

# Violence a Matter of Religion?

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## I

To speak of a connection or at least imply a connection between religion and violence has become commonplace in our time. Our short-term memory has already blocked out the fact that the greatest atrocities in history occurred in the twentieth century and that they were not committed in the name of any of the major religions but in the name of political ideologies, such as National Socialism and Marxism. Even if one were to make the case that there is such a phenomenon as “political religion”, as Eric Voegelin had done in 1938 in a small volume under that title and as is occasionally reaffirmed by contemporary students of modern political movements, the equation between what is commonly understood as “religion” and “political religion” has too many variables to be of much theoretical use. On the other hand, there is the collective memory of violence committed in the name of so-called “religions,” such as Christianity and Islam, most vividly represented in the expansion of Islamic civilization in the first centuries following Mohammed’s death, the militarization of Christianity known as the Crusades, and more recently the religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century that resulted early on in the three prevailing symbolisms that dominate modernity. These are a) Bodin’s mystical understanding of religious toleration, b) Hobbes’ Leviathan that puts an end to the demonic violence of war of all against all, and c) the long decline of European spirituality, first within the confines of the state churches established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and later in the European nation state commonly known as “secularization” with its emancipatory rhetoric that only too often

hides spiritual indifference; d) a fourth variant occurred in North America and especially the United States where “freedom of religion” became the symbol of the constitutional non-interference of the state in religious matters, but where Christianity continues to be a living force in public life until this day. Viewed in the context of post-reformation Western history religion can be characterized in the way Jürgen Gebhardt recently suggested: “Formal amorph, inhaltlich von der christentumsgeschichtlichen Überlieferung bestimmt, wurde Religion zu jener Universalkategorie, die einerseits erst die Konzeptionalisierung zentraler empirischer Sachverhalte des Menschlichen und seiner Ordnung definierte, andererseits aber die hier explizierten Ordnungs- und Sinngehalte unter den Vorbehalt des letztlich Irrealen stellt.”<sup>1</sup> In summary, when we speak today of religion and violence, we do so within a context that is the result of four centuries of attempts to tame the religious politically and to put it into an imaginary museum where the spiritual symbols of our civilization languish together with those of other cultures and civilizations.

Over forty years ago the eminent scholar of comparative religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith concluded a small book entitled *The Meaning and End of Religion*<sup>2</sup> by advocating the term “religion” be dropped, “partly because of its distracting ambiguity, partly because most of its traditional meanings are, on scrutiny, illegitimate.”<sup>3</sup> Smith even ventured so far as to predict that the term would disappear “from serious writing and careful speech” within twenty-five years from his writing. Forty-three years later we know better: the term is being used even more frequently than decades ago, and as far as “serious writing and careful speech” are concerned, the situation has not changed significantly since the 1960s. On the other hand, Smith argued that the adjective “religious” might be worth retaining, even if the noun were to be rejected, because, as he wrote, “living religiously is an attribute of persons. The attribute arises not because those persons participate in some entity called *religion*, but because they participate in what I have called transcendence.”<sup>4</sup>

It can hardly be a coincidence that René Girard, a thinker fundamentally engaged in the science of *la condition humaine* has chosen the term “religieux” in the title of his address to this conference. It was Girard who formulated the problem with polemic succinctness when he wrote: “Those who discuss religions give the impression of taking them very seriously, but in reality they don’t attach the least importance to them. They view religions, all the religions, as completely mythical, but each in its own fashion. They praise them all in the same spirit we all praise kindergartner’s ‘paintings,’ which are all masterpieces. The upshot of this attitude is that we are all free to buy what pleases us in the supermarket of religions, or better still to abstain from buying anything.”<sup>5</sup> One is tempted to add: and let us not forget to look at the expiration date!

Now, Girard’s book appeared in France in 1999 and in American bookstores only months before the events of September 11. Differences between religions had taken on a new meaning and President Bush could revive the old American battle word “crusade,” while the so-called Islamic fundamentalists have taken to calling the coalition forces “crusaders.” The term “religion” appears to be alive and well, and inter-faith dialogue, a movement that had begun to gain ground in the waning decades of the old millennium, is struggling in a time of literalist

readings of the holy books, called either Christian or Islamic fundamentalism. We have entered the post-secular society, to speak with Jürgen Habermas, something that is corroborated in titles such as *The Desecularization of the World*<sup>6</sup> and *Sacred and Secular*<sup>7</sup>. The conclusion of reputable sociologists of religion is that we have broken a two hundred year trend. In Peter Berger's words: "The world today is massively religious, is *anything but* the secularized world that had been predicted (whether joyfully or despondently) by so many analysts of modernity."<sup>8</sup> Yet Berger has to concede that there are two exceptions to his proposition, one being Western Europe, the other "an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences."<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the resurgence of fundamentalist movements and the decline of mainline religions are noted in more recent studies<sup>10</sup>, but none of the so-called empirical studies of religion shed any light on the question how these perceived trends reflect what people in different cultures and societies across the globe believe to be the truth of their lives and why they believe what they do.

Sociologists, regardless of their personal attitudes, treat religion as a social phenomenon, rather than approaching the subject from a "religious" position or, more precisely, from an understanding of human existence as open to the transcendent nature of their questions. It is again Girard who confronts us with a "religious" view of the situation I have just described when he writes: "The word of the Gospel is unique in really problematizing human violence. All other sources on human kind resolve the question of violence before it is even asked. Either the violence is considered divine (myths), or it is attributed to human nature (biology), or it is restricted to certain people or types of persons only (who then make excellent scapegoats), and these are ideologies. Or yet again violence is held to be too accidental and exceptional for human knowledge to consider. This last position is our good old philosophy of Enlightenment."<sup>11</sup> The difference between the predominant attitude in the field of sociology of religion and Girard's linking religion and violence in this passage becomes immediately clear when it is understood that a modern sociologist, whatever his religious affiliation, or lack thereof, are, tends to regard religion from a Western point of view, much as it appears in Gebhardt's formulation quoted earlier. "Religion" or the "religious" must be treated as phenomena, because they have been relegated to the domain of the "irrational" since the end of the Enlightenment and, therefore, cannot enter the scientific discourse other than as objects of investigation. They are strictly to be treated as "phenomena" and thus belong to the realms of the phenomena that can be explored by science. This problem has long been recognized as one of the major problems arising already at the beginning of modernity, as Eric Voegelin discussed at some length in his *History of Political Ideas*. In the section entitled "Phenomenalism" with which he introduces his chapter on Schelling. "Phenomenalism," in Voegelin's discussion of modernity is a heuristic concept denoting "the preoccupation of man with the phenomenal aspects of the world, as they appear in science, and the atrophy of the awareness of the substantiality of man and the universe."<sup>12</sup> Let me, therefore, suggest the adjective "non-phenomenalistic" here in an attempt to characterize Girard's work on mimetic violence, the scapegoat, and the Gospel. I do so to distinguish it from other studies on religion

and violence, however sophisticated they may be, and to indicate that I see his work primarily as an attempt to restore the philosophical science of the religious in reality, in contrast to a phenomenal science of the role of violence in what is commonly referred to as “religion.” This aspect of Girard’s work makes it not necessarily difficult to understand, but challenges the majority of contemporary approaches to the issue of violence in the religious context, be they psychological, sociological, or political. In this connection, it is no accident that Voegelin developed the term “phenomenalism” on the occasion of discussing the philosophy of Schelling, which he saw as the last serious, if flawed, philosophical attempt to rescue the meaning of religiosity from the morass of sentimentalism into which it had fallen in the European middle class during the height of the Enlightenment, an effort continued by Kierkegaard and completed by Nietzsche’s murder of the Christian God.

But let us return to Girard’s conclusion that the Gospel succeeds in “really problematizing human violence,” and that all other explanations are *per se* reductionist, regardless whether they see violence as divine, biological, exceptional, or accidental. My point is that Girard refuses to look at violence as a phenomenon. He sees in it the very essence of human nature, a nature based on mimesis, on the desire to imitate what is worth imitating, for what is worth imitating is also desired by others. Girard has increasingly come to see this mimetic rivalry as more than a mere anthropological principle and has come to view it on a cosmic plane as a rivalry between Satan and God. Thus, he sees a way out of the vicious circle of violence, the *Teufelskreis* in German, once the devil actually has been identified as God’s mimetic rival. Violence, if I understand Girard correctly, is neither God’s work (Girard explicitly rejects the idea of the Homeric gods inducing violence among men), nor man’s work, nor nature’s work. It is the result of man’s misguided mimetic desire. Girard’s theory of violence, thus, is neither a theology of violence nor an anthropology of violence, but a theanthropological theory based on a profound understanding of Greek and biblical myth, as well as its modern literary variants, and as such it continues the tradition of Schelling, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, as well as Freud, in challenging the verities of the Enlightenment that I would call the theology of the *amor sui*, or the *amour propre*, if you wish. Yet, unlike Nietzsche and Freud, Girard takes the reality of the divine seriously and is not afraid of stating that the goodness of God might in fact call for an antagonistic force greater than fallible man, that is, a radically evil force, Satan. In his most recent full-length study of the problem, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard makes a persuasive argument why our modern Christian culture with its public abhorrence of violence and its reverence for victims is only the most recent phase in this battle between Good and Evil, waged on the battlefield of humanity. While I hardly suspect Girard of Manichaeism, given his strong insistence on our metaphysical freedom and his carefully wrought argument regarding the passage in Mark 8:33, where Jesus rebukes Peter for his questioning Jesus’ prediction of his suffering and death, I would argue that even this persuasive explanation of the reality of collective and individual violence must ultimately be seen in terms of the history of order. In other words, Girard may well have a most profound understanding of the nature of violence as a philosophical problem, but the historical dimension of the anthropological-cosmic drama of the “mimetic complex” requires some elaboration in what Eric Voegelin has called the “Ecumenic Age.”

For a number of years I have been concerned with the question of human violence, beginning with conversations between the late Dante Germino and myself, about what we then called “Gnostic Violence.” Germino, as did more recently Barry Cooper in his *New Political Religions* (2004), questioned the applicability of Hannah Arendt’s understanding of violence as a political instrument, a pragmatic mode of action to the forms of religiously inspired violence and terror that obviously has been on our minds over the past decade and a half. While Germino spoke of “expressive violence” to denote the kind of violence that becomes an end in itself,<sup>13</sup> Cooper prefers the term “magic” violence, because, as he writes, “it [violence] is a magic instrument capable of transfiguring reality”<sup>14</sup>. Not being an unadulterated political theorist like my two friends, I have been sitting on the fence regarding the proper terminology for non-instrumental violence, and I have done so mainly because of Girard’s theory of mimetic violence, which, in my opinion, brings together instrumental, expressive, and magical violence. Let me explain: If mimetic desire, or “drive”, as Girard has called it more recently<sup>15</sup>, is a basic part of human nature, the ensuing acts of violence cannot be neatly compartmentalized into this or that kind of violence. Violence partakes of all levels of human nature; it spans the ontological range of human nature from the vegetative and animal levels to the intellectual and spiritual levels. This was my argument, if presented in a still sketchy manner, in an article I wrote in 2002 under the title “Die Sprachen der Gewalt” and in which I argued, calling on Schelling, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Kafka, that violence is a quasi “inalienable” aspect of human existence, precisely because of what Schelling calls “das Böse” als “das reinste Geistige” that is always at war with Being, since it is part of the ground of being before God.<sup>16</sup> Thus, God, according to Schelling, is by virtue of the fact that He is more than Being, a suffering God. In Schelling’s admittedly Romantic philosophy of Being and Becoming, sentences like these become possible: “Das Sein wird sich nur im Werden empfindlich (sensitive)...Ohne den Begriff eines menschlich leidenden Gottes, der allen Mysterien und geistigen Religionen der Vorzeit gemein ist, bleibt die ganze Geschichte unbegreiflich.”<sup>17</sup>

The language of Schelling is not the language of Girard, and it is also not the language of the sociology of religion. Yet, there is a common reality both languages express, and that is the reality of violence and suffering. Schelling’s ontological language of theogony locates the origin of violence in the pre-divine Ground of Being, whereas Girard begins in the middle of the ontological story, man in search of the origin of his mimetic desire. The story is not finished yet, and the reason for this is history. When Schelling speaks about history he means the history of the suffering God. When Girard speaks about the Passion in the context of the Gospel, he actually speaks about history, although not precisely in the sense of Voegelin’s order of history. The apparent contradiction between the two stories becomes more accessible to our understanding, once we take history seriously and look for the manifestations of violence not in the type-concepts of theogony or anthropology, but in the historical interpretations of this process of active and passive violence. When we do that, we notice that violence is above all a communicative act – someone has to cast the first stone! For what

reason? In order to change reality through an assertive act of magic, as Voegelin thought, with regard to modern systems of perfection? Is there a deeply seated human grievance against creation? All of our systems of justice center around the question: who cast the first stone? Was it God? Was it Cain or Abel? In other words: where is the beginning of violence? What was the founding murder? This is not a sociological, not a political question, not even a theological question. It is a philosophical question, to which there can only be a philosophical answer, but one that cannot be “rational” in the narrow sense because it asks the question of the Beginning. Once this question is asked, it necessarily implies the question of the Why of violence. I see the history of this question as the founding story of Judaism and Christianity, and, by virtue of association, the founding story of Islam. In answer to the question, it is again Girard who gives a persuasive reading of the story of Cain and Abel where Yahweh protects Cain against those who would kill him to avenge Abel’s death by putting the mark on Cain, so that he cannot be killed. Yahweh himself would avenge Cain, avenging his death sevenfold, and the community reacts through Lamech by pronouncing the seventy-sevenfold retribution. The founding myth of Judeo-Christian civilization is the exponential increase of violence, a mimetic reenactment of Yahweh’s threat of retribution. The origin of civilization is divinely inspired violence, the “re-collective” act of remembering Yahweh’s threat of violence. This Yahweh was still close to what archaic societies knew as the murder of the divinity. Girard’s reference to Mircea Eliade’s term “creative murder” (*meurtre créateur*) aids us in understanding the meaning of the primordial biblical murder, according to John 8:44: “He [the devil] was a murderer from the beginning.”<sup>18</sup> As Eliade himself states: “The murdered divinity is *never* forgotten, though men may forget one or another detail of his myth. It is the less possible to forget him because it is primarily after his death that he becomes indispensable to mankind”<sup>19</sup>.

Based on this reading of the story of Cain, I would like to formulate my thesis regarding the relation between religion and violence as follows: Yahweh provokes Cain into murdering Abel, because he does not accept Cain’s unbloody sacrifice, whereas he does accept Abel’s blood sacrifice. Does this mean that God wants blood, or does it mean that he will not accept any sacrifice from Cain, because Cain is a potential murderer? Let us assume that God, as he later does with Job, pushes Cain to his limits, and Cain cracks. After Cain has committed the murder, he should be brought to justice, but there is no system of justice other than revenge. Again God intercedes and establishes his own system of justice that is meant to prohibit revenge killing by threatening sevenfold divine revenge against any potential killer of Cain. The “Cain’s mark” is the “sign” of Cain’s deed, but it is also the sign of his inviolability. In the fourth generation, the original Cain’s mark has just become Cain’s name, and Lamech, the representative of the descendants of Cain, now uses Yahweh’s threat against those who would kill him to avenge his violence against others, increasing it by a factor of eleven. If this proliferation of violence were to go unchecked, the further descendants of Cain would soon become a killer army. The story ends here, its outcome is left open, but everyone knows its beginning. God may not want blood, but he also does nothing to prevent the bloodshed that he provoked in the heart of Cain. The prevention of further violence is at this stage the threat of greater violence. This early model of

the escalation of violence did not work, in fact, it must have been so unsatisfactory that it required a different remedy. The question will have to be asked what Cain's and Abel's stories signified, what their meaning could have been, if they in fact not only did not prevent violence but originated it. How can we move God to change his demands on us? That is the question that is answered in time with the notion of a God more benevolent than was the Yahweh who spoke to Cain.

But before we get to this point, a few remarks are in order. The account of original violence given in Genesis deliberately – as I believe – does not ask the question of the Why of violence. Yet it clearly points to the brotherly rivalry. Who served God better – Cain or Abel? Why was Cain's offering rejected? The biblical account suggests that perhaps Cain's offering was not made in the spirit of honesty, that Cain had it in his mind to outdo his brother, a perfect case of mimetic rivalry. Wisely, the authors refrained from giving a definitive answer. Is the murder of the divinity that preceded their story an earlier case of mimetic rivalry?

In lieu of speculating on the origin of the primeval murder, the authors of Genesis, unlike Freud in his *Moses and Monotheism* told a very different story, in fact, a set of stories that speaks of the experience of man as an exodus from violence; admittedly, not a one time event, but rather a process that becomes paradigmatic for the future of the religious retreat from violence, as the authors of the story of Abraham describe it. Abraham's covenant with God is the acknowledgement that the cycle of violence can be broken if man imaginatively responds to God's call. No one perhaps has told this imaginative response better than Thomas Mann in the chapter "How Abraham Discovered God" in volume II of *Joseph and His Brothers, Young Joseph*. In Mann's ironic story, Abraham understands that his human dignity is tied to the dignity of the "Highest," and he sets out to find out for himself what this "Highest" is. He finds it in the largeness of his own soul, without which he would not have been able to find God's qualities, and yet, as the narrator does not fail to point out, this God, close as he is to Abraham, his "I" still remains outside Abraham's "I." At the end of the chapter, God calls out, to the secret annoyance of the angels: "It is incredible how well this lump of earth has come to know me. Am I not beginning to make a name for myself through him? Truly, I will anoint him." Written at a time when the "political religion" of National Socialism was beginning to formulate its gospel of violence, Mann's Abraham becomes one of the heroes of the counter-myth to the Nazi myth, not in a utopian denial of evil and violence but through putting them in their place. Thomas Mann's narrative of Abraham's discovery of God bears definite similarities to the much younger Apocalypse of Abraham, but that need not concern us here, since both texts attempt to describe what Voegelin typically calls a "leap in being." As such, Abraham's discovery of transcendence brings the mimetic rivalry of the gods to an end in the soul and mind of man, but even this differentiation of reality does not bring an end to violence. Voegelin has discussed this event that is the precondition for Abraham's covenant with God as the beginning of an order that in the future will be the order of "a social body in history."

In the context of this paper I want to be careful not to lapse into the language of theology. At the same time, we must not overlook the possibility that the cycle of violence and surrogate victimization can be broken, once the cosmological order in which it had played such a highly symbolic role gives way to the new forms

of spirituality that arose during the *Ecumenic Age*, to use Voegelin's term here as the technical term for the historical processes that mark the first millennium BC and the first centuries of our era. To stay with the example of Abraham's covenant with God and the hope it offers, not for the abolishment of violence, but for an exodus into the future of Israel as the people under God, a universal symbol is created here that will be expanded into the story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt. Biblical scholarship has shown the process of this exodus as a spiritual exodus constantly threatened by the struggles that mark the breakdown of the cosmological empires and shape the first millennium BC Voegelin has described the second exodus, the one led by Moses, culminating in the conquest of Canaan, as an event in pragmatic history that was not even important enough "to be registered in Egyptian records"<sup>20</sup>. And yet, in spiritual terms, this covenant became of monumental importance in shaping the people of Israel as the people under God whose memory of the covenant "transfigured the pragmatic event into a drama of the soul and the acts of the drama into symbols of divine liberation"<sup>21</sup>. The drama still informs a large part of our thinking about religion, even if the drama originally was not a "religion," but the discovery of historical existence beyond history, and as such a unique event in history. The story of Israel becomes in the process the story of historical violence on an increasingly large scale: violence perpetrated in the name of God, and violence suffered in the name of God. It becomes, for all times, the paradigmatic story of the emergence of meaningful order and the recession from and return to such meaningful order as has been perceived in the symbol of the covenant with God.

Again, the description of this process of symbolization in history must use symbols generally understood as theological, but here these symbols denote first of all a process that we must be aware of, if we want to understand its millennial reemergence in the form of what we now call "religion." The understanding of this process is of great importance to our question here: what does religion have to do with violence?

Let me review what we have so far mentioned as relations between the religious and violence, seen from an anthropological and philosophical point: There is first of all Girard's theory of sacrifice and the surrogate victim that is meant to bring the community torn by mimetic violence together. There is, secondly, the ongoing mimetic violence and its symbolization as Satan, the force that prevents the community from abandoning violence. Then, there are the symbolisms of evil and the destructive, negating forces that Schelling identified as "the most purely spiritual" and violence at the ground of Being before the suffering God. The mythical symbols for this process are the "creative murder," the primeval murder of the divinity and on the set of stories that accompany it, the biblical Ur-violence of Cain and Yahweh. Always, the violent beginning is remembered as something that must be overcome, but cannot be overcome –except symbolically, as the covenant of God with Abraham and later with Moses and the people of Israel. The vision of an order in which violence would not have to be ritually exorcised through the sacrifice of a surrogate victim remains the hope of humanity, but violence continues to shape pragmatic history as much as the attempts to overcome violence. The symbolic exodus from pragmatic history can become a source of violent disorder itself, as Voegelin had argued in *The Ecumenic Age*, thus showing that the precarious order of the covenant is anything but a permanent remedy against violence.



At the heart of this problem is a question: How could Israel's experience of the covenant and its history "as the present under God," as Voegelin calls it in *Israel and Revelation*, become a religion that was characterized by the tension of universality and intolerance? How, in other words, could the experiences of Abraham and Moses and their covenants with Yahweh become a set of dogmatic truths jealously protected against external contamination at the same time at which prophets like Jeremiah call the people to reform and return to the original experience? The individual parts of this historic puzzle are far too many to be assembled here for us to see just how vulnerable the idea of the covenant always was, positioned in the middle of the cultures of the ancient Near East with their Pantheon of gods that required recognition and a certain intellectual diplomacy, so as not to offend good neighborly relations? In drawing on Voegelin's account of this history, one is struck by the intensity with which this tension is expressed in the remembrance of Moses who, in Exodus, appears as the human being who is called by Yahweh to lead his people out of Egypt, while in Deuteronomy he is the stern lawgiver who tells his people: "When Yahweh your God has led you into the land you are entering to make your own, many nations will fall before you. Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than yourselves. Yahweh your God will deliver them to you and you will conquer them. You must lay them under ban. You must make no covenant with them nor show them any pity. You must not marry with them: you must not give a daughter of yours to a son of theirs, nor take a daughter of theirs for a son of yours, for this would turn away your son from following me to serving other gods and the anger of Yahweh would blaze out against you and soon destroy you. Instead, deal with them like this: tear down their altars, smash their standing stones, cut down their sacred poles and set fire to their idols. For you are the people consecrated to Yahweh your God; it is you that Yahweh our God has chosen to be his very own people out of all the peoples of the earth." (Deut. 7, 1-6)

The passage speaks to us today across two and a half millennia. It does so, because in a very fundamental way we are the heirs to this moment in the history of the covenant. We must begin with a concrete society, though. Abraham participated in the first covenant; Moses became the executor of the second covenant. History in its pragmatic unfolding cares less about covenants and more about territory and power. With Deuteronomy, we are at a juncture in history, a thought that demands an understanding of history that goes beyond the pragmatic. It demands answers to questions such as: Why did the God of Abraham and the Moses of Exodus grow into the sectarian God of Moses, the lawgiver of the Josianic reform, or, as Eric Voegelin put it so poignantly, why did God, the author of a people, become the author of a book, i.e., Deuteronomy? As Voegelin writes in *Israel and Revelation*: "The Deuteronomic Torah stands on the borderline between the orders of Israel and of the Jewish community. On the one hand, a chapter of history had come to its end when the author of a people became the author of a book. On the other hand, the book unfolded a life of its own, when it motivated the post-exilic circles of traditions to organize the memories of Israel

into the Bible (*sepher*) with its main division into the Law (*torah*) and the Prophets (*nebi'im*) – a division that characteristically overlays and breaks the narrative as the symbol of Israel's existence in historical form"<sup>22</sup>. The broken narrative becomes the symbol, not only of Israel's existence but that of the Jewish people, and the rest of humanity.

As Voegelin points out, Deuteronomy is above all a war book spelling out what the people must do if the Kingdom of Judah is to assert itself in the middle of the imperial struggles between Assyria and Egypt, and it calls for a national resurgence in the face of Assyrian domination. In this sense, Deuteronomy is above all a document of political theology. "The wars of Israel in Deuteronomy," Voegelin writes, "are religious wars," only to continue: "The conception of war as an instrument for exterminating everyone in sight who does not believe in Yahweh is an innovation of Deuteronomy"<sup>23</sup>. The conclusion Voegelin draws from the rhetoric of Deuteronomy is that here "we are touching the genesis of 'religion,' defined as the transformation of existence in historical form into the secondary possession of a 'creed' concerning the relation between God and man. In the case of Deuteronomy, this first 'religion' in the history of mankind would have to be described as the Sinaitic revelation, mediated through Moses, when broken by the belligerence and civic virtue of a little men's patriotic movement"<sup>24</sup>. Voegelin's harsh judgment, which he himself tried to mitigate in a subsequent paragraph, is meant to be "realistic" about the chances of spiritual order for survival in the world of clashing forces. But Voegelin also makes clear the consequences of such a will of the spirit for survival when he concludes: "For its survival in the world, therefore, the order of the spirit has to rely on a fanatical belief in the symbols of the creed more often than on the *fides caritate formata* – though such reliance, if it becomes socially predominant, is apt to kill the order it is supposed to preserve"<sup>25</sup>. We touch here on a very troubling aspect of reality, no less troubling than the mimetic violence, which the covenants with God were meant to manage. For, undoubtedly, Deuteronomy was above all an attempt by a literate class of priests to rekindle the spirit of Yahweh's covenant with Moses. It was needed if the nation wanted to assert its identity in response to the decline of Assyrian hegemony. Here lie the roots of modern sectarian fundamentalist movements, as SN Eisenstadt notes in his study of modern fundamentalism.<sup>26</sup> In the historical situation of the seventh century, the "existential" experience of the God who led his people out of Egypt becomes the national creed, with all its strengths and weaknesses, the weakness being that the individual can now simply "believe" and obey the law, and does not have to experience the tension that makes the earlier account of Genesis and Exodus a perennially universal story. Voegelin, in this context uses the expression "the word of God that had been mummified in the sacred text," and he contrasts it to "the word of God that continued to be spoken through the mouth of the prophets"<sup>27</sup>.

Here we have finally reached the crucial point of the new religion: it is a religion of the Word, more specifically of the written Word. Voegelin goes so far as to claim that with its origin in Deuteronomy "the myth of the Word" begins to pervade "not only the Pentateuch but the whole body of literature eventually included in the rabbinical canon; and it imposed its form through canonization, also on Christian literature"<sup>28</sup>. What began as a protective device in the civiliza-

tional crisis of the eighth and seventh centuries becomes the word that lives on past Exile and Diaspora – that is its strength. But the word also can become an obstacle to the “free unfolding” of the spirit, as Voegelin puts it, as he lists all the limitations the word imposes on the spirit, when it becomes “something like a sacred incubus. Literalist interpretations of the myth lead to critical misunderstandings of reality and lay the groundwork for the dogmatic battles of millennia.

At the same time, the violence of the expansion of the cosmological empires creates a “disorder in the souls of the victims of such violence, a disorder that no empire of the cosmological type could repair,” and yet the Jewish community emerged victoriously from this struggle “for the bare survival of order in the soul of man,” and was able to continue in its own right and as “the matrix of Christianity”<sup>29</sup>.

The importance of this episode in the history of Israel and by implication in the history of Western humanity can hardly be overstated. The tone is set for responses to the ecumenic violence that defines pragmatic history for the next several hundred years and the search for an ecumenic response in the symbol of a universal mankind. The universal religions are born.

#### IV

What I have tried to illustrate with this digression into the story of the Pentateuch is that what started out as a flight from Girardian mimetic violence became a potential new source of violence when the one partner of the covenant became a people with a territory in which the written word of God not only was the internal law but also became the means of distinguishing God’s people from its enemies. The Jewish “religion,” while it was not directed against all other nations was now a political theology that enabled its priests to identify who would be an enemy and who would not, who would be a member of “Verus Israel” and who would be marked as apostate, estranged, and forgetful of the covenant. In the Second Temple period, religion had become the concern of the “Yahweh alone” movement and a matter of a dissident group that the put an “iron wall” around the identity and tradition of the pure, true Israel.<sup>30</sup> What Voegelin argued was that this development, whose sectarian nature he does not sufficiently acknowledge, proved to be the Achilles heel of the unique experience of Israelitic covenant and that the historical symbol of “Scripture” became the form in which the most important parts of this experience were transmitted throughout the past two and a half millennia. In other words, what began as the great promise of an answer to unmitigated violence could become a new source of violence, once the written word was canonized as the Bible and the covenant with God became, as it were, a written document that took the place of the experience of a historical tension between humanity in time and the eternal divine. If one is willing to follow Voegelin, especially into his later thinking about this problem in The Ecumenic Age, one has to come to the conclusion that there had to be better ways to deal with the imperial ecumenic violence between 500 BCE and Gelasian reformulation of the issue as the division between spiritual and temporal power. Unfortunately, in Voegelin’s view, the other great civilizing force of the time, Greek philosophy, was also deformed into a doctrinal symbolism, in Stoic philosophy.

And it was in this context that the Roman Cicero formulated the idea in *De natura deorum* that “the philosopher’s understanding of divine reality becomes *religion*, while the older myth is depreciated as *superstition*”<sup>31</sup>. But Cicero’s argument for religion did not originate in the same spiritual fervor that dominated an Abraham, a Moses, or the prophets. Instead, “[t]he false theology is not invalidated by the philosopher’s noetic experience, rather it is false, because if it were true, it would psychologically destroy the piety and religion on which the order of man’s existence in society depends”<sup>32</sup>. One cannot get farther away from the Jewish experience, even in its doctrinal form. The success of the Ciceronian topos *religion* through its adoption by the Church Fathers as the universalist answer to the Jewish “sect” has, however, been limited to the West, and that it was a rather ambiguous success becomes more evident by the day, when the “religion” Western intellectuals and public figures of all sorts attribute to Islamic, Buddhist, Hinduist, and other spiritual and cultural communities, including Christian Evangelicals, has become a social phenomenon that blows itself up in suicide attacks or tries to load up the US Supreme Court with pro-life Justices.

Jan Assmann, in *Die mosaische Unterscheidung* has reformulated this situation in an interesting way. Assmann’s first thesis is the connection between the monotheism of the Aton worship of Akhenaton and the discovery of the one God by Moses, a thesis that Voegelin anticipated when he addressed the issue in *Israel and Revelation*, speaking of *summodeism* rather than monotheism, a designation endorsed by Assmann in his postscript to the German translation of Part I of *Israel and Revelation*<sup>33</sup>. Voegelin’s dislike of terms like “polytheism” and “monotheism” as a “facile categorization”<sup>34</sup> is well known, because “the numbers are not important, but rather the consciousness of divine reality as intracosmic or transmundane”<sup>35</sup>.

While this is at the heart of my argument, I am not inclined to simply dismiss Assmann’s thesis as spurious, just because I do not appreciate his terminology. Assmann himself is aware of the secondary importance of the term “monotheism” when he emphasizes that the at the core of the Mosaic distinction lies the distinction between true and false religion, and that in Judaism the universality of the one God does not necessarily imply the universality of mankind. Instead, Assmann claims— I think correctly, as far as the later phases of Judaism are concerned: “The universalism that is inherent in monotheism, is placed into a messianic end of time; in the world, as it is, the Jews are the protectors of a truth that concerns all human beings, to be sure, but with which, before all others the Jews were entrusted, as an avant-garde.”<sup>36</sup> In Assmann’s distinction between the “cosmotheistic” “primary religions” and the “secondary religions” that are conceived as “counter-religions” to the primary religions, the element of hatred and violence that already existed in the primary religions is transformed into hatred “against pagans, heretics, idolaters, and their temples, rites, and gods”<sup>37</sup>. For the people of Israel the messianic postponement of universality allows for the understanding that “the goyim may worship whomever and however they wish,” “but Christianity and Islam did not recognize this boundary and for this very reason again and again became violent”<sup>38</sup>. What had begun as Abraham’s covenant and the first exodus increasingly became the domain of pneumatic representatives of the Word and apocalyptic prophets of the Kingdom of God, the Coming of the Messiah, The Second Coming of Christ, and the return of the Mahdi.

Where Voegelin sees the origin of pneumatic violence in the doctrinalization of the Word, since Deuteronomy, since Stoic philosophy, and the creation of Scripture, Assmann notes with approval that the “Selbstaussgrenzung” that is the faith of the Chosen People is far less violent than the Christian and Islamic “Fremdaussgrenzung” that results in missionary zeal and the order of submission. In this reading, tolerance and intolerance toward the faith of others become a question of compatibility and incompatibility, or, as Assmann calls it, “translatability”. The question why it would be more difficult for people who believe in one transcendent God to be incapable of translating their faith, is not seriously posed by Assmann, because, unlike Voegelin, he does not ask the question what really happens in what we still may call “religious experience”. Intolerance and the resulting violence here result from the simple distinction between “true” and “false religion,” which Assmann considers a “revolutionary innovation”<sup>39</sup>. I would call this distinction a secondary phenomenon, resulting from the original intensity of the spiritual experience of individuals and the fervor with which it is transmitted to the community. Here, the term “pneumatic” is a far more accurate designation of the “religious,” and such very real manifestations of pneumatic intensity in the denial of the order of being that Voegelin first noticed in Isaiah’s prophetic existence and for which he coined the term “metastatic faith,” or the apocalyptic expectations of a transformation of the world through divine intervention, or the Gnostic rejection of the order of being as fundamentally flawed in the divinity, or, finally, the retreat from both intracosmic and transcendent divinity in a conscious act of rebellion – all of these seem to me to have a greater explanatory value in the explanation of what we have come to call “religious violence” than the distinction between “cosmotheism” and “monotheism.”

Of course, the polemical terminologies are as old as the distinction between the people of Israel and the *goyim*, between Christians and pagans, Muslims and infidels. And, as Assmann correctly points out, the new experiences bring with them new constructions of identity and alterity. Who one is, is in fact defined by one’s spiritual constitution or the absence thereof. The Other does not just worship a different God or a different ideal; the Other is fundamentally different, as long as one stays on the level of the intranslatability of spiritual symbols. “The ‘pagan,’” Assmann observes, “is not simply ‘the Other’ but the product of a polemical construction”<sup>40</sup>. “Already in the Bible, there already exists a literary genre that casts a deliberately uncomprehending look at the religion of the Other and places it under the “verfremdende” (alienating) light of a satirical description, thus putting it up to ridicule: religious satire”<sup>41</sup>. Assmann cites as examples the description of “pagan” idolatry in Psalm 115, or Deutero-Isaiah’s mockery of idolaters in Is. 44. 9-19, to name only two examples. Religious satire does translate the Other into the code of one’s own religious and political culture in a polemical, yet non-violent way, and thus actually challenges the other to respond in kind. But as the events of February 2006 show, it is still possible to respond violently to religious satire, if the *ressentiment* is strong enough.

We have thus reached the point where we can address once more the original question of any inherent connection between religion and violence. Mimetic violence as described by René Girard continues to be a foundation of any discussion of violence that goes beyond the mere instrumental use of violence in the

realm of the political. Girard has stated his anthropological principle of violence nowhere more clearly than in the conclusion to *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* when he writes: "This dynamic concept of Satan enables the Gospels to articulate the founding paradox of archaic societies. They exist only by virtue of the sickness that should prevent their existence. In its acute crises the sickness of desire generates its own antidote, the violent and pacifying unanimity of the scapegoat. The pacifying effects of this violence continue in ritual systems that stabilize human communities. All this is epitomized in the statement "Satan expels Satan"<sup>42</sup>. However, this formulation ought not to be read as a literal theory of the origin of religion. But it does connect that "universal category" of religion with the sickness of mimetic desire that requires a remedy. Yet, while Girard emphatically denies that the sickness is ever cured in archaic societies, he also claims a special place for the Gospel in that it once and for all makes it clear to the attentive listener that it is impossible "to 'purge' or 'purify' communities of their violence. Satan cannot expel Satan"<sup>43</sup>. What the Gospel succeeds in showing, Girard argues, is that Satan is "a figure created by structures of mimetic violence"<sup>44</sup>. Far from disagreeing with Girard, I tried to show that the structures of mimetic violence early on led to Abraham's covenant with God, but only after Abraham had discovered God. The covenant remains one of the great symbols of the attempt to overcome violence. But when the covenant becomes a "religion," something that can be written down and set off against other "religions," it itself becomes the Satan that will not only not expel Satan, but increase his stature in the world. The experiences of transcendence that shape the order of history since the Ecumenic Age have occurred at moments of intense ecumenic violence. They have been the repeated moments where humanity gained an insight into the futility of trying to expel Satan with Satan. It is the recurrent forgetting of this insight that characterizes our global civilization long past its ecumenic origins.

- <sup>1</sup> Jürgen Gebhardt, 'Politik' und 'Religion', unpublished paper, 2005.
- <sup>2</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: The New American Library, 1962; 1963)
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- <sup>5</sup> René Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001) p. 103.
- <sup>6</sup> Peter L. Berger, ed, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington D.C and Grand Rapids, MI, 1999).
- <sup>7</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> Berger, p. 9.
- <sup>9</sup> Berger, p. 10.
- <sup>10</sup> Norris and Inglehart, p. 241.
- <sup>11</sup> Girard, p. 184.
- <sup>12</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Order and Last Orientation*, vol. 25 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt and Thomas A. Hollweck (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999) p. 178.
- <sup>13</sup> Meindert Fennema and Dante Germino, "Violence in Political Theory," in *The Virginia Papers on the Presidency* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), pp. 155-167.
- <sup>14</sup> Barry Cooper, *New Political Religions, or and Analysis of Modern Terrorism* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 25.
- <sup>15</sup> "A conversation with René Girard," in *The Girard Reader*, Ed. James G. Williams (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000) p. 268.
- <sup>16</sup> Thomas Hollweck, "Die Sprachen der Gewalt," in *Von himmlischer Ordnung und weltlichen Problemen*, Eds. Mir A. Ferdowsi, Dietmar Herz, and Marc Schattenmann (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003) p. 52.
- <sup>17</sup> F.W.J. Schelling, *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (Stuttgart: Reclam), p. 124.
- <sup>18</sup> *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 82 ff.
- <sup>19</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 98.
- <sup>20</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, CW 14 (Columbia and London, 2001), p. 152.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- <sup>22</sup> CW 14, 423.
- <sup>23</sup> CW 14, 426 f.
- <sup>24</sup> CW 14, 427.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> Cf S. N. Eisenstadt, *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution. The Jacobin Dimension of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially the sections "The monotheistic civilizations" and "Proto-fundamentalist movements in different Axial Civilizations."
- <sup>27</sup> CW 14, 417.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* This idea that was actually taken up again by Jan Assmann in a section of his *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003) entitled "The 'scriptural turn' – vom Kult zum Buch," where Assmann comes to the conclusion that "[d]er Schritt in die Religion der Transzendenz war ein Schritt aus der Welt – man möchte fast von einer Auswanderung, einem Exodus, sprechen – in die Schrift," p.150.
- <sup>29</sup> CW 14, 430.
- <sup>30</sup> I follow here Jan Assmann's discussion of "religion as resistance" in his *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1999), chapter 5 "Israel und die Erfindung der Religion."
- <sup>31</sup> CW 17, 92.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Jan Assmann, "Nachwort," in: Eric Voegelin, *Die kosmologischen Reiche des alten Orients – Mesopotamien und Ägypten*, Ed. Jan Assmann (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002), 219.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. CW 17, 118.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Jan Assmann, *Die mosaische Unterscheidung. Über den Preis des Monotheismus* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003), 30.

<sup>37</sup> Op. cit., 29.

<sup>38</sup> Op. cit., 31.

<sup>39</sup> Op. cit., 38.

<sup>40</sup> Op. cit., 39.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> *I Saw Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 182.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 192.