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BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION, MYTHOLOGY, AND A THEORY OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE.

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Abstract

Aristotle might have been optimistic when he said that human beings by nature desire to understand, nevertheless, understanding is the professional obligation of the intellectual, and since there can be no understanding without theory, we intellectuals cannot neglect the search for theory. Violence is an odd thing to want to understand, but we seek to understand it not to enhance the pleasure of contemplation but rather to deal with it more effectively. Therefore, we seek a theory of violence to use as a lens through which to view the evidence. I wish to propose such a theory as a contribution to the discussion of the possible role theology might play in an understanding of the violence that attends the birth of the new South Africa. As an outside observer I cannot understand the situation as well as those who are existentially involved and so I must present the theory in general terms and leave it to others to decide its applicability.

Introduction

There is debate in the RCA, and in the professional literature, about the appropriateness of the term 'ethnic' to describe the violence that is presently taking place. This debate is not confined to the South African situation but ranges across the whole field of the study of nationalism and nationalistically inspired conflicts, which are flaring anew across central and eastern Europe[1]. In the RCA the issue is complicated by the fact that the policy of Apartheid sought to cultivate ethnic differences in an effort to divide the black opposition, and this has led to a situation in which it is possible to add to the general methodological assertion that ethnicity is a social construction, the specific

1.Donald L Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985); Larry Diamond, *'Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict' Journal of Modern African Studies* 25/1 (1987) 117-128; Donald L Horowitz, *A Democratic South Africa? Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society* (Berkeley: University of California, 1991); Anthony D Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); John A Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1982). For a point of view that downplays the importance of ethnicity see, Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.:Cornell University, 1983).

claim that in this case it is also a deliberate political construct[2]. We cannot enter into this discussion and so must simply aver that in proposing a theory of ethnic violence and suggesting it might be pertinent to an interpretation of the RCA situation we do not intend to beg the question, but rather leave it to others to decide.

The theory is in the final analysis a religious theory because it pivots on what the discipline of Religious Studies calls 'the Sacred.' Its originator, Rene Girard[3], claims that it is disclosed most clearly in the Bible, and that it shows the Bible to be the one text in Western Culture that fully unmasks the role of violence in society. It is, therefore, especially germane to Christian theology, which takes the Bible as its charter document. My own attempt to read the biblical revelation by means of the theory highlights the Cross as the central narrative and historical event in terms of which the rest of the text is to be interpreted.[4] In fact, the theory might be called a hermeneutic of the Cross, and in what follows I wish to commend it not only as a hermeneutical theory but also as a theory of ethnically motivated violence. I shall try to demonstrate the link between these two functions by using it to read the Exodus narrative. The presentation takes the form of six more or less extended propositions:

1) The Source, Nature, and Function of a Theory;
2) A Reading of the Exodus Narrative in Exodus 12:29-36; 14:26-31; 15:19-21;
3) The theory of Sacred Violence;
4) The Cross as a hermeneutical principle;
5) Ethnic Violence and the Sacred; and
6) Application of the analysis to intergroup ethnic violence.

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2. For a general account of this phenomenon see PL Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966). For a current example of the analysis of social construction from the point of view of anthropology see, Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa,* Vol 1 (Chicago: Chicago University, 1991),

3. R Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure,* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University, 1965) ; idem, *Violence and the Sacred,* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University, 1977); idem, *The Scapegoat,* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University, 1986); idem, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World,* with J-M Oughourlian and G Lefort, (Stanford: Stanford University, 1987); idem, *Job the Victim of his People* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1987); idem, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University, 1991); *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, Rene Girard, and Jonathan Z Smith on Ritual Killing and Social Formation,* (ed. RG Hamerton-Kelly, with an Introduction by B.Mack and a Commentary by R.Rosaldo; Stanford: Stanford University, 1987); *Violence and Truth: On the Work of Rene Girard* (ed. P.Dumouchel; Stanford: Stanford University, 1988); J-M Oughourlian, *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1991); *E Webb, Philosophers of Consciousness* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1989).

4. Robert G Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

1. The Source, Nature, and Function of a Theory:

Since we bring the theory to the evidence we wish to understand, it is necessary to declare the source, nature, and function of theory if we do not wish to appear arbitrary. We can only give a cursory account here, which leaves several important concepts undeveloped.

A theory is not induced from the evidence at hand because it is always already present when one approaches the data. It is, however, based on the data in a more complex way than simple induction. This way might be called tradition[5]. The source of theory is tradition because tradition is the deposit of a history of trial and error in the interpretation of the data in question, refined over generations into a relatively few orienting insights. This tradition includes not only the data and the observer but also the historical context and the change of that context through time. The source of theory is therefore tradition as the larger cultural context, from which it emerges by the 'test of time.'

Tradition becomes theory when the observer takes a critical stance towards it. A mythological understanding of tradition regards it as sacred and inviolable, while a pragmatic understanding acknowledges that some insights have not stood 'the test of time,' while others have.

The ability to take a critical stance towards tradition entails the notion that reason is more or less independent of tradition, which suggests the modern Cartesian notion of rationality. Deconstructive postmodernism denies this idea of reason and thus denies the possibility of a critical stance towards tradition short of complete scepticism. The practical outcome of this point of view is relativism checked only by politics.

There is, however, a middle way between modernism and scepticism, that uses 'hard-core commonsense notions'[6]. While criticizing modernism's dualism between spirit and matter and its limitation of perception to sense perception, this 'constructive postmodernism', based ultimately on the thought of Alfred North Whitehead, also criticizes the epistemological scepticism of deconstruction. It is, therefore, possible to take a rationally critical attitude to tradition.

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5. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952) is the ultimate source of this idea about the role of tradition in theory. In this volume he sets out a sophisticated understanding of the link between theory and history, which he subsequently demonstrates through five learned volumes entitled *Order in History,* culminating in the brief and unfinished masterpiece, *In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1987). I intend to develop my own view of theory and tradition with the help of Voegelin.

6. This is the term used by David Griffin in his 'constructive (rather than deconstructive) postmodern' philosophy. It means simply that there are certain categories, like causality, that are practically indispensable,('that cannot be denied without contradicting one's own practice') and that in the case of such categories the demands of practice should determine the limits of theory. cf. David Ray Griffin, *'Postmodern Theology and A/Theology: A Response to Mark C Taylor,'* in *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989) 29-61. Voegelin also has a high doctrine of the competence of reason, arrived at by a different route but having the same practical effect.

In terms of the European philosophical debate our position includes aspects of the approaches of both Gadamer and Habermas[7]. While not seeking to reconcile these two positions we do like Gadamer emphasize the role of tradition and recognition, and like Habermas emphasize the role of rational evaluation in the context of ongoing communication. Tradition does not displace rationality but rather engages it in the dialectical task of evaluating tradition. The recognition that identifies a coalescence of the horizon of the text with the horizon of the interpreter is not a stable category but is itself subject to historical change in the dialectic of communication, and so an interpretation can only be a way-station in the ongoing dialogue about the meaning of experience as deposited in our texts and experienced in living, and rationality is the instrument for the ongoing evaluation of the authenticity of our recognitions. There is always the possibility of a false consensus, which can only be dealt with by an ongoing rational communicative practice.

One of the chief ways to test a theory warranted by tradition is to apply it to the evidence at hand and to note the power of the interpretation to command assent and open up possibilities for further research and communication. Therefore, there can be no 'final' interpretation, but there can be patterns of insight that are pragmatically useful for interpreting the evidence and are recognized as such by responsible observers. These patterns of insight are theories.

To give an example of a tradition from the theory of international relations, the structural realist theory, which holds that the agents in the international arena are sovereign states and not sub-state entities, and that states always act to secure and enlarge their own power draws on a tradition that runs from Thucydides through Machiavelli and Hobbes, to Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. It commands the assent of many scholars in the field and it provokes a lively debate about its own efficacy.

A theory is, therefore, a critically adopted point of view, taken after rational reflection on the tradition in which the observer is embedded. It is an orienting insight because it determines the point of view from which one interprets the data and the relative importance of the data items, and it is an organizing principle because it orders the data into a pattern of explanation that can be tested by comparison with other patterns.

The functions of theory are, therefore, twofold: to orient attention, and to enable understanding by the integration of data. Theory orients attention by fixing the point of view and marking the important data in the field. In most fields there is an overwhelming plenitude of data and one needs some guide as to the relative importance of these data items. A good theory will orient attention to the data that is most likely to illuminate the whole field.[8] Theory integrates data in terms of itself and in terms of the tradition. By integration we mean the relating of the lesser known to the better known within patterns of

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7. J Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 152-164.

8. One might note here the debate in the field of mathematics about the status of computer-aided proofs. A traditional proof is a theory based on a selection of data, that claims to be able to illuminate the whole field. Computers, however, are able to grind through the whole field and thus change the nature of theory fundamentally. They remove the element of brilliant risk from the theorem.

established knowledge, or tradition. This integration is what constitutes understanding and it takes place by means of comparison.

In the field of biblical studies comparative history has been the dominant mode of interpretation for more than a century. We believe that we understand the text better by comparing its categories to the categories of contemporaneous texts. Theory as the critically evaluated deposit of experience over generations enables us to compare the text not only with its synchronic parallels but with the diachronic ones also. Theory in this sense is a concentrated statement of diachronically stable categories with which to compare and integrate new data.

The Girardian theory contains a few such diachronically stable categories that have been warranted in literature dating from the Greek tragedies to the present, the ethnography of traditional and modern societies and cultures, and in the Bible. They are mimetic rivalry, scapegoating, the Sacred, ritual, prohibition, and myth, and the disclosure of these categories and their operation by the Bible. Before we expound the theory, however, we wish to give an example of a reading enabled by it.

2. A Reading of the Exodus Narrative (Exodus 12:29-36; 14:26-31; 15:19-21).

Theologians read the Bible through the lens of one or another theory derived from their respective traditions. Historical and philological exegesis does not escape this predicament because its positivism is a theoretical assumption and not a self-evident truth[9]. The conflict of theologies, therefore, is amongst other things a conflict of interpretive theories. In this regard theology is dangerously akin to ideology, in that it easily functions to cloak political, social, and economic interests. We have learned from psychoanalysis that it is possible to have a 'false consciousness' or to live 'in bad faith,' saying one thing and doing another, or systematically deceiving ourselves and others in pursuit of unconscious goals. Theology as ideology would be the deliberate use of interpretive theories to obscure reality, while theology as 'bad faith' would be the unconscious use of theories for the same purpose, and both aberrations are acts of violence. Girard's theory, as applied to biblical interpretation is akin, therefore, to psychoanalysis insofar as it can be used to uncover the role of violence in theology (and positivism), and in the Bible itself.

In order to demonstrate how the theory functions I present an interpretation of the Exodus narrative in which I focus on the issue of the violence of god. Raymund Schwager has given us a good introductory study of this theme in the Old Testament in the light of the theory of sacred violence[10]. A discussion of the whole problem of violence in the Bible is beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is important to note at the outset that the violence of god in the Exodus story has to be evaluated in the context of the whole Old Testament, which includes both the violence of god and the process of the redefinition of

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9. For a critique of positivism in this connection see, Eric Voegelin, *The New science of Politics,* 1-26. According to him the first outcome of positivism is the 'accumulation of theoretically undigested, and perhaps undigestible, facts, the excresence for which the Germans coined the term *Materialhuberei,*' (pp.8-9).

10. Raymund Schwager, SJ, *Must there be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987),43-135.

the divine nature in the direction of non-violence. Schwager shows that violence among human beings and the violence of the divine play a large part in the Old Testament. In the former case there are over six hundred passages that explicitly talk about human violence, and in the latter approximately one thousand passages that tell of the anger, revenge, and punishment by death and destruction inflicted by the divine[11]. According to Schwager the passages about the divine violence might be classified in four categories,

> i) God appears as an irrational killer wanting to kill people for no apparent reason;
> ii) He personally takes revenge on those who do evil ;
> iii) He delivers evil-doers to other humans for punishment;
> iv) He allows the consequences of evil deeds to fall upon the perpetrators[12].

These stages represent a progress away from the attribution of violence to the divinity, and we must bear this progress in mind as we approach the Exodus story, which seems to be classifiable in category ii.

It is well-known that the Exodus narrative has been a mainstay of liberation theology, which focuses its reading on the theme of the liberation of the slaves from Egypt.[13] I do not wish to exclude the focus on the liberating activity of god and his vindication of the victims. Clearly the Exodus is about the liberation of slaves. What troubles me is the apparent glorification of the divine violence in the text, which can become a justification for the violence of the oppressed against their oppressors today, when the text is read through the Marxist lens of inevitable class conflict. It would seem necessary, now that Marxism is being rejected in places where it once ruled, to reconsider theories based on it in terms of 'the test of time' and thus to reconsider readings based on those theories. I do not, however, pretend to do anything like that here, but merely to show another reading.

Virtually all Jewish and Christian readings of the Exodus narrative take the point of view of the author for granted and identify with the Hebrews. Let us, however, try another, suspicious, reading. The story is told of a child who on returning home from instruction at the synagogue was asked what he had learned. He said that the teacher had told them how the Israelites fleeing from the Egyptians were caught between the superior Egyptian land forces and the Red Sea. At this point Moses got on the radio and called in air strikes by the

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11. *Must there be Scapegoats?* 47, & 55. 'Aside from the approximately one thousand verses in which Yahweh himself appears as the direct executioner of violent punishments, and the many texts in which the Lord delivers the criminal to the punisher's sword, in over one hundred other passages Yahweh expressly gives the command to kill people. These passages do not have God himself do the killing; he keeps somewhat aloof. Yet it is he who gives the order to destroy human life, who delivers his people like sheep to the slaughter, and who incites human beings against one another' (60).

12. *Must there be Scapegoats?* 61-62.

13. Enrique Dussel, *'Das Exodus-Paradigma in der Theologie der Befreiung,' Concilium* 23 (1987) 54-60; AF McGovern, 'The Bible in Latin American Liberation Theology,' in NK Gottwald, (ed.), *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (Orbis: Maryknoll, 1983) 461-472; M Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

Israeli air force, and the Israeli army corps of engineers laid pontoon bridges over the sea. Under cover of the air force the Israelites completed a successful retreat, and when the Egyptian armored columns tried to use the same bridges the air force bombed them and many Egyptian armored vehicles were lost in the sea. When his parents expressed disbelief, and demanded the truth, the little boy admitted he had made up the story, but in his own defence he said, 'You would in any case not have believed what they told me.'

Well what had they actually told him? They told him that the god of Israel has visited ten plagues on the Egyptians, culminating in the killing of all the first born of Egypt, both humans and animals. That god had then arranged things so that the Israelites could steal vast quantities of gold, silver, and jewels from the Egyptians. Then god had drowned thousands of Egyptians in the sea, and all of this had been celebrated in the song of Miriam, one of the most ancient fragments in all the Bible, to the effect, 'Is it not wonderful that god has killed so many of our enemies?'

Now for sheer self-congratulation this story is hard to beat. It presents its own author's people as helpless victims, and therefore, impenetrably righteous. As victims they could not possibly be anything but innocent, pure as the driven sand, unable because of their weakness to inflict any violence on anyone. Their god does the murdering for them, and because a god does the killing it is on a grand scale, and not an ounce of remorse is appropriate. As enemies of god's specially beloved innocent victims, these targets of the divine righteousness deserve to die, indeed, their dying glorifies god, because it shows the divine justice against the mighty and the divine favour for the weak. And the story goes on beyond the Exodus narrative to justify the slaughter of the Canaanites and other hapless groups that get in the way of the Israelite march, according to the principle of the holy war, which was not invented by Islam but is there in the Bible a thousand years before the birth of the prophet Muhammad. Read this way the Exodus narrative is a piece of propaganda for the Israelite people, which justifies their use of deadly force against their enemies by identifying it with the divine violence against the enemies of god.

In terms of the literary history of the Bible the Exodus narrative was written by the J writer who was part of the Davidic-Zion tradition and as such was concerned to glorify the conquests of the Davidic monarchy. It is therefore not the only strand of tradition concerning Israel's self-understanding and must be read in the context of the whole history of traditions in the Pentateuch. When read thus in context it is balanced by other traditions that show that Israel was aware of the nature of its god as one who sides with victims. This element in the Bible has been convincingly analyzed by James Williams[14], who shows the many ways in which Israel was moving from the mythology of violence to the revelation of the God who vindicates victims[15]. One such trace occurs in Ex 1:10 which tells of the order to kill the male children of the Hebrews, which indicates that there is an historical core behind the story, a history of Egyptian persecution of a minority within its borders, a minority probably derived from the Hyksos invasions of 1725-1575 BC. Williams characterizes the text as rep-

14. James Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

15. See especially the section *'The Struggle over Sacrifice'* (ibid) 117-121.

resenting 'a process of struggle to witness to the revelation of the innocent victim'[16].

But there is also a hint of another group of victims behind the text in the account of Moses' murder of the Egyptian in Ex 2:11-15. Thus we have two groups of victims, one on each side, both Hebrews and Egyptians, and in the present account the Egyptian victims, from the first born of both sexes and of their animals to those who perished in the sea, seem to outnumber the Hebrews[17]. It remains troubling, therefore, that the narrative is so one-sided, placing all the blame on the Egyptians, and implying that they deserved the catastrophic losses that they sustained. This point of view is characteristic of myths of ethnic self-justification, according to which the maintenance of the chosen group is more important than the lives of individual human beings, and the animals who might perish with them.

3. Mythology in the theory of sacred violence:

How shall we understand the violent elements of this story, the vengeful god, the innocent victims, and the divine murder of the first-born and the Egyptian host? I suggest that the theory of sacred violence enables us to see what is going on here, and so I present a brief description of the theory.

In order to do so I must present a 'likely story' about origins. It is not to be taken as a literal account of a single instance but rather as an ideal account of the way it might have been. In the beginning, in the primal hominid bands, a Hobbesian 'state of nature' prevailed, a war of all against all because of the nature of desire. Desire is mimetic because it imitates the desire of another. Consider only the power of the movies to enthrall, by causing us to identify with the characters, and the power of modern advertising to persuade. All this is merely the modern version of the ancient power of the story which is in turn based on the more ancient nature of human desire as mimetic. Desire is a power that draws us to imitate one another to the extent of identifying with the other, and because we are in imitative thrall to one another we copy the desire of the other for an object, and thus we are bound to become the rival of the other, and rivalry is bound to lead to violence. In the primal bands this mimetic rivalry made community impossible, until the moment when spontaneously from the midst of a crisis of mimetic violence there emerged the surrogate victim. The group coalesced in the common killing of one victim, and culture emerged from this scapegoat, in the following way:

> Gazing in the stupefaction at the corpse, the group, experiencing its first moment of peace, drew a catastrophically false conclusion. It concluded that if the death of the victim brought peace its life must have caused the

16. *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred* 72.

17. Williams claims that there is a progress in the narrative away from sacrificial violence, because whereas in Ex 2:16 all the male children of the Hebrews are to be killed, in Ex 12:12 only the first born are to be killed. This does not really hold, because in the latter case it is the first born of all humans, male and female, and of all animals as well, that are to be killed. The difference between the two cases seems to be small, in absolute terms, although the former case does have the eventual assimilation of the whole group in view. The situation could only be viewed as an advance if the maintenance of the group identity of the Hebrews is to be valued more than the worth of individual human and animal lives. In terms of absolute numbers the Egyptians would suffer greater losses that the Hebrews.

> violence. Thus the group misattributed its own violence to the victim. The all-powerful victim, not the group's own mimetic rivalry and scapegoating, caused violence and brought peace. By this primal self-deception and self-alienation the victim became the all-powerful source of bane and blessing for the group and was transformed into the god, and religion as institutionalized scapegoating, came into being.

Bane and blessing are the two valences of the Sacred, the *tremendum et fascinans*. The negative valency arises from the capacity to cause violence (mimetic rivalry) and the positive from the ability to control it (surrogate victimage). Out of this misunderstanding - which I call the double transference because the group transfers to the victim both its own violence and the violent curb on violence - come the three building blocks of culture: *prohibition, ritual, and myth.*

> *Prohibition* is the ban on activity that might cause mimetic rivalry to break out again, dissembled through the Sacred into the threat of the vengeance of the god.
>
> *Ritual* is the repetition of the primal murder under controlled circumstances to renew its pacifying power, and therefore sacrifice is the first and fundamental ritual.
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> *Myth* insofar as it is the story of origins and order, is essentially the account of the founding murder told from the point of view of the murderers, and is, therefore, by definition an alibi for the killers and a public relations 'spin' on violence.

Thus we have the categories of the theory in terms of which the data is to be integrated by comparison: mimetic rivalry, scapegoating, the Sacred, and its three manifestations, ritual, prohibition, and myth. They appear in many transformations in the course of history. The Exodus narrative as we have it is one such mythic transformation.

According to the theory myth is a sub-category of the Sacred; it is a verbal account of the primal scapegoating which presents it in such a way as to vindicate the killers and blame the victim and thus transform it into the Sacred. Myth presents victims as gods and victimizers as priest-kings. It is the verbal expression of the deception of the double transference.

In our suspicious reading we take the violent version of the Exodus story as a myth because it has several features that point to the presence of the Sacred:

3.1 The group is sacred;

The special association with the divine is in fact simply a claim made by the group, while in the narrative it is mythically presented as an act of choice by the god. 'He chose us we did not elevate ourselves to this status.' This is an instance of the double transference at work, attributing the sacralizing activity to the god. In fact it is a self-sacralizing act which takes place by means of a mythification of the group's sense of its own controlled violence.

3.2 It demonstrates this sacrality by scapegoating the Egyptians;

The scapegoating of the Egyptians takes place mythically by attributing their destruction to the god. This is a mythical expression of the outbreak of the

group's own violence against its enemy scapegoat. It is necessary for the group to sacrifice a surrogate victim in order to maintain itself as a group, but it is also necessary to hide this violence from itself if it is to be efficacious, and so it transforms the deed into the action of the god. In this narrative the group members separate themselves by two steps from the violence; it is not done by them but by the god, and they are in any case victims not perpetrators.

3.3 It underlines its sacrality by presenting itself as a victim;

The self-presentation as victim has a twofold purpose. It pretends that the group could not be guilty of violence, and it identifies the group with the Sacred. The Sacred is essentially the first victim transformed by the double transference into the god. By casting themselves in the role of victim the group consolidates its identification with the Sacred at one level, and furthers the mythic objective of covering over the traces of the truth about its violence. The text scapegoats the Egyptians at one level, but at a more important level it scapegoats its own Hebrews. The latter move is a self-scapegoating, a self-identification as victim that places the group in the special category of the Sacred thus setting it off from all other groups.

3.4 The god is vengeful and violent.

In order to maintain the myth that the group is innocent of violence it is necessary to categorize the divine as violent (i.e. 'to accuse the god of violence,' since *kategorein* in Greek means 'to accuse publicly'). This is the price that must be paid for 'bad faith,' the myth-representation of the divine as vengeful and violent.

This, by no means exhaustive, analysis is enough to show that the Exodus narrative as read through the lens of our theory is in part a myth of ethnic self-justification. This raises the question of the nature of the biblical disclosure of the divine. If so important a narrative is a myth in this destructive sense, what might we say about the Bible as a whole?

Girard himself resists this reading because he wishes to emphasize the revelatory power of the Bible as a whole[18]. On his reading an original myth told how a sacrificial crisis, symbolized by the ten plagues, had been resolved by the expulsion of the Israelite troublemakers. The non-mythical truth, however, was that the Hebrews were actually innocent of any wrong doing, but chosen as scapegoats by which to resolve a crisis of mimetic violence afflicting the Egyptian community, and symbolized by the plagues. In siding with the expelled troublemakers the Bible shows that it does not believe the myth of the Hebrews' guilt, but sees accurately a situation of sacred violence in which a community restores its order by expelling innocent victims. Wolfgang Palaver reminds us that there are in fact extant accounts of the Exodus that present it as the justified expulsion of troublemakers or diseased people[19]. One of these sources, Manetho, says that he was drawing on ancient reports, suggesting

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18. *Things Hidden* 153-154.

19. Wolfgang Palaver, *Politik und Religion bei Thomas Hobbes: Eine Kritik aus der Sicht der Theorie Rene Girards* (Innsbrucker theologische Studien 33; Innsbruck-Wien: Tyrolia, 1991) 156-158; Josephus, *Contra Apionem*,1:26-31.

that the Egyptian form of the myth might be old. It is just as likely, however, that Manetho's and other similar accounts, recorded by Josephus from the Ptolemaic period, refer to later anti-Jewish retellings of the biblical story rather than to contemporaneous accounts of the Exodus from an Egyptian point of view. There is really no way of knowing for certain about such an original Egyptian version.

According to Girard, the fact that the Bible sides with the Hebrews shows its demythifying purpose, because it takes the side of the victims rather than the side of the persecutors. In order to make this claim he must posit the existence of an original myth of Egyptian rectitude which the Bible has demythified by siding with the victims rather than justifying the state. If we allow the possibility of an original myth of rectitude then this is a mixed text, in which sacred violence is only partially excluded[20]. The Bible has seen that the victims are innocent but it has taken over the mythic notion of the gods violently intervening to expel the trouble-makers, shifting the violence from the side of the Egyptian gods to the side of its own god. The status of the victims has been changed but not the nature of the divine. Now the god vindicates rather than expels the victims, nevertheless he remains the violent champion of the order of a community. On this premise the demythifying force of revelation is at work but has simply not gone far enough.

It is difficult to call such a maneuver a demythification in terms of the theory because the divine remains violent, and the violence of the Sacred is the heart of the theory. Furthermore, there are possibly two sets of victims behind the narrative, one Hebrew and one Egyptian, and so even the recognition of the expelled victims as innocent could be partisan. We must reckon with the possibility that a process which maintains the violence of the Sacred also misrepresents the victims as innocent when in fact they are not victims at all but merely using the mythic resources of the Sacred to wrest the category of victim for their own use. Their victimage is as much a myth as their god.

In the light of these possibilities, there are three possible interpretations:

i) either the Exodus narrative is simply a trans-mythification, or

ii) a demythified myth of Egyptian rectitude has been remythified into a myth of Israelite innocence,[21] or

iii) the Exodus narrative is a myth of innocence composed *de novo*, by which the real perpetrators of violence aggrandize themselves, attribute their vindication to god, and thus identify their own violence as divine and their group as sacred. In the first case, of transmythification, one group simply takes over the myth of another and changes the identities of the protagonists, making themselves the innocent victims and the others the villains. In the second case, of remythification, we have what amounts to the same thing, excepting that the process has gone through a stage of demythification, which has then been overcome by myth

20. Palaver, *(Politik und Religion* 156 n 54) calls it *'ein Mischtext,'* and Girard *(Things Hidden* 154) says, 'I believe we are dealing with mythic forms that have been subverted but still retain many of the characteristics of myth.'

21. cf. Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), who argues that the gospel of Mark is such a myth, designed to blame the Jews for the death of Jesus and thus put the Christians in the role of victims so as to take the moral high ground in the rivalry with the synagogue.

again. In the third case, of simple mythification, the Bible creates a myth behind which lies the historical fact of a bandit gang that inflicted a defeat on an Egyptian posse and then used the mythic version of the event as part of their self-sacralization. There is a trace of this historical core in the account of Moses' murder of the Egyptian in Ex 2:11-15.

In all three cases the Bible is actively involved in the myth-creating process. According to our theory there are real victims behind every myth, and we are not disappointed in this case. There are real victims behind the narrative, but we cannot tell whether they were Egyptian or Hebrew, or both, and there is really no way to tell. One might tilt in favour of the Bible's claim that they were Hebrew, in view of the other evidence of its concern for real victims, and its success elsewhere at unmasking mythology, and so conclude that the victims were Hebrew. Furthermore, because re-mythification differs from mythification, in that the latter is generated directly by the Sacred whereas the former is an attempt to restore the *status quo ante* after a break has occurred in the sacred order, the trace of the break might remain visible through the restoration. Since the Exodus narrative displays the signs of struggle, being a hybrid with innocent victims and a violent god, we might suggest that it is a case of remythification and not a simple mythification; but we have already seen that it could be taken not only as a hybrid but also as a pure myth in which the claim to be victims is disingenuous. If one were to tilt in favour of the Bible, however, the process at work would be type ii) above, but one cannot be certain, and so we are left with the three possibilities. In any case such a tilt would not alter the fact that the energy that drives the mythic cover-up of violence is constitutively operative in all three cases, and thus in one of the pivotal narratives of the Bible.

4. The Cross as a Hermeneutical Principle:

This reading raises the question of the effect of Girard's theory on biblical interpretation. Girard himself tries to defend the non-mythic nature of most of the Bible, being careful to avoid the heresy of Marcion. He allows that the Bible is a mixed text in which myth and gospel are intermingled, but the force of revelation is everywhere at work pushing back the veil of myth. The Bible only demythifys, it does not mythify or remythify, and whatever of myth remains in the Bible is an error of omission not of commission. In general, he wishes to save as much of the text as he can.

Girard regards the passion narratives as the clearest manifestations of biblical demythifying, in the sense of disclosing victimage and siding with the victim. If we take this point with radical seriousness, and use the passion as a lens through which to read the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, we must allow that there are occasions when the Bible itself falls below the level of its own best insight, and also accept that Israel and the New Testament communities sometimes did not only fail to live up to the revelation that unfolds through them, but also actively opposed it. The hermeneutic of the Cross enables us to see a mythic force within the Bible itself and to read the biblical revelation as a dialectic of myth and gospel. It is not merely the case that the revelation through Israel and the Christians pushes back an inert veil of myth but rather that within the revelation-bearing people there is a struggle going on between the gospel and the Sacred, between the forces of demythification, mythification, and remythification.

The most telling fact in favor of this method of interpretation is that in the Exodus story god intervenes with great violence to vindicate a chosen people in their hour of need, while in the gospels Jesus goes to violent death unrelieved. If we read the Exodus narrative in the light of the Cross we must take into account the fact that at the Cross God did not intervene to save his son. On this reading we have the telling juxtaposition of Israel backed against the sea and god intervening with overwhelming violence to save him, with Jesus backed onto the Cross and god holding off. At the Cross god suffers rather than inflicts violence. The Cross discloses a god who suffers violence, and the Exodus discloses the divine as violent and chauvinistic. We must choose either the god of Exodus or the god of the Cross. For myself, I choose the latter, and take it as a canon within the canon, a fulfillment of the Bible's message that enables me to re-read all that has gone before and understand it at last.

> In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he has appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (Heb 1:1).

The death of Christ is, therefore, indeed the end of the Sacred[22], and if it is the end of the Sacred it is the end of the idea of a sacred people whose violence against other groups is warranted by their special status. On the Cross died not only the god of power and might, the Lord of the armies of Israel, but also the notion of an elect people. The focus of election narrowed to one man, and then he was murdered; election died with him. Since then all the human race is elect, or no one is, which amounts to the same thing. When the gentile Pilate cried 'Behold the man!' (John 19:5) he spoke the Bible's disclosure of our common humanity, beyond the murderous divisions of ethnicity become exclusive and self-righteous. The end of ethnic exclusionism is the heart of the gospel message, and it must be taken with radical seriousness if the gospel is to play its proper saving role against the ethnic violence and revived chauvinism of our time.

This is the central conviction of the Apostle Paul. When in Gal 2:19 he says that he died to the law through the law, and was crucified with Christ, he is telling us that the form of the Jewish religion to which he had subscribed brought him to the point where he could no longer accept its claims. In the context, which is the argument with Peter and Barnabas about the exclusion of the gentiles in Antioch, Paul's statement means that the fact that the Jewish way of life, for which the term 'law' is a synechdoche, excludes non-Jews, shows it to be a structure of sacred violence. Paul knew this at first hand because his service of that law had made him a persecutor. 'Through the law I died to the law,' means 'when I realized what the law had made me, I rejected its claims upon me,' and 'I was crucified with Christ' means 'I identified with the victims.' Paul changed sides from the victimizers to the victim, from the Jewish community, in its Jewish and Christian forms, to the community of Christ, which is the whole human race. Paul's conversion, therefore, takes the form of a rejection of the sacred community whose boundaries and fortunes are to be violently maintained, in favor of an inclusive community of love. The community of the crucified does not defend itself but gives itself away, lives by faith, and looks for a transcendental vindication in the Resurrection.

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22. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 231.

The Cross, therefore, discloses the violence of the Sacred in all religion including the religion of the Old Testament, and the religion that Christianity has become in so many of its manifestations. This is not to say that the Old Testament is a text generated only by the Sacred, but merely to acknowledge that there are two forces at work, namely, violence and grace. In the Old Testament the prophetic tradition is a special instance of the generative power of the anti-sacral energy of grace, especially in its opposition to the cultus and its testimony to the religious marginality of the prophets, and it is to that tradition that I trace the biblical antecedents of Jesus and Paul[23]. The crucial distinction between Jesus and Paul, and the prophets, is in the conception of the divine judgement as non-violent in the sense that for the former god gives humanity up to the consequences of our own wrong actions rather than inflicting direct punishment.

5. Ethnic Violence and the Sacred.

The Exodus story is, therefore, a myth of ethnic propaganda, to be exposed by the Cross. The same sacral mechanism as generated it has also generated other such myths, as may be seen from a consideration of ethnic-nationalist myths in the modern period. There is no agreement in the literature about the role of ethnicity in nationalism, but that it does play a part is hard to deny[24]. Anthony Smith gives the most balanced account, holding that both the forces of industrialization and modernization on the one hand and ethnic self-identification and self-assertion on the other hand play a role in the development of nationalism. He approaches an understanding of ethnic ties '...by a symbolic perspective, one that seeks for clues to the nature and role of ethnicity in the 'myth-symbol complexes,' and the associated values and memories, which unite and divide populations, and which direct their attitudes and sentiments'[25]. This approach demands an understanding of the nature and function of myth in society, which Smith does not give. He is content to observe the historical fact that ethnic groups use myth to solidify the identity of the group, but does not ask why myth is effective for this purpose. Girard's theory can account for the generation and effectiveness of these myths.

Several of the central European ethnic myths identify the in-group as the people chosen by god or destiny, victimized by outsiders, but prevailing because of the virtue of the ancestors and the faithfulness of the god[26]. It is also well-known that a similar mythification of history was practised by Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa[27]. Although we have not analyzed a large enough

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23. See my *The Divine Passion* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1988).

24. Anthony D Smith, *Ethnic Origins;* John A Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism.* For a contrasting point of view see, Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism.* Gellner downplays the role of ethnicity in the origins and structure of nationalism, preferring to see it as the result of the transition from agrarian to industrial society and the resulting demands for unity in service of the industrial state.

25. Smith, *Ethnic Origins*, 211.

26. See especially, Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism.*

27. L Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985); J.A Loubser, *The Apartheid Bible: A Critical Review of Racial Theology in South Africa* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman 1987); RG Hamerton-Kelly, 'The Biblical Justification of Apartheid in Afrikaner Civil Religion,' in K Keulman ed. *Critical Moments in Religious*

sample of these myths to be sure, it does seem as if there is a common structure to the myths of ethnic self-justification, which corresponds to the sociological commonplace of the in-group/out-group dichotomy. The Girardian theory can tell us the genesis of this dichotomy and of its attendant myths.

The structure of these myths is the same as the structure of the Exodus story, which functions as the *mythomoteur*[28] of Israelite self-understanding in the J-E-D sources of the Pentateuch, in the same way as the later myths do for their groups.

There is, furthermore, *prima facie* evidence to suggest that the biblical narrative of the Exodus and the chosen people has been a powerful hermeneutical influence on the development of ethnic identity in the age of nationalism, not least amongst the Afrikaners in South Africa. The story has functioned as a hermeneutical lens through which to view the experience of the group and to give that experience time-transcending meaning. In this function it has been a confirming myth, enabling groups to identify the myths generated by the Sacred in their midst as sanctioned by the Bible.

We might call such myths, the myths of ethnic self-justification, and, taking the Exodus story as a paradigm, might summarize their message as follows:

i) the group has been chosen by the god and is therefore different from all other groups;

ii) this difference is to be maintained because the god wills it, and if it is not maintained the group will not be able to perform the function for which the god chose it[29];

iii) anyone who threatens the life and integrity of the group threatens the will of the god, and so is an enemy not simply of the group but of the god;

iv) such enemies are to be destroyed without pity, and in doing this the group has the assistance, usually miraculous, of the god[30];

v) the group is innocent of all malice in this; indeed, it is often portrayed merely as a victim that is vindicated by the divine, as in the Exodus narrative;

vi) this portrayal of the group as a victim has the further advantage of evoking resentment by means of the memory of

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History (Macon: Mercer University, 1992, forhtcoming); DJ Bosch, 'Afrikaner Civil Religion and the Current South African Crisis' *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 7/1 (1986) 1-14.

28. Smith uses this term to describe the dominant myth in the self-identification of an ethnic group.

29. John W Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) is a good presentation of these first two elements in the self-presentation of both the Anglo-American and the Japanese sides in WW2.

30. On the pitilessness of the divine in the Bible see, Schwager, *Must there be Scapegoats?* 59-60; cf 'I will punish what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass' (1 Sam 15:2-3).

victimage, of the wound once inflicted by the traditional enemy[31].

6. Application to the analysis of intergroup ethnic violence:

Having applied the theory to expose a myth of sacred violence in the Bible, we can use it to expose this myth in culture, taking a cue from the Bible as read through the Cross. We cannot go into detail, but only list some ways of proceeding.

a) Listen for the mythological elements in the justification given for violence, especially the invocation of the divine sanction.

b) Watch for the use of scapegoats by the group to solidify its own unity.

c) Watch for self-scapegoating, the identification of the self as a victim and therefore entitled to the moral high ground, which on our theory is simply the sacred precinct.

d) Watch for mimetic contagion in the realm of ethnic chauvinism. The theme of chosenness is well-known in Afrikaner nationalism, and so there is a ***prima facie*** probability that some forms of African nationalism, like Pan Africanism, are mimetically shaped by it.

e) Read the Bible in the way we have suggested, as a dialectic of violence and grace, of the Sacred and the gospel, and let its message deconstruct all claims that include less than the whole human race in their scope.

f) By including the whole human race, including oneself, in all accusations and praise one undercuts the drive to ideology. Ideology is in fact the mythology of sacred violence in the service of the persecuting group.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to affirm the revelatory function of the Bible as a whole, and to dissociate myself from any Marcionite views. The revelation of the divine takes place throughout the Bible, but not uniformly nor univocally. There is a dialectic of grace and sin in the process of revelation because the human authors of the Bible are not relieved of their humanity when they write. Sometimes they fall below their own best insights, sometimes they actively resist them, most of the time, however, they record them faithfully for us to see and heed. This is specially true in the case of the passion narratives and Paul's theology of the Cross. Therefore, the Cross is the center of the canon within the canon, which identifies the divine revelation at the points of conflict

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31. An image used to great effect by Totius (JD du Toit) in the poem, *Vergewe en Vergeet,* based on Deuteronomy 4:9, in *Groot Verseboek* (DJ Opperman, ed; Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1983) 45-47. He uses the image of the injured branch, drawn from Schiller. On the 'wound' in the aetiology of nationalism see, Isaiah Berlin, 'The Bent Twig, On the Rise of Nationalism' in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1991) 238-261. The reference to Schiller in on p.246.

amongst the traditions within the Bible as well as in the substance of the traditions themselves. Reading the Bible in this way we can avoid making an ideology of revelation, and avoid making god the flag bearer of our own group.