

29. Kundera, *The Curtain*, 655.
30. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
31. René Girard et al., *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).
32. Lawrence's paper is an excellent comparative account of our major figures, together with an acute appreciation and critique of Girard.
33. Compare the following from Mark Halperin and John F. Harris, *The Way to Win: Taking the White House in 2008* (New York: Random House, 2006; as reported in the *New York Times*, 3 November 2006, B35). Bush views himself as a "national clarifier." His theory of leadership is as follows: "A successful leader will stand forthrightly on one side of a grand argument. Then he or she will win that argument by sharpening the differences and rallying his most intense supporters to his side." This is politics not as the art of compromise but as the separation of friend and foe.
34. Rossbach, *Gnostic Wars*.
35. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 257–314.

The Evangelical Subversion of Myth

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In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud writes that long before he himself penetrated the secret of human origins, the Christian gospels had done so. "In the Christian doctrine," he says, "men were acknowledging in the most undisguised manner the guilty primeval deed."¹

Here as elsewhere, the apparently unbelievable assertion of *Totem and Taboo* contains a gigantic insight. What Freud says here is literally true, except of course for his psychoanalytical interpretation of the primordial murder. In order to show this truth, one must go, not surprisingly, to those texts in the gospels that have the most unpleasant connotations to our ears, those most strongly repressed, even by the Christians, who avoid them more and more. Even they do not look closely at these texts because if they did, they might have to agree, they fear, with those who see a spirit of hatred at work in the gospels, a vindictive streak even in many words attributed to Jesus himself. Of all these texts, the so-called "Curses against the Pharisees," in Matthew 23 and Luke 11, have perhaps the worst reputation. They seem to confirm the opinion that the mind behind Matthew 23:35–36 still believes in the primitive blood curse (Gen. 4:10–12):

On you will fall the guilt of all the innocent blood spilt on the ground,
from innocent Abel to Zechariah, son of Berachiah, whom you murdered

between the sanctuary and the altar. Believe me, this generation will bear the guilt of it all. (Matt. 23:35–36)

Abel is not a Jew. How could these lines be read in the context of the primitive blood curse of the Jews? To the ancient Jews, the Bible was more than a religious code and a history of national origins. It was the history of the entire human race, the sum total of all knowledge. The religious murders are limited neither to a single blood lineage nor even to a single religious tradition. After the well-known figure of Abel, who is the first murder victim in the Bible, a rather obscure figure is mentioned. Why? He is the last murder victim in the second book of Chronicles, which happens to be the last book of the Jewish Bible (2 Chron. 24:20–21).² Thus, the first and last victims in the Bible are mentioned. These two names obviously stand in lieu of a complete enumeration, which is impossible. There would simply be too many names. All the victims between the first and the last one are tacitly included.

This cannot fail to evoke the type of victimage I have been talking about, and the text of Luke gives us one more reason to believe in it.

If the word *beginning* (*arche*), which suggests the foundation of culture and is present in John (1:1), is absent from Matthew, it is present again or rather an even more significant word is present in the text of Luke, which runs almost parallel to the one of Matthew (Luke 11:49–51):

This generation will have to answer for the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation/beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah. (Luke 11:50)

The word that is translated by some as “beginning” and by others, better still, “as foundation,” is *katabole*. The Greek says *apo kataboles tou kosmou*. *Apo* suggests a generative relationship rather than a merely temporal one. *Katabole* means the ordering or reordering that terminates some kind of disruption, the climactic resolution of a crisis. There is a medical use of it analogous to the purgative *katharsis*, or paroxysmal fit (Plato, *Gorgias*, 519a). *Kosmos* means order. The Latin Vulgate translates *apo kataboles tou kosmou* by *a constitutione mundi*—“from [or since] the constitution of the world,” but still does not render the connotation of a paroxysmal process. In conjunction with murder, especially the type of murder we have at the beginning of the Bible, like the murder of Abel, the Greek expression *apo kataboles tou kosmou* cannot fail to evoke the dynamics of our myth and ritual. The tracing back of religious murders to Abel, the association of the first murder with the *kataboles tou*

kosmou, cannot suggest a merely chronological coincidence between the first murder and the foundation of the world. There is collusion between human culture and murder that goes back to the beginning of humanity and that, according to Jesus, continues down to his own time, and is still operative among the Pharisees.

Matthew 23:35–36 and Luke 11:49–51 are a revelation of the original murder.

Now let us read another curse that evokes the mechanism we have uncovered in the previous readings:

Woe unto you, lawyers and Pharisees. Hypocrites! You build up the tombs of the prophets and embellish the monuments of the saints, and you say, “If we had been alive in our fathers’ time, we should never have taken part with them in the murder of the prophets.” So you acknowledge that you are the sons of the men who killed the prophets. Go on then, finish off what your fathers began! (Matt. 23:29–32)

The Pharisees do not deny that the murders took place. Far from approving or ignoring the murders, they condemn them severely. They want to disassociate themselves from their murderous ancestors and religious forerunners. In the eyes of Jesus, however, they do not succeed; the religious behavior of the Pharisees paradoxically perpetuates the solidarity it denies, the solidarity with the murder of the prophets.

The murder of the prophets was a collective action and the arrogant denial of participation is also a collective action. “If we had been alive in our fathers’ time, we should never have taken part with them in the murder of the prophets” (Matt. 23:30). In other words, we should never have surrendered to the mimetic contagion of the collective victimage. The Pharisees reassure themselves that they are incapable of such a deed.

In order to demonstrate their noninvolvement in violence, their own intrinsic innocence, the sons condemn their fathers; the original murders had been committed with a similar intent. The murderers murdered their victims, we found, in order not to perceive their own violence; this is the real significance of the scapegoat effect, which projects the violence of the community onto the victim. The sons, therefore, do exactly the same things as their fathers; they condemn them as murderers in order to achieve the same purpose as the murderers themselves, in order to obfuscate their own violence. The condemnation constitutes an act of violence that repeats and reproduces every feature of the original murder, except for the physical death

of a victim. The sons have only shifted from one type of scapegoat to another. They are the spiritual murderers of their own murderous fathers and, as such, well worthy of these fathers from whom they think themselves separated by an abyss.

The continuity from generation to generation is insured, each time, by an effort to break with the past that always takes the form of an actual or symbolical murder of that past, of physical or spiritual victimage. Our hypothesis alone can make this "filiation" intelligible, because the original murder is already a means for the community to break with its own past violence, to forget the reality of that violence by thrusting its entire weight upon the collective victim. All later culture repeats the violent flight from violence; people repeat the violent burial of the truth that already characterizes even the most primitive forms of cultural foundation and elaboration. All human culture begins and continues with a violent burial of the truth.

In the case of the Pharisees, and Oedipus and his oracle, the victims seem to be vindicated, the murderers are condemned, the break with the violent seems complete; but this appearance is deceiving.

Past murders are denounced as the exclusive responsibility of the actual murderers, as something that is of no real concern to those who come after, to the pious Pharisees, except, of course, as a cause for self-congratulation. The old structure is reversed; the original murderers now occupy the place of the original victims and vice versa; the reversed structure serves the same purpose as the original one; it justifies the contemporaries by disengaging them falsely, because violently, from the violence of the past. The repudiation of the past is analogous to and continuous with the violence of the past.

Now I go to another text that has always appeared even more obscure, vindictive, and sinister perhaps than the ones already quoted, but it really means absolutely the same thing. It is John 8:43-44. The interlocutors inside the text are not designated as scribes or Pharisees but simply, this time, as the Jews.

It is true that this text is a historical source of Christian anti-Semitism, but one can show that it is only because the text is completely misunderstood by the Christians.

Your father is the devil and you choose to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and is not rooted in the truth; there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie he is speaking his own language, for he is a liar and the father of lies [or of liars]. But I speak the truth and therefore you do not believe me. (John 8:44)

At least five themes in this enigmatic text are closely interrelated. Satan is described as an inexhaustible source of lies; the Jews are still imprisoned in these lies, because they share in Satan's desires. The Jews actively collaborate in a satanic delusion, which exists from the beginning and which is essentially connected with murder. Satan was a murderer from the beginning.

What kind of murderer can this be?

The designation of Satan as a murderer is usually interpreted as a veiled reference to the story of Cain and Abel. Most commentators rightly believe, in other words, that John 8:44 is not unrelated to the text: "On you will fall the guilt of all the innocent blood spilt on the ground, from innocent Abel to Zechariah," and so forth (Matt. 23:35).

This is true, up to a point. The murder of Abel comes first in the Bible chronologically, of course, but perhaps also in another and more fundamental sense.

We found that the murder of Abel is the primordial murder in the sense that it is the foundation of the Cainite culture, which is presented as the first human culture. Satan is the mimetic cycle itself, the mechanism of human culture. That is why his reign is really at an end, even though his triumph seems more complete than ever. We can understand very well why he would be a murderer from the beginning, and the father of all liars (meaning all the hearers of Jesus), the father of an entire culture that is not rooted in the truth. We can well understand why Jesus would speak of two languages, his own language, which reveals the original murder and is therefore the language of truth, and the language of his listeners, which is a lie because it is still rooted in the original murder. The one truth that these listeners resist the most is the truth being uttered at that very moment, in that very text, the truth of the original murder.

It is not wrong to relate this text of John to the story of Abel. The two are related; but the people who connect the one to the other do not understand the relationship; they do not perceive the genetic mechanism of culture behind the murder of Abel. From the phrase "Satan was a murderer from the beginning," they think that something is missing. The missing information would be the identity of the victim and of the murderer. We are told that the victim is Abel. In the text of the gospels we see a garbled murder mystery from which the names of the actors have been removed by mistake. We feel we add something to the text by supplying these names. This attitude is supremely significant. All interpreters always think they have a perspective, a methodology, another text that goes further than the gospel text. They do not realize that as long as they look for the individual or generic names of the victims and culprits, in specific episodes of murder, they remain imprisoned

in mythology; they have not yet uncovered the truth. In order fully to uncover the truth, you must eliminate all proper names, all fictional elements. You must replace all the fabulous stories of origins by the semiotic matrix, by the genetic mechanism of all myths and rituals. This is exactly what the gospel text is doing when it says: at the beginning of human culture was murder and all human beings without exception are the sons and daughters of that murder. Down to the present day, they remain imprisoned in its lie because they have not yet really uncovered its operation.

If I am right, all modern attitudes are regressive and repressive in comparison with the text of the gospel.

With vertiginous speed but with complete clarity, a mechanism is formulated in John, the best formulation because it is purely abstract and universal, the most likely to be misunderstood. Now we understand that it is the same thing to be a son of Satan and to be a son of the men who killed the prophets. The surest means to perpetuate the lies that are rooted in the original murder and to generate more liars is to say, "If we had been alive in our fathers' time, we should never have taken part with them in the murder of the prophets."

The original murder is an inexhaustible source of falsified cultural meanings and values in which not the Pharisees alone, not the Jews alone, but all of humanity is still imprisoned.

The connection in John between Satan, murder, untruth, and the *arche*, the beginning, means exactly the same thing as the connection between murder, the denial of murder, and the foundation of the world in the Synoptic Gospels. The foundation and principle of this world, the devil and Satan are one and the same thing and they are none other than the spontaneous scapegoat mechanism as the source of all previous religion and all human culture, the mechanism of symbolicity itself.

Far from saying entirely different things and being rooted in a different spirit, the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John say exactly the same thing. The vast effort of modern criticism to dismember the New Testament as well as the Old, and to compel each text to diverge from every other, resembles the attitude of many classicists toward the tragic corpus of our Greek and European heritage; we must suspect that this immense enterprise of dissociation is not innocent; it must be part of our effort to elude the significance that is common to all these texts, to flee from a message that we go on treating more or less in the same fashion as those whose place is designated in the gospels as the first recipients of that message.

The traditional interpretation of the text tends to narrow down the scope of the text to the interlocutors inside the text who are, of course,

Jewish religious groups. Its traditional title, "Curses against the Pharisees," already constitutes an interpretation. This reading is obviously wrong. We can assert its essential deficiency even if already in the letter of the text that has come down to us certain details tend, if not to support the traditional reading, to suggest that the people who transcribed it had an imperfect understanding of that text. The reading we provide is too powerful, too faithful to the letter of the text not to sweep aside what still may appear to us as minor textual blemishes. These are not sufficient to discredit the present reading, which is both too coherent and effective in its relative complexity (*lectio difficilior*) to be refuted by such minor blemishes. These can be caused either by temporary lapses of the gospel writers, literally overwhelmed by the enormity of the message they had to record, and they can also be deficiencies on our own part, signs of our continued inability to grasp that same message in its entirety.

Whatever the case may be, the reading I give totally implicates the reader and suggests there cannot be any innocent misreading of such a text.

The gospels constantly claim that they bring into the world something that has never been heard before. The commentators take it for granted that this revelation is exclusively related to supernatural matters. The supernatural dimension in the gospels is essential but it cannot be assessed properly—it will always be confused with some kind of religious idealism—if the human aspect of the revelation is not perceived. There is a hidden dimension to human behavior (violence) that is an essential part of the revelation:

There is nothing covered up that will not be uncovered, nothing hidden that will not be made known. You may take it, then, that everything you have said in the dark will be heard in broad daylight, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be shouted from the housetops. (Matt. 10:26–27/Luke 12:2–3)

The Lukan instance of this saying comes immediately after the crucial passage in the "Curses," on the hidden collusion between murder and religious culture (Luke 11:49–51).

Another text that suggests that the revelation of human cultural origin is an integral part of Jesus's revelation is the borrowing by Matthew of Psalm 78:2, which is placed in the mouth of Jesus:

I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things that have been kept secret since the foundation of the world. (Matt. 13:35, quoting Ps. 78:2)

If we look back upon the traditional reading of texts like the "Curses against the Pharisees," we can see that the emphasis is not on the things that are said but on those to whom they are said, the immediate listeners of Jesus, the people he is personally confronting. The focus of the text is narrowed, its scope is diminished; a revelation that concerns all people equally, all religious and cultural systems, is turned into a denunciation of some people only, those belonging to one particular religion.

It is not insignificant, of course, that the Pharisees are the direct targets; but the significance is quite different from the one usually imagined. If there were, anywhere on earth, one religious cultural form—past, present, or future—that did not deserve the accusations proffered against the Pharisees, the gospels would not have the universal scope that the Christians themselves have always claimed, but that they perpetually deny in practice by restricting to Judaism those consequences of the Christian revelation they want to divert from themselves. If Pharisaism were not the highest mode of religious life yet attained by man, it could not stand for every other form; the words uttered by the gospel would not reach all cultural forms at the same time. This role of Judaism as representative of humanity as a whole is one with the idea frequently repeated in the New Testament itself that the election of Israel never has and never will be canceled, that they play a privileged role in the revelation of the entire truth.

Today we have reached a new stage in the history of our relationship to the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. Christian anti-Semitism is constantly repudiated and denounced. This repudiation, however, has not resulted in a greater understanding of the gospel text. Far from it: we find that the text has become a stumbling block even to the Christians themselves who see it as the cause of their own past violence. Thus, instead of seeking the source of that violence in themselves, they are still trying to project it onto some kind of sacralized scapegoat, and since all possible human victims have been exhausted, they must dispense with a human scapegoat and go directly to the text of the gospels, the text par excellence, the text that denounces victimage in all its forms and is itself denounced as the single greatest source of violence and hatred in our world. Even those who do not go that far think it advisable to turn away from the text; it is prudent not to acknowledge the doubts they may have in regard to its perversity.

For close to three centuries, in all institutions of higher learning, it has not been intellectually respectable to deal with the text except as an object of demystification, and every time we mention it we must take the ritual precaution of insulting it and reviling it in order to demonstrate that our

attitude is the proper one, that we truly belong to the mimetic consensus of the modern intelligentsia. We must still reenact, vis-à-vis that text, gestures of ritual defilement that would be criticized as ethnocentric and regressive if they were directed at any non-Judaeo-Christian culture or religion.

We have reached the point where we can understand the enormous role played by the tomb in the texts we are reading. The Pharisees, we are told, like to erect funeral monuments to the long dead prophets; these tombs, by definition, are empty, but the Pharisees themselves and their culture are compared to real tombs, in other words, to tombs that still contain the remains of human beings:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like unto whited sepulchers; they look well from the outside, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all kinds of filth. (Matt. 23:27)

A tomb has two purposes. It is destined to honor a person who has passed away and also to dispose of a corpse, to hide it from the survivors, to make the ugly and dangerous reality of corruption and death invisible and inaccessible. Those two purposes are at odds with each other; they are never mentioned in the same breath. A tomb makes it possible to achieve both simultaneously. The tomb hides the material reality of corruption and asserts the spiritual continuity of human culture, the recollection and glorification of the past.

The rotting corpse inside and the beautiful structure around it resemble the entire process of human culture in its relationship to the original victim. The inside and the outside of the tomb recall and reproduce the dual nature of the primitive *sacra*, the conjunction in them of violence and peace, of death and life, of disorder and order. This structural homology must not be fortuitous. With the exception of tools, the most ancient traces of human culture are tombs, and tombs may well be the original monuments of humanity.³

Why did our still half-human or incompletely human forefathers invent such an institution as the burial of dead bodies? It is difficult to think that one fine day the idea simply occurred to them; they must have been under intense pressure to act in such a novel way. I personally believe that the pressure came from the mimetic crisis and victimage that we have encountered so many times and that, unlike the scheme invented by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, is perfectly conceivable at the prehuman level as a mechanism of hominization. The inventors of burial were not dealing merely with a dead body in the naturalistic sense but with a collective victim against whom they had

We have already noted the last words of the "Curses against the Pharisees," *à propos* of the original murder: "all the innocent blood shed since the foundation of the world" (Luke 11:50). Here, we have "things kept secret": *Kekroumena apo kataboles tou kosmou*. The only words that differ in the two sentences are "all the innocent blood" in one and the *kekroumena* in the other. The reference to "things kept hidden" is interchangeable with "all the blood that has been shed," because the one and the other refer to the same mechanism of collective violence that must remain hidden in order to remain the mainstay of human religion and culture, in order to go on functioning as it still functions with the contemporaries of Jesus.

No one today, not even most Christians, takes seriously the claim of the gospels that the words of Jesus, and his death, constitute the fulfillment of the Old Testament. To us it sounds like a particularly mischievous piece of mystical nonsense that can be maintained only by the most benighted religious provincialism in a particularly nefarious alliance with ethnocentric arrogance.

And it is true, indeed, that this assertion, in the past, has never amounted to much more than that. For the medieval Christian, the belief that the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old and can account for everything in it is accepted as a principle of faith and it becomes the basis for the so-called allegorical or figural interpretation of the Bible, supposedly informed by a purely Christian understanding.

If you look at the allegorical interpretations of the Middle Ages, you will find that, in spite of certain early insights, to a large extent, the belief in the interpretive power of the New Testament remains a dead letter; it does not result in anthropological knowledge any more than it translates into a new religious formulation. Just as in the case of the modern exegetes who do nothing but refer John 8:44–45 back to Cain, for lack of anything else to say, the medieval allegorists, already, prefer to dwell with Old Testament stories, or, in the gospels, with purely parabolic discourse, rather than with statements as direct and pregnant as those we are now reading, which must remain a dead letter or worse until their real object is perceived, the original murder and its consequences.

Once this real object is perceived, we realize that the claims of the gospels in regard to the Old Testament must be taken seriously. We have found that a tendency to deconstruct the myths of collective violence is already at work in the Old Testament, but only in the gospel does this tendency become aware of its own significance because only there does it reach and understand its true goal, which is the reduction of all human religion and culture to its generative mechanism.

I wish I had space to examine with you other passages of the gospels that have found no explanation so far and that make a great deal of sense when they are read in the light of the reading I propose, in the light of the original murder as revealed in the gospels. When they confront such phrases as "let the dead bury the dead" or "where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather," the exegetes have nothing much to say; they surmise that these phrases must be proverbial, but they leave the significance of these proverbs undetermined.

I will also mention in passing the parable of the unfaithful vine growers (Matt. 21:33–46/Mark 12:1–12/Luke 20:9–19) who always unite against the messengers sent by the lord of the vineyard, who expel all of them and finally kill the son himself. After this parable Jesus ironically asks his listeners to interpret for him another Old Testament quotation: "The stone that has been rejected by the builders has become the keystone" (Ps. 118: 22–23/Matt. 21:42/Mark 12:10–11/Luke 20:17).

I also draw your attention to the possible relationship of what I am talking about with such sentences as the one uttered by Caiaphas in the gospel of John: "It is better for one man to die so that the whole people will be saved" (John 11:49–50).

One interpretation of the "Curses against the Pharisees" remains that still enables those who have adopted the gospels as their Holy Scripture and call themselves Christians to elude the full burden of the message. This interpretation is the traditional one, the one that sees in that text only that and no more, curses that would be exclusively directed against a Jewish sect, or perhaps Judaism as a whole and that would concern no one else.

This reading does once again what Jesus reproaches the Pharisees for doing. It suppresses the revelation of the semiotic matrix. It redirects the painful impact of the revelation toward someone else. Since the readers see themselves as followers of Jesus, they cannot choose him as their scapegoat; they have to turn against the only other people present in the picture, who are, of course, his direct interlocutors, the Pharisees. They are the last available victims. This time it is the Christian's turn to say: "If we had been alive in the time of our Jewish spiritual fathers, we should never have taken part with them in the murder of Jesus." If the Pharisees are said by Jesus to exceed the measure of their fathers, the traditional Christian reading of the "Curses" certainly exceeds the measure of the Pharisees. It does the same thing once more, but this time the victimizers never cease to read the text that condemns their own victimage as they go on with their victimage. They invoke as their justification the text that in reality condemns them in the most explicit fashion.

united and been reconciled. This collective victim they already regarded with a prereligious mixture of terror and veneration, and that is why they could not simply abandon him on the spot as their own animal forefathers had done, and burial was invented. The idea of the tomb does not come from the sacred; it may well be the first and essential manifestation of the sacred. The practice of religious burial suggests there never was such a thing as natural death for early humans; all people who died were automatically assimilated to the sacralized victim. That is why burial rites, all over the world, like all other rites, invariably amount to a reenactment of the mimetic crisis and scapegoat reconciliation. They include death and disintegration, therefore, but they end up with renewal; through the corruption of death they are trying to reach to the supreme power of life.

The idea that humans less intelligent and courageous than ourselves invented religion in order not to face death in the naturalistic sense, death as the end of everything, *period*, is nonsense. Death as a purely natural event is obviously a very recent invention; early humanity never had to elude that kind of death because it never learned about it. Death first appeared as sacred power through the misunderstood scapegoat mechanism, which is the universal mechanism of human culture. Far from being a mask for our naturalistic concept of death, the awareness of which would have come first and be falsified only later by ad hoc religious myth, religion comes first, and it turns early man into a builder of tombs because religion is the mythological face of the misunderstood scapegoat mechanism.

Thus we cannot say that the gospel text, the text of the so-called "Curses against the Pharisees," turns the tomb into a metaphor of human culture. It is human culture as a whole that is a metaphor of the tomb, and the tomb itself is the original metaphoric and pragmatic displacement of the misunderstood scapegoat reconciliation, the first and fundamental transformation of that mechanism into the first symbolic monument of human culture. However complex culture may become later, it remains an extension of funeral rites, an edifice erected around a sacrificial victim. If the tomb is really the original nucleus, and if all subsequent developments retain the tomb-like quality that is obviously present in the mechanism of self-deception associated by the gospels with the higher stages of religion, we should say not that our text is metaphorical but that it reveals the tomb as the first symbolic metamorphosis of victimage.

If all sacrificial culture is a tomb, so is every individual member of it, shaped and structured by the same protective misapprehension, by the same absence of radical crisis or critique that constitutes the whole.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like unto whitened sepulchers; they look well from the outside, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all kinds of filth. (Matt. 23:27)

This passage cannot fail to recall the modern idea of an individual or collective unconscious, of human consciousness and behavior being governed by something that is part of us, that is most intimately ours and yet cannot be reached and does not want to be reached. We can easily verify, indeed, in everything I have said so far, that the victim inside the individual or collective tomb, the excluded scapegoat, operates as the unknown source of all cultural significance and behavior, individual and collective. This does not mean, however, that the gospel text should be interpreted as an anticipation or approximation of the psychoanalytical idea, that it is a still imperfect vision of something that Freud later perfected. In spite of its extreme brevity and concentration, the gospel text brings together in the most effective manner many ideas that are not really engaged by Freud because they were incompletely grasped; primarily, of course, the idea that the individual unconscious, even in modern man, is still rooted in some kind of primordial murder and that it is associated with the mourning of the dead.

Even though or perhaps because its metaphoric resources are always simple and easy to visualize, the gospel text outlines a scheme of self-deception more intellectually powerful and more rigorous than that of Freud.

We have found, for instance, that men can deplore the violence of their forefathers and yet retain the stamp of that violence, so that finally even our own repudiation of murder can really amount to a displaced reenactment of the murder mechanism. Thus, as culture, in appearance, moves farther and farther away from its origins and erases all traces of the collective violence that really came first, in reality, the entire process remains structurally homologous to the crudest manifestations of the misunderstood victimage phenomena. If sacrificial culture is a grave that presents itself almost explicitly as such, because again and again, victims are killed on a sacrificial altar, a later culture, in which blood sacrifice has lost much of its importance, or disappeared entirely, as it has in ours, is still a grave, but a grave that does not signal or even denies its own nature as a grave.

In order to represent the process visually, the gospel shifts from the tomb of the sarcophagus type, the visible monument that is erected above the ground, to the tomb that is underground and unmarked, invisible even as a tomb. The unmarked tomb makes not only its content invisible but itself as well. If any tomb is a means to disguise and to hide, the underground

tomb is an improved and redoubled tomb, a tomb at the second power so to speak.

Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like graves that appear not, over which men may walk without knowing it. (Luke 11:44)

I certainly have neither the time nor the capacity to develop all the implications of a reading that does not arbitrarily narrow down the scope of the gospel text to one cultural world only. But one fundamental implication becomes clear. In these texts, something is completely revealed, more completely still than in the Old Testament and a fortiori in any work of literature. This something is the semiotic matrix of all mythology and ritual.

If we try to locate the gospels as a whole, we quickly realize that the whole text presents itself as a process that begins with a warning and an invitation by Jesus to the Jews first, then to humanity as a whole. The time has come for men to become reconciled to each other without sacrifices and other sacrificial means, because sacrifices are at an end.

The reaction of the listeners shows that they do not understand what is at stake any more than we do. The modern historical school, and now the structuralist school, is no more able to understand what the urgency of the message is about than the medieval and Christian commentators who believed in the apocalyptic threat but interpreted it in a supernatural and therefore a sacrificial way, as if the violence in the gospels still came from a violent god. The whole idea of a sacrificial pact between the Father and the Son, the sacrificial interpretation of the passion, which is completely absent from the gospels, is the central element, of course, in that sacrificial reading of the gospels. It is really the same old scapegoat misunderstanding, since it projects human violence onto a divine figure once again. The sacrificial reading is unable to conceive of a god that would be absolutely free of violence, which is what the gospel text is really about. My reading of the gospels is not a humanistic reading at all. It is almost impossible for human beings, and also terribly perilous, to conceive a divinity that would be absolutely free of violence.

As soon as this conception becomes intelligible, humans must realize that the violence is all theirs. All sacrificial protection is at an end and people can see their own violent truth for the first time. This is what is meant by the idea that the blood of all victims will fall upon the generations of those who hear the gospel, that all this blood will be required of this generation, that the post-gospel humanity will bear the guilt of it all. This has nothing to do with a

primitive blood curse. It simply means that, even if they must be misinterpreted at first, and distorted in a sacrificial sense, the gospels have not been written in vain and the revelation will finally reach the consciousness of all men, making traditional culture impossible and compelling humanity to live in the full glare of its own truth, unprotected by sacrificial ritual and mythology.

The process described in the gospels is very carefully worked out. As people react more and more negatively to the offer of reconciliation, this offer becomes more pressing and the consequences of a refusal are more and more clearly spelled out. The texts we have read represent a crucial moment in that revelation, and they make it possible for us to understand what the central text of the four gospels, the Passion, is really about from an anthropological standpoint.

If human beings refuse the nonsacrificial reconciliation that must be substituted for the now exhausted sacrifices, they will inevitably attempt to suppress the knowledge that is provided to them by the gospels; they will try once more to close human culture upon itself and erect more violent barriers against their own violence. It is unavoidable, therefore, that an attempt to consolidate once more the culture of misunderstood scapegoat phenomena will include a new victimage, and the victim, this time, will not be arbitrary, in the sense that this time, he must be the One who threatens or seems to threaten the entire system through his untimely revelations of what human culture is really about. Unanimous victimage, in other words, will be reenacted, but this time it will be reenacted against the one who has revealed the very existence and function of that unanimous murder.

The truth once more will be buried, and, up to a point, it will be buried very deep, since everything is going to be interpreted once more in a sacrificial way. At the same time, however, the text of the gospels, however imperfect it may be in some of its details, remains intact, and, at any time, any interpreter who chooses to repudiate sacrificial distortions can see for himself or herself that, in that text, the truth of the original murder, after being revealed theoretically, so to speak, is also reenacted, and that murder must be reenacted because its truth is intolerable and humans refuse to hear it. In the Passion, humanity resorts once more to the original murder in order to go on deceiving itself about this same original murder.

The idea that the truth of the original murder cannot be uttered without triggering once more the original murder is very clear in the gospel.

Then you acknowledge that you are the sons of the men who killed the prophets. Go on then, finish off what your fathers began. (Matt. 23:32)

In all gospel texts, the revelation in words always precedes the actual reenactment of the truth revealed, because the mechanism that must remain buried to be effective will inevitably be triggered once more by the fact that it is unburied, that it is re-surrected, so to speak.

It would take a long analysis to show that this is what happens in the case of the Passion. I have no time for this, of course, but I will go for one minute to a much briefer text, which belongs not to the gospels properly speaking but to the Acts of the Apostles and as such still retains gospel-like characteristics. This text is Stephen's martyrdom, which comes at the end and as a result of a speech that he makes before the Sanhedrin. All we need to quote are the last words of that speech, but they are crucial since they are nothing more nor less than a repetition of the "Curses against the Pharisees" and they are interrupted by the violent action of the crowd. It is undoubtedly these words, here, that reveal the role of collective murder in human culture, that trigger a violent and unanimous attempt to suppress this revelation, and this attempt inevitably reproduces the deed that mankind tries to deny and to suppress. Here is the text:

Stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ear, you always oppose the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did, so you do also. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you have now been betrayers and murderers. . . .

Now, as they heard these things, they were cut to the heart and gnashed their teeth at him. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed upon him all together. And they cast him out of the city and stoned him. (Acts 7:51-58)

Even before Stephen's vision of Christ in glory, his listeners are moving toward unanimous violence because of the words that link them up once more, and their whole culture, to the religious murders of the past. In the Anchor Bible edition of the Acts, Johannes Munck compares the last words of Stephen to "a spark that starts an explosion,"⁴ a spontaneous and irresistible discharge of collective fury. There is no condemnation of Stephen by the Sanhedrin. It is true, on the other hand, that the murderers of Stephen manage to restrain their rage long enough to drag their victim outside of the city limits. This is

another ritual precaution common to many societies. The pollution of violence and death must not be permitted inside the community. We seem to have an inextricable mixture of legal and illegal features, of ritual and of spontaneous elements. Here are the comments of Johannes Munck:

Was this an examination before the Sanhedrin and the following stoning a real trial and a legally performed execution? We do not know. The improvised and passionate character of the events as related might suggest that it was illegal, a lynching.⁵

We are told that ritualism and spontaneity are poles apart; in our text, they are so much the same thing that they cannot be distinguished. From the standpoint of the ritual and cultural origin postulated here, this ambiguity has great significance. The scholars' hesitation between the most spontaneous and the most ritualized form suggests that the second may well be the scrupulous copy and mimicry of the first. The ritual form can always provide a satisfactory channel for a spontaneous outburst; it can become de-ritualized, so to speak, without important changes, because it is nothing but the ritualization of a first such outburst that has proved so successful in reestablishing the peace that its forms are carefully remembered and reproduced. That worldly wisdom we found in ritual stoning does not result from a statesmanlike calculation that would operate without a model and plan everything *ex nihilo*; it is patterned after a scapegoat phenomenon so effective that it remains unrecognized and it is read, in consequence, as an intervention of the divinity.

The unanimity of the participants is a quasi-technical indication here, which is more explicit in the Greek original *homothumadon*, and in its literal Latin translation in the Vulgate, *unanimiter*, than in most modern translations. The unanimity is required by the scapegoat ritual and it is the spontaneous result of the intolerable words uttered by Stephen, of the enormous scandal they provoke.

The lynching of Stephen has all the structural characteristics of the original murder I have been talking about. The lynching immediately follows the most decisive words of Stephen, those that repeat the "Curses against the Pharisees," the revelation by Jesus himself of the original murder. We can verify the paradoxical relationship between this murder and its motivation. The original murder reappears to keep the original murder covered up. Stephen is lynched in order to keep the truth of lynching hidden; but the truth of lynching is already out. It has just been expressed by Stephen when he repeats

the words of Jesus. The proof that it is too late is that the lynchers *stop their ears* as they rush unanimously, *unanimiter*, against Stephen.

The Passion of Jesus is preceded by the revelation of the original murder in the "Curses against the Pharisees" and other texts. The Passion stands in the same relationship to these texts as the martyrdom of Stephen to the last lines of his speech. In both instances, the revelation is by both word and deed. First there is the word, then comes the deed, which confirms and corroborates the word, not because those who commit the deed want the word to be authenticated and confirmed but just the opposite. Those who commit the deed want to silence, suppress, and expel the word, but they unwittingly confirm it because the Word talks about its own suppression and expulsion.

But all these precautions are of no avail. Every word of the victim, every gesture of his victimizers is implacably recorded in the text of the Acts; this means, of course, that the collective violence against the truth, the attempt to bury that truth once more in a unanimous violence, is turned into a more complete revelation: everything covered up will be uncovered. First we have the words, which tell us about the violent repression of the truth, every time this truth is about to be uttered, and then we have the violent repression itself. Thus, the words of the revelation come first and they are immediately confirmed and verified by the action; this is as it should be if the revelation is true, since what the revelation reveals is the violent repression of its own violent truth by human culture.

We can understand why the Greek word for witness, *martyros*, has come to mean in our modern languages a victim in the sense of Stephen. To be a witness means not only to repeat the words of Jesus but also to pay for these words with one's life, not in some kind of meaningless and irrational sacrifice, but as a testimony to the truth of these words, as an immediate verification, so to speak. It is obvious from the preceding that Christianity claims no monopoly on innocent victims; it does not even claim a monopoly on those victims who die with the truth of their death in their mouths; from now on, all victims will die on the right side of truth, so to speak. They say that violence belongs not to God, as men have always believed, or to the specifically religious element in religion, as they now try to believe, but to the human cultural community as such and the human community immediately confirms this revelation by putting the witness to death. They will add to our knowledge rather than subtract from it.

As we understand this significance of the martyr, which cannot be reserved, of course, to the specifically Christian martyrs, we also understand

the meaning of one more important passage in the "Curses against the Pharisees," a passage that is present both in Matthew and Luke (Matt. 23:34/Luke 11:49):

The wisdom of God has said, "I will send them prophets and apostles; and some of them they will put to death and persecute so that the blood of all the prophets that has been shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation." (Luke 11:49)

Why the wisdom of God? The more men multiply victims, the more they reveal the truth they want to deny, the truth of human culture. It is not God's fault, of course, if this truth becomes accessible to men through more and more victims. It is the fault of humanity, which desperately tries to repress and exclude the knowledge that has been available to it.

Woe unto you, lawyers! You have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not go in yourselves and those who were on their way in, you stopped. (Luke 11:52/Matt. 23:13)

"Those who were on their way in, you stopped." Who can these be? They can only be the Jewish people, insofar as they are exposed to the Old Testament, to that prophetic inspiration that keeps uncovering the truth of human culture, as we have said, but never entirely succeeds. If the Pharisees had wanted, they could have made further progress along the same route, just as Jesus himself has done and is doing, but instead, they have killed that inspiration and immobilized the Jewish religion in ritualistic complacency. All genuine inspiration has dried up or floundered in scholarly minutiae, in petty legalism.

Once the truth is out, once it has been inscribed in a text, it cannot be repressed any more. Beneath all the languages that keep repressing the truth, the language of mythology and ritual, the language of philosophy, or the language of modern ideology, another language is at work, another Logos that has nothing to do with the Logos of human culture.

Today, all efforts of modern criticism could be said to focus upon the notion of Logos, which signifies human culture itself insofar as it is one with language. Contemporary criticism effectively reveals that Logos as a whole is coming unstuck and falling apart. This criticism can show more and more how meaning has been assembled and put together, the logical and structural flaws in even the most beautiful constructions of human culture.

I fully agree with this criticism. I simply believe that it can be carried much further and that it is going to be carried to its logical end as the role of human violence in all cultural creation becomes more and more obvious.

One thing only is wrong with that criticism; it is distorted and spurred by one enormous illusion, and this is the strangest and most durable illusion of all Western thought. It is the illusion that the Greek Logos of Heraclitus and the Judaeo-Christian Logos are one and the same thing. This illusion is already present in medieval thought, which sees the Heraclitean Logos as a forerunner of John's Logos. It is present in the modern historical schools, which see John's Logos as a copy and usurpation of the Greek Logos. It is still present in Heidegger, the first one who tried to separate the Greek Logos from the Judaeo-Christian but who does not succeed because he sees the same violence in both. This assimilation of the Greek and the Judaeo-Christian is more than a mistake, of course, it is a fact of our history; it is, indeed, the major intellectual fact of our history.

In order to understand that the two cannot be the same, it takes very little; all that is needed, really, is to read the definition of the Christian Logos in the prologue of John. It seems that some invincible distraction has prevented us so far from reading these very simple lines. This is not surprising. These lines tell us that the Judaeo-Christian Logos, Christ as Logos, is really the truth that is not here, the truth that is always expelled, denied, and rejected. No wonder we could not read these lines; they constitute the most direct formulation of everything that is now at stake in our cultural crisis, in the disintegration of the Greek and cultural Logos. This Greek Logos is the logos built on violence and the misunderstanding of human violence; it is the Logos of expulsion whereas the Judaeo-Christian Logos is the expelled truth, or rather Truth itself, still expelled and rejected.

*And the light shines in darkness,
and the darkness does not comprehend it. . . .
He came unto his own, and his own received him not. (John 1:5, 11)*

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1950), 154.
2. The New Testament tradition has confused this Zechariah, who was, according to this

text in Chronicles, the son of Jehoiada, with Zechariah the canonical prophet, who was the son of Berechiah (Zech. 1:1). One might assume that Jesus used current idiom for an oft-used trope, "from Abel to Zechariah," to refer to the constant historical phenomenon of the murder of the messengers of God.

3. Cf. Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). This profound meditation by one of his younger colleagues and admirers is much in the spirit of Girard (Editor).
4. *The Acts of the Apostles*, trans., with introduction and notes, Johannes Munck; rev. William F. Albright and C. S. Mann (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 70.
5. *Acts of the Apostles*, trans., with introduction and notes, Munck; rev. Albright and Mann, 68.