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Elements in Religion and Violence

Transforming the Sacred into Saintliness

Wolfgang Palaver

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Elements in Religion and Violence

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TRANSFORMING THE SACRED INTO SAINTLINESS

*Reflecting on Violence and Religion with René
Girard*

Wolfgang Palaver

University of Innsbruck



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Transforming the Sacred into Saintliness

Reflecting on Violence and Religion with René Girard

Elements in Religion and Violence

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ABSTRACT: Studies into religion and violence often put religion first. René Girard started with violence in his book *Violence and the Sacred* and used the Durkheimian term “sacred” as its correlate in his study of early religions. During the unfolding of his theory, he more and more distinguished the sacred from saintliness to address the break that the biblical revelation represented in comparison with early religions. This distinction between the sacred and saintliness resembles Henri Bergson’s complementing Emile Durkheim’s identification of the sacred and society with a dynamic religion that relies on individual mystics. Girard’s distinction also relates to the insights of thinkers like Jacques Maritain, Simone Weil, and Emmanuel Levinas. This Element explores some of Girard’s main features of saintliness. Girard pleaded for the transformation of the sacred into holy, not their separation.

KEYWORDS: Girard; religion; sacred; saintliness; violence

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1 Introduction

The world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-stricken town needs doctors. Where there is a need there is also an obligation. (Weil, 2001, p. 99)

Today the topic of symposia, workshops, or lectures is usually religion and violence, not the other way around. This is a first concern I want to express in this Element. We must start with human violence and ask afterward in what way religion relates to violence. It may enhance violence or strengthen peace. Both these relations are possible. To find out, however, what type of religion is prone to violence and what type of religion contributes to peace, we need a normative concept of religion. To focus on such a concept is my second concern. For many years, I have followed René Girard's anthropological approach concerning violence and religion without, however, putting enough emphasis on his later distinction between the sacred and the holy.

Working on the so-called European wars of religion a couple of years ago showed me how important Girard's distinction really is (Palaver, 2016a, pp. 257–258). Scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds have demonstrated in recent years that it is much too simple to see religion as the main cause of these wars. José Casanova, the well-known sociologist, showed that these wars were not caused by religion leading to the secularized modern state but were much more part of the modern state building that led “to the confessionalization of the state and to the territorialization of religions and people” (2008, p. 9). In addition, many historians today question the usual understanding of these wars. Luise Schorn-Schütte, for instance, a German historian, emphasized the dovetailing of religion and the political against all too simplified concepts that focus only on religious or political dimension of these wars (2010). William Cavanaugh's theological contribution to this debate was also important for me. He criticized the myth of religious violence by interpreting the so-called European wars of religion as the birth pangs of the modern state (2009, pp. 123–180). Cavanaugh also showed that the use of the term “religion” in these debates was already highly problematic because its modern understanding stems from the questionable claim that these wars were religious wars. His insight that

the modern state itself fulfils a religious role if we reflect on nationalism and modern wars also underlines the fact that it is very difficult to distill a special religious dimension as a root cause of violence.

Girard's distinction between the sacred and the holy can lead us further because it distinguishes between a type of religion that directly results from violent entanglements between human beings and a type of religion that the nonviolent God has offered to his creatures. In the following, I will show how Girard clarified his distinction between the sacred and saintliness during the unfolding of his mimetic theory. Two scholarly debates serve as its theoretical background and enhance our understanding of Girard's distinction. Both started around Emile Durkheim's book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* from 1912. The first debate was the war over the sacred in French sociology in which Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade criticized Durkheim's approach for its societal reduction of the sacred. A nearly contrary critique of Durkheim came from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Gauchet who rejected the claim either that the sacred is the primary social institution or that it would not be possible to reach an end of religion. Girard's mimetic theory differs significantly from all these positions. Like Durkheim, he recognized the foundational dimension of the sacred and could not follow Lévi-Strauss's or Gauchet's view of religion. He also clearly distanced himself from Otto's understanding of the holy with its emphasis on its nonrational dimension. His important deviation from Durkheim's view of the sacred, however, followed indirectly a second debate that leaned more strongly toward philosophical and theological questions. It started during the Dreyfus Affair with Charles Péguy's discovery of saintliness in the defense of innocent victims of scapegoating. Péguy, a student of Henri Bergson, influenced his teacher in his development of a concept of religion that distinguished between two types of it in Bergson's late book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* from 1932. Bergson's distinction between a static and a dynamic religion systematized some of Péguy's intuitions; complemented Durkheim's reductionist view; and initiated a tradition of saintliness, which influenced thinkers like Simone Weil, Jacques Maritain, or Emmanuel Levinas. Their emphasis on sanctity contributed to Girard's seminal distinction between the sacred and saintliness as two sections of this Element will show in detail. Finally, I conclude

this Element with an overview of the most important dimensions of saintliness as they follow from Girard's distinction.

2 Why Violence Precedes Religion and Not the Other Way Around

To ask “why is there so much violence around us?” may feel like an eternal question, but in fact it is really a very modern one. (Girard, 1998, p. 129)

2.1 Starting with Human Violence

Reflections on religion and violence in news media and popular literature and by scholars like the new atheists tend to emphasize religion as the main culprit by usually putting this term first. I prefer “violence” as the starting point because it reminds us immediately about the fact that human beings are ultimately responsible for acts of violence. It is also easier to define violence than religion. When people use physical force to injure or abuse other human beings, we rightly call it violence. This type of direct or personal violence ranges from muggings in the street to rape, terrorism, or acts of war. Reducing violence, however, to physical or direct acts is a much too narrow approach. We definitely need a broader concept and have to include for example psychic violence, symbolic violence, or epistemic violence (Lawrence and Karim, 2007; Christ, 2017). The Norwegian founder of peace studies Johan Galtung decades ago went beyond direct violence by introducing the concept of “structural violence” that he identified with social injustice: “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations” (1969, p. 168). Later Galtung defined violence more precisely as consisting in “avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally to *life*, lowering the real level of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible” (1990, p. 292; unless otherwise noted, all emphasis in original text). He also broadened his understanding of violence by adding cultural violence as a third type besides direct and structural violence (1990; cf. Dennis, 2018, pp. 38–40). According to Galtung, these three types of violence form a “vicious *violence triangle*” (1990, p. 294; cf. 2004).

Direct violence is the most visible form, whereas structural violence and cultural violence remain invisible most of the time. Structures of unequal economic or political power following sexism, racism, or the discrimination of minorities are typical examples of structural violence. Cultural violence that overlaps partly with symbolic violence provides the justification of direct or structural violence. It is essentially symbolic and plays an important role in “religion and ideology, in language and art, in science and law, in media and education” (Galtung, 1996, p. 2). According to Galtung, this violence triangle is vicious because the different types of violence tend to reinforce one another. Focusing on violence means considering the whole violence triangle.

Starting with violence does not mean maintaining that human nature is violent but to open our eyes for the violent potentials that are part of human life. According to Galtung, human beings have potentials for violence as well as for love (2004, p. 6). A century ago, the Austrian writer Robert Musil who participated in the First World War noted afterward that “human nature is as capable of cannibalism as it is of the *Critique of Pure Reason*” (1995a, p. I 391; cf. 1995b, p. 121). Behavioral scientists express similar insights today. Richard Wrangham (2019), for instance, claims in his recent book *The Goodness Paradox* that human beings “can be the nastiest of species and also the nicest” (p. 3).

It is highly irritating and embarrassing to belong to a species with such violent potentials. We therefore want to attribute immediately all violence to others by claiming our innocence and our inborn nonviolence. René Girard rejected the notion that aggression is the main cause of violence because it is often one-sided in its attempt to blame others for being violent aggressors: “It aggressively divides mankind between the aggressors and the aggressed, and we include ourselves in the second category. But most human conflicts are two-sided, reciprocal” (2004b, p. 9). Starting with violence also means confronting ourselves with our own inclinations toward violence. The Swiss writer Max Frisch formulated the most challenging question in this regard: “Let us assume that you have never killed another human being. How do you account for it?” (1974, p. 4). Frisch’s harsh question does not lack evidence. Steven Pinker refers to studies that were conducted with university students who are not known to be exceptionally aggressive but showed high rates of homicidal fantasies: “Between 70 and 90 percent of the men,

and between 50 and 80 percent of the women, admitted to having at least one homicidal fantasy in the preceding year” (2011, p. 484). To face one’s own violence, however, is quite challenging. Strong defense mechanisms protect us against this self-inspection. Girard claimed in an interview with Robert Harrison that the “real unconscious” is the “rejection of an awareness of our own violence” (Haven, 2020, p. 123).

Recent research shows a certain inclination toward conspecific violence among primates and human beings due to social behavior and territoriality (Gómez, Verdú, González-Megías, and Méndez, 2016; Pagel, 2016). This heritage, however, does not mean that human beings are determined to violent behavior. These studies claim a 2 percent rate of lethal violence at the origin of our species. During human history, this rate rose as high as 30 percent and declined to 0.01 percent in modern societies.

Girard’s mimetic theory has contributed significantly to the field of violence studies. Like Galtung, he rejected claims about an inborn violent human nature and he too went far beyond acts of direct violence, clearly deconstructing types of structural and cultural violence. Bruce Lawrence and Aisha Karim recognize Girard as an important author to understand the “religious element to structural violence” because he understood that the primordial religious attempt to tame violence had to rely on the “application of violence” (2007, p. 221; cf. Girard, 1977, p. 20). More in line with Galtung’s typology, Girard reflects on structural violence where he refers to the “deprivations of the poor,” the general tendency of majorities to scapegoat minorities or to acts of racism (1986, pp. 6, 17–18, 22, 32, 39, 90, 120; 1987c, pp. 38, 129, 446). Girard’s deconstruction of the pre-Axial religions as the offspring of a foundational murder that not only shaped religion but also the whole culture due to its being rooted in violence goes even beyond Galtung’s critical assessment of cultural violence. Girard’s critical approach dares to unmask violence even in those myths that show no obvious traces of violence by relying on structural parallels with those myths that expose at least some traces of violence:

We are beginning to see that the representations of persecution we have already deciphered are for us an Ariadne’s thread to guide us through the labyrinth of mythology. They

will enable us to trace the real origin in collective violence of even the myths that contain no stereotypes of persecution. (1986, p. 33)

Violence not only shaped the realm of the sacred but culture as well. According to Girard, the judicial system and even ancient philosophy are outstanding examples of cultural violence because of their roots in a murderous victimage mechanism (Palaver, 2019).

In an important regard, however, Girard reached a deeper level of unmasking the invisible underground of violence that remained outside Galtung's scope. In the work of this pioneer of peace research, we do not find a convincing explanation of the human causes leading to the vicious violence triangle. Girard, however, recognized in ordinary human relations a high potential for human violence. In an article in which he distances himself from those scholars of violence who confine their studies to small acts of direct violence, he highlights the relational character of human violence:

They want to isolate the smallest knowable particle of violence. By the act of violence they mean mugging in big cities. Of course violence in big cities, anonymous violence that strikes like lightning, more or less at random, is a real problem today. It is a very big problem which I do not want to minimise. But all criminologists will tell you that most violence occurs between people who have been acquainted with each other, often for a very long time. Violence is a relationship. (1998, p. 129)

Girard's focus on the relational dimension of violence enabled him to recognize the puzzling fact of sibling rivalry as a main root of human violence:

We instinctively tend to regard the fraternal relationship as an affectionate one; yet the mythological, historical, and literary examples that spring to mind tell a different story: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Eteocles and Polyneices,

Romulus and Remus, Richard the Lion-Hearted and John Lackland. . . . The fraternal theme . . . itself is a form of violence. (1977, p. 61)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2015) endorses Girard's insight in his book *Not in God's Name*, highlighting sibling rivalry as a key to understanding religious violence.

Initiated by his careful readings of great European novelists, Girard shares insights with many poets and writers who recognized how easily human relations can turn into nasty entanglements (1966). The German poet Friedrich Hölderlin whose writings accompanied Girard throughout most of his unfolding of mimetic theory observes in his fragment *Hyperion's Youth* that ordinary life often resembles a "war" that is fought beneath a "mask of peace" (2008, p. 242). This invisible war stems from entanglements of desiring humans. A sentence in his novel *Hyperion* summarizes marvelously what Hölderlin understands about rivaling desires after basic needs are satisfied: "Young lambs butt their heads together when they are sated with their mother's milk" (1990, p. 69) What Hölderlin expressed with this sentence leads to Girard's insight into mimetic rivalry that he discovered in major writers. Whenever human beings imitate others and desire objects they cannot share or enjoy together, they easily turn against one another. Mimetic desire is, according to Girard, the main cause of human rivalries and violence. Girard criticizes social sciences harshly for overlooking the potentials of violence in human relations:

The mimetic nature of desire accounts for the fragility of human relations. Our social sciences should give due consideration to a phenomenon that must be considered *normal*, but they persist in seeing conflict as something accidental, and consequently so unforeseeable that researchers cannot and must not take it into account in their study of culture. (2001, pp. 10–11)

This claim to recognize the normality of conflicts coming along with human relations, however, does mean that human beings are necessarily prone to

violence caused by mimetic desire. In the very same book, in which Girard highlights the fragility of human relations, he also maintains, “mimetic desire is intrinsically good” (2001, p. 15)

Recognizing mimetic rivalries as the main root of human violence also consists of concepts that refer to scarcity instead. Two authors have explained religious violence by emphasizing scarcity as its prime cause. Regina Schwartz used it to address monotheism’s proneness toward violence, and Hector Avalos (2019) extended her thesis to religions in general. An emphasis on scarcity remains, however, banal and superficial because it is mainly the result of mimetic rivalries and not their precondition. Girard rightly highlights the advantages of a “theory of conflict based primarily on appropriative mimicry” over against one “based on scarcity” (Williams, 1996, p. 10). Paul Dumouchel, a philosopher following Girard’s anthropology underlined the secondariness of scarcity and its social origin:

Scarcity is defined neither by any quantity of goods and resources nor by parsimony of nature. Scarcity is constructed in the fabric of interpersonal relations. . . . Scarcity exists nowhere but in the network of intersubjective exchanges that creates it. Scarcity is a form of social organization, nothing else. (2013, p. 23)

It is true that scarcity has a central role in many religious scriptures. Sibling rivalries in the Hebrew Bible most obviously illustrate this problem and disclose at the same time its roots in mimetic rivalry. Many passages in the Bible reveal the mimetic causation clearly and do not prove a violent religious scarcity to justify violence. Schwartz at least recognized passages that emphasize God’s plenitude but weakened her insight by claiming that this vision was difficult to sustain (1997, pp. 34–37; cf. Mittleman, 2018, p. 170; Meir, 2019, pp. 75–77). Indeed, the vision of plenitude is difficult to sustain because we humans so easily end up in mimetic entanglements. According to Rabbi Sacks, the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible seems to illustrate nothing but scarcity caused by mimetic rivalry. However, this is only true if we overlook the counternarrative that we find beneath the surface of these texts hinting “at the most radical of monotheism’s truths:

that God may choose, but God *does not reject*. The logic of scarcity – of alpha males and chosen sons – has no place in a world made by a God whose ‘tender mercies are on *all* his works’ (Psalm 145:9)” (Sacks, 2015, p. 123). Sacks knows that scarcity comes along with competition for wealth and power, but that divine love “is governed by the principle of plenitude” (p. 172). We touch here the realm of the holy that unites people and due to its lack of materiality does not necessitate scarcity, as the German philosopher Max Scheler very well understood: “Nothing unites beings more immediately and intimately . . . than the common worship and adoration of the ‘holy,’ which by its nature excludes a ‘material’ bearer, though not a symbolic one” (1973, p. 94; cf. Palaver, 2013a, p. 94).

If we would start with religion instead of violence, it might also be an attempt to blame others for causing violence. Girard justly warned us not to give in to this temptation: “The violence we would love to transfer to religion is really our own, and we must confront it directly. To turn religions into the scapegoats of our own violence can only backfire in the end” (2004b, p. 20). Girard’s warning does not mean that we should turn a blind eye on all those cases of violence in which religion played a role. We just have to look at the so-called European wars of religion between 1520 and 1648 that resulted in one of the bloodiest periods in modern Western history (Pinker, 2011, p. 293; cf. Palaver, Rudolph, and Regensburger, 2016). The cruelty in these wars was so extreme that terms like “massacre” and “cannibal” became part of common parlance during these years (Jacoby, 2011, p. 12). It is, however, much too simple to see religion as the sole root of violence. André Comte-Sponville, an atheistic French philosopher does not overlook in his *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* all those examples that show how religions contributed to violence, but he refers in the end to human beings as such where he looks for causes of violence:

What incites people to commit massacres is not faith; it is fanaticism, whether religious or political. It is intolerance. It is hatred. Believing in God can be dangerous. We need only remember the massacre of Saint Bartholomew’s Day, the Crusades, the wars of religion, the Jihad, the September 11

attacks. . . . Not believing in God can be equally dangerous. We need only remember Stalin, Mao Tsetung or Pol Pot. . . . Who will add up the deaths on either side and decide what they mean? Horror is numberless, with or without God. Alas, this tells us more about humanity than it does about religion. (2007, p. 76)

It is also important to understand that the interplay between violence and religion differed significantly throughout human history. We have to distinguish between the most important stages of this history. (Comte-Sponville, 2007, p. 76) If we follow Robert Bellah's distinction between tribal, archaic, and Axial religions, we can find specific types of violence that characterize these different forms of religion. Concerning tribal religions, Bellah states that these societies were not automatically peaceful despite their strong in-group solidarity but knew, for instance, "endemic conflict between groups," adding, "even cannibalism shows up in the fossil record" (2011, p. 130). Group identity often developed in opposition to other groups. Bellah recognized friend-enemy patterns in tribal societies that have not yet left our world: "In-group solidarity and out-group hostility are recurrent human possibilities at every level, from foragers to school-children to nation-states" (p. 94). In-group aggression, too, was "only relatively successfully controlled" (p. 130). Hunter-gatherer bands were egalitarian but needed aggressive acts to prevent upstarts from dominating the group. Bellah refers to Christopher Boehm's book *Hierarchy in the Forest* and summarizes the usual sanctions of these egalitarian bands in the following way: "Potential upstarts are first ridiculed, then shunned, and, if they persist, killed" (p. 177; cf. Boehm, 1999). Regarding the latter Boehm himself recognizes in such killings the most extreme form of ostracism and claims, "45,000 years ago, capital punishment was a human universal" (2011, p. 528; cf. 2012, p. 35).

With the emergence of chiefdoms, sedentarism, and agrarianism, humanity entered its archaic stage. Although this was certainly a step forward in the development of human culture, it also led to severe forms of violence. Benjamin Schewel, a philosopher working on history and religion, explains why "conflict, violence, and oppression were common

tendencies” in the archaic age: “The divine king’s desire to constantly expand his empire created a cycle of ‘sacred’ warfare and cultures of slavery and oppression. In this regard, consider the Israelites’ enslavement by the Egyptians and the Aztecs’ practice of sacrificing captured peoples before the altar of their gods” (2017, p. 177). Warfare between armies seeking territorial conquest also emerged during the archaic stage of humanity. Hunter-gatherers knew fights between tribal groups and other outbursts of violence but not organized warfare as such (Bellah, 2011, pp. 194–195; Armstrong, 2014, p. 12; Pally, 2019a, 2020).

The Axial age – to address the third major stage in the development of humanity – is characterized by the critique of a social order that relied on injustice and violent oppression. Leading figures of Axial religions criticized the violent patterns dominating in the tribal and archaic stages and sided with the victims of violence. If we reflect on the history of the Abrahamic religions, however, we realize that these religions have also been tempted to use violence in their defense of victims. This type of religiously motivated violence is extremely dangerous and partly shapes contemporary terrorism (Palaver, 2008, 2010, 2013b, 2016b, 2018). Charles Taylor rightly observed that the “Axial transformation” with its ethical siding with victims of persecution could lead to an escalation of violence unknown to previous ages and often additionally amplified by modern secular revolutions: “Violence is now on a new footing. It is in the service of the Higher. And this means it can be all the more implacable, ruthless and thorough. Where much earlier warfare was ritualized, and hence limited, post-Axial sacred killing will become more and more rationalized and limitless” (Taylor, 2007, p. 687).

2.2 The French Wars over the Sacred and a Normative Concept of Religion

Taking violence as the starting point, however, does not seek a whitewashing of religion. There are too many examples of religiously justified acts of violence to exclude religion as a cause contributing to violence. As soon, however, as we turn toward religion, we realize the huge difficulty to come to an acceptable and useful definition of it. The late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1997) justly claimed that “‘religion’ belongs to a family of curious and often embarrassing concepts which one perfectly

understands until one wants to define them” (p. 166). One of the main reasons for this difficulty was mentioned in the book *The Myth of Religious Violence* by the Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh: “There is no transhistorical or transcultural concept of religion. Religion has a history, and what counts as religion and what does not in any given context depends on different configurations of power and authority” (2009, p. 59). Karen Armstrong, an expert in comparative religion, also claims by following Cavanaugh and other scholars “that there is no universal way to define religion” (2014, p. 4). Today we encounter many different, often incompatible theories of religion. Benjamin Schewel (2017) bundles these theories, for instance, into seven quite diverse narratives in his recent book *Seven Ways of Looking at Religion*. We also should keep in mind the three major stages in the development of humanity that not only differ concerning violence but also relate to different types of religions.

Looking at religion faces many more problems than reflecting on violence. In the following, I will refer to those problems coming along with certain theories of religion that are important for our reflection on the relationship between violence and religion and that will lead us to a better understanding of Girard’s distinction between the sacred and the holy. A first problem arises with the Western concept of “religion” itself because it is in regard to many other cultures and even in regard to premodern Christianity in Europe “idiosyncratic and eccentric” (Armstrong, 2014, p. 4). It has close affinities with Protestant Christianity that lean toward a more privatized understanding of religion. According to the cultural anthropologist Talal Asad (1993), such a concept of religion easily serves ideological attempts to blame primarily religion for causing violence and exculpates all secular agents at the same time. Asad criticizes the “absurd claim that ‘religion’ is a main cause of conflict and violence in the world, while secular politics is the agent of prosperity, order, and peace” (Schewel, 2017, p. 105). This critique is close to William Cavanaugh’s study of how the modern understanding of religion emerged with the birth of the sovereign state during the so-called European wars of religion and how the distinction between religion and politics helped subordinate the ecclesiastical institutions to state power (2009, pp. 57–122; 2016). Armstrong rightly refers to Girard to remark that this Western view of religion tends to turn it into a scapegoat (2014, p. 3).

Today popular media and quite a few scholars point to monotheism as a main cause of religiously motivated violence. Earlier, I introduced Johan Galtung's vicious violence triangle to achieve a broader understanding of violence and mentioned that religion is central in his definition of cultural violence. His understanding of religion, however, shows a clear bias against the Judeo-Christian tradition. In his investigation of the role of religion in cultural violence, he strongly rejected the Judeo-Christian legacy by distinguishing between "a transcendental God outside us and an immanent god inside us, maybe also inside all life" (1990, p. 296). The first type began, according to Galtung with the "Judaism of the Torah" that was later taken over by Christianity and Islam. Combined with a dualism of God against Satan this "catastrophic idea" led to violent outcomes like sexism, racism, and the Inquisition. Along this line of thinking, Galtung is also highly critical of the concept of "chosenness" that he calls a "vicious type of cultural violence" and explains with it the oppression of Palestinians by Israel (p. 297). Only "softer" version of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam exemplified by Sufism, Francis of Assisi, and Spinoza avoid the violence of a transcendental image of God. Galtung especially favors Gandhi's ecumenism, his emphasis on enhancing all life, and his insistence on working on all issues simultaneously as it follows the "archetype" of the "Buddhist wheel" over against the "Christian pyramid" (p. 302). Galtung's typology is much too simple and does not stand up to a thorough examination. Even for traditional types of Christianity or Islam, one cannot claim a purely transcendental understanding of God. Augustine believed in a transcendent God who was at the same time "more inward than my most inward part" (2008, p. 43 [Conf. 3.6]). In addition, despite Islam's emphasis on God's transcendence, we find in the Qur'an also the well-known verse that God is nearer to his human creatures than the "jugular vein" (Surah 50:16). It might be true that Francis of Assisi initially put more emphasis on the humanity of Christ, but his encounter with the Muslim sultan led him to emphasize God's transcendence (Rout, 2011, p. 211). Gandhi's understanding of God, too, does not correspond to a clear-cut distinction between good immanence and bad transcendence because the Mahatma believed that God is "immanent and at the same time transcendent" and referred to verses in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (7.13, 7.24, 8, 9.10–11) for God's transcendence (1982, p. 137; cf. 1969, pp. 258–263, 280). Finally, the Jewish

concept of “chosenness” cannot be identified with its violent perversions if we follow its best interpreters. Emmanuel Levinas, for instance, understood that “election is made up not of privileges but of responsibilities” (1990, p. 21; cf. 136, 175–177; 2004, pp. 117–118; cf. Meir, 2010, pp. 352–353). We will see later that Girard’s view of the Judeo-Christian tradition differs significantly from Galtung’s without overlooking acts of violence that were committed by members belonging to it.

Galtung’s take on religion is partly reacting against a long-standing tradition in modern religious studies that claimed superiority for Christianity. Schewel (2017, p. 120) describes how the diverse religious traditions were judged “according to their nearness to prevalent Christian practices and beliefs, particularly of a Protestant sort.” Rudolf Otto, the German theologian and comparative religionist who focused on the numinous in his theory of religion, is a perfect example for this earlier tradition. For him, the achieved balance between rational and nonrational elements was “a criterion to measure the relative rank of religions” and led him to the conclusion that Christianity “stands out in complete superiority over all its sister religions” (Otto, 1952, p. 142; cf. Capps, 1995, pp. 23–24).

By distancing himself from such Christian self-exaltation, Galtung at least aims for a still normative concept of religion with which he preferred a God within us to monotheist concepts of transcendence. Many other scholars, however, no longer dare to maintain a normative concept of religion. Their use of the term “religion” remains most of the time purely descriptive. According to Schewel, such a self-limitation to pure description prevents any serious reflection on the relationship between violence and religion. To illustrate his critique, he quotes Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion and concludes, “there is nothing in this definition that helps us distinguish Mother Teresa’s religion from Osama bin Laden’s” (2017, pp. 119–120). Girard also strongly criticized the prevalent relativism that no longer normatively distinguishes between different types of religion but settles for the celebration of differences (1999, p. 13; 2001, pp. 12, 77, 122, 176; 2014a, pp. 1–45; Vattimo and Girard, 2010, pp. 49–52). He claimed that mimetic theory is “explicitly anti-relativist” and criticized all those scholars who “don’t make any distinctions among religions” (2014a, p. 113; 2014b, p. 102). For an example, we can refer to Girard’s criticism of Mircea Eliade

who discovered a “creative murder” in many origin stories but “in keeping with his practice of pure description” did not dare a universal explanation of it (2001, p. 83; cf. [Eliade, 1978](#), p. 72).

To understand Girard’s normative theory of religion, we have to situate his approach in relation to the war over the sacred in French sociology in the twentieth century ([Tarot, 2008, 2009](#)). Its starting point was Emile Durkheim’s theory of religion with its special focus on the sacred, its identification of the social with the religious, and its claim that “nearly all the great social institutions have been born in religion” (1965, p. 466; cf. [Tarot, 2009](#), p. 13). Durkheim used the term “sacred” in opposition to the “profane” to comprise all known religious beliefs and practices as becomes most obvious in his definition of religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden” (1965, pp. 52, 62). He also recognized a defining “ambiguity of the notion of sacredness” ([Durkheim, 1965](#), p. 455). Furthermore, he maintained that religions are also undergoing historical change: “If it is true that religion is, in a sense, indispensable, it is no less certain that religions change – that the religion of yesterday could not be the religion of tomorrow” (1973, p. 51). Siding with the defenders of Captain Dreyfus whose wrongful conviction was only corrected years later by a growing awareness of his innocence led Durkheim to the conclusion that the religion of the modern world consists in the sacredness of the individual: the “human person . . . is considered sacred in the ritual sense of the word . . . it is a religion in which man is at once the worshiper and the god” (p. 46). This modern “religion of humanity” differs, of course, from religions of the past concerning rites, symbols, and the need of priests or temples but is as early religions socially constituted because religion “is nothing other than a body of collective beliefs and practices endowed with a certain authority” (pp. 48, 51).

Durkheim’s understanding of the sacred led to strong criticism from two very different angles. On the one hand there were, according to the sociologist of religion Camille Tarot, the religious essentialists like the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto and the historian of religion Mircea Eliade who rejected Durkheim for reducing the sacred to the social that ultimately culminates in a de-sacralization. The other criticism came, according to

Tarot, from the religious non-existentialists like the structuralist ethnologist

Claude Lévi-Strauss who did not have problems with Durkheim's societal reductionism but repudiated his emphasis on the sacred as a universal and determining religious factor. In addition to these authors, we must add the political philosopher Marcel Gauchet whose relation to the Durkheimian tradition is complex. Despite a deep influence of structuralism on his way of thinking, he broke with it decisively by bringing the pre-Axial sacred back into the debate.

A short summary of the positions of Otto, Lévi-Strauss, and Gauchet will help situate Girard in this French war over the sacred. Via Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto's book *The Idea of the Holy* from 1917 played an important role in these debates (Eliade, 1987, pp. 8–10). Otto used the term “numinous” to include those dimensions of religion that go beyond the purely rational, ethical, or esthetic. The numinous “refers to an intangible, unseen, but compelling reality that inspires both fascination and dread. It designates the irrational, nonrational element most characteristic of vital religion” (Capps, 1995, p. 21). Otto selected the term *mysterium tremendum* – meaning “aweful mystery” (1952, p. 25) – to describe the emotional experience that comes along with the numinous. People may experience it as a “gentle tide” but also as a bursting eruption “up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering” (pp. 12–13). Otto also insisted on the fundamental ambivalence of the “numinous experience” because he described the “mysterious” as both “daunting” and “fascinating” (p. 31). He discovered this dual character of the numinous in the “entire history of human religious awareness” and “argued that this fundamental contrast inherent in the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* was always present” (Capps, 1995, p. 23). Divine wrath and divine love express the two sides of the numinous.

Lévi-Strauss's structuralism repudiated Durkheim's approach very differently. He did not at all see a primary role for religion at the foundation of society. Whereas Durkheim claimed that religion was the first human institution, Levi-Strauss placed it deliberately at the very end of a list that he mentioned in his famous introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss: “Any culture can be, considered as a combination of symbolic systems headed by

language, the matrimonial rules, the economic relations, art, science and religion” (1987, p. 16; cf. Tarot, 2009, p. 23). Language replaced religion in Lévi-Strauss’s eyes. This expulsion of religion became most obvious in the last chapter of his book on totemism as well as in his condemnation of sacrifice as meaningless at the end of his mythological tetralogy (1991, pp. 92–104; 1990, pp. 625–695 [“Finale”]).

Marcel Gauchet has not rejected the sacred like Lévi-Strauss and recognized clearly the significance of it at the beginning of human civilization (Schewel, 2017, pp. 24–29). Religion, however, was for him a “*historical phenomenon . . . with a definite beginning and end*” that he identified with the tribal stage of humanity before the emergence of the state and the Axial revolution that happened later (Gauchet 1999, p. 21). In continuation of the Axial revolution in Judaism, Christianity led to our modern secular world that is at least on the political level “capable of existing without religion” (p. 10). For this reason Gauchet claims that Christianity “proves to have been a *religion for departing from religion*” or a religion that led to the “end of religion” (pp. 4, 103, 162–164).

Girard positioned himself over against all these different attitudes toward the sacred. Concerning the institutional primacy of religion and its continuing relevance for human life, he was closest to Durkheim (Girard 1987c, p. 82). He also shared with Otto and Eliade that human beings are essentially religious beings, *homo religiosus* (Eliade, 1987, p. 15; cf. Tarot, 2009, p. 20). We can see Girard’s emphasis on *homo religiosus* in the very motto he gave his first book, quoting Max Scheler (“Man believes in either a God or in an idol. There is no third course open!”), or in his discussion with Vattimo, in which he claimed, “religion forms part of human nature” (1961; Vattimo and Girard, 2010, p. 31; Scheler, 1961, p. 399; cf. Gifford, 2015). For this reason, he strongly criticized Lévi-Strauss’s “arbitrary purge” that made “the great religious questions” obsolete (1978b, p. 170). Despite some similarities between Gauchet and Girard concerning pre-Axial religions, the French American anthropologist did not understand Christianity as a religion leading to its departure. Against Gauchet’s thesis, he maintained that “our celebrated humanism will turn out to have been nothing but a brief intermission between two forms of religion” (2014b, pp. 120–121).

This emphasis on two forms of religion is essential to understand Girard's approach. Almost none of these authors to whom we related Girard's theory realized the identity of violence and religion at the primordial level of human culture (1977, p. 262). This is especially true for Lévi-Strauss whose expulsion of religion corresponds with his neglect of the mimetic crises that early human groups had to cope with. The foundational murder that overcame the internal violence of early human groups resulted in the first type of religion justifying Girard's conclusion that "any phenomenon associated with the acts of remembering, commemorating, and perpetuating a unanimity that springs from the murder of a surrogate victim can be termed 'religious'" (p. 315). The identity of violence and this first type of religion explains the radical break that Girard discovered between the pre-Axial religions and the God-given nonviolence that he claimed to be at the center of biblical revelation and especially of Christianity. Early on, Girard distinguished in his work between the "the religion that comes from man" and "the religion that comes from God" (1987c, p. 166). The first type of religion is "a more or less violent disavowal of human violence" that he identified with the sacred. The second type is given by the nonviolent God and can be identified with the holy. In his interview with Steven Berry that was conducted after 9/11 but before Girard's last book, he again distinguished these two types of religion, introducing the term "holy" to distinguish it from the primordial sacred:

We're talking about two types of religion. One fundamentally deifies scapegoating. Therefore, it ultimately deifies violence itself. When I called my second book *Violence and the Sacred*, it really meant that the sacred is nothing but violence; it's only insofar as you don't see this that violence is the sacred. The real sacred – or let us say the holy, let's not use the same word – is love, divine love: not human love, which is a miserable imitation of divine love, but real divine love. (Girard and Berry, 2015, p. 116)

Girard's last book *Battling to the End* finally provides a consistent and systematic distinction between the sacred and the holy. He expressed it most

clearly in his rejection of fundamentalist longings for God's violent interventions: "The apocalypse has to be taken out of fundamentalist hands. . . . Human violence produces the sacred, but holiness leads to the 'other shore' that Christians, like Jews, vehemently believe will never be stained by human madness" (2010, p. 48).

Benoît Chantre, Girard's philosophical interlocutor in his last book, addressed this important distinction repeatedly and referred for this reason to Charles Péguy, Henri Bergson, and Emmanuel Levinas. As we will see later, Péguy and Bergson developed an understanding of saintliness that contributed to Girard's distinction. This is also true for Levinas who himself was influenced by Bergson (1979, 1990, 2019; cf. Goodhart, 2014, pp. 201–228). The following reflections show how Girard understood these two very different types of religion. His distinction between the sacred and the holy does not aim at their complete separation but longs for "the gradual transformation of the *sacred* into the *holy*": "The God of the Bible is at first the God of the sacred, and then more and more the God of the holy, foreign to all violence, the God of the Gospels" (2008, p. 218).

The difference between the two types of religion forced Girard to distance himself from Durkheim whose work he appreciated in general. He criticized the fact that the French sociologist was not able to include the perspective of the biblical religions in his understanding of the sacred:

No doubt my thesis is closely related to Durkheim's concept, but I think it is going too far to define my argument as "Durkheimian." In Durkheim we find neither the mimetic cycle nor the single victim mechanism. And above all we do not find there . . . the insurmountable difference between primitive religions, on the one hand, and Judaism and Christianity, on the other. (2001, p. 100; cf. 2010, p. 120; Graham, 2007)

Rudolf Otto also neglected the radical difference between the pre-Axial sacred and the biblical revelation. Close to Durkheim's claim that the sacred is ambivalent, Otto also saw the ambiguity of the numinous. Neither recognized a type of religion that could explain this ambivalence without

participating in it. Girard, in contrast to Durkheim as well as to Otto, understood that the pre-Axial sacred was by its very nature Janus-faced but that it was not true at all for the biblical revelation. An example can illustrate the difference between Otto and Girard. A verse in the Letter to the Hebrews that says that it is “a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31) is for Otto proof of God’s “non-rational essence” coming along with a “dark and awful ring” (Otto, 1952, pp. 76, 84). Girard referred to the same verse when he showed that Nietzsche’s mental breakdown followed his total commitment to revive, glorify, and modernize “more and more sinister aspects of the primitive sacred” (Girard, quoted in Williams, 1996, p. 254). Girard’s following critique also addresses indirectly problems coming along with Otto’s understanding of the numinous: “Our learned scholars cannot understand that there are two different kinds of transcendence. For them, religion is always the same opaque mass of superstitious absurdity. They don’t see that Christianity sheds light on mythical religion whereas mythical religion doesn’t shed light on anything at all” (2014b, p. 102).

Along this line of thinking, we will later see how differently Otto and Girard read the Book of Job. To maintain a fundamental ambiguity of religion as Otto does weakens a proper understanding of the relationship between violence and religion (Mittleman, 2018, p. 102). The historian R. Scott Appleby (2000) referred in his book *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* to Otto’s concept of the numinous to explain examples of violent and peaceful religious conduct. Cavanaugh, however, rightly questioned Appleby’s reliance on Otto and claimed that it does not lead to a plausible understanding of religious violence (2009, pp. 44–49). To explain religiously motivated violence as an offspring of some irrational impulses prevents an analysis that takes a broader view and includes economic and political causes as well.

Concerning a normative concept of religion, Girard recognizes in Christianity a superior way to respond to human violence. Cavanaugh provides a good summary of Girard’s approach: “Girard’s solution to the problem of violence . . . is not secularization. Girard’s solution to the problem of violence is a ‘religious’ one: he believes that Jesus Christ, the victim who ends all sacrifice, is the *key* to undoing violence. The gospel

undoes myth” (p. 41). Girard’s understanding of Christianity is important for a normative theory of religion that addresses the problem of violence. His claim, however, that Christianity is superior mirrors similar claims from the past without really engaging with other post-Axial religions in a comparative way. For this reason, I take a step beyond Girard’s thesis about Christianity and broaden his view by walking through a door that he himself opened when he published his book *Sacrifice* in 2003 that deals with the Vedic tradition in ancient India and with Indian ways to overcome the sacrificial past (2011; cf. [Palaver and Schenk, 2018](#)).

By broadening Girard’s perspective, I follow Gandhi’s claim that all post-Axial religions “are equally true and equally imperfect” and that “none is superior, none is inferior, to the other” (1976, p. 420). In addition, Benjamin Schewel’s approach comes close to this attitude where he refers to the philosopher of religion and theologian John Hick who developed a pluralistic theology of religions and defined a normative core of religion that also chimes with insights of Girard’s mimetic theory. According to Schewel, Hick recognized in all major Axial traditions (“i.e., Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Zoroastrianism, Greek philosophy, Christianity, and Islam”) a normative core that consists in the transformation of “self-centeredness into Reality- or Other-centeredness” ([Schewel, 2017](#), p. 133; [Hick, 1989](#), pp. 39–40):

Each axial tradition states that we should liberate ourselves from attachments and desires and orient our lives instead around the divine Other. In doing so, however, we need not turn away from the world and other people, for they are both created and sustained by the divine. We should instead respond to them with great compassion and appreciation. (p. 133)

We will later see that this normative core addresses also a central insight of Girard to overcome those types of acquisitive desires that lead to rivalries and the escalation of violence.

In conclusion to this section, I provide here a short summary of Girard’s view of religious violence. At first, we have to remember that he did not see a separate religious force that causes violence but recognized in mimetic

crises of early tribal groups how an unconscious and collective act of violence against a single victim created the sacred to externalize the violence of the group and to protect it against its inner forces of self-destruction. The biblical revelation uncovered the structural violence governing the early sacred by siding with the victim and by emphasizing God's nonviolence and his complete separation from those projections of violence that created the sacred divinities. The biblical revolution deprived the old sacred of its protective function to contain violence. Wherever people were not able to convert toward nonviolence, the possible outcome was often an increase of violence. A religious legitimization to side with victims of persecution could lead to an increased use of violence. Concerning religion, this critical stage of being in-between the old sacred and the holy is dangerous because it lacks on the one hand the sacred protection of the pre-Axial religions and is, on the other hand, not yet able to fully endorse the divine offer of nonviolence. Girard recognized in this regard a "fragmented" use of the biblical revelation that turns it into a dangerous weapon (1986, p. 116). This insight corresponds to observations of Charles Taylor – mentioned earlier – about how the Axial transformation can lead to an escalation of sacred killings. I used Girard's insight to highlight the fragmented relation to the Islamic tradition that we can observe among violent jihadists (Palaver, 2018).

This section started with Galtung's account of acts of violence committed by members of monotheistic religions. Girard did not overlook such acts of violence as his interpretation of "texts of persecution" shows: "These texts range from the documents of medieval and modern anti-Semitism, including violent pogroms, to the records of the Spanish Inquisition and the trial of witches down to the primarily oral text of modern racism, the lynching of blacks, for instance, in the American South" (1978b, pp. 190–191; cf. 1986, pp. 1–23). Girard did not shy away from addressing these acts of violence as persecutions committed by Christian majorities. Without the protection of the old sacred with "its mythical reconciliation and ritual practice," there arises the danger that there will be "more rather than fewer victims" (Williams, 1996, pp. 16–17). This is the result of a fragmented adherence to the biblical revelation that Girard also called a "sacrificial misreading common to Christians and non-Christians alike" (Girard, quoted in Williams, 1996, p. 18).

3 Violence and the Sacred

The failure of modern man to grasp the nature of religion has served to perpetuate its effects. Our lack of belief serves the same function in our society that religion serves in societies more directly exposed to essential violence. We persist in disregarding the power of violence in human societies; that is why we are reluctant to admit that violence and the sacred are one and the same thing. It is important to insist on this identity. (Girard, 1977, p. 262)

René Girard's seminal book on violence and religion *La violence et le sacré* appeared in Paris in 1972. The exact wording of the title is important because the French American anthropologist took violence as his starting point and used the Durkheimian term *sacré* (sacred) to address the relationship between violence and religion. How easily these two points can be overlooked is revealed in the German translation of this book that chose *Das Heilige und die Gewalt* as its title, starting therefore with the religious term and substituting "sacred" with the term "holy" (Girard, 1987a). Although Girard predominantly used the term *sacré* (sacred) in his book, there are also a few passages in which he employed the word *sainte* (saintly or holy) in connection with violence. The first sentence of the book already includes the expression "*chose très sainte*" (most holy; *qodesh qodesh*) – frequently used in the Hebrew Bible in connection with sacrificial rites – to express the positive side of the double-sided nature of pre-Axial sacrifices (Girard, 1972, p. 13; cf. 377; 1977, p. 273). In addition, he also used the term *violence sainte* (holy violence) in a few passages (1972, pp. 42, 64; cf. 38; 1977, pp. 20, 23, 39). Two main reasons may explain why he did not restrict himself to the term "sacred" only. First, the terms have been used incoherently up until the present day in the Western languages that have shaped scholarly debates about religion. Rudolf Otto's German book *Das Heilige*, for instance, was translated as *Le sacré* in French and as *The Holy* in English. This incoherence also influenced Girard who wrote his book for "anthropologists" as his "natural interlocutors" who did not distinguish between the sacred and the holy at all (Girard and Bertonneau,

1987, p. 21). Furthermore, Girard was in general suspicious of attempts to create neat and separate distinctions because the “archaic sacred” – a term he later used instead of “primitive sacred” that characterizes tribal as well as archaic religions – in itself has a tendency to blur its own ambiguity by quickly distinguishing between good and bad types of violence (1977, p. 265). He even did not claim a complete separation in his later unfolding of the difference between the sacred and the holy but emphasized a difference that does not exclude a “paradoxical unity” between the two at the same time (2014a, p. 43; cf. Cayley and Girard, 2019, pp. 66–67). Sacrifices based on the pre-Axial sacred belong, according to Girard, to a “holy history” (*une histoire ‘sainte’*) already before Christianity (1994, p. 146; 2014b, p. 97).

3.1 Raymund Schwager’s *Emphasis on the Distinction between the Sacred and the Holy*

The Swiss Jesuit and Innsbruck-based theologian Raymund Schwager became an important dialogue partner of Girard soon after *La violence et le sacré* was published. From the beginning of their dialogue onward, Schwager insisted on distinguishing between the sacred and the holy. This becomes most obvious in his own book *Must There Be Scapegoats* that he originally published in German in 1978 and in which he applied Girard’s anthropology to a better understanding of violence and redemption in the Bible. He used the term “sacred” to summarize Girard’s anthropology and called Jesus against whom the violent persecutors united the “single holy one” (1987, pp. 189; cf. 1–42; 1999, pp. 128, 189). In a letter from August 30, 1981, he complained to Girard that one of the critical reviewers of Schwager’s book did not realize his “radical distinction between the sacred (violence) and the holiness [*sainteté*] of the Christian God” (Girard and Schwager, p. 107). In a later letter from February 22, 1988, Schwager also criticized that the German publisher chose “*heilig*” [holy] instead of “*sakral*” [sacred] for the title of Girard’s book (Girard and Schwager, 2016, p. 167).

Influenced by Schwager, Girard soon distinguished even more strictly between the sacred and the holy. This is already visible in his authorized English translation of *Violence et le sacré*. The first sentence no longer

includes a quotation from the Bible and one of the passages about holy violence was even turned into sacred violence (1977, pp. 1, 39). It became more and more important for him to distinguish the Biblical revelation from the pre-Axial sacred. In his letter to Schwager from October 30, 1991, he claimed that for him divine revelation begins “with the revelation to Israel, that is to say, from the moment when there are texts that document something other than a religion of violence and the sacred” (Girard and Schwager, 2016, p. 184). His first book that explicitly and intensively engaged with the Bible, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* – like Schwager’s book from 1978 – no longer mingles the sacred and the holy at all (1978a, 1987c).

However, it took, a long time until Girard unfolded more directly the difference between the sacred and the holy in his later writings. For many years, he mainly aimed at a deeper understanding of the sacred recognized as a key dimension of pre-Axial cultures. Girard saw his understanding of religion as part of evolutionary theory investigating its specific task at the beginning of human civilization (2008). He rejected accounts of religion that reduced it to a merely cognitive construct, which overlooked the much more important rituals and prohibitions that are the center of early religions (Girard and Palaver, 2008, p. 60).¹ According to Girard, the most important function of the sacred consisted in taming human conflicts in primeval tribal groups. It was a religious way to contain the violence of early human groups: “*Religion* in its broadest sense . . . must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man’s efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence” (1977, p. 23). How were early religions able to contain human violence?

3.2 *The Scapegoat Mechanism*

Girard recognized a crisis of hyper-mimetic intragroup rivalries as his starting point for understanding the preventive role of the sacred. Although mimetic desire or mimesis is at the root of the crisis, it also

¹ By using the term “early religions” or partly “pre-Axial religions,” I follow Charles Taylor (2007, pp. 147, 151; 2012, p. 45), who has fused Bellah’s terms of “tribal” and “archaic” into “early” or “pre-Axial.”

provides the way out of it. At the height of the crisis when all are drawn into violent rivalries and all objects that initially triggered the conflicts are no longer at the center of the rivals' attention, imitative behavior can unify the group because all the objects that created disunity have been supplanted by hatred and violence between antagonists. Unlike exclusive objects, violence against a rival can be shared. Whereas mimetic desire in its acquisitive mode causes "disunity among those who cannot possess their common object together," it is its antagonistic mode – a highly increased form of mimetic rivalry in which violence between the opponents has been substituted for the desire for concrete objects – that creates "solidarity among those who can fight the same enemy together" (1991, p. 186; cf. 1987c, p. 26). The arbitrary blow of one of the rivals against another can fascinate others so much that they imitate this act of aggression enthusiastically leading quickly to a growing collective ganging up against a common enemy. The war of all against all suddenly becomes a war of all against one resulting in the expulsion or killing of a single victim. Girard called this unconscious, collective deed the "scapegoat mechanism."

We can connect Girard's understanding of the scapegoat mechanism – at least indirectly – with recent research by primatologists and behavioral scientists. First, we can turn to the work of Frans de Waal who has recognized a certain continuity between animals and human beings concerning scapegoating. He maintains that "scapegoating is one of the most basic, most powerful, least conscious psychological reflexes of the human species, one shared with so many other animals that it may well be hardwired" (de Waal, 2006, p. 170). As mentioned earlier, Christopher Boehm's research on the importance of ostracizing sanctions among hunter-gatherers explains the early universality of capital punishment, a type of punishment that clearly leads back to scapegoating rites emerging from the founding murder (cf. Antonello, 2015; Haw, 2017). More recently, Richard Wrangham (2019) whose work relies partly on Boehm distinguishes between reactive aggression responding immediately to a threat that is much more common among wild animals and proactive aggression that is an instrumental and "cold" use of violence requiring planning and collaboration. The second type of violence is much more common among human beings. According to Wrangham, human evolution has resulted in humanity's self-domestication moving more and

more away from reactive violence. Proactive violence has played a key role in this domestication. Wrangham mentions an “execution hypothesis” explaining a selection against violent men:

It proposes that selection against aggressiveness and in favor of greater docility came from execution of the most anti-social individuals. . . . Coalitions of males became effective at deliberately killing any member of their social group who was prepared to use violence on his own behalf and simply did not care what others thought about him. In the end, execution was the only way to stop such a male from being a tyrant. (pp. 128, 141)

Wrangham links the execution hypothesis with the human universal of capital punishment. His evidence strengthens Girard’s scapegoat theory without, however, considering religion (Gans, 2019). By excluding religion, Wrangham seems to give in to a much too rational account of human evolution. He recognizes the importance of language for the “coalitionary proactive aggression” but does not see how the emergence of religion and language are closely intertwined and stem from ritual experiences (p. 277). We could refer in this regard to the insight of the anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport (1999) who claimed in his seminal book *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* that “religion is as old as language, which is to say precisely as old as humanity” (p. 16). According to Girard, language emerged in the scapegoat mechanism:

It seems possible, during the ritual around the victim, that cries at first inarticulate should fall into a rhythm and become ordered like steps in a dance, particularly since in ritual centred around the sacrificial act a spirit of collaboration and agreement pervades the reenactment of all aspects of the crisis. There is no culture on earth that does not hold its sacred vocables or words to be primary and fundamental in the order of language. (1987c, pp. 103–104)

To understand how, according to Girard, the sacred emerges out of the scapegoat mechanism, it is important to focus on the “double transference” that characterizes the experience of the persecuting mob over against its victim (p. 37). From our own experiences of scapegoating, we immediately understand that scapegoating means the transferal of all the negative elements onto a victim. He or she seems to have caused all the problems in the group and must be expelled as the incarnation of evil itself. To understand the pre-Axial sacred, however, we must realize that an additional transference of peace and reconciliation complements the transference of evil. According to Girard, “a victim who has been made into a devil is thereafter made a god” (2010, p. 82). It is this second transferal that distinguishes our contemporary experience of scapegoating from the victimage mechanism leading to the sacred. The persecutors see the victim not only as the source of the crisis but at the same time as the benevolent bringer of peace. It is he or she to whom the sudden reconciliation in the group is attributed. He or she is seen as both absolute evil and absolute good at the same time. This strange experience of badness and goodness coming from the same source is the religious experience of the pre-Axial sacred. The Latin root of the word sacred *sacer*, for instance, originally meant something that is simultaneously both cursed and blessed (1977, p. 257). The victim is demonized and deified. He or she becomes a god.

Early religions are not an invention of priests to deceive their people but the result of an unconscious social mechanism to overcome a dangerous internal crisis. It is for this reason that Girard claimed that “the peoples of the world do not invent their gods” but “deify their victims” (2001, p. 70).

Early religions are important cultural institutions that overcame a crisis of violence without, however, being able to free themselves from violence because the killing or expulsion of the scapegoat remains a highly violent act. According to Girard, the “paradox of archaic religion” is “that, in order to prevent violence, it resorted to substitute violence” (2004b, p. 13). It is for this very reason that Girard claimed that violence is the “heart and secret soul of the sacred” (1977, p. 31). His unwavering insight into the deep connection between violence and religion, however, did not lead him to a superficial dismissal of early religions that would overlook the fact that these religions were already aiming for peace. Early on in Girard’s

unfolding of his mimetic theory, he underlined the fact that these “religions of violence” were “always in search of peace” (1987c, p. 401). These religions “were a first path toward God” and “the practice of sacrifices was a way of keeping violence to a level that God didn’t desire, but that he tolerated” (2014b, p. 97).

3.3 *The Relative Peace of the Pre-Axial Sacred*

Sacrificial rites are, according to Girard, the conscious repetition of the founding mechanism to strengthen the peace that was gained originally. It is for this reason that these rites often reveal traces leading back to the foundational murder. Wilhelm Mühlmann (1964, pp. 313–319), a German anthropologist, used the term “peace of God” to discuss forms of religiously facilitated times and spaces of peace in early societies. Two examples taken from Tacitus’ *Germania* clearly show how these forms of peace were predicated on bloody sacrifices. The first example tells about the religious cult of the Semnones, a Germanic tribe, performing a rite that took place in a pacified sacred wood. Peace is visible in the fact that all the participants enter the sacred grove “bound with a chain” preventing the use of weapons (Tacitus, p. [Germania 39]). The ceremony, however, contains quite open violence: “A human victim is slaughtered on behalf of all present to celebrate the gruesome opening of the barbarous ritual.” Taking the original Latin of the last part of this quote into account – *ritus horrenda primordia* – it is most likely referring to the founding murder (Burkert, 2010, pp. 53–54). An even stronger example can be found in Tacitus’ description of a feast celebrated by some tribes of the Baltic Sea worshipping the goddess Nerthus, who is identified with Mother Earth. During the days of the feast, they experience “peace and quiet” (Tacitus, p. [Germania 40]): “No one goes to war, no one takes up arms, all objects of iron are locked away.” Again, however, this time of peace relies on human sacrifice. The slaves who were washing the equipment of the cult afterward in a lake were “swallowed up in the same lake.”

We can discover the relative peace of the pre-Axial sacred in Greek mythology also with the help of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin. He described the Greek gods as tamers of mimetically inflamed violence. In his poem “Stuttgart,” he identified Dionysus – the “communal god” – with the choir that “fused by a common compulsion . . . the

fierce souls of fighters . . . into unison” (1998, p. 145). Girard quoted a similar passage from Hölderlin’s hymn “The Only One” that clearly illustrates that this god limits violence: “Euaios” (which means Dionysus) “who / Harnassed tigers to his / Chariot and, commanding / Joyous worship down / To the Indus, / Founded vineyards and / Tamed the wrath of nations” (1984, p. 85; cf. Girard, 2010, pp. 127–129). In addition, the god Hercules who is, according to this hymn, one of the “princes” is – if we follow the German philosopher and theologian Romano Guardini – a founder of order that tames the mimetic chaos: “He brings order. He enables human life in security and fertility. He is lawmaker and ruler” (Guardini, 1996, p. 268; cf. p. 456).

4 The Biblical Difference

The original and only actual sacrifice was human sacrifice. At what moment did this practice become horrible and insane? It is in Genesis, this moment, in the image of the denied sacrifice of Isaac, the substitution of the animal. Man, advanced in God, frees himself from his stagnant ritual, from that beyond which God wants to take us – and already has. (Mann, 1996, p. 199)

To understand Girard’s later distinction between the sacred and the holy, we have first to understand the “biblical ‘difference’” that he discovered by comparing early religions with the religions of the Bible (2004b, p. 14). Girard was able to demonstrate that his theory can easily explain many myths and rituals of different cultures and epochs. When he turned to biblical texts, however, he discovered that the main passages are not like early myths telling the story of a collective murder from the perspective of the murderers, but rather they side with the victim and expose the violence of the persecutors. Already in very old texts – like in the Book of Genesis – we can find passages expressing a movement away from a world that practiced human sacrifice. The most important text in this regard is the story of Abraham (Gen 22) who was going to sacrifice his son Isaac until God asked him to offer a ram instead (Girard, 1987c, p. 239; 2014b, pp.

28–29). Other texts challenge the mythic pattern of early religions more deeply by siding directly with victims of collective persecution. Penitential psalms, the dialogues in the Book of Job, passages in the writing prophets – especially the Suffering Servant Song (Isa 52–53) – tell us about the collective violence against an innocent victim. From a Christian perspective, the most important passages in the Bible in this regard are the passion narratives in the Gospels. Like mythical texts, these narratives talk about collective violence against a single individual. For Girard, the Gospels, unlike pre-Axial myths, do not side with the persecutors but reveal the innocence of the scapegoat Jesus. In John’s Gospel, a quote from the Psalms clearly underlines the innocence of Jesus: “They hated me without a cause” (John 15:25; cf. Ps 35:19). From a Girardian point of view, Judaism and even more so Christianity stand in opposition to early religions. The biblical religions are not rooted in the scapegoat mechanism but expose it. They are an essential part of a religious revolution leading to the modern view that every human life is holy and deserves protection. Girard justly claimed that “the victimary principle or the defence of victims has become holy: *it is the absolute*” (2008, pp. 257–258). Contrary to Durkheim’s claim of a socially constituted modern sacredness of the individual, Girard recognized that it is rooted in a religious attitude that differs from the primordial sacred and does not emanate from society.

4.1 The Book of Job Reveals the God of Victims and Not the Ambivalence of the Numinous

Girard’s insight into the significant difference between early religions and the biblical revelation became visible early on in his critical distance from Rudolf Otto (Otto, 1977, pp. 131–2; 1987c, p. 67). Like Otto’s insight into the dual character of the numinous, Girard, too, recognized a paradoxical duality of the sacred. He referred to this affinity but rejected Otto’s claim that this belongs essentially to religion in general:

In an attempt to make the mystery of violence and the sacred . . . acceptable, Otto proposes his famous concept of the *numinous*. Despite what my critics maintain, I have

absolutely no sympathy for that sort of attitude. But I refuse to share in the rationalist's blindness, as exemplified in Evans-Pritchard or Lévi-Strauss. Somehow it must be possible to analyse primitive religion thoroughly without becoming its accomplice along with the irrationalists or dismissing it along with the rationalists. (Otto, 1987c, p. 67)

Girard's distance from Otto's understanding of religion becomes most obvious if we compare their interpretations of the Book of Job. For Otto, it was central for his understanding of the numinous (Mittleman, 2018, p. 101). He highlighted the "fear of God" that terrified Job (Job 9:34; 13:21) and focused especially on the God-speeches at the end of the book (Job 38–41) (Mittleman, 2018, pp. 14, 77–81). According to Otto, these speeches present the *mysterium* "in its pure, non-rational form" (p. 79). He recognized in it a theodicy that "operates at once as a vindication of God to Job and a reconciliation of Job to God" (p. 77). In Job's response – "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6) – Otto recognized "inward *convincement* and conviction" (p. 78). The term "conviction" is highly problematic because it seems to say that Job's protest was not justified. Behemoth and Leviathan, the two monsters in God's speeches express in Otto's eyes "the monstrous" that means the "'mysterious' in a gross form" (p. 80). Finally, Otto connected the numinous experience of Job with the crucifixion of Jesus: "The 38th chapter of Job is a prophecy of Golgotha. And on Golgotha the solution of the problem, already adumbrated in Job, is repeated and surpassed" (p. 173). According to Otto, a "burden of non-rational, mystical significance . . . hangs like a cloud over Golgotha" (p. 169). In view of the Book of Job and other prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible, he rightly claims that the problem consists in the "the guiltless suffering of the righteous" (p. 173). The solution, however, that Otto recognized departs significantly from the prophetic tradition when he claims that it lies "entirely in the non-rational aspect of deity" (p. 173):

In Job the suffering of the righteous found its significance as the classic and crucial case of the revelation . . . of the transcendent mysteriousness and "beyondness" of God.

The Cross of Christ, that monogram of the eternal mystery, is its completion. Here rational are enfolded with non-rational elements, the revealed commingled with the unrevealed, the most exalted love with the most awe-inspiring “wrath” of the numen, and therefore, in applying to the Cross of Christ the category “holy,” Christian religious feeling has given birth to a religious intuition profounder and more vital than any to be found in the whole history of religion.

There is a superficial similarity between Otto’s interpretation of the Book of Job and Girard’s book *Job: The Victim of His People*. Both claimed that the Book of Job found in Christ its completion. Such claims are not without their own problems but should not distract us from the fact that otherwise Otto and Girard came to significantly different conclusions. In contrast to traditional readings, Girard concentrated primarily on the dialogues between Job and his friends (Girard, 1987b; 1992; cf. Williams, 1992; Palaver, 2013a, pp. 207–9). Focusing on these, he argued that Job is the scapegoat of his community, that his friends are his persecutors, and that their god is the projection of the community’s collective violence.

Girard’s interpretation of the Book of Job is also striking concerning those recent findings of behavioral scientist mentioned earlier. I referred to Wrangham’s execution hypothesis that he introduced in a chapter with the title “The Tyrant Problem” (Wrangham, 2019, pp. 128–41). Hunter-gatherers executed those “tyrants” who seemed to threaten the egalitarian band. According to Girard’s reading of the Book of Job, this collective aggression against so-called tyrants is an age-old pattern that this book of the Bible strongly criticized. Oedipus is in Girard’s eyes a key example of a scapegoat in Greek mythology. One of Sophocles’s tragedies bears the title “Oedipus Tyrannus,” addressing therefore one of the reasons that Oedipus was scapegoated (Girard, 1977, p. 149; 2004a, pp. 32, 65, 79). Reading about Job’s fate, Girard is reminded “of the tyrant of the Greek cities” (Girard, 1987b, p. 12). He compares the Greek king/tyrant with the Jewish prophet (Girard, 1987b, pp. 33–40). Like Oedipus, Job became a scapegoat, a victim of his people. Unlike Oedipus, however, Job’s insistence on his innocence leads to the biblical perspective that enables us

to side with the persecuted victim: “The Dialogues of Job are an Oedipus story in which the victim forever refuses to add his voice to those of his persecutors. Oedipus is a *successful* scapegoat, because he is never recognized as such. Job is a *failed* scapegoat.” (1987b, p. 35) Girard’s chapter “The Ancient Trail Trodden by the Wicked” most clearly outlines the biblical alternative to Wrangham’s execution hypothesis (Girard, 1987b, pp. 14–18): “The violent succession of *tyrants* corresponds to the ‘ancient trail of the wicked’” (1987b, p. 58). Job is persecuted like many scapegoats accused of tyranny before him: “There are many other passages to suggest that the central event of the text, the terrible experience that is just beginning for the hero, is a recurring phenomenon of collective violence that is particularly, but not exclusively, directed against the ‘mighty’ and the ‘tyrants’” (Girard, 1987b, pp. 16–17).

The dialogues in the Book of Job penetrate the pattern of mythical texts in that they convey not only the viewpoint of the persecutors but also that of the victim, Job. In verses 16:19–21 and 19:25–27, the persecutory God is juxtaposed to a God of victims who proves to be a defender of Job’s innocence.² Job’s trust in this God is an experience of the holy clearly distinguished from the violent sacred. According to Girard, the overall story of this biblical book, as well as the portrayal of the God-speeches – with the exception of 42:8, where in the epilogue the truth of Job’s stance is recognized – represents a regression to the level of the mythical gods of persecution. The bestiary that God depicted in his speech constitutes in Girard’s eyes “a display of irresistible power” (Girard, 1987b, p. 141). Whereas Otto saw in Job’s final repentance the culmination of the numinous experience, Girard criticized the silencing of Job whose questions and outcries did not receive an answer from the God of the final speeches: “Job is finally docile and silent, full of terrified admiration for the ostrich and Leviathan. Each animal takes its turn, and the scapegoat admits

² Job 16:19–21: “Even now . . . my witness is in heaven, and he that vouches for me is on high. My friends scorn me; my eye pours out tears to God, that he would maintain the right of a mortal with God, as one does for a neighbor.” Job 19:25–27: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

he is free of his sorrows. It is difficult to take this farce seriously” (Girard, 1987b, p. 142). What Otto called the holy is in Girard’s eyes nothing but the old violent sacred: “The god of Behemoth and of Leviathan pretends to be the God of that innocent victim, Job; but he remains the God of persecutors” (Girard, 1987b, p. 152). For Girard, the center of the Book of Job is a god of victims and not a mysterious divinity forcing Job to shut up. In this line of interpretation, Girard concluded that Christ incarnates the “God of victims . . . because he shares their lot until the end” (Girard, 1987b, p. 157). This God has nothing to do with the God of the persecutors: “He is the most miserable, ridiculous, least powerful of all the gods” (Girard, 1987b, p. 157). Girard emphasized Jesus’s cry of forsakenness on the cross to emphasize how strongly the crucifixion differs from the mythic sacred:

I think that it is necessary to rid ourselves of the sacred, for the sacred plays no part in the death of Jesus. If the Gospels have Jesus pronounce on the Cross those words of anguished impotence and final surrender, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani” . . . this is not to diminish faith in the resurrection or in the all-powerful Father. It is to make quite clear that we are dealing with something entirely different from the sacred. Here life does not come directly out of the violence, as in primitive religions. (Girard, 1987c, p. 231)

Otto, to the contrary, did not refer to Christ’s forsakenness because like Job’s protest in the dialogues it would disturb the “solution” that he found in his celebration of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

In his distance from Otto’s numinous, Girard follows closely the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Bible that in its emphasis on anti-idolatry distinguishes clearly between the sacred and the holy. Otto also recognized a development from the numinous to the holy from the days of Moses onward:

The venerable religion of Moses marks the beginning of a process which from that point onward proceeds with ever increasing momentum, by which the numinous is throughout rationalized and moralized, i.e. charged with ethical

import, until it becomes the “holy” in the fullest sense of the word. The culmination of the process is found in the Prophets and in the Gospels. (Otto, 1952, p. 75)

This raises the question about who is closer to the prophetic tradition, Otto or Girard? To answer this question, I turn to two Jewish thinkers who strongly belonged to the prophetic tradition and who like Girard distanced themselves clearly from Otto’s numinous: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Emmanuel Levinas. In Heschel’s book *The Prophets* we can find a critique of the God-speeches and Job’s surrender to it as well as an explicit rejection of Otto’s numinous. With the help of the Prophet Isaiah (5:16),³ Heschel emphasized God’s justice over “against the transcendent majesty and the crushing mystery of the Creator of the universe” (p. 273). Many passages in Heschel’s book are a critique of the numinous, which stands against the prophetic understanding of God: “The numinous is not the supreme category for the prophets, else they would not have attacked the sacred” (Heschel, 2001, p. 293; cf. 311–12, 396, 567, 623). The numinous belongs to the world of “primitive religion” in which the “power of the gods is felt as a constant threat” (p. 311).

Levinas distanced himself even more strongly than Heschel from Otto’s numinous. Again, this becomes immediately visible in his understanding of the Book of Job. Reflecting on the “useless suffering” in Auschwitz and a “host of cruelties” in the twentieth century, Levinas saw no possibility for a “consoling theodicy” and recognized in Job’s “faithfulness to ethics” (Job 27:5–6)⁴ and his refusal of a “theodicy right to the end” a biblical insight close to his own considerations. Close to Levinas, also Girard underlined the “ethical” message of the Book of Job because it “affirms the truth of Job’s innocence” (Batnitzky, 2015, p. 214). Like Girard, Levinas also focuses in his

³ Isa 5:16: “But the LORD of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness.”

⁴ Job 17:5–6: “Far be it from me to say that you are right; until I die I will not put away my integrity from me.

I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.”

reading on the dialogues in the Book of Job and not on the God-speeches (Levinas, 1998, pp. 91–100, 241–2; cf. Meir, 2008, p. 245). In regard to the numinous, Ephraim Meir summarized very well Levinas's different understanding of the Bible: "Biblical revelation is not the *mysterium tremendum* of Rudolf Otto, beyond good and evil and beyond rationality; it is a word that demands to be heard" (Meir, 2008, p. 183). Where Levinas expressed his fraternal ethics, he underlined at the same time how much it differs from the numinous: "The presence of the face coming from beyond the world, but committing me to human fraternity, does not overwhelm me as a numinous essence arousing fear and trembling" (Levinas, 1979, p. 215). According to Levinas, it is the Jewish anti-idolatry that breaks with the numinous that cannot therefore be the "source of all religion" (Levinas, 1990, p. 14). Close to Girard, he also identified the sacred with violence: "The Sacred that envelops and transports me is a form of violence" (Levinas, 1990, p. 14). The following passage rejects profoundly Otto's theory of religion:

Jewish monotheism does not exalt a sacred power, a *numen* triumphing over other numinous powers but still participating in their clandestine and mysterious life. The God of the Jews is not the survivor of mythical gods. . . . Monotheism marks a break with a certain conception of the Sacred. It neither unifies nor hierarchizes the numerous and numinous gods; instead it denies them. As regards the Divine which they incarnate, it is merely atheism. (Levinas, 1990, pp. 14–15)

The distance from the violent sacred requires, according to Levinas, a "metaphysical atheism" (Levinas, 1979, p. 77): "To relate to the absolute as an atheist is to welcome the absolute purified of the violence of the sacred." This comes close to Girard's claim that the gospels have "established a kind of practical atheism" in their weakening of the pre-Axial sacred (Girard, 1987c, p. 183; 2008, pp. 256–7). With Levinas we must broaden Girard's claim because this weakening begins in the Hebrew Bible. With Paul Ricoeur we might even ask if such an (atheistic) purification does not characterize all Axial religions (Ricoeur, 1999, p. 11). In my eyes, Girard's biblical difference belongs to the "Great Disembedding" that,

according to Charles Taylor, comes along with the “Axial revolution” (Taylor, 2007, pp. 146–158).

4.2 The Adulterous Woman Who Is Saved from Being Stoned

One of the key passages in the New Testament to which Girard returned frequently is a text in the Gospel of John (John 8:1–11) that tells the story of Jesus saving an adulterous woman from being stoned (Girard, 2001, pp. 55–61; 2014b, pp. 121–126). A mob of would-be lynchers encircled a woman to punish her for being caught in adultery. Jesus’s creative interruption by first writing something on the ground and afterward asking the crowd who by being without sin could cast the first stone led to the disintegration of the compact mob when the members of the crowd walked away one by one. Girard referred frequently to this story to demonstrate scapegoating as an offspring of the foundational murder at the beginning of human civilization on the one hand and the overcoming of this ritualized pattern of traditional punishment emphasized in many stories of the Bible on the other. This story indirectly mirrors the exodus of the Biblical religions from the mythic past of the violent sacred with its bloody sacrifices toward our modern world with its emphasis on the dignity of every single person and individual responsibility. Girard’s thesis about how the violent roots of the pre-Axial sacred were exposed by the biblical revelation is at the center of his theory of religion. We can take this story as an illustration of the religious transformation from early myths to world religions that happened throughout the Axial age. One of the thinkers who dealt with this transformation generally was the political philosopher Eric Voegelin. He observed a history of religious symbolization from “compactness” to “differentiation” (Voegelin, 2001, p. 43). The prophets of Israel especially expressed a differentiated experience. Voegelin recognized this transformation also outside the biblical realm as the following reference illustrates: “The Aeschylean tragedy moves, in search of order, from its compact expression in the polytheistic myth toward the Logos of the psyche; the Deutero-Isaianic drama moves from the compact revelation from Sinai toward the Logos of God” (p. 550). Girard came close to this insight of Voegelin when he recognized certain similarities between the Hebrew prophets and Greek tragedies (Girard, 1977, p. 66). Voegelin’s distinction can be applied to the story about the adulterous woman who is first encircled by

a crowd representing compactness and demonstrates later differentiation taking place when all the persecutors leave the scene individually, one by one. Reading the story about the adulterous woman in this way allows us to take it as an illustration for the transformation from the pre-Axial sacred to the post-Axial holy. The sacred is embodied in the violent mob collectively ganging up on a single victim. We cannot find individual responsibility in the realm of the sacred but only the bloodthirsty mob acting unanimously and mechanically and in imitative conformity. The holy, to the contrary, consists in Jesus's individual intervention that enabled the people to imitate him and turn into responsible individuals. The sacred is characterized by the contagious attraction of the collective that does not allow individual dissent. Girard is right to emphasize that Jesus first tried to escape the magnetic pull of the crowd by writing something on the ground. His detachment from the mob became a model for those elders who left the crowd first. Jesus embodies the holy by acting in full accordance with the Holy Spirit who is a defender of victims (Alison, 1996, pp. 65–68; Kaplan, 2013, pp. 159–163):

The decision against violence would remain impossible, Christianity tells us, without the Divine Spirit that is called the Paraclete, which is to say, in everyday Greek, “the defense lawyer,” which is exactly the role that Jesus himself plays here. And he lets it be understood that he is the first Paraclete, the first defender of victims. (Girard, 2014b, p. 124)

Holiness relies on individual responsibility that does not root in an individual and autonomous strength but is given as a gift, is given by divine grace. It was the presence and concrete acting of Jesus that enabled some of the elders to step out of the crowd and renounce violence.

5 From the Sacred to Saintliness in France

We said that a single injustice, a single crime, a single illegality, particularly if it were officially confirmed, particularly if it were universally, legally, nationally condoned, a single crime is enough to make

a breach in the social compact, in the social contract, a single forfeit, a single dishonor is enough to dishonor a people. It becomes a source of infection, a poison that corrupts the whole body. What we defend is not only our honor, not only the honor of a whole people, in the present, but the historical honor of our whole race, the honor of our forefathers and children. (Péguy, 2001, p. 76)

5.1 From Durkheim's Sacred to a New Saintliness

For a better understanding of Girard's distinction between the sacred and the holy, it is helpful to return to Emile Durkheim's seminal book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* from 1912 and the Dreyfus Affair that preceded it. Although Durkheim, himself a Dreyfusard, observed a change of religion in modern times concerning the sacredness of the human person, he did not see the fundamental religious difference that others recognized in the juridical battles that finally proved the innocence of Captain Alfred Dreyfus. Durkheim's focus was on the sacred that he identified with the social regardless of its specific content. The society commands, according to Durkheim, the behavior of its members religiously: "If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion" (Durkheim, 1965, p. 466). Even such religiously opposed poles as the "saint and the sacrilegious, the divine and the diabolic" are closely related to each other and are altogether "sacred" (p. 456).

In the battles between Dreyfusards and their adversaries, both sides thought themselves to be part of a religious movement (Strenski, 2002, pp. 95–131). Discussions full of sacrificial images and references to scapegoating were pervasive. In the middle of this cultural and religious war, we discover a small group of Dreyfusards who recognized a saintliness that differs significantly from Durkheim's understanding of the sacred. Two persons are outstanding in this regard, the atheist Jewish journalist Bernard Lazare and the Catholic writer Charles Péguy who wrote an important portrait of Lazare (Aronowicz, 1998). Lazare published the first study that showed in detail the juridical errors that led to the wrongful conviction of Dreyfus. Péguy's portrait brings an astonishing religious attitude to light that helps us understand what saintliness in contrast with the sacred means.

Although Lazare was a “professional atheist,” Péguy claimed nevertheless that “the eternal word” resounded in him, an “atheist dripping with the word of God” (Péguy, 1998, p. 65). In Péguy’s eyes, Lazare was “one of the greatest among the prophets of Israel” (Péguy, 1998, p. 47). To be a prophet means to stand up for truth and justice and resist the all too common temptation “to buy peace through handing over the scapegoat” (Péguy, 1998, p. 44). Lazare’s siding with Dreyfus brought him not only into conflict with the many anti-Dreyfusards in the military and in the Catholic Church but also alienated him from many members of the Jewish community who would have preferred an undisturbed life over the danger of becoming targets of growing anti-Semitism in France. Lazare’s prophetic stance meant to defend the innocent and resist scapegoating. He practiced this not only in his defense of Dreyfus but also in his solidarity with persecuted Jews in Romania: “He was for all these destitute people, for all these persecuted people, a flash of light again, a rekindling of the torch whose light eternally will not go out” (Péguy, 1998, p. 64). In Péguy’s eyes, Lazare had a “heart that bled in all the ghettos of the world” (Péguy, 1998, p. 55). Lazare belongs to the prophetic tradition that we exemplified earlier with the Book of Job. It is not by chance that his last writings were posthumously published as *Job’s Dungheap* and that his understanding of this biblical book comes close to that of Levinas when he claims that Job links the problem of evil to that of justice and “does not make it into a metaphysical but into an ethical problem” (Lazare, 1948, p. 47 [translation altered]). Lazare’s strength was his “inner spiritual power” that helped detach him from all longing for power (Péguy, 1998, p. 62). For him “the entire apparatus of power, the reason of state, temporal power, political powers, authorities of all sorts – political, intellectual, even mental – weighed not an ounce in the fact of a revolt, of a moment of conscience itself” (Péguy, 1998, p. 59). Péguy identified Lazare’s prophetic attitude with saintliness: “He had, undeniably, something of the saint, of sanctity, about him. And when I speak of saints, I am not under suspicion of speaking metaphorically. . . . He was a hero, and, besides, had large parts of holiness” (Péguy, 1998, pp. 49, 70; cf. p. 65). Lazare’s holiness is important for Péguy’s own attempt to transform heroism into holiness (Chantre, 2013, pp. 141–6). Finally, Lazare is also a key example of how Péguy understood *mystique* as an essentially

effective action. Péguy's term "refers neither to a contemplative attitude nor to an idealism unwilling to sully itself through political activity. It refers to an action that does not confuse the truth it is serving with the quest for power of the party it might be associated with" (Aronowicz, 1998, p. 12). Looking at the Dreyfus Affair, Péguy distinguished a Christian mystique and saintliness from political reason that aims at temporal salvation only and defends those sacred rights demanding the sacrifice of the one for the many: "One does not sacrifice a city, a city is not lost, for one citizen" (Péguy, 2001, p. 75; cf. Astell, 2003, pp. 190–191). Dreyfus could therefore only choose between sacrificing himself and being forced to do so. Péguy, to the contrary, rejected – as we can recognize in the epigraph to this chapter – even a single crime for political reasons and interests.

Péguy, who studied philosophy with Henri Bergson had nevertheless an important impact on his teacher (Pilkington, 1976, pp. 27–98). In 1914, shortly before his death he defended Bergson against the Catholic Church, which put his work on the index of forbidden books. His life and work also contributed indirectly to Bergson's book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* from 1932 (Bergson, 2013, pp. 584–585; cf. Péguy, 2019, pp. 53–55, 221–233). Bergson's emphasis on saintliness shows a clear affinity with Péguy's active mysticism. According to Bergson, "complete mysticism is action" and goes back to the "Jewish prophets" (Bergson, 1977, pp. 226, 240; cf. Steinmair-Pösel, 2019, p. 99). One is reminded of Péguy's portrait of Lazare when reading in Bergson that we hear the voice of the prophets of Israel "when a great injustice has been done" (Bergson, 1977, p. 76; Worms, 2012, p. 36). And just before Bergson addresses the prophets' emphasis on justice, he asks like Dostoevsky if it is allowed to sacrifice one for the many: "What should we do if we heard that for the common good, for the very existence of mankind, there was somewhere a man, an innocent man, condemned to suffer eternal torment?" (Bergson, 1977, pp. 75–76; cf. Dostoevsky, 1991, p. 245). Bergson's answer is like the one Péguy gave regarding Dreyfus: "No! A thousand times no! Better to accept that nothing should exist at all! Better let our planet be blown to pieces." (Bergson, 1977, p. 76)

Bergson advanced Péguy's distinction between the sacred and the holy and distanced himself from Durkheim's approach (Kolakowski, 2001, pp. 73–74; Lefebvre and White, 2010; Lefebvre, 2013, pp. 32–48). Admittedly, there are

only a few direct references to Durkheim in Bergson's book from 1932, but the famous sociologist is one of the important interlocutors of the philosopher. Already the title with its emphasis on *two* sources seems to repudiate Durkheim's claim that "howsoever complex the outward manifestations of the religious life may be, at bottom it is one and simple. It responds everywhere to one and the same need, and is everywhere derived from one and the same mental state" (Durkheim, 1965, p. 461; cf. Gifford, 2015, p. 325). Bergson rejected Durkheim's reduction of religion to something purely social by distinguishing between two types of religion, a static religion that accompanies closed societies with their constitutive enmity toward other groups and a dynamic religion that enables the open society aiming at universal fraternity.

Tribal or static religion is close to Durkheim's understanding of the sacred and comes along with group pressure: "This religion, which we have called static, and this obligation, which is tantamount to a pressure, are the very substance of closed society" (Bergson, 1977, pp. 266–267). They are also deeply connected with violence because the mentality of all closed society "is fundamentally a warring instinct" (Marrati, 2006, p. 311). Very close to Girard's remark that social theory should dare to recognize conflicts as normal, Bergson maintained that even if wars are "rare or exceptional," they are "normal" and not "abnormal" (Bergson, 1977, p. 31; cf. 277; Girard, 2001, pp. 10–11; Lefebvre, 2013, pp. 6–14):

Peace has always hitherto been a preparation for defence or even attack, at any rate for war. Our social duties aim at social cohesion; whether we will or no they compose for us an attitude which is that of discipline in the face of the enemy. (Bergson, 1977, p. 31)

Although Bergson observed a natural inclination toward enmity and war, he did not believe that this is an inevitable pattern of human sociability. The main reason for a more hopeful outlook relied on the fact that he did not only know static religion but also an alternative to it. He sharply distinguished it from universal or dynamic religion that roots in the active mysticism of exceptional individuals and not in the pressure of the

collective. In Bergson's eyes, it suddenly provided a moral perspective to recognize that religion "has been known to enjoin immorality, to prescribe crime" (Bergson, 1977, p. 102). Modern societies, however, have not forever overcome the affinity to closure that characterizes static religion. In 1934, Bergson recognized in Hitler a proof of his theory because the Nazis' message of hatred led to a "return to paganism" (Chevalier and Bergson, 1959, p. 215; Worms, 2012, p. 38).

Bergson's distinction between static and dynamic religions referred indirectly to the Axial revolution where he described the "exceptional men" that incarnated the morality of the open society: "Before the saints of Christianity, mankind had known the sages of Greece, the prophets of Israel, the Arahants of Buddhism, and others besides" (Bergson, 1977, p. 34). To emphasize the importance of action for a complete form of mysticism, he mentions Saint Paul, Saint Teresa, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Francis, and Joan of Arc (Bergson, 1977, p. 228). Joan of Arc was very important for Péguy and is also for this reason mentioned by Bergson, with a distance, however, because he does not call her a saint like the others despite her canonization by the church in 1920 (Bergson, 2013, p. 464). In her case, only the extraordinary activity counts not her attitude as a warrior fighting for her nation. Joan of Arc has been an important point for discussions in France. Durkheim explained Joan of Arc's belief that she was obeying "celestial voices" and the religious motivation of Christian Crusaders with his thesis that a "general exaltation" turns even an "inoffensive bourgeois" into "either a hero or a butcher" (Durkheim, 1965, pp. 241–242). Simone Weil, too, was hesitant about Joan of Arc (Doering, 2010, pp. 132–133). She admired her as a "saint," as the "virgin fighting on behalf of justice" and her Christlike "uncertainty" but was highly critical of how her legend was later used by public opinion risking to "debase God to the point of making Him a partisan in a war" (Weil, 1956, pp. 15, 55, 195). About her own time, she warned against using Joan of Arc as a "cloak . . . to nationalist idolatry" (Weil, 2002b, p. 254). Putting the complex case of Joan of Arc aside, the saints, these exceptional individuals experienced the breakthrough of the creative life-drive, *élan vital*, that Bergson identified with God and that enabled these mystics to love the whole of humanity and nature and not just their own family or tribe. Jesus was, according to

Bergson, who emphasized the superiority of Christianity maybe too strongly, the summit and completion of this mysticism. For our distinction between the sacred and the holy, it is important to see that Bergson emphasized sainthood as the kernel of the dynamic religion. Saints do not rely on social pressure to spread their message but invite people to imitate their way of life:

Why is it, then, that saints have their imitators, and why do the great moral leaders draw the masses after them? They ask nothing, and yet they receive. They have no need to exhort; their mere existence suffices. For such is precisely the nature of this other morality. Whereas natural obligation is a pressure or a propulsive force, complete and perfect morality has the effect of an appeal. (Bergson, 1977, p. 34)

Vladimir Jankélévitch justly called this appeal a “contagion of love” (p. 160). The saints’ way of imitation does not automatically end up in mimetic rivalry. Péguy recognized a positive type of mimesis at the center of Christianity with its emphasis on the “communion of saints” following Jesus Christ (Péguy, 1992, pp. 406–407, 456–457, 1123–1124; cf. Béguin, 1957; Chantre, 2013, pp. 113–114; Vélikanov, 2019). Bergson followed Péguy in this regard and maintained that these saints are through God’s appeal oriented toward him and can therefore love their brothers and sisters through him: “All great mystics declare that they have the impression of a current passing from their soul to God, and flowing back again from God to mankind” (Bergson, 1977, p. 53). Bergson set all his hopes on a sainthood that should lead to a world of universal fraternity.

With the philosopher Jacques Maritain, we add one more thinker who belongs to this tradition of saintliness that parted from Durkheim’s reductionist understanding of the sacred. Despite Maritain’s severe difficulties with the ontology of his teacher Bergson, he followed his longing for a holiness strengthening fraternal love. In his seminal book *Integral Humanism* from 1936, he pleaded for a “new style of sanctity” (Maritain, 2017, p. 229). The common task, according to Maritain, is the “realization of a fraternal community” and not the “medieval idea of God’s empire to be

built on earth, and still less would it be the myth of Class or Race, Nation or State” (Maritain, 2017, p. 280). Maritain distinguished between the sacred and the holy by following to a certain degree Bergson’s distinction between two types of religion:

For pagan antiquity, “holy” was synonymous with “sacred,” i.e., with that which is physically, visibly, socially in the service of God. And it was only in the degree to which sacred functions penetrated it that human life could have a value before God. The Gospel profoundly changed this by interiorizing in the heart of man – in the secret of the invisible relations between the divine personality and the human personality – the moral life and the life of sanctity. (Maritain, 2017, p. 230)

Investigating Maritain’s distinction between the sacred and the holy more closely reveals that he recognized a stronger connection between the sacred and violence or force and its lack of universalism. Two examples illustrate that observation. One is his description of the “historical idea of the Middle Ages” that was “controlled by two dominants: on the one hand, the idea or myth . . . of force in the service of God; on the other, this concrete fact that temporal civilization itself was in some manner a function of the sacred, and imperiously demanded unity of religion” (Maritain, 2017, p. 243). The second example stems from an important essay by Maritain that was part of his struggle to overcome the widespread anti-Semitism inside the Catholic Church. He still, however, insisted on a superiority of Christianity over Judaism because only the Christian church forms a “community of saints” (Maritain, 1948, pp. 151–152): “The bond of Israel remains a sacred and supra-historical bond, but a bond of promise, not of possession; of nostalgia, not of sanctity.” There is no need to agree with Maritain in this regard. We can nevertheless gain from his reflections on sanctity that the sacred is closer to violence and more parochial.

This tradition of saintliness influenced Girard himself in different ways, as it also did thinkers like Simone Weil and Emmanuel Levinas who themselves preferred saintliness to the sacred and are important in

understanding Girard's approach. Like Girard, Weil appreciated Durkheim's conflation of religion and society up to a certain point. This identification of the religious and the social contains in her eyes "an element of truth" (Weil, 2001, p. 46). Girard, too, sided with Durkheim concerning the religious origin of the social and preferred him to social-contract theorists like Hobbes (Girard, 1977, pp. 306–308; 1987c, p. 82; 2014b, p. 25). Durkheim's understanding of religion was helpful in understanding the functioning of society and recognizing how deeply religion and society depend on each other. Girard's insight that "there is no society without religion because without religion society cannot exist" is very close to Durkheim's approach (Girard, 1977, p. 221). Is this social role of religion, however, genuine religion? Thinkers influenced by Péguy and Bergson and even more so by the Bible expressed their doubts.

Levinas's disapproval was the strongest. He already distanced himself in his early writings from Durkheim's understanding of the sacred. In an article published in 1946, he criticized Durkheim's concept of the sacred because it blurred the difference between early religions and the monotheistic tradition that emerged with Judaism (Levinas, 1989, pp. 32–33; cf. Caruana, 2006, p. 563). In 1950, he rejected Durkheim's concept indirectly by connecting the "sacred" to discoveries of "contemporary sociology" in the "prelogical mentality of Australia and Africa" and claiming that the "Bible and the Talmud" declared a "merciless war" on it (Levinas, 1990, p. 101). Ten years later, he again maintained that the "sociological category of religion does not coincide with the Jewish phenomenon," meaning God's subjection of human beings to ethics (Levinas, 2004, p. 113).

Although Weil conceded that Durkheim's theory "contains an element of truth," she recognized also his confusion of the religious and the social, claiming "that the social feeling is so much like the religious as to be mistaken for it" (Weil, 2001, p. 46; cf. Astell, 2017a, pp. 251–252; 2017b, pp. 398–399). In one of her notes, she identified the social with the beast in the Revelation of John (Rev 13) and with Plato's "Great Beast" concluding that "the Devil is the collective" and that Durkheim mistakenly understood it as the "divinity" (Weil, 1970, p. 304). She also emphasized saintliness as a religious attitude that differs from Durkheim's reductionist understanding of the sacred and even longed for a new type of sanctity. Like Bergson, she

was aware that despite Jesus's opening toward a universal religion, historical Christianity was often much closer to a static religion. The First World War provided Bergson with a very sobering example. He observed that the

nations at war each declare that they have God on their side, the deity in question thus becoming the national god of paganism, whereas the God they imagine they are evoking is a God common to all mankind, the mere vision of Whom, could all men but attain it, would mean the immediate abolition of war. (Bergson, 1977, p. 215)

According to Bergson, historical Christianity is a “mixed religion” (Bergson, 1977, p. 214). Weil struggled with similar insights during the Second World War. In a letter from 1942, she remarked that many Christians attached themselves to the church “as to an earthly country” (Weil, 2001, p. 49). This was, according to Weil, a betrayal of Jesus's “completely universal love” (Weil, 2001, p. 50). Saints like Saint Francis, however, did not succumb to this temptation. He and similar saints shared implicitly Jesus's universality. Our world of today, however, forces us according to Weil to move even beyond this implicit universality to a fuller embrace of it:

We are living in times that have no precedent, and in our present situation universality, which could formerly be implicit, has to be fully explicit. It has to permeate our language and the whole of our way of life. Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself also without precedent. (Weil, 2001, p. 51)

With her plea for a new saintliness, Weil came – despite her misunderstandings of Péguy – very close to his point of view (Chantre, 1999, p. 57; 2013, p. 14). She appreciated Maritain's emphasis on saintliness but criticized him for not understanding the necessary “newness” properly enough (Weil, 2001, p. 51). She most likely exaggerated, however, the differences between Maritain and herself in this regard (Perrin and Thibon, 2003, p. 95).

Girard underlined Weil's remark that Durkheim confused the social with God in his personal copy of Weil's book (Weil, 1950, p. 272). Despite his general appreciation of the work of Durkheim, he – as we saw earlier – remarked that the French sociologist excluded the perspective of the biblical religions from his understanding of the sacred. In Girard's eyes, Durkheim's theory of religion was helpful in understanding the sacred but had nothing to say about the holy. After his own personal conversion in the late 1950s, saintliness definitely became an important goal for Girard himself (Palaver, 2013a, pp. 5–8; Haven, 2018, pp. 113–117). When he met with biblical scholars in California in the late 1980s, he responded to their question about the practical consequences of his anthropology that “perhaps we should begin by striving for personal sanctity” (Bailie, 2009, p. 183; cf. Kaplan, 2013, p. 163). Systematically, however, he unfolded his distinction between the sacred and the holy in his dialogues with Benoît Chantre when they worked on his last book *Battling to the End*. Chantre referred frequently to Péguy, Bergson, and Levinas to express his understanding of saintliness. In Girard's introduction to this book, he called the “various authors, poets and exceptional people” that he discussed with Chantre a “communion of saints” (Girard, 2010, pp. xvi–xvii). Besides Péguy, Bergson, and Levinas, we must add to this communion the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, Simone Weil, and Jacques Maritain who is one of the very few philosophers that Girard held in high regard.

Girard's emphasis on the holy shares many insights with the tradition of saintliness that I outlined in this chapter. I do not dare to say that he saw himself as part of the mysticism that Bergson recognized at the center of open religion. In Girard's earlier books, he distanced himself clearly from all associations with mysticism and insisted strongly on the scientific character of his work (Girard, 1972, pp. 18, 442; 1977, p. 5; 1987c, pp. 63, 274). Later, however, he opened up to the mystical perspective close to Bergson's understanding if we see how he praised Hölderlin's mysticism or take his claim into account that all true theology is mystical theology realizing God's nonviolence and knowing at the same time that we cannot easily grasp him (Girard, 2010, pp. 123, 130; Girard, Gounelle, and Houziaux, 2007, p. 110).

His affinity with the tradition of saintliness nevertheless becomes obvious as soon as we realize his view of the Dreyfus Affair. He often referred to it to

criticize those relativisms that are not able to distinguish between early religions and the biblical revelation. Girard recognized an analogy between early religions and the anti-Semitic anti-Dreyfusards on the one hand and the Dreyfusards and the Bible on the other (Girard, 2001, pp. 145–146; 2010, p. 74; 2014a, p. 118; cf. Astell, 2003, p. 190). What counts for him is the defense of the innocent victim against the mob of persecutors. This truth stands against all relativist attitudes. Girard praised Péguy for his “fight for the truth,” especially for “fighting to defend a scapegoat” (2010, p. 74; cf. 2001, p. 146). Péguy belongs to the “communion of saints” that Chantre brought into the discussion and that forced Girard to make his distinction between the sacred and the holy more explicit. Concerning Péguy, Girard hesitated initially to fully endorse Chantre’s appreciation of the poet and writer. Péguy knew that there is a “deep contradiction” between the hero and the saint, corresponding to the “eternal contradiction between the temporal and the eternal” (Péguy, 1944, p. 177). In Joan of Arc, however, he saw a unique historical moment where the hero and the saint merge: “By a unique intersection of these two races, by an election, by a vocation unique in the history of the world she is at once saintly among all heroes, heroic among all the saints” (Péguy, 1944, p. 179). Péguy wrote this in 1911, a few years before the outbreak of the First World War in the early days of which he lost his life. For Bergson, Weil, and Girard who experienced the war-torn twentieth century longer and more extensively than Péguy, heroism had lost its traditional appeal. We already saw how Bergson and Weil distanced themselves from Joan of Arc as a divinely inspired warrior. Girard explicitly expressed his dislike of heroism in his dialogues with Chantre: “I do not like heroism very much,” and “warrior heroism is related to violent religion” (Girard, 2010, pp. 82, 84). Chantre, however, recognized a “transformation of the hero in a saint” in Péguy’s most important writings (Girard, 2010, p. 82). Cautiously Girard himself recommended the “transformation of heroism into saintliness” discussing Péguy and Levinas with Chantre (Girard, 2010, pp. 82, 91, 98–99). Girard’s recognition of a “positive undifferentiation” that does not cause violence but allows a saintly identification, “a chain of identity” of one with the other by imitating Christ leading to a saintly community, a “mystical body,” proves his approval of Chantre’s reading of Péguy (Girard, 2010, pp. 71, 82, 131, 133; cf. Chantre, 2013, pp. 114, 139; Hodge, pp. 208, 211). On Girard’s inauguration into the

Académie Française in December 2005, Michel Serres, a French philosopher and longtime friend of Girard, also explained that the new religion that no longer relies on the sacred but aims at saintliness founds a new community, the church. It is the attempt to “constitute a new collective, abandoning the sacred allegiance for the communion of saints” (Serres, 2009, p. 12).

For a proper understanding of how the sacred and the holy differ, it is important to understand how Péguy’s influence helped Bergson distance himself from Durkheim. His introduction of a dynamic religion considerably widened the view of religion that was restricted by its identification with static religion and enabled an emphasis on saintliness by thinkers like Maritain, Weil, Levinas, and Girard. Our world of today does not need a return to the old sacred but a new saintliness that overcomes violent patterns of static religion and aims at an open society based on universal fraternity. These developments in France contributed to Girard’s distinction between the sacred and the holy. Simone Weil was especially important for Girard’s work. For this reason, her distinction between idolatry and true religion will be unfolded in the following section.

5.2 Simone Weil’s Distinction between True Religion and Idolatry

Girard’s claim of a biblical difference and the French debates about theories of religion make his later distinction between the sacred and the holy more plausible. In his inaugural address of 2005, Michel Serres expressed most clearly how mimetic theory distinguishes between the sacred and the holy. He highlighted this difference in his response to Girard’s lecture on the Catholic priest and Dominican Ambroise-Marie Carré, who was Girard’s predecessor in the Académie Française and who searched for holiness during his whole life (Girard and Serres, 2007):

The holy is distinguished from the sacred. The sacred kills, the holy pacifies. Nonviolent holiness roots out envy, jealousy, ambition for high position, sanctuaries of mimeticism, and thus delivers us from rivalries that exasperate us toward the violence of the sacred. Sacrifice devastates; sanctity gives birth. Vital, collective, personal, this distinction cognitively

recovers the difference between the false and the true. The sacred unites violence and lying, murder and falsity; its gods are modeled by the collective in its fury. Inversely, the holy brings love and truth into accord. It is a supernatural genealogy of truth that modernity never suspects; we speak the truth only in loving innocently; we discover, we produce nothing except through becoming holy. (Serres, 2009, p. 16)

Serres referred frequently to the fact that both he and Girard learned from the French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil who led them to reflect intensively on violence (Serres and Latour, 1995, p. 35; Serres and L'Yvonnet, 2014, p. 35). In their youth, they especially read *Gravity and Grace* and the two terms in the title of this collection of her notes help us understand how she related violence and religion.

Weil used the term “gravity” for both, the impregnable force of the mob of the scapegoat mechanism and the image of god that follows human longings for power. According to Weil, among animals and human beings the weak often end up as persecuted scapegoats, a fact so widespread that she identified it with the law of gravity: “Men have the same carnal nature as animals. If a hen is hurt, the others rush upon it, attacking it with their beaks. This phenomenon is as automatic as gravitation. Our senses attach all the scorn, all the revulsion, all the hatred that our reason attaches to crime, to affliction” (Weil, 2001, p. 71; cf. Meaney, 2010, p. 576).

Weil found an especially striking example for her understanding of gravity among humans in Thucydides’ famous Melian dialogues. According to Thucydides, the powerful Athenians explained to the islanders of Melos that justice relies on a balance of power and that in all other cases power always gets its will: “You understand as well as we do that in the human sphere judgements about justice are relevant only between those with an equal power to enforce it, and that the possibilities are defined by what the strong do and the weak accept” (Thucydides, 2013, p. 380). In the eyes of the Athenians, this seemingly natural law dominates the human as well as the divine sphere: “In the case of the gods we believe, and in the case of humankind it has always been obvious, that as a necessity of nature wherever anyone has the upper hand they rule” (p. 382).

Like Girard, however, who recognized in the biblical revelation a God who does not stem from the foundational murder, Weil's view of religion also was not limited to this pseudo-religiosity of gravity. She recognized grace as its radical alternative. Weil distinguished gravity and grace according to the type of religion that goes along with them. Dominant in the realm of gravity is a type of religion, mentioned by the Athenians in the Melian dialogues, that sees both human beings and gods as always determined by power, commanding force, and violence. Grace, according to Weil, however, has nothing in common with this pseudo-religiosity of power but stems from a God who differs radically from such human imaginations of power.

Grace refers to the divine creator whose renunciation and self-limitation created the world. Without mentioning the source, Weil drew on the concept of *tsimtsum* in the Kabbalah (McCullough, 2014, pp. 88–91; Sneller, 2017, p. 21). Because God “emptied a part of his being from himself,” he enabled his creation to fill the emptied space (Weil, 2001, p. 89). In Christ she discovered this type of divinity exactly where he renounced it. Weil referred to the famous passage of Christ's *kenosis* (self-emptying) in Paul's letter to the Philippians: “Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Phil 2:6–7).

These considerations led Weil to a fundamental distinction between true religion and idolatry:

The religions which have a conception of this renunciation, this voluntary distance, this voluntary effacement of God, his apparent absence and his secret presence here below, these religions are true religion, the translation into different languages of the great Revelation. The religions which represent divinity as commanding wherever it has the power to do so seem false. Even though they are monotheistic they are idolatrous. (Weil, 2001, p. 89)

This distinction is closely linked to her reflections on “atheism as a purification” and to Girard's distinction between the sacred and the holy (Weil, 2002a, pp. 114–115).

One of the problems concerning Weil is her harsh rejection of the Hebrew Bible. Both Levinas and Girard criticized Weil for neglecting her own tradition (Girard, 1987c, p. 245; Lévinas, 1990, pp. 133–141). This, however, does not mean that she did not participate – at least indirectly – in the prophetic tradition that we described in our discussion of the Book of Job. Weil sides – broadly seen and putting aside that she did not see in Job a Jew – with Herschel, Levinas, and Girard in her understanding of this book of the Bible. She recognized in Job a renunciation of the usual grasp for power that shapes false religions and counted him among those people who understood the “most essential truth about God” that he is “good before being powerful” (Weil, 2003, p. 14). Weil called Job a “figure of Christ” and most likely influenced Girard’s similar claim (Weil, 2001, p. 120; Girard, 1987b, p. 165). She saw the connection between Job and Christ in their struggle with God. Therefore, she drew a parallel between Christ’s cry of forsakenness (Mark 15:34) with Job’s harsh indictment “he laughs at the affliction of the innocent!” (Job 9:23) (Weil, 2001, p. 120; cf. Meaney, 2007, pp. 159–160). Job’s protest is according to Weil, “not blasphemy but a genuine cry of anguish. The Book of Job is a pure marvel of truth and authenticity from beginning to end” (Weil, 2001, p. 120).

6 Dimensions of Saintliness

You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy. (Levinas, quoted in Derrida, 1999, p. 4)

This concluding section highlights the most important dimensions of saintliness as distinct from the sacred. It will draw on many insights and authors from the previous sections and will especially emphasize in what respect these dimensions relate to Girard’s mimetic theory. It will start with Girard’s long struggle about the appropriate use of the term “sacrifice,” address subsequently the individual dimension of the holy, move on to its special type of mediation, and discuss its relation to worldly power. A further discussion will put a light on the conception of God that matches

with the understanding of the holy as it is proposed in this Element. Finally, I will address the relationship of the holy to the sacred that is not a dualistic separation but allows the transformation of the sacred into the holy.

6.1 From the Sacred Sacrifice to Saintly Sacrifice

In close connection with his anthropological investigations, Girard carefully studied ritual sacrifices that repeat consciously and regularly the foundational murder to strengthen the internal peace of early communities: “Sacrifice is the resolution and conclusion of ritual because a collective murder or expulsion resolves the mimetic crisis that ritual mimics” (Williams, 1996, p. 11). Human or animal sacrifices are typical examples of this type of sacrifice that fully belongs to the realm of the sacred. Girard’s thesis about sacred sacrifices concurs with Bergson’s observation that human sacrifice is “a custom to be found in most ancient religions perhaps in all, could we trace them back far enough” (Bergson, 1977, p. 202; cf. Gifford, 2015, p. 319). Over a long period, Girard struggled with the question if the term “sacrifice” applies only to rites of early religions or also to Jesus self-giving of his life on the cross. For many years, he used the term only for early religions to uphold his seminal distinction between the sacred and the holy. According to Girard, a nonviolent God replaced the violent God of the sacred past who no longer demanded sacrifices but nonviolence:

The Christ of the Gospels dies against sacrifice, and through his death, he reveals its nature and origin by making sacrifice unworkable, at least in the long run, and bringing sacrificial culture to an end. The word “sacrifice” is not important in itself, but the singularity of the Passion is obscured if the same word is used for the Passion and for what takes place in sacrificial rituals. (Williams, 1996, p. 18)

One of the reasons for Girard’s early refusal to use the term “sacrifice” for both types of religion was his critical view of sacrificial Christianity: one that still did not recognize the biblical revolution that moved in principle beyond all sacrificial cultures. An outstanding example for this view is the

French philosopher and writer Joseph de Maistre, who understood sacrifice in a way that is close to the old sacred. For de Maistre, everything depended on the spilling of blood: “We can say that blood is the manure of the plant we call *genius*” (de Maistre, 1994, p. 29). The world was for him nothing but a huge sacrificial altar and war – following this way of sacrificial thinking – was something divine (Bell, 2007, pp. 310–311; Girard, 2010, p. 84). Isaiah Berlin summarized de Maistre’s sacrificial social theory concisely. Society rests in de Maistre’s eyes “at least as much on the uncreated, original, overpowering human yearning for sacrifice, the impulse to immolate one-self on a sacred altar without hope of return” (Berlin, p. 148). Girard justly criticized de Maistre as a Christian reactionary who divinized social order (Williams, 1996, p. 203). De Maistre’s understanding of sacrifice played an important role in the Dreyfus Affair in which the anti-Dreyfusards used his work to justify the victimization of Dreyfus for the sake of social order (Strenski, 2002, pp. 119, 123). His work also exemplifies Bergson’s observation that “static religion has to some extent lingered on into dynamic religion” (Bergson, 1977, p. 187).

Girard’s letter exchange with Raymund Schwager made him change his mind concerning the use of the term “sacrifice” (Girard and Schwager, 2016; Girard, 2014a, pp. 33–45; cf. Moosbrugger, 2013; Palaver, 2014). To overcome the illusion that violence can always be overcome without any suffering he started to use the term more broadly but still distinguishing clearly between the sacrifice of others and self-sacrifice. His most important biblical example for his later position is the story about the judgment of Solomon in the Hebrew Bible (1 Kings 3:16–28). In this story the bad harlot that preferred sacrificing the child to surrendering it to her rival represents the old sacred and is distinguished from the good harlot who is ready to sacrifice her right to the child so that the child may live. The second harlot risks her life to save the child and represents a saintly type of sacrifice:

What the biblical account says is that one can renounce sacrifice in one sense – sacrifice of another, violence against another – only by assuming the risk of sacrifice in another sense – the sacrifice of Christ, who died for all who were dear to him. Use of the same word in each case dispels the

illusion of a neutral ground where violence is nowhere to be seen. (Girard, 2014a, p. 43)

This insight, broadly understood, also characterizes those thinkers who belong to the previously mentioned tradition of saintliness. It is especially true of Péguy, who understood very well that the fight against scapegoating Dreyfus required the risk of one's own life: "Our opponents will never know, our enemies could not know all that we have sacrificed for the sake of this man, and with what a heart we have sacrificed it. For him we have sacrificed our entire life" (Péguy, 1944, p. 105). The Dreyfus Affair required, according to Péguy, "heroism," "sanctity," and "sacrifice to the point of martyrdom perhaps" (Péguy, 2001, p. 73; cf. p. 28). This is especially true of Bernard Lazare, who, like Jesus, accepted becoming a scapegoat for the sake of truth and justice and who "lived and died . . . like a martyr" (Péguy, 1998, p. 49; cf. Vélikanov, 2019). Péguy understood very well that action in the public realm always requires sacrifices. He criticized, for instance, the Catholic Church for being the "official religion of the bourgeoisie . . . , the official formal religion of the rich" and that a necessary economic and social revolution requires "bearing the cost" of it (Péguy, 2001, pp. 58–59; cf. Aronowicz, 1998, p. 30). In addition, "The economic, social and industrial price must be paid, the temporal price. Nothing can evade it, not even the eternal, not even the spiritual, not even the inward life. That is why our socialism was not so stupid after all, and why it was profoundly Christian" (Péguy, 2001, p. 59).

Close to Péguy and influenced by him was Bergson's view of sacrifice. He rejected utilitarian claims that reason could motivate sacrifice and overcome self-interest (Bergson, 1977, pp. 23, 87; cf. Lefebvre, 2012, pp. 207–208). According to Bergson, sacrifice relies strongly on emotions, and he mentioned two possible ways that human beings would be willing to undergo it. First there is the "subrational" pressure of the society with its deeper natural roots that motivates human beings to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the whole (Bergson, 1977, pp. 9, 37, 84, 119). This is a form of sacred sacrifice sustained by static religion. The other way includes all "suprarational" "*appeals* made to the conscience of each of us by *persons* who represent the best there is in humanity" (Bergson, 1977,

p. 84). Such appeals may inspire heroes and saints to disregard death and offer themselves in saintly sacrifices. This type of sacrifice characterizes dynamic religion. Levinas appreciated this second type of sacrifice where he addresses his appreciation of Bergson as opposed to Heidegger:

In *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, the duration that *Creative Evolution* considered as vital impulse becomes inter-human life. Duration becomes the fact that a man can appeal to the interiority of the other man. Such is the role of the saint and the hero beyond that of matter, the same hero and saint who lead to an open religion in which death no longer has a meaning. (Levinas, 2000, pp. 55–56)

Levinas connected in general the sacrifice for others with holiness (Levinas, 1998, p. xiii). Jankélévitch understood Bergson's saintly sacrifice the same as Levinas: "Freedom kills death in the divine folly of the sacrifice for others" (Jankélévitch, 2015, p. 207).

Overcoming the sacrifice of others may require self-sacrifice. A saintly sacrifice might become necessary to abstain from sacred sacrifice. The difference between sacred and holy sacrifice is fundamental, but it does not mean a radical separation negating any connection between early religions and the post-Axial traditions. According to Girard, there exists a "paradoxical unity of religion in all its forms throughout human history" (Girard, 2014a, p. 43). This unity relies on an ontology of peace that roots in creation and has influenced early religions, too. Rejecting this unity results easily in scapegoating the scapegoaters and in an escalation of violence. We do not need to extirpate sacred sacrifice but to transform it into saintly sacrifice.

6.2 The Saintliness of the Responsible Individual

An important dimension of saintliness is its emphasis on the individual. We can begin with one of Péguy's observations about the downside of groups: "When I was small I believed that groups worked. Today we know that groups do not work. They create agitation" (Péguy, 1944, p. 159). In his portrait of Lazare, he underlined that the prophets were lonely fighters against the complacency of the many. Only a "handful of rebels, an active

minority, a small band of enthusiasts and fanatics, a small band of the driven, grouping themselves around a few chiefs who are none other than the prophets of Israel” have dared to disturb the peace of the many in their fights for justice (Péguy, 1998, p. 44). The majorities were most of the time ignorant of those courageous and lonely fighters. Péguy claimed that the “disregard of Israel for prophets” found a parallel in the “disregard of sinners for saints” during Christian history (Péguy, 1944, pp. 140–141). The French term for “disregard” that Péguy used was *méconnaissance*, a concept with which Girard characterized the misrecognition typical of the mythic persecutors of early religions (Girard, 2007, p. 422; cf. Palaver, 2013a, p. 152). It seems that this ignorant attitude of the many is long lasting and not easy to overcome.

The sacred is a collective type of religion as it became most obvious in Bergson’s definition of tribal religions. When he juxtaposed the dynamic religion to the collective character of the static religion, he highlighted the individuality of the exceptional mystics that enabled others to join their inspiration. He saw dynamic religion was an “inner” or an “entirely inward” religion (Bergson, 1977, pp. 179, 186). Simone Weil and Emmanuel Levinas, too, shared Bergson’s stress on the individual. Weil was very critical of the collective that she recognized as the most dangerous type of idolatry: “The Great Beast is the only object of idolatry, the only *ersatz* of God, the only imitation of something which is infinitely far from me and which is myself” (cf. Weil, 2002a, p. 164). Human beings are mimetically attracted to adore the great beast that is the collective. We need a special grace to avoid the magnetic pull of the crowd. Weil’s suspicion of the crowd was so strong that she mentioned that as one of the reasons why she – despite her deep love of Christ – could not join the Catholic Church (Weil, 2001, p. 11). Only outside the collective is an opening toward the true God possible: “Society is the cave. The way out is solitude” (Weil, 2002a, p. 165). The way out of the cave, however, does not require the self-assertiveness of the individual. Like in Sufism, she claimed that only the giving up of one’s own self allows the overcoming of idolatry. Only “through one’s own annihilation; through dwelling a long time in a state of extreme and total humiliation” – “a death of the soul” – can one pass “over into truth” (Weil, 2005, pp. 90–91).

Levinas was highly critical of Weil's attitude to the Hebrew Bible and rejected her type of mysticism. Like Bergson and Weil, however, he also emphasized the individual dimension of saintliness. He underlined an ethical approach toward saintliness and saw the individual's responsibility for the other at the center of it (Goodhart, 2014, p. 226). According to Levinas, "saintliness" means that "the concern for others is greater than the concern for oneself" (Levinas, 2004, p. 128). We can discover this insight in the Hebrew Bible that calls at the beginning of chapter 19 of Leviticus to become holy like God and later in the same chapter commands charity (Mittleman, 2018, pp. 49–52): "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:2.18). Levinas also criticized the sacred because it violently destroys any individual freedom, which is a precondition of responsibility. In Levinas's eyes, violence can lie "in our fear and trembling when the Sacred wrenches us out of ourselves" (Levinas, 1990, p. 7). He also noted, "The numinous or the Sacred envelops and transports man beyond his powers and wishes, but a true liberty takes offence at this uncontrollable surplus" (Levinas, 1990, p. 14). Holiness requires individual freedom without, however, absolutizing freedom because that would also prevent the responsibility for the other, would prevent saintliness.

Girard does not differ much from Péguy, Bergson, Weil, or Levinas in emphasizing the individual dimension of saintliness. In his laudation for Girard, Serres rightly distinguished between two types of religion that the Gospel recommends by its "dissociation between Caesar and God, it distinguishes between the collective and the person" (Serres, 2009, p. 12). Due to Girard's insight into the violence of the scapegoat mechanism, he remained throughout his unfolding of his anthropology very suspicious of all types of masses, in which he always feared the lynch mob. We can find a good example for his suspicion of the masses in his interpretation of the biblical story of the prophet Jonah who was swallowed up by a whale. He deciphered this image of the whale as a symbol of the violent crowd and linked it with Hobbes's biblical metaphor that he used for his concept of the state: "The whale is an image of the violent crowd, and this is what Hobbes obviously understood when he entitled his famous work *Leviathan*" (Girard, 1996, p. 197). Girard also addressed the question of the individual.

The most striking contemporary example to which he referred in an interview is the former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who should get a chapter in a study devoted to the “possible influence of individuals on history” (Girard, 2014b, p. 7). I would go too far if I were to claim that Girard saw in Gorbachev a saint, but he recognized in this individual a person who consciously changed history for the good, a person on a saintly path. According to Girard, “another Brezhnev in his position” would have prolonged the totalitarian regime for another fifty years. Girard, of course, did not give in to an atomized individualism that neglects the relational character of human life. But his emphasis on the dominance of imitation did not lead him to neglect individual freedom. We saw in his interpretation of the story of the adulterous woman that only individual conversions lead to the dissolution of the lynch mob. These individual conversions, however, remained in the framework of mimetic relations because it was ultimately the imitation of Jesus that allowed first the elders and in their following the others to leave the mob of persecutors. In a rejection of Nietzsche’s view of Christianity, Girard most strongly underlined the fact that Christianity supports a real individual. Christian saintliness follows this line of thinking:

Undoubtedly, from the perspective of the mimetic mechanism, which is also a Christian perspective, there is a real individual. This is the one who goes against the crowd for reasons that aren’t rooted in the negative aspects of mimetic desire. He is the one who can resist the crowd. Nietzsche is never more wrong than when he says that Christianity is the religion of the crowd, as opposed to Dionysus, which is seen as the religion of the aristocracy, of a minority. It is exactly the other way around: Dionysus is the crowd and Christianity is the small minority able to resist the crowd. The Christian individual contradicts the crowd; he or she doesn’t join the multitude in the scapegoat resolution of the mimetic crisis, and moreover denounces the very scapegoat mechanism as a murder through the declaration of the innocence of the victim. (Girard, 2008, pp. 239–240)

6.3 *An Intimate Mediation*

The individual dimension of saintliness does not exclude at all its connections with imitative relations as we saw earlier in referring to the communion of saints. Péguy experienced in his friendship with Bernard Lazare a model to imitate that was full of charity and opened for him the perspective of saintliness (Péguy, 1944, p. 103; 1998, p. 50). Chantre recognizes in this special friendship an intimate mediation that influenced later Bergson as well as Girard (Chantre, 2013, pp. 114–116, 144). Whereas mimetic desire that aims primarily for worldly possessions leads automatically into the deadlock of mimetic rivalries, there is also this saintly type of mimesis. Bergson referred – as we saw earlier – to an imitation of saints that does not work like pressure but like an appeal. The appeal of the exceptional mystics elicits an imitative response because “there is in the innermost being of most men the whisper of an echo” (Bergson, 1977, p. 214; cf. pp. 35, 100, 215). For an example, he referred to his friend William James, who claimed never having mystical experiences himself but who “added that if he heard them spoken of by a man who had experienced them ‘something within him echoed the call’” (Bergson, 1977, p. 246; cf. 2013, p. 475; James, 1985, p. 379; James, 1920, p. 210). This type of imitation follows by taking a friend, a family member, or a personality already within us as a model:

As a matter of fact this personality takes shape as soon as we adopt a model; the longing to resemble, which ideally generates the form, is an incipient resemblance; the word which we shall make our own is the word whose echo we have heard within ourselves. (Bergson, 1977, p. 35)

Jesus’s disruption of the mob that persecutes the adulterous woman invites others to imitate his detachment from the crowd. This is also an example of how mimesis works in an appellative way. Bergson’s understanding of this type of an open imitation influenced Girard’s later reflections on mimesis. At the initial stage of mimetic theory, Girard distinguished between external mediation that is typical of traditional societies with their hierarchical differentiations preventing the outbreak of violent mimetic escalations and internal mediation that follows the breakdown of these differentiations leading into

rivalries and violence (Girard, 1966). Pushed by his interlocutor Benoit Chantre, he took up Péguy's and Bergson's insights and advanced them by introducing a type of "intimate mediation" that can lead out of the impasse of mimetic rivalries without trying to return to patterns of external mediation (Girard, 2010, pp. 133, 158, 168–169, 205; cf. Chantre, 2018, pp. 101–108; Astell, 2017b, pp. 408–410). According to Girard, intimate mediation "transforms mimetism and opens the door to the other side of violence" (Girard, 2010, p. 205). It leads from violence to reconciliation. We are no longer dealing with undifferentiation that leads to violence but with the previously mentioned positive undifferentiation that we can find at the basis of the community of the saints. Reflecting on a passage in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:16: "I appeal to you . . . be imitators of me"), Girard referred to "an endless chain of 'good imitation,' non-rivalrous imitation" and observed that "the 'saints' are the links of this chain" (Girard, 2008, p. 222). Mimesis no longer aims at the being of the other or at the desirable objects of the other but becomes a type of identification relating emphatically to the other. Innermost mediation results in charity and fraternal relations. Girard claims that only saints can escape the violence that comes along with internal mediation by discovering this innermost type of mimesis. He understands it along with Augustine's discovery of the innermost God in himself and identifies it with the imitation of Christ:

Saint Paul says, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." [1 Cor 11:1] This is the chain of positive undifferentiation, the chain of identity. Discerning the right model then becomes *the* crucial factor. We imitate Christ less than we identify with the one who, in the apocalyptic texts, *will have been* Christ. To imitate Christ is to identify with the other, to efface oneself before him: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." [Mt 25:40] Identification supposes a special aptitude for empathy. (Girard, 2010, p. 133)

Girard's explanation of the innermost mediation as a fraternal empathy with the other that only retrospectively realizes its identification with Christ

comes very close to Levinas's understanding of saintliness. When Levinas talked to Christians, he often referred to Mt 25 to underline that "the relation to God is presented there as a relation to another person. It is not a metaphor: in the other, there is a real presence of God" (Lévinas and Robbins, 2001, pp. 171; cf. pp. 52, 177, 255–256). This understanding of Mt 25 comes close to Levinas's view of the Christian *kenosis* that is also an important dimension of saintliness, as I will explain in Section 6.5.

6.4 Detachment from Worldly Power

My summary of Maritain's reflections on saintliness showed that one of the key features that distinguishes the holy from the sacred is its greater distance from worldly power and violent means. Previously we mentioned Péguy's praise of Lazare's distance from worldly power as a sign of saintliness. From the perspective of mimetic theory, distancing from worldly power means to aim for those eternal or holy goods that are not divisive. I also mentioned Max Scheler, who understood perfectly well that the holy can unite people and belongs to a higher rank than material or worldly goods. Similarly also the American philosopher and friend of Bergson William James mentioned among the features characterizing saintliness "a feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests" (James, 1985, p. 272; cf. Hick, pp. 300–303). This shift of the emotional center overcomes temptations to violence and leads instead to charity as one of its most important practical consequences. Fraternity and love of enemies belong therefore to saintliness: "The saint loves his enemies, and treats loathsome beggars as his brothers" (James, 1985, pp. 274; cf. 278–284). James referred to Saint Francis among other examples and recognized, too, that this attitude is not restricted to theism but is also true for Stoicism, Hinduism, or Buddhism.

Aiming at worldly power, however, does not strengthen fraternity and love of enemies but leads to their opposite. We can look for examples in the history of the Catholic Church to illustrate this temptation. The more its representatives aimed at worldly power, the more it succumbed to violence. Despite its emphasis on its religious role, it often left the path of saintliness. During the investiture struggle, Pope Gregory VII and his theologians developed a self-understanding of the church that strongly claimed a political role in the world, also legitimating violence against those who

were disobedient in a way that was definitely a departure from the practices of the past (Althoff, 2013). Violence in this sense was an essential dimension of the Papal Revolution of 1075 that led to the Crusades as well as to a series of wars and rebellions (Berman, 1999, pp. 103–106). In addition, the papal bull *Unam sanctam* of Boniface VIII from 1302, according to which the pope governs the world as well as the church, is a consequence of this legacy of a church focused on political ambitions in this world. It is this church – departing significantly from its earlier self-understanding – that serves as a mirror image for the modern absolutist state as we find it for instance in the work of Thomas Hobbes (Barion, 1960).

According to Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare movement with its strong emphasis on fraternity, Europe has “holiness” at its roots (Lubich, 2009, p. 250). Regarding modern Europe after the Second World War, she mentioned its founders Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, and Alcide De Gasperi. Girard, too, referred positively to these founding fathers of modern Europe and connected their attitudes with Pope John Paul II’s repentance for the Catholic Church in the year 2000. Indirectly, Girard underlined that this path of saintliness rested on a self-understanding of the church that has given up its worldly claims:

When I say that the papacy won, I am thinking immediately of this repentance, by which the papacy triumphed over itself and acquired worldwide significance. Before our eyes, it succeeded in expelling all imperial ideas, at the very point when its temporal power disappeared. (Girard, 2010, p. 201)

Holiness does not follow from worldly power but requires a detachment from it. In the [next section](#), we will see that this understanding of holiness roots in God’s own renunciation of worldly power.

6.5 A Kenotic Concept of a Nonviolent God

Girard’s understanding of the sacred comes close to Weil’s description of false religion as being identical with a commanding divine power. He recognized many instances in human history that demonstrate a strong

identification between violence and god. This identification, however, does not prove the reality of violent gods but is merely the projection of the outcome of mimetic escalations between human beings. The more resistance the mimetic rivals exert against the appropriation of a desired object, the more likely it is that the violent resistance itself becomes the most desirable object (Girard, 1977, p. 148; 1987c, p. 330). Such a fetishizing of violence leads directly to its identification with divine power. The pre-Axial sacred is completely dominated by such a divinization of violence. The modern world also provides outstanding examples of how the escalation of mimetic rivalry leads to the idolization of violence. Girard's last book on the German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz illustrates how this Prussian general devoted his life to a "god of war" as the epitome of a mimetic escalation to extremes (Girard, 2010, p. 71). For Clausewitz and many of his contemporaries, this "god of war" was incarnated in Napoleon (Girard, 2010, pp. 12, *passim*). Remnants of this identification of violence with God are still present in fundamentalist longings for "divine terror" (Girard, 1987c, p. 195). Girard clearly rejected such understandings of God. In his readings of the apocalyptic passages in the synoptic Gospels, he strongly claimed that these texts address "human terror" and not God's violent interventions. He repeatedly emphasized God's nonviolence.

His critique of Heidegger's interpretation of the Johannine logos as the expression of a "divine authoritarianism" is a good example of how Girard rejected imagining God in terms of human force and power (Girard, 1987c, p. 265). Whereas Heidegger saw in Jesus's father a kind of "chief of police" Girard insisted on the fact that "the supernatural, in the Christian sense, respects freedom" and "cannot make itself felt as a commanding force" (Girard and Bertonneau, 1987, pp. 12, 20). In his last book, Girard countered Heidegger's endorsement of the sacred with a reading of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin which emphasizes the holy (O'Regan, 2017). His reading of Hölderlin's late hymns on Christ underlines his siding with a kenotic understanding of God close to that of Weil (Girard, 2010, pp. 120–135). Girard opposed the violent and immediate sacred of pre-Axial myths to the holy as the imitation of the kenotic Christ. The immediacy of mythic violence is opposed to the mediation provided through the imitation of Christ, who follows the kenotic retreat of the Father:

To listen to the Father's silence is to abandon oneself to his withdrawal, to conform to it. Becoming a "son of God" means imitating this withdrawal, experiencing it with Christ. God is thus not immediately accessible, but mediately: through his Son and the story of Salvation, which as we have seen takes on the paradoxical appearance of an escalation to extremes. (Girard, 2010, p. 123)

A kenotic understanding of God breaks with the typical images of divine power. Hölderlin emphasized Christ's kenosis (Palaver, 2015b; Ogden, 1991). In the third version of his hymn "The Only One," Hölderlin ascribed to the pagan gods – these "worldly men" – typical attributes of human power: "Hercules is like the princes. Bacchus is the spirit of the community" (quoted in Girard, 2010, pp. 128–129). Christ, however, is different because he "resigns himself" (quoted in Courtine, 1999, p. 137).

Christ's kenosis also breaks with the acquisitive desire that so easily leads to mimetic rivalry and violence. In some translations of Christ's kenosis, this becomes especially obvious when it is said that he "thought it not robbery to be equal with God" (Phil 2:6 KJV). An appropriative desire does not only lead to violence by aiming at worldly and therefore often divisive goods but also results in violence by understanding God as a property to possess (Ricoeur, 1999, pp. 9–10). As mimetic beings, we must reach out for models without acquisitiveness. Girard recommended for this reason the imitation of Christ:

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. . . . If we imitate the detached generosity of God, then the trap of mimetic rivalries will never close over us. (Girard, 2001, p. 14)

Girard emphasized the uniqueness of Christianity in its ability to transform the sacred into the holy. With Weil, Ricoeur, and others, however, we can see that this transformation is not confined to Christianity but characterizes all Axial religions in some way (Ricoeur, 1999, p. 11; Avery, 2017; Palaver

and Schenk, 2018). With Benjamin Schewel, we referred in the beginning to John Hick's thesis that the transformation of self-centeredness into Reality- or Other-centeredness is the normative core of all Axial religions. This also opens up a door for Girard's mimetic theory because it is such a transformation that characterized the final chapter of his first book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, in my eyes a masterpiece of Christian spirituality, in which he follows Weil's understanding of kenosis by taking up her expression "creative renunciation" (Girard, 1966, p. 307; cf. Palaver, 2015a). Giving up our self-centeredness enables us to open ourselves up to others in a loving way and to what is real and eternal. With saintliness, we renounce our self-centeredness and can therefore stay away from the temptations of violence.

6.6 Transforming the Sacred into Saintliness

Finally, we must address one more important question. It is not another dimension of the holy but addresses the important relation between the sacred and the holy. It was Maritain who criticized Bergson's distinction between static and dynamic religion as resulting in a complete separation between them that comes close to a Manichaean dualism (Maritain, 1948, p. 99). Leszek Kolakowski's view is milder, claiming that the distinction is "less sharp than it appears at first sight" (Kolakowski, 2001, p. 86):

Static forms of religiosity preserve both a mystical potential and the traces of the spiritual force once implanted in them by religious geniuses; the ideas and feelings which lead the human race to an open society make progress, by inches, within tribal communities.

We do not have to decide between these two interpretations of Bergson's work. We must, however, ask the question if Girard's distinction between the sacred and the holy results in a dualistic separation between these two types of religion or allows a transformation from one into the other.

Why is a separation dangerous? The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor who followed Girard's main insights reflected especially on the dangers that come along with our separation from the early sacred (Palaver,

2017). According to Taylor, the more we think we can completely break free from the bloody past the more we are in danger of increasing our dependency on scapegoating. Taylor warns us that the “recreation of scapegoating violence both in Christendom . . . and in the modern secular world” results from attempts of reform that try to break entirely with the past: “It is precisely these claims fully to supersede the problematic past which blinds us to the ways in which we are repeating some of its horrors in our own way” (Taylor, 2007, p. 772).

Girard’s distinction between the sacred and the holy does not result in separation. Even at the beginning of Girard’s engagement with the Judeo-Christian revelation over against the sacred of early religions, he did not claim a complete separation between these two types of religion. We referred to this fact at the end of Section 3.2. In Girard’s last book *Battling to the End*, a separation between the sacred and the holy is clearly rejected in favor of the necessity to transform the one into the other. In one of the most important chapters of this book, he follows Hölderlin’s insight that there is not only a “fundamental discontinuity” but also a “continuity between the Passion and archaic religion” (Girard, 2010, p. xv; cf. p. 129). In his earlier work, by reversing Nietzsche, Girard often emphasized the fundamental difference between Dionysus, a symbol of the collective sacred, and the Crucified, standing for the holiness of Jesus. Girard’s last work complements this important insight with Hölderlin’s emphasis on the connection between Dionysus and Christ – “you are . . . the brother / Of Euio too” (Hölderlin, 1984, p. 85). That does not, however, hide the truth that “Dionysus is violence and Christ is peace” (Girard, 2010, pp. 127, 130).

There is always the possibility of either slowly transforming the early world toward the perspective of the Kingdom of God or of cutting short a long and difficult path by violently eradicating the pre-Axial past. Modern terrorism and many types of fundamentalism – including secular forms – represent attitudes that want to break completely free from the past. We are, however, in need of transformative attitudes that are ready to deal with our own involvement in violence and search for a common attempt to overcome it.

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Religion and Violence

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