in my view, is too reactionary and negative to be anything more than an interim movement. It is simply the final episode in the protest against the totalistic phase of human universalism; which, as I have suggested, emerges as a feature of the cognitive

development of the human mind itself. Given the universalism inherent in human nature, there is no way back to animal-like instinctivism, or even simple communitarian pluralism. Human beings *will* think in universal terms; the question is whether those terms will be Wholistic or Totalistic. But even this is not a real option, for Totalism chokes the life out of even its adherents, not to mention its opponents, and so is not a sustainable alternative. The only real question, then, is whether humanity will survive long enough to realize its Wholistic destiny.

This remains to be seen.

¹ Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), I.48.1

² *Ibid.*, Ib. 2.3.

³ Girard, René, *Things Hidden Since the Foundations of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 103.

⁴ Ricoeur, Paul, *The Symbolism of Evil*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 35.