

REDEEMING WRATH AND APOCALYPTIC VIOLENCE

REDEEMING WRATH AND APOCALYPTIC VIOLENCE:
GIRARD AND VON BALTHASAR IN RESPONSE TO
NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation compares the soteriologies of René Girard and Hans Urs von Balthasar as they engage and respond to the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, and specifically, to Nietzsche's critique of atonement theology. It proceeds on the basis that all three figures comment upon a shared problematic, one defined by the relationship between the violence of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth and the salvific efficacy of his death. Chapter 1 defines this problematic by tracing its development from Anselm through Luther and Calvin, and argues that by retaining the language of satisfaction despite the loss of the metaphysical framework that rendered it intelligible, the Reformers construed divine wrath in more strictly punitive (and less pedagogical) terms. The subsequent chapters outline the representations Nietzsche, Girard, and von Balthasar give of the crucifixion of Jesus and their accounts of its significance. Nietzsche argues that Christian priests used the event of Jesus' violent crucifixion as a symbol to hold the weak in thrall; the Cross came to symbolize the threat of divine wrath and the hope of a quasi-magical salvation. Nietzsche thus argues that Christian soteriology serves an anti-salvific function. Girard and von Balthasar each argue that Christian soteriology does not enslave Christians to a lie but orients all human beings to the truth of human existence. They also agree that the violence of the crucifixion is significant for the revelation it bears. But whereas Girard argues that the Christian doctrine of divine wrath is a residue of violent pagan religion and thus has no place in interpreting the meaning of the crucifixion, von Balthasar argues that this doctrine serves to highlight the unique quality of God's re-ordering love. By analyzing and interpreting their responses to Nietzsche, this dissertation seeks to evaluate the contributions Girard and von Balthasar offer for a post-Nietzschean soteriology.

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List of Abbreviations and Editions of Primary Sources Used:

Anselm of Canterbury:

CDH: Why God Became Man. Translated by Janet Fairweather. In *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*. Edited by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998.

John Calvin:

ICR: Institutes of the Christian Religion. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

René Girard:

BTTE: Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre. Translated by Mary Baker. *Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010.

ISS: I See Satan Fall Like Lightning. Translated by James G. Williams. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.

TS: The Scapegoat. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

TH: Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.

V&TS: Violence and the Sacred. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

Martin Luther:

LW: Luther, Martin. Luther's Works. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann. 55 vols. Philadelphia, PA: Muehlenberg, 1955-1986.

WA: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. 120 vols. Sonderedition der kritischen Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe). Weimar: H. Böhlau, 2000.

Friedrich Nietzsche:

A: Antichrist. In *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books, 1976.

BT: Birth of Tragedy. In *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

BG&E: Beyond Good and Evil. In *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

D: Daybreak. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

GoM: On the Genealogy of Morals. In *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

GS: The Gay Science. Edited by Bernard Williams. Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

KGA: Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Werke. Edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. 40 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967—.

TI: Twilight of the Idols. In *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books, 1976.

TSZ: Thus Spake Zarathustra. In *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books, 1976.

WP: Will to Power. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1968.

Hans Urs von Balthasar:

AddS: Apokalypse Der Deutschen Seele : Studien Zu Einer Lehre von Letzten Haltungen. 3 vols. Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1998.

TD: Von Balthasar, Hans Urs. Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory. Translated by Graham Harrison. 5 vols. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988.

The character § stands in for “section” or “chapter” where applicable.

All page numbers listed for the longer sections from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* refer to Kaufmann’s edition in *The Portable Nietzsche*.

INTRODUCTION

By What Necessity?

This thesis will compare the soteriologies of René Girard and Hans Urs von Balthasar as they engage and respond to the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, and specifically, to Nietzsche's critique of atonement theology. In order to do so, I must delineate the shape of a problematic shared by all three figures, hopefully one that does not force them onto too Procrustean a bed. It is the burden of this introduction to specify the way this problematic is defined in chapter one, and to explain briefly the ways the subsequent chapters comment upon it such that there is indeed a unity to the dissertation as a whole. Two questions help to define this problematic: 1) the problem of the violence of the crucifixion, and 2) the question of the relationship between the violence of the crucifixion and its salvific efficacy. Both of these questions require some explication before I continue.

To claim that the violence of the crucifixion is a problem is itself far from straightforward. No one who takes the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth and the historicity of his crucifixion seriously could deny that Jesus suffered in being crucified. On the contrary, even many who take Jesus' death to have been an accident of history are willing to grant that it may have been the *deepest* human suffering due to the raw severity of the punishment, the depth of Jesus' alienation from other human beings, Jesus' apparent innocence and the consequent injustice of the event, or what have you. The suffering of Jesus only becomes a *problem*—it only becomes legible as *violence*, properly speaking, when the question of its justification arises—regardless of the terms in which that justification is offered. Christians, historically, have found it a *kerygmatic* necessity to present it as not only justified, but as Good News, and have availed themselves of all

manner of traditional resources in doing so. Indeed, the decidedly plural voice of the New Testament itself stands as a witness of this activity. The fruit of this activity is, of course, the judgment that the violence of the crucifixion does not take place outside the purview of divine providence. It is rather foreknown, permitted, even *willed* by God in some fashion. While this is enough to render the crucifixion less inherently objectionable, the question remains of how the death of Christ may be proclaimed as something that uniquely and ultimately bears divine revelation for humankind.

Thus the problem of the violence of the crucifixion leads into the question of whether there could have been some other means of bringing about the outcome of the crucifixion, however the latter is characterized—the redemption of humankind, reconciliation between God and humankind, the triumph of God over the devil and/or evil, etc. (We need not settle upon one formula or another at this point). For even if it is granted that Jesus was *unjustly* crucified, his death would seem to display his powerlessness, or, worse, as the apostolic interpretation of Isaiah 53 acknowledges, one executed in such shameful fashion should be accounted struck down by God and afflicted.¹ Indeed, there are myriad ways in which the death of Jesus could become an objection to the Gospel rather than the Gospel itself—and the violent manner of his death would seem to make them more pressing rather than less. Thus arise the many questions

¹ Acts 8:32-35 depicts the apostle Philip interpreting Isaiah 53's "Suffering Servant" as a prophetic anticipation of Jesus.

that begin with the words that comprise the title of this introduction: “by what necessity?”²

That these questions are answered in terms of the “efficacy” of the Cross, and that Christ’s suffering and death are described as a means efficacious for the realization of some end—the latter of which is describable in terms of a formula—deserves a brief methodological comment. These terms, “efficacy”, “means”, and “formula”, are recent additions to the atonement theological lexicon. Another recent arrival is “theory”, the usage of which has become ubiquitous in contemporary atonement theology.³

Theologians are described as authoring “theories of the atonement,” their theories are isolated from one another and from the historical, polemical, and sacramental contexts in which they were elaborated, and they are analyzed down into logical premises—often with an eye to finding biblical proof-texts for each premise or to characterizing an opponent’s view in unflattering terms. While it is undeniable that some profit is gained from this approach, particularly in that it permits recognition of the many ways in which scriptural authors answered the above-cited question from Luke 24: 26, the language of

² Luke 24: 26.

³ The ubiquity of the language of “theory” is confirmed with a glance through the pages of some of the recent significant books in the field of atonement theology. The term appears 47 times in Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011); 76 times in Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); 41 times in S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: a Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006); 96 times in J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001). Although other lines of inheritance could be drawn, but a significant work in the growth of this tendency toward typologization is undoubtedly Gustav Aulén’s, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1937), in which the term appears on 50 of the book’s 176 pages. “Model” is often used in similar ways.

theory tends to foster in atonement theologians what Nietzsche calls the “inherited defect of all philosophers,” namely, “lack of historical sense.”⁴

One of the lesser aims of this thesis is to resist this approach, particularly because it tends to imagine the task of theology on the model of the exact sciences by prizing simplicity, clarity of expression, and a drive toward uncontroversial formulation—so as to secure a formula’s widespread acceptability among its stakeholders. Indeed, insofar as it promises exhaustiveness, objectivity, and perfect legibility, it encourages the impulse toward epistemological closure in ways that fail to take account of the way the atonement theological debate itself is situated in ecclesial and cultural history. Further, I submit that this gesture toward closure ought to look dubious to the extent that atonement theology would take itself to have an object which cannot be approached by fully realized concepts but only by images, symbols, analogies, and metaphors which break in the course of fulfilling their mediating function.

The principal interlocutors of this thesis will assist me greatly in resisting the approach described above in that each one regards it as something of a task to offend the pieties of his readers in the course of making his argument—Nietzsche by describing Christianity as a history of violence, Girard by insisting upon Christianity’s unique and revelatory non-violent message, and von Balthasar by giving testimony to a God sovereign in both wrath and suffering. My approach intends to capitalize on this aspect of

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, 2nd ed., Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), I, 2, p. 13. Translation altered. *KGA*, IV: 2.20.

their writing by taking seriously the terms within which they each make their arguments and resisting the temptation to translate one's argument into the terms of the other. After a first, context-setting chapter (to be described presently), each of the subsequent chapters will focus on the differing representations Nietzsche, Girard, and von Balthasar give of the crucifixion of Jesus and on their accounts of its significance. While the set of questions this thesis engages places it within the domain of atonement theology, I will follow⁵ my sources by employing a “syncretism of method”⁶ as is appropriate to the interdisciplinary encounter I intend to stage.

With these methodological concerns noted, the first chapter seeks to define the problematic of this thesis by examining the shifting metaphysics that is implicit in the usage of a longer-tenured but much more controversial atonement theological term, namely “satisfaction”. This chapter will examine the extent to which Anselm is rightly credited with bringing into being an atonement theological paradigm which focuses quite exclusively upon the Cross of Christ, which construes the Cross as ‘efficacious’ for salvation (thus keying the drive toward atonement *theory*)—*specifically* in that it turns away divine wrath. This chapter is a work of historical retrieval. In it I argue that although Anselm uncompromisingly asserts the divine right to punish sinners, the image

⁵ As von Balthasar writes, “*methodos* is the pursuit of a way, and when One claims to be the way and we believe him, method could be translated as *sequela*, following.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, trans. Adrian J. Walker, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 363.

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems in der modernen deutschen Literatur* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1930), 211 n.1. Cited in Alois M. Haas, “Hans Urs von Balthasar’s ‘Apocalypse of the German Soul’: At the Intersection of German Literature, Philosophy, and Theology,” in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler, trans. Michael Waldstein (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 49 n. 17.

of God implicit in “Why Did God Become Man?”⁷ is neither that of a blood-thirsty pagan deity nor that of a “a mighty private man...incensed at the injury done to his honour.”⁸ On the contrary, I argue that in developing his conception of God as “regulating” sin by wrath Anselm sought to *differentiate* God’s way with humankind from that of needy or capricious pagan deities, and that by his account of satisfaction he sought to display the disjunction between human juridical processes and those that unfold in the divine council. I then argue that although the Reformers continue to use “satisfaction” as a term within their soteriologies, they do so in light of changes in the metaphysical framework underlying it—specifically, the loss of Augustine’s account of evil as privation and the development of the Scholastic theology of merit. These changes lead, in stages, to changes in the construal of divine wrath, which becomes more strictly punitive; God comes to be “satisfied” not through Jesus’ perfection of obedience but through the shedding of Jesus’ blood. This, in turn, leads to a crisis in justifying the violence of the crucifixion, as the anthropological focus of post-Reformation soteriology ironically obscures the connection between the suffering of Christians and the suffering of Christ, and disjoins divine justice and goodness from one another.

Friedrich Nietzsche bears witness in his writings to the consequences of the crisis described in chapter 1. According to Nietzsche, the spiritual absolutism of post-Reformation atonement theology leads Christianity into a death spiral. Although the intent was to display the lavishness of divine grace, it invites Christians into conscience-

⁷ Throughout this dissertation, I will follow the current convention, which is to refer to Anselm’s book by its Latin title, *Cur Deus Homo*.

⁸ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. VI (London, UK: Williams and Norgate, 1899), 76.

vivisection; the God who pities all also forces those to whom he shows pity to dwell upon their sins (*TSZ*, IV, “The Ugliest Man”). Because few are capable of the extreme conscience vivisection involved in worshipping a God who chose, groundlessly, to put aside his own wrath by means of Christ’s death, those who still insist upon worshipping him despite their ignobility ultimately change his nature so that he becomes “old and soft and mellow and pitying” (*TSZ*, IV, “Retired”). This leads to Nietzsche’s famous “death of God” (*GS*, 125). Even as he recognizes the gravity the moment of God’s death has within culture—for with God’s death, so the highest ideals of culture also die—Nietzsche himself would rather hasten Christianity’s end, and he thus offers what I call a critique of atonement theology.

Chapter 2 of this thesis thus describes the way Nietzsche renarrates the history of Christianity in a way that revalues its central concepts. Nietzsche argues that Christian priests sought to transform Jesus’ naïve but peaceful way of life into a religion, and used the event of Jesus’ violent crucifixion as a symbol to hold the weak and fearful in thrall; in the priests’ hands, the Cross comes to symbolize both the threat of divine wrath and the hope of a quasi-magical salvation. I thus describe Nietzsche’s argument that Christian soteriology serves an anti-salvific function, that it leads neither to personal renewal nor to eternal life, but habituates Christians to a feeling of bad conscience and hinders the development of true human sovereignty. I argue that despite his critical posture, Nietzsche is farthest of all from counseling nihilism and from claiming that all suffering—Jesus’ included—ought to be understood as meaningless. He rather seeks to

restore Jesus' own nobility to legibility and to understand how "our old [Christian] morality too is *part of the comedy*" (*GoM*, Preface, 7).

In chapters 3 and 4, I attend critically to the different ways René Girard and Hans Urs von Balthasar each argue that the Crucifixion of Jesus and its Christian interpretation serve not to enslave Christians to a lie but to reveal and to orient all human beings to the truth of human existence in relation to the transcendent. For both Girard and von Balthasar, the violence of the crucifixion is significant for the revelation it bears. But Girard and von Balthasar differ starkly in their accounts of the role of divine wrath in explaining the event of Jesus' crucifixion and accounting for its violence.

In Chapter 3, I engage Girard's argument that the Crucifixion reveals the scapegoat mechanism, a psycho-socio-religious mechanism that serves to secure a kind of peace by absorbing and cathartically dissipating the violence that otherwise threatens cultural structures. The scapegoat mechanism operates when rivals within a community in crisis become polarized against a victim, and, in banding together to kill (or sacrifice) the victim (upon whom God's wrath is said to have fallen), find themselves reunified. Girard argues that when this structural situation is repeated identically in the Gospels with Jesus in the place of the victim, the effect is not reunification through sacralised (pagan) religious violence, but the complete revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. This enables those who recognize Jesus' innocence (especially Christians, initially) to bring to conscious recognition the mechanisms of victimization and sacred violence that are at the heart of culture. Girard argues that Christianity has, ironically, been one such culture of violence insofar as it has claimed that Jesus suffered the wrath of God on the Cross; such

an interpretation actually obscures what the event was intended to reveal, namely that wrath is simply a screen for human violence. Here Girard echoes a Nietzschean point, and indeed, he argues that Nietzsche recognizes the way Christianity would put an end to sacrifice. However, Girard argues, Nietzsche turns back from this recognition and, going against his conscience, reasserts the necessity of sacrifice. Girard argues that the strain of this psychological struggle drove Nietzsche insane, and that Nietzsche's suffering is not unlike that of culture, which suffers the consequences of continuing to deny the demythologizing movement set into motion with the Gospels. I conclude this chapter by evaluating Girard's engagement with Nietzsche. By analyzing Girard's criticism of Nietzsche in the terms of Girard's own theory, I suggest that Girard fails to realize his best insights and to recognize the common cause Nietzsche makes with him because of the way he understands his own prophetic agency *vis-à-vis* Nietzsche's.

In Chapter 4, I analyze the contestation of Nietzsche's philosophy of existence von Balthasar offers through his imaginative retrieval of atonement theology. In the chapter I examine von Balthasar's "theodramatic" approach to theology and highlight the way his theological discourse opens to non-canonical sources, including Nietzsche's, despite some contrary appearances. In order to show that this is the case *apropos* of Nietzsche, I draw together von Balthasar's atonement theology from *Theodrama* and his early work *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*. Von Balthasar redescribes divine sovereignty in Trinitarian and kenotic terms in order to highlight the unity of divine goodness and justice in God's patient covenantal maintenance of human freedom. This allows von Balthasar to recover divine wrath as an expression of God's re-ordering love

for humankind, and to recover, against Nietzsche, the appropriateness of the atonement. Von Balthasar's theological boldness does not, however, prevent him from recognizing and grappling with the way Nietzsche's thought arises from an authentic existential posture before the absolute; von Balthasar thus finds in Nietzsche a resource for a necessary renewal of negative theology salutary for his own project even as he does not assimilate or baptize Nietzsche's thought in order to make it more palatable for Christians. He rather allows Nietzsche's own answers to the "necessity" question to unsettle and provoke his own further questioning.

CHAPTER ONE

Violent Satisfaction?

On the Shifting Metaphysics of Divine Wrath

Introduction

In an age when a symbol is more likely to be threatened by being called ‘mysterious’ than by signifying so directly that it may be nothing other than a sign, the Cross is undoubtedly that Christian symbol most threatened by its own surfeit of significance and by the multiplicity of the layers on which it registers. The irreducibility of this plurality does not owe to the simple fact that the biblical writers themselves speak in different voices with regard to its interpretation, but to the fact that the Cross is the heart of the Christian Gospel. As Gospel only attains its nature by way of being proclaimed—as *kerygma*—the Cross necessarily refuses location either at the center of any enclosure or enshrinement in some equally problematic liminal space beyond all human gatherings. The words *In hoc signo vinces* therefore do not properly fly on the banner of a human program of military conquest (as a Eusebian sociolatriy would have it), but on the banner of God’s conquest of history in its paganism.

This chapter will address some of the shifts in medieval to post-Lutheran atonement theology that lead to the development of the soteriological problematic with which Nietzsche engages—and which Girard and von Balthasar also find unavoidable in formulating their responses to Nietzsche. The problem of narrowing the theme for this chapter involves reckoning with the complex historical interrelation of divine and human authorities. For if the Cross names the ultimate (though, historically considered, not the final) triumph of God over the principalities and powers (2 Col 2:15), and if those human authorities that would *proclaim* the Cross of Christ occasionally find themselves among

the powers over which Christ must triumph, any characterization of the problem of the Cross in *theo*-historical perspective will involve description of one stage in a battle that is equally historical and apocalyptic. To put it another way, if the Cross is an event that shows the political theological maxim “sovereign is he who decides the exception” to be originally true as a description of *divine* sovereignty, any description of the discourse that arises from the Cross-event must be an account of the Cross’s own exceptional historical movement in and through those configurations of profane power that would hinder its movement.

My point of departure here will be Anselm’s interpretation of the death of Christ, as Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* formulates the problem of the Cross in a way that is amenable to the broader discussion undertaken in this thesis in that Anselm’s soteriology highlights the questions of divine violence, suffering, and justice, and of the sacramentality that issues from the Cross.

Specifically, Anselm describes the life of Jesus in *Cur Deus Homo* as “recompense paid to God for the sins of mankind” (*CDH*, II:18),¹ and thus Jesus’ death as atoning for the guilt humankind bears because of sin. Critics of Anselm argue that *Cur Deus Homo* suggests that the violent manner of Christ’s death was necessary for its salvific effect.² While this is true in a certain sense, it nonetheless mislocates in a

¹ Anselm, “Why God Became Man,” in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, trans. Janet Fairweather (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 260–356. All subsequent references to this work will be made parenthetically by book and chapter number.

² See, for example, Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 76–89 and Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy About, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical

significant way the importance of the violence involved in the crucifixion, and it misconstrues the way salvation is to be understood as an effect of Christ's death. The same critics would argue, furthermore, that according to Anselm, the problem solved by the death of Christ—the problem of God's wrath against humanity for their sin—is to be understood in forensic or legal terms; the blood of the righteous man Jesus stands in as payment of the penalty—as the *human* blood—which would otherwise have been justly exacted as the penalty for sin. This, it is argued, leaves the reader of Anselm with a more or less pagan image of a God, one whose anger can only be appeased through the propitiary offering of human sacrifice. This is a God constrained not by his desire that man become righteous, but by his love of his own honour to visit retributive violence upon those slow to worship him. According to this interpretation of *Cur Deus Homo*, only when such divine violence has been vented and this God's wounded honour restored will he be placated.

In this chapter I will give a reading of Anselm that problematizes such an interpretation of *Cur Deus Homo*, though exonerating Anselm of the charges that have been leveled against him is rather beside the point. The point of offering this reading is first, to take note of the rather unique terms in which Anselm formulates the problem of the atonement—which, it bears noting, is a problem Anselm does not think he can solve once and for all³—and second, to give an account of how modern criticisms of Anselm's

Press, 2005), 71–74. Although Bartlett does well to refer to the way Anselm's atonement theology was taken up by the Reformed tradition (89), his treatment of Anselm differs strongly from the one offered here.

³ "One certainly must not deny there to be...a logical explanation other than the one of which we have been speaking" (*CDH*, II:17). The very fact that Anselm undertakes no critical comment upon his earlier work, *On the Fall of the Devil* in *Cur Deus Homo* is itself informative as to the heuristic nature of

formulation have become possible by taking note of the significant shifts in the understanding of the atonement that took place with Luther, and which later came to fruition with Calvin. I will attend here to the way satisfaction and wrath—key terms in Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*—underwent redefinition, and to the way the metaphysics of the atonement theological question changed prior to and through the influence of Luther. I hope to track the way the question of the meaning of Christ’s death went from being a question that remained autonomous even in the penumbral light of all theological interpretation to one fully illuminated through the doctrine of human justification, and to examine the theological consequences of this shift.

Anselm and the Patristic Tradition

Before moving directly into Anselm, it will be beneficial to give a brief summary of the patristic sources to which Anselm is responding in writing *Cur Deus Homo*. Athanasius’ *De incarnatione*⁴ may be named the closest stylistic parallel⁵ for Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*. Like *Cur Deus Homo*, *De incarnatione* addresses a particular question: just as Anselm asks why God became man, Athanasius asks what God’s purpose was in sending the divine Word. Athanasius and Anselm are each able to present the work of Christ systematically and in relative isolation from broader theological questions because

Anselm’s approach in *Cur Deus Homo*. Indeed, there is thorough congruence between the two works, especially on God’s relation to evil. This becomes particularly apparent in *On the Fall of the Devil* chapter 18, which is entitled “How the bad angel makes himself bad and the good angel makes himself good, and that the bad angel owes thanks to God for the good he received but abandoned, just as the good angel does who retained what he had received.”

⁴ Athanasius, *On The Incarnation*, trans. Penelope Lawson (London: Mowbray, 1953).

⁵ George Huntston Williams, “The Sacramental Presuppositions of Anselm’s ‘Cur Deus Homo,’” *Church History* 26, no. 3 (September 1, 1957): 249.

they each focus on a single question. Moreover, the particular questions Athanasius and Anselm address in their works allows them each to develop their arguments by simply following the unfolding of the contradiction between humankind's divinely intended end (beatitude) and its condition (sinfulness) before the divine council. In both cases, the resolution of this contradiction lends a kind of dramatic or even *aesthetic* necessity to the way their arguments proceed.

With this patristic parallel cited, it is still no exaggeration to claim that Anselm's work marks a radical shift in medieval Christology. Anselm is clearly influenced by Augustine, and, as I will discuss below, the aesthetic theme that runs throughout *Cur Deus Homo* depends on both an Augustinian understanding of 'fittingness' and Augustine's privative understanding of evil.⁶ However, Anselm's atonement theology differs from Augustine's in that it minimizes to the greatest possible extent the importance of the role played by the devil in the drama of salvation.

Augustine understands all human willing as oriented to its end in a movement of worship.⁷ In the Garden, Adam and Eve failed to love the command they had been given by God out of God's omniscient intellect and for their good, and, being lifted up in pride—or, to put it another way, worshipping their own creaturely ability to self-legislate—they rather loved a command that derived from their own mutable intellect. In

⁶ For the latter see, for example, Augustine, *The Augustine Catechism: Enchiridion of Faith, Hope, Love*, trans. Bruce Harbert, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998), paragraphs 11-13.

⁷ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), book IX, chapter 17.

adopting this pattern of willing, Adam and Eve subjected themselves to the devil, who brought this pattern of willing into being when he himself fell. Augustine argues that while the devil's power over humankind is limited by God, it is nonetheless a real power; death follows sin by a divinely instituted necessity.⁸ The devil, having received this power to kill from God and the right to rule over sinners from the sinners themselves, enslaves and oppresses those subject to him above all with fear, pain, and the threat of death.

In Augustine's *De Trinitate*, the incarnation of the Son and Christ's Passion are to be understood as an interruption of the devil's lordship. When the Son of God is sent on his mission to save humanity, he enters the devil's kingdom, which is the domain of sin and temptation. Just as other human beings are tempted, so Jesus is tempted by the devil to adopt the devil's own prideful pattern of willing. When the devil is not successful in bringing Jesus to sin, he holds the same threats over Jesus that are so effective with all other human beings—threats of pain and death. And the devil actually puts Jesus to death on the cross. In this, however, the devil has overstepped his bounds, for God ordained death for *sin*, and Christ never sinned. As a result, the death of Christ serves to unmask the true character of the devil's action, which is (as is also the case for all sinful human beings) a seeking of power through injustice. Ironically, then, the very action by which the devil sought to aggrandize himself most, and the action that the devil, failing to see Jesus' divinity, understood as the culmination of his power—that became the action by

⁸ *Ibid.*, XIV, 11–15.

which he lost his power. In overstepping his bounds, the devil lost his hold on all humanity. The devil's injustice is overcome by Christ's justice.⁹

The imagery here is twofold. On the one hand, the devil has rights over those within his domain. Christ ransoms humankind and revokes the devil's claim to lordship simply by being obedient to the Father even to the point of yielding his body to the unjust one. That is, Christ pays what was not owed to one who nonetheless made the demand. As Augustine puts it, Christ "by his just blood unjustly shed *cancelled the I.O.U.* (Col 2:14) of death, and justified and redeemed sinners."¹⁰ On the other hand, though, the devil appears as one deceived by Christ, who, appearing as man, was indeed within his domain but, as sinless and as God, was still outside his power.

In Augustine's formulation, the two images (of ransoming humankind from the devil and of God's deception of the devil) both depend on the ambiguity of satanic authority. While the devil's pursuit of his rights could be considered just by virtue of the fact that he has been given power to pursue them by a legitimate authority, the fact that the devil only received authority by virtue of sin, which is a condition of injustice, means that even a just exercise of that authority will be a kind of injustice. God's means of victory over the devil work in concert with the inner tendencies of the *libidinum dominandi* as Augustine describes it throughout *City of God*. Here the devil overextends

⁹ Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), VIII, 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV, 3, xvii.

himself out of a lust for power that precludes him from properly grasping (both intellectually¹¹ and ‘politically’, as it were) that which is properly his.

Anselm acknowledges the theological precedent set out in Augustine’s and other ‘ransom’ and ‘deception’ arguments, placing them in Boso’s mouth (*CDH*, I: 6-7) noting that “unbelievers” raise “objections” against the fittingness of God’s chosen means for salvation on the basis of these arguments.¹² Indeed, as a character in the dialogue, Anselm gives no indication that it is in any way problematic to say that humankind was liberated from bondage to sin by being ‘ransomed.’ The problem that Anselm the *author* of the dialogue seems to have with the ransom and deception arguments is that “from different viewpoints...the same action is both just and unjust, and it is possible that it may be judged by one person just and by another person unjust” (*CDH*, I: 7). As noted above, this ambiguity derives from the ambiguity of satanic authority—though the history of the interpretation of Anselm’s argument shows that his own approach does not entirely avoid the problem of ‘apparent injustice.’ It seems evident that Anselm felt the force of the

¹¹ In *De Trinitate*, one gets the sense that the devil himself is among those whom Augustine accuses of failing to have a scriptural hermeneutic adequate for understanding the dual nature of Christ.

¹² Thus Williams overstates his case when he claims that Anselm “dropped as inadequate a theory of God’s ransom to or trickery toward the devil” (248). Williams explains Anselm’s decision to drop this “theory” by focusing on one aspect of Anselm’s context, namely, the broad historical shift from a sacramental theology centered around baptism to one centered around penance and the Eucharist. Since the Eucharist had replaced baptism as the highest Christian sacrament, Williams argues, Anselm found it necessary to articulate a theory of the atonement reflective of “the prevailing *subjective*, experiential, sacramental means of appropriating the effects of the atoning act” (245), namely Eucharist. While this shift is certainly historically important, the way Williams grants it privileged explanatory force nonetheless detracts 1) from the aspect of his context to which Anselm actively draws our attention, namely the polemical context of *Cur Deus Homo*, and 2) from the questions that Anselm exercised himself in engaging, namely the problem of the seeming justice and injustice of God’s action in Christ’s passion and death. The fact that Williams describes Anselm’s innovation as being occasioned by a need to respond to the way his contemporary Christians were “appropriating the effects of the atoning act” is itself noteworthy as it seems something of an anachronistic (because Lutheran) formulation.

objections noted by Boso quite deeply if they motivated him to so radically alter his approach to accounting for the fact that “the Most High should stoop to such humble things; that the Almighty should do something with such great laboriousness” (*CDH*, I: 8).¹³ With this, Anselm sets out to argue that what took place in God’s “stooping” and Christ’s “labor” was not the humiliation of God but the exaltation of man, and that the atonement does not impugn the rationality of the divine will (*CDH*, I: 8).

By What Necessity?

Anselm frames his argument for the necessity of the atonement by noting the disjunction between the condition of mankind (“the human race...had been completely ruined”) and “what God had planned for mankind” (*CDH*, I: 4), namely “a state of blessedness which cannot be had in this [post-lapsarian] life” (*CDH*, I: 10). Given this disjunction and that it would be unfitting for God’s plan to go unrealized, some means for the redemption of humankind needed to be found. It is rather crucial that the opposition at this point in Anselm’s argument (*CDH*, I: 4) is between a “ruined” humankind and a humankind that has been “set free,” because Anselm’s insistence on the necessity of satisfaction for sin or of sin’s punishment (*CDH*, I: 13)—an insistence that dominates the commentary of most critics—otherwise sounds strictly retributive.¹⁴ For Anselm, God’s

¹³ It bears noting that *De Trinitate* evinces a similar concern with establishing a hermeneutic according to which the humbling of God the Son is not unfitting, but rather in accord with “what the Greeks call *harmonia*” (IV. 1). This concern with “appropriateness” is particularly evident in *CDH*, I: 3-4.

¹⁴ Indeed Timothy Gorrige characterizes Anselm’s argument as thoroughly retributive. See Timothy Gorrige, *God’s Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence, and the Rhetoric of Salvation*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion 9 (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996). On the concept of retribution, see John Cottingham, “Varieties of Retribution,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 29, no. 116 (July 1979): 238–246.

plan only stood in danger of being frustrated because humankind had become enslaved to sin. For God's plan to be realized, however, humankind must be freed from the effects of sin, and this is no small matter.

According to Anselm, "to sin is nothing other than not to give God what is owed to him": "all the will of a rational creature ought to be subject to the will of God" (*CDH*, I: 11). When a creature fulfills this duty, God is honoured. When one sins, by contrast, one fails to give to God what is owed and one simultaneously inflicts an insult upon God, for in sinning, one "takes away God's honour" (*CDH*, I: 13). One remains in a state of guilt as long as one does not repay both the debt incurred by sin and the honour that has been taken away. Because one owes a debt of obedience to God in every moment subsequent to the one in which one sinned, however, repayment of the debt is impossible; the debt of obedience is infinite for the sinner. It follows that reconciliation with God by one's own means is doubly impossible. First, one cannot repay in the present moment what went unpaid to God in a past moment, for the now-obedient sinner only gives to God in the present moment what is justly owed in any case. Second, even if one were to repay in the present what went unpaid in the past, this does not address the fact that one must also "pay back more than [what one] took, in proportion to the insult which [one] has inflicted" (*CDH*, I: 11). This repayment of the debt *and the "more"* would be the "satisfaction which every sinner is obliged to give to God" (*CDH*, I: 11). When Boso states that logic of satisfaction "frighten[s him] a little" (*CDH*, I: 11) Anselm immediately delves into the reasons why it would be unfitting for God to forgive a sin "out of mercy alone, without any restitution of the honour taken away from him" (*CDH*, I: 12).

The concept of satisfaction is typically the point at which Anselm’s atonement theology seems most vulnerable to historicizing critique. Anselm is interpreted as illegitimately drawing conclusions about divine justice on the basis of analogies from medieval legal codes; for it is only according to the latter that one must offer recompense for offense proportional to the dignity of the legal status of the offended party.¹⁵ A number of considerations mitigate against this suggestion. First, Anselm wrote *Cur Deus Homo* while he was archbishop of Canterbury. It was in this office—one he resisted accepting¹⁶ and from which he later requested release¹⁷—that he would have become familiar with the vicissitudes of “satisfaction” in practice. If he requested release from his office because he “did not see how to live [in it] without detriment to his soul”¹⁸ he could hardly be mistaken for an unthinking supporter of the medieval system of hierarchically-determined honour within which the notion of satisfaction was at home. For this reason it seems unlikely that that system recommended itself to Anselm as a model for understanding divine justice. Second, at this point in *Cur Deus Homo*¹⁹ Anselm claims to argue “supposing Christ were left out of the case” (“*remoto Christo*”).

¹⁵ Gorrings notes that whereas “a blow exchanged between two peasants might call for nothing but a mutual pardon...if directed against a king [the same act] would threaten the integrity of the whole social order and demand the death sentence.” *Ibid.*, p. 93. R.W. Southern is among the most influential commentators upon Anselm, and his articulation of the way the sinner’s offense against divine honor maps onto the logic of a peasant’s offense against the feudal lord’s honor has widespread currency in the secondary literature. See R. W Southern, *St. Anselm: Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 220–227.

¹⁶ “The king presented Anselm with the episcopal staff and it had to be held against Anselm’s closed hand, for he refused to take it.” G. R. Evans, *Anselm* (London, UK: Continuum, 2001), 15.

¹⁷ See Anselm’s Letter 206 in *ibid.*, p. 19. Evans also notes that Anselm’s biographer, an eyewitness to his life, presents “Anselm as a man of God who stuck out like a sore thumb among the worldly.”

¹⁸ Evans, *Anselm* p. 19.

¹⁹ That is, after *CDH*, I: 10 and before II: 1.

Indeed, Anselm claims a strictly logical basis for his argument; he writes for those “who are unwilling to believe anything without a prior demonstration of its logicity” (*CDH*, I: 10). It follows that he must exclude reference to his contemporary legal norms as rigorously as he excludes reference to that which Christ reveals about the nature of divine justice.

At the same time, however, one must keep in mind that Anselm’s intention with “*sola ratione*” is likely to differ significantly from what many assume this to mean.²⁰ Anselm vows to write the treatise in light of 1 Pet 3:15—viz. in order that his readers could be ““ready always to give satisfaction to all who ask for the reason for the hope that is in us”” (*CDH*, I: 1). Evans notes that the “unbelievers” cited in I: 6 appear to have been Jews with whom Anselm’s contemporary Gilbert Crispin was polemically engaged,²¹ and David Brown suggests that Anselm may have had Muslims in mind as well.²² If this is the case, the criteria for what could count as a “demonstration” change significantly. Logical arguments that are formulated with biblical (or Abrahamic) categories like sin, grace, expiation, and redemption and biblical (or Abrahamic) images of God in mind would have been more easily licensed by those to whom Anselm responds than those based upon medieval law codes. David Brown suggests that scripture (the study of which

²⁰ See Anthony Bartlett’s typical commentary on what Anselm’s “*sola ratione*” can and cannot mean. *Cross Purposes*, 76 n. 90.

²¹ Evans, *Anselm*, p. 71-72.

²² David Brown, “Anselm on Atonement,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 283. See also R. W. Southern, *St. Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 198-202.

formed Anselm's principle occupation, as a Benedictine monk) and Platonism ought to be considered among the crucial sources for Anselm's logic.²³

Warrant for Brown's suggestion that scripture remain in consideration as a source for Anselm's 'logical' argument may derived from *Cur Deus Homo* itself. In I: 18, Anselm explicitly states that he expects his conception to square with Scripture: "If I say anything which is undoubtedly contradictory to Holy Scripture, it is wrong; and, if I become aware of such a contradiction, I do not wish to hold to that opinion." Although Anselm says this with reference to his somewhat speculative discussion of whether redeemed human beings were created solely for the purpose of replacing fallen angels, his language in I: 18 parallels closely the description he offers in I: 2 of the way the entire work should be understood. Anselm writes in I:18, "even if I may seem to be proving it logically," his treatment of these questions is a) offered in response to specific questions asked by particular people ("your questioning"), b) requiring confirmation by a greater authority, and c) provisional in that it awaits further divine revelation. "It is not to be accepted as having any validity beyond the fact that it seems for the moment to be so" (*CDH*, I: 18).

Two conclusions follow from this. First, while Anselm's argument may be proto-Scholastic in style, Anselm himself evinces a greater sensitivity to the historicity of his own 'logic' than is typically assumed. Given this, those who would defend Anselm by

²³ Brown, p. 286.

taking his claim to argue on a strictly logical basis at face value²⁴ do him just as much a disservice as those who would criticize him for failing to do so.²⁵ Second, while Anselm makes his argument *remoto Christo*, Anselm seems not so much to have bracketed a scriptural understanding of God and of God’s will for humankind so much as he seems to have bracketed *specifically* Christ’s redemptive work.²⁶ Karl Barth’s claim that “Anselm’s premises were all in any case implicitly derived from revelation”²⁷ suffers only from imprecision—since the particular way in which this ‘implicit derivation’ takes place nonetheless requires an account. Barth is clearly correct in arguing that Anselm’s methodological maxim *fides quaerens intellectum* seems to have guided him in writing the *Cur Deus Homo* much more than is commonly assumed.

On Unregulated Sin and Divine Glory

Returning to the text of *Cur Deus Homo*, we see that Anselm argues that it would be unfitting for God to allow sin to “slip by unregulated” for this would entail that sinfulness, in being treated like righteousness, would be like God, possessed of the freedom of being subject to no law (*CDH*, I: 12). In such a case, righteousness, by contrast, would be in a position of lesser freedom as it would remain subject to that law which stipulates that one give God what is owing to God. This makes it clear that God’s

²⁴ See the section entitled “Anselm on the Need for Atonement: Polemical Considerations” below regarding the polemical context and pastoral function of *Cur Deus Homo*.

²⁵ Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 76 n. 90.

²⁶ It bears noting also that Anselm does not bracket this work for the entirety of the work, as his discussion of Christ and Christ’s work becomes rather openly reliant on the New Testament in Book II. As I discuss below, Anselm works hardest to bracket Christ’s work particularly in the section under discussion, from I: 12 to I: 24.

²⁷ Brown p. 283.

unwillingness to forgive is disanalogous with a human being's unwillingness to forgive. Since God is the measure of justice, freedom, and benevolence, "one should not give the name of 'benevolence' to something which brings about a result unfitting for God." One ought rather to conclude that "it does not belong to his freedom or benevolence or to will to release unpunished a sinner who has not repaid to God what he has taken away from him" (*CDH*, I, 12).

Thus far this may seem a rather question-begging argument; it seems as though one must accept, on the one hand, that the unfittingness of sin's going unregulated makes God's regulation of sin by wrath just, and, on the other, that because God's actions cannot fail to be just, the fact that God does regulate sin by wrath makes that regulation fitting. If the case for this kind circularity is pressed, Anselm's argument seems particularly vulnerable to the objection that God is more concerned about preserving his own honour than with reconciling humankind to himself. Indeed, if sin takes away God's honour and if the punishment of the sinner redounds to God's honour (*CDH*, I: 12), the argument that Anselm's formulation harbors a "mythological conception of God [that presents God] as the mighty private man...incensed at the injury done to his honour and [who] does not forego his wrath till he has received an at least adequately great equivalent"²⁸ seems well grounded.

²⁸ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (London, U.K.: Williams and Norgate, 1899), vol VI, p. 76 in *ibid.*, p. 291.

This objection only has force, however, if the particular conception of “fittingness” that Anselm has in mind is not kept in view. As Forde notes, while Anselm clearly employed ideas from the realm of law and justice, “Anselm did work with the more aesthetically tinged Augustinian concept of *order* rather than strict justice and law.”²⁹ Although Boso says that it is “self-evident” that “there is nothing more intolerable in the universal order than that a creature should take away honour from the creator and not repay what he takes away,” (*CDH*, I: 13) exploring the premises implicit in this judgment will repay the effort.

Strictly speaking, God’s honour is inviolable: “Nothing can be added to, or subtracted from the honour of God, in so far as it relates to God himself” (*CDH*, I: 15). However, “when a rational being does not wish for what is right, he dishonours God, with regard to himself, since he is not willingly subordinating himself to God’s governance, and is disturbing, as far as he is able, the order and beauty of the universe” (*CDH*, I: 15). There are therefore two orders of divine honour: there is God’s inward, inviolable honour and there is that honour of God that owes to God in virtue of God’s just ordering of the universe. It seems that these kinds of honour map more easily onto the biblical language of divine *glory* than onto the legal language pertaining to the restitution of a medieval lord’s *honour*. It is the former order of honour/*glory* that has been set “above the heavens” (Ps. 8:1), and the latter order of honour/*glory* (in which God’s sovereignty is *exercised*) in view of which God’s name is “majestic...in all the earth” (Ps. 8:1). It is the

²⁹ Gerhard R. Forde, “Seventh Locus: The Work of Christ,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 38.

latter order of divine honour that admits of a certain kind of violation, though it bears noting that when the creature violates divine honour, the creature only violates it “with regard to himself” (*CDH*, I: 15). Because the created order was created with the intention that each creature participate in and contribute to that order’s beauty, and because the beauty of that order testifies to the glory of its creator, when a creature fails to act in accordance with the creator’s intention that creature interrupts the directness with which the created order testifies to God’s glory.

Sin as Self-Exclusion

Anselm’s qualifier “with regard to himself” (*CDH*, I: 15) is crucial in that the interruption in the directness with which creation testifies to God’s glory will be particularly felt by the defaulting creature. While a creature’s sin is only objectively intelligible as a mysterious act of will, that sin fundamentally alters the way in which the sinful creature’s will operates; the order out of which the sinning creature has opted by sinning will seem less beautiful to him—even to the point that the creature’s sin may seem retrospectively justified to the sinful creature. Indeed, this is the impulse of the doctrine of original sin (which Anselm affirms even of Mary in *CDH*, II: 16); sin damages the fallen creature’s will to the point that the ‘fitting’ order—the order that is maintained when the creature responds to God’s gift of a possible happiness with the counter-gift of free obedience—does not seem fitting to the creature. David Brown is worth quoting at length here:

For [Anselm], as for the New Testament, everything in the world should be seen in essentially teleological terms, as created with a divine purpose to be fulfilled.... It is not, then, that God has

laid down some rules which inferiors have violated and so needs satisfaction for such infringements, but rather that human beings have been made so that they can only be fulfilled if they fulfill or satisfy what is owed to God because of how He has made their natures. God made human beings for eternal bliss through their loving God for His own sake, which means that it is only when their natures are ordered aright in this way that salvation becomes possible for them.³⁰

The Augustinian resonances in Anselm's conception of human happiness in its connection with justice are less pronounced in *Cur Deus Homo*. Still, brief consultation of Anselm's *De Veritate*³¹ reveals that Brown's contention regarding Anselm's understanding of the essentially teleological orientation of all creatures is well founded: when Anselm describes justice as rectitude, he conceives this as a creature's natural movement towards its end, illustrating with reference to the heat of a fire, the motion of a stone in the air toward the ground, the motion of a horse to pasture, and a rational creature willing the preservation of rectitude for its own sake (§12). Moreover, in *De Conceptu Virginali*³² one sees that Anselm, like Augustine, describes evil, sin, and injustice as "nothing" (§5-6).

Anselm understands God's punishment of sin as deriving from God's commitment to governing and preserving the created order's beauty despite sin, and it seems that only Anselm's *remoto Christo* style of argument prevents him from arguing that God's maintenance of this order should be understood as the expression of divine love. By means of punishment, God secures the modalities of the order in which human beings participate such that the disturbance enacted by the creature's sin is only ever a

³⁰ Brown, 292.

³¹ Anselm, "On Truth," in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, trans. Ralph McInerny (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 151–174.

³² Anselm, "On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin," in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, trans. Ralph McInerny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 357–389.

disturbance of the order as subjectively perceived by the fallen creature—while God’s lordship and the order itself remain secure.

In I: 14, Anselm describes these modalities. If humankind is obedient, God’s honour is preserved. If a human being sins, but then pays recompense for his sin with repentance, God’s honour is preserved (through God’s own suffering, as we shall see). If a human being sins and is unwilling to pay recompense, “God brings him into submission to himself against his will, by subjecting him to torment...in this way [showing] that he is his Lord” (*CDH*, I: 14). Even in this worst case, God’s subjection of the sinner to torment testifies to the inner character of the entire order as a gift:

since man was created in such a way as to be capable of possessing blessed happiness were he not to sin, when he is deprived of blessedness and of all that is good on account of sin, he is paying back what he has violently seized from his own property (*CDH*, I: 14).

Though Anselm does not quote Job 1:21, it seems that his logic is designed to affirm Job’s judgment: ““The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”” In punishing, God revokes that which was initially given the sinner, namely the possibility of a blessed happiness. The revocation of the sinner’s possible blessed happiness—the blessed happiness that the sinner attempted to seize for himself—simultaneously testifies to the fact that the gift of a possible happiness was indeed given and that it remains to be sought through obedience or, if sin has intervened, through repentance. The order itself remains inviolate and beautiful, as does God’s honour. This is the way the punishment of a sinner redounds to God’s honour, according to Anselm.

God as a “Private Mighty Man”?

The charge that Anselm’s conceptions of divine wrath and of God’s preservation of his honour through punishment derive from analogies with medieval legal codes has it the wrong way around. The God described in *Cur Deus Homo* is not modeled after a medieval lord. Rather, interpreters of his argument read Anselm’s argument through the lens of a retributive rather than regulative and restorative conception of justice—because all punishment is understood as retributive in character. Upon the recognition that this reading yields a description of divine justice that is ill in accord with their own political and aesthetic sensibilities (and it bears noting here that the political and the aesthetic are categories united rather than divided within the Latin term *ordo*), Anselm’s argument—and particularly his claims regarding “necessity” in *Cur Deus Homo*—is judged hubristic and fundamentally wrongheaded.

That pursuit of restitution of one’s honour would lie within a sovereign’s prerogative seems intolerable to those who have adopted “the gentle way in punishment” and have “cut off the king’s head.” Consider: 1) a medieval lord possesses his authority and the honour owing to his station due to the confluence of contingent historical factors— typically, his heredity, his particular realm’s history, the customs of his age, etc. 2) When a medieval lord pursues the restitution of his honour from an offender, the lord assumes that the factors that grant him sovereignty do so legitimately. 3) Moreover, the medieval lord’s pursuit of the restitution of his honour is, like all juridical procedures within the *saeculum*, subject to the vagaries of political jockeying, insufficient evidence, corruptible witnesses, improper procedure, and the fallibility of the sovereign’s own

judgment both in judging the evidence and in assessing the measure of his own dignity. The justice yielded when a medieval lord pursues the restitution of his honour therefore differs in kind from the action of God in maintaining order despite the fact that Anselm describes divine justice in terms that look quite similar.

The familiarity of the concept of honour would have allowed Anselm's description of God's exercise of sovereignty precisely the kind of ready intelligibility he sought—though it must be granted that his immediate audience was likely led by his argument also to affirm the legitimacy of the punishment of criminals by earthly authorities.³³ But it must equally be granted that this is a latent rather than an intended effect precisely because Anselm's argument can be read otherwise as a hollowing out of the conception of honour that earthly sovereigns claim for themselves. To put it differently, the political theology of *Cur Deus Homo* can be read in the tradition inaugurated by Augustine's *City of God* in that the true glory and true justice of the City of God are set off against the Earthly City's counterfeit glory and its splendidly vicious justice.³⁴ Consider: 1) divine sovereignty is not at all contingent, but is logically entailed by God's creation of the universe and by God's gracious will to continue sustaining that order despite his creatures' sin. 2) When God pursues the restitution of his honour, this is not so much for the sake of his own inward honour—which is inviolable in any case—but for the sake of the stability of the order he has created and in the beauty of which

³³ On this point, Timothy Gorringer's analysis in *God's Just Vengeance* is quite pressing.

³⁴ Indeed, I would argue that Book XIX of Augustine's *City of God* ought to be read not as a political manual for earthly sovereigns but as a *reductio* of any earthly sovereign's claim to execute a perfect justice, given the darkness of the human will and its hiddenness to the authority that would judge it. Augustine, *City of God*, 909–964.

human beings may participate through obedience. And 3) when it comes time for God to execute justice, it is the Slain Lamb that sits in the divine judgment seat.

Anselm on the Need for Atonement: Polemical Considerations

Cur Deus Homo goes beyond hollowing out earthly honour, however, and explores that mystery of divine justice according to which the Lamb of God became the Slain Lamb. Although I have gone a good ways toward exonerating Anselm of the charge of illegitimately analogizing—perhaps too far!—the account articulated thus far still lacks an account of why it was fitting that Christ’s praiseworthy desire for obedience which, as we have seen, conduces to the honour of God a) should issue in Christ’s death, and b) should lead to the salvation of humankind.

According to Anselm’s argument, human beings are either obedient, disobedient and willing to make recompense through contrition and penance (the latter being an outward display of the former, which is an inner disposition finally visible only to God), or disobedient and unwilling to make recompense. Thus far, the place of the obedient and the obstinate is clear. But recall that even the recompense human beings would make for sin ought not to avail because the offense against the divine honour caused by sin is infinite and, further, that such recompense, strictly speaking, is only ever a form of the obedience that is rightly owed to God in any case (*CDH*, I: 20). Given this, and that all human beings have sinned, the question remains: if human beings can only take their place within the divine order when they have truly become equals of the sinless angels (*CDH*, I: 19), like them, enjoying the state of blessedness of those without sin, how can

human beings be freed from the effects of sin—that is, how can the debt of sin be paid and how can the penitence of a sinner be deemed recompense for sin?

Anselm argues that the debt of sinful humankind is infinite and cannot be paid by a sinner. Further, if that debt is to be paid, it is necessary that “someone who can give to God from his own property something which exceeds everything which is inferior to God, must himself be superior to everything that exists apart from God” (*CDH*, II: 6). This means that the one who gives to God must be divine. Because it is also true that “the obligation [to pay the debt] rests with man,” it is necessary that the one who pays the debt be a member of the human race. Given this, the answer to the question that forms the title of *Cur Deus Homo* is quite clear: that God should become man is logically entailed by three premises: 1) it would be unfitting for God not to realize his plan for humankind (for this would suggest that God’s plan was ill-conceived or that God lacked the power to realize his plan) (*CDH*, I: 25), 2) God freely subjects himself to the force of his own will to do good and thus graciously wills to realize his plan for humankind (*CDH*, II: 5), and 3) there was no other means for the payment of the debt owed to God than the incarnation and death of Christ.

It must be acknowledged that third premise seems suspect at this point. It seems suspect for two reasons. The first has to do with Anselm’s understanding of necessity, upon which the exclusion of other means of salvation depends. In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm seems to equivocate in his usage of the language of necessity. At some points he uses necessity language in what looks like a strictly logical sense and at others he uses it in what can only be called an aesthetic sense. Because the former would seem binding

both for unbelievers and believers, and the latter would seem only to hold for Christians whose understanding of divine justice and order has been formed by Christian scripture, there seems to be a deep ambiguity to Anselm's argument. The second reason why the third premise (no other means for paying the debt) seems suspect derives from the first reason; the disconnect between the logical and aesthetic senses of necessity is particularly acute if one reads the argument of *Cur Deus Homo* as if it is intended to convince any potential reader. Indeed, read in this way, the stakes of his argument are raised to an almost impossible height. Even if his argument that there were no other means for the payment of the debt owed to God were to be convincing, it would still seem to fall short of ruling out other possibilities. The *ambiguity* in Anselm's usage of necessity language leads his argument into *incoherence* if one assumes that Anselm writes for an audience of 'logical persons.'

It is at this point it becomes rather crucial that the polemical context of *Cur Deus Homo* be kept in mind. Despite her status as one of the best contemporary Anselm scholars, it can be argued that G.R. Evans helps to perpetuate an anachronistic reading that views Anselm's choice of methodology through the lens of Scholasticism when she describes him as having "chosen the hardest route so as to gain the proof which will convince the largest number of people."³⁵ While many have found Anselm's argument compelling because of his *remoto Christo* method, construing Anselm's choice of this method as devoid of historically contingent rhetorical considerations seems problematic.

³⁵ Evans, *Anselm*, p. 72.

His method may be better understood in terms of its polemical context since, as Brown notes, “both [Muslims and Jews] believe that atonement is possible without an incarnation.”³⁶ One might further conjecture that the legal terms in which Anselm describes the divine-human relationship may be an attempt, on Anselm’s part, not to make his argument in terms that are logically neutral, as it seems Evans would have it, but rather, in terms familiar and (likely) acceptable to his interlocutors. Evans’ approach latently encourages the reader to miss rather crucial transitions such as those between I: 10 and I: 11 (when Anselm shifts into a style of argument explicitly directed at those who accept nothing without demonstration) and I: 25 – II: 1 (to be discussed presently). Evans’ approach thus exacerbates the disconnect between the logical and aesthetic senses of ‘necessity,’ and makes Anselm’s choice to have his argument double back upon itself (such that Anselm restates the major premises in the argument at numerous points) nearly unintelligible. For if Anselm’s aim was, as Evans herself states, to “woo his readers into enjoyment not only by presenting them with satisfying arguments, but also by pleasing them with elegant writing,”³⁷ it seems that both the argument of *Cur Deus Homo* and its elegance could have been improved through the elimination of such differences in voice.

Anselm’s “Logical Necessity”: Theological Logic

The division between the first and second books of *Cur Deus Homo* is not made simply to avoid “tedium [caused] by too long a continuous argument” (*CDH*, I: 25) nor is

³⁶ Brown, “Anselm on Atonement,” 283.

³⁷ G. R. Evans, *Anselm and Talking About God* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1978), 145.

it a matter of mere contingency. It rather marks a transition keyed by a shift in the desire of his audience. Anselm's desire in Book II is to respond to Boso's desire that his faith be strengthened and to take further those who have been shown the necessity of the atonement. Those who have become convinced that Anselm has shown that it would be unfitting for God not to bring his plan for humankind to fulfillment will agree that at this point, "one either has to look outside the Christian faith...for the satisfaction that needs to come about, or, alternatively, one should have an undoubting belief in that faith" (*CDH*, I: 25). Boso asks of Anselm, "bring me to a position where I may understand that, in terms of logical necessity, all the things which the Catholic faith teaches us to believe have to be the case, if we wish to be saved" (*CDH*, I: 25). The "logical necessity" Anselm has in mind is therefore not "logical necessity" as such; the subtlety with which Anselm negotiates perspectives in *Cur Deus Homo* suggests rather that, for Anselm, logic itself derives from authoritative sources. To claim, then, that in Anselm's work "all appeal to authority in fact disappears,"³⁸ or that one finds in Anselm "the subjection of tradition to the criticism of reason,"³⁹ is to miss the role that authority continues to play in Anselm and to claim for Anselm a concept of "reason" that has made too clean a break with the tradition within which Anselm situates himself.⁴⁰ Anselm seems quite conscious that reference to authoritative sources is ineliminable in human life and he writes *Cur Deus*

³⁸ Brown, 283. It bears noting that Brown sees this as only *relatively* true, that is, "in...contrast to the theology of the time." He also mentions that Anselm does not quote other texts in place of Scripture.

³⁹ Robert S. Franks, *The Atonement* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1934), 14.

⁴⁰ The approaches to Anselm taken by Evans and Barth diverge sharply at this point.

Homo in light of this.⁴¹ So we need not conclude from the fact that Anselm continues to refer not to Christ but to “someone who is God and man” (*CDH*, II: 6) in the subsequent argument that *Cur Deus Homo* has no particular audience (or that it has the above-cited audience of ‘logical persons’) in mind. On the contrary, the fact that his argument becomes more directly conversant with Christian doctrine indicates that his subsequent argument is designed to convince Boso (and other Christians like him) directly and, indirectly, those (“unbelievers”) who will accept the claim that the divine-human relation admits of the quasi-legal construal described above, and who have followed Anselm’s argument (through *CDH*, I: 11-I: 25) that an atonement is necessary.⁴²

Indeed, it seems that Anselm’s subsequent argument is designed to show how Christian doctrine has a fitting answer to a question that seems to him inadequately addressed within Judaism and Islam. That question regards “how God saves mankind, when he does not forgive a person for his sin if the person in question does not give back what he owes on account of that sin” (*CDH*, I: 25). This is a pertinent question precisely because disobedience to divine law is a reality for Jews and Muslims. To put it differently, Anselm’s subsequent argument in *Cur Deus Homo* may be interpreted as a Kierkegaardian “second ethics,” one designed to respond to the fact that a first ethics (of

⁴¹ On this point, Brown’s argument seems somewhat divided against itself; he suggests, on the one hand, that Anselm eschews argument from authority while noting, on the other, that authoritative sources were clearly influencing the formulation of Anselm’s ‘logic.’

⁴² Further support for this analysis of the intended audience may be found in *CDH* I, 20: “This is not addressed to anyone apart from those who either looked forward in anticipation to Christ before his coming, or believe in him after his coming.” It would seem that Anselm’s hope is that the Jews and Muslims with whom he is engaged could, respectively, become those who “looked forward in anticipation to Christ” and those who “believe in him after his coming.”

the law and choice) is “shipwrecked on the sinfulness of the sinful individual.”⁴³ Thus whereas in the first book of *Cur Deus Homo*, the aesthetic and logical senses of necessity were shown to be harmonious by virtue of the theological ground shared between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the second book articulates the fittingness of Christian truth in its specificity.

In book II, then, Anselm harmonizes the aesthetic and logical senses of necessity by pointing, in *a posteriori* fashion, to the actuality of the atonement. He hopes to show a) that Christianity articulates the means by which God saves humankind despite the infinite debt that arises from sin and b) that this is good news to all who claim that a right relation to God involves giving God his due honour through obedient action—because it is precisely their debt that is infinite. If his reader will accept his logic, the reader will see that other means of salvation are excluded simply by the fact that God *actually* addresses the infinite debt in this way.⁴⁴ Anselm argues that “something which is truthfully deduced to be the case by unavoidable logic ought not to be subjected to doubt even if the reason why it should be the case is not perceived” (*CDH*, I: 25). Thus if unavoidable logic shows that Christ’s death does repay the debt and does save humankind, even if there could have been other means of salvation, those other means are irrelevant for the

⁴³ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: a Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Albert Anderson and Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 20.

⁴⁴ Recall the above-cited seemingly suspect third premise from the section entitled “Anselm on the Need for Atonement: Polemical Considerations

one who actually understands himself to have been saved from sin, for other means have been deemed unfitting *by God*.

This logic is convincing for Anselm's particular interlocutor in *Cur Deus Homo*—Boso—for Boso has made the movement of faith that enables the aesthetic and logical senses of necessity to be thus harmonized. Moreover, one would not call his decision to understand them as harmonious irrational. As author, Anselm does not address the ambiguity introduced by his seeming equivocation because he cannot—except by using his authorial prerogative to represent Boso as one who has accepted, through a kind of logical reasoning, their harmonization in the mystery of the divine decision to save humankind through Christ.

Anselm's argument in Book II therefore alternates between two tasks: first, Anselm examines the conditions necessary for human salvation through arguments that deploy terminology acceptable both to his avowed interlocutor (Boso) and to his extra-dialogical interlocutors, the latter of whom may or may not have made the movement of faith. And second, Anselm explores, in *a posteriori* fashion, the mysterious divine decision to save humankind by means of the incarnation and death of Christ in order to demonstrate that it is not only not unfitting, but, on the contrary, necessary—which is to say both needful and appropriate.

A Fitting Means of Salvation

Interestingly, in the sequence of his argument, Anselm first pursues the latter task. So, Anselm argues, given that humankind is in debt to God because of sin, it is necessary

(needful and appropriate) that the hypothetical savior be truly human (*CDH*, II: 6). Given that confusion of the two natures in the hypothetical savior would make the God-man either too human, too divine, or something unrecognizable as either divine or human, the natures must be unconfused (*CDH*, II: 7). Given that God wants humankind to recover its former dignity, it was necessary that the redeemer be of the same race as those he redeems. But since the hypothetical savior “will be more honorably procreated [either] from a man in isolation or from a woman in isolation” and “the sin of mankind... originated from a woman, [it is fitting that] the medicine of sin and the cause of salvation should be born of a woman” (*CDH*, II: 8). And given that the woman through which sin entered was a virgin woman, it is necessary that the hypothetical savior also be born of a virgin woman. This is the “inescapable logic” (*CDH*, II: 9) according to which “all the things which the Catholic faith teaches have to be the case” (*CDH*, I: 25). This is a logic that is “extremely beautiful” (*CDH*, II: 8) *for faith*.

Regardless of how beautifully the coming-to-be of the God-Man can be described, all this would be for naught if the work he performs does not save humankind. It is crucial for Anselm that the God-man offer his work not as payment of the devil, but strictly as a sacrifice of obedience offered to God. All other men die by obligation; death follows from sin. The *divine* qualification of the God-Man entails first, that he is not capable of sinning, because “all capability is consequent upon will” (*CDH*, II: 10) and the God-Man is not capable of willing evil (*CDH*, II: 10) (though this is a perfection in him, and thus something praiseworthy), and, second, that he is possessed of an omnipotent will, and can thus “lay aside his soul and take it up again” (*CDH*, II: 11). It follows, then,

that the death of the God-Man, cannot be said to issue from sin. Rather it issues from the God-Man's permission: "if it is his will to give his permission, it will be possible for him to be killed" (*CDH*, II: 11). Moreover, the God-Man cannot be understood as willing his own death, for that would be blame-worthy suicide, and a form of disobedience to God. So the death of the God-Man must be understood as issuing from his will to "[submit] himself to God's will by upholding righteousness with perseverance" (*CDH*, II: 11). But in acting obediently in this way, the God-Man will "in some way...be laying aside himself, or something from himself, to the honour of God, since he will not be a debtor" (*CDH*, II: 11). The God-man's particular service therefore differs from mere creaturely obedience in that a) it is offered by one that is not in debt to God because of sin and b) it is a supererogatory service—that is, it is a service that is given to God purely as a gift, since the God-Man, as God, possesses, to use Anselm's language, his own person "independently" as his property (*CDH*, II: 10), but voluntarily lays this aside in order to bring God honor.

Anselm emphasizes the aneconomic nature of what would otherwise look like debt cancellation. Boso asks, "if to kill him is as bad as his life is good, how can his death overcome and destroy the sins of those who killed him?" (*CDH*, II: 15). Anselm responds by pointing to the fact that whereas the manifold sins of humankind issue from the blindness that is the penalty of sin, only the God-Man's act springs from a conscious will to reconcile sinners with God (*CDH*, II: 15). Anselm further emphasizes the aneconomic character of God's restoration of human nature by arguing that it "was more miraculous than his action in bringing it into existence, [for] the restoration was

concerned with man as sinner and was contrary to what he deserved, whereas the creation was concerned with man in a state of sinlessness” (*CDH*, II: 16). For Anselm, then, both creation and reconciliation take place by a gift of God. Even the “parable” in II: 16, which leads some to suggest that one finds in Anselm an “uncritical identification of the metaphysical and the legal,”⁴⁵ rather undoes the legal as such. For in this case as in no other, law and grace coincide; the king in Anselm’s thought experiment concedes,

in view of the magnitude of the service, that any people who acknowledge before or after th[e] day [on which the hero renders his service] that they wish to receive pardon through the [hero’s] act...and that they accede to the agreement concluded on that occasion, will be absolved from all their past guilt (*CDH*, II:16).

It is clear in Anselm’s thought experiment that those who would wish to receive pardon after sinning subsequently must “be willing to give satisfaction” (*CDH*, II: 16). But when one translates the thought experiment into the salvation-historical terms that Anselm clearly has in mind (and into which he naturally slides later in the dialogue), it becomes clear that the service rendered by Christ is action by God on behalf of humankind, and the sinner’s offer of satisfaction enables forgiveness of sin only in view of Christ’s service.

It is well understood across religions that sacrifice brings atonement, and thus Christ’s death is often described as a sacrifice. And it seems appropriate to discern in Anselm’s parabolic description of Christ’s death as making satisfaction ‘once for all’ (*CDH*, II: 16) a reference to Hebrews 9:27. But Anselm here hollows out the concept of sacrifice—or rather, he seeks a genuinely biblical concept of sacrifice formulated specifically in light of Christ’s death. Here Anselm follows out the polemical

⁴⁵ Franks, 25.

implications of the scriptural concept of sacrifice, especially as they come to bear on a pre-Christian conception of sacrifice. Consider that pagan deities demand and are sustained by sacrifice. Further, paganism is characterized by an economic system within which so much suffering is reckoned equivalent to so great an offense, or so much blood is required to absorb so much wrath. A retributive economy suffices for paganism because pagan deities are genuinely vengeful—and this vengefulness is itself justified precisely because apostasy constitutes a genuine threat to the pagan deity's lordship. Insofar as the God of the Jews (or perhaps Muslims) does not cleanse his people by his own blood (Heb 9: 22-25) but rather demands that they purify themselves by means of the sacrifices (literal or metaphorical) prescribed by the law, Judaism (or Islam) may appear as a yet another pre-Christian formulation that stands in need of purification. For in such a case, the structure underlying the Jewish (or Muslim) divine-human relation shows rather too great a continuity with paganism's retributivism; Jewish (or Muslim) soteriology becomes the management of a calculable sacrificial economy, and the disjunction between God and the gods is undermined to the point of erasure.

Miraculous Salvation

The miracles of incarnation and atonement stand out in stark relief at this point. In view of the excessive character of Christ's gift of himself, paganism's sacrificial economy is finally and decisively broken open, and a genuine alternative to the pagan conception of wrath comes into being. With Christ's death—and for the first time—there is a gift of infinite value. It is this gift that outweighs all the sins of mankind and makes atonement actual. Indeed, only in light of Christ's work and thus only *a posteriori* can

one see that the economic system of reckoning was broken from the beginning, since even what we consider to be the lightest sin is, in fact, of “infinite magnitude” (*CDH*, II: 14) such that any human attempt to offer satisfaction would not avail. God the Son did not die to propitiate the wrath of God the Father if this wrath is conceived of as a threatened, fearful vengeance. God’s wrath arises out of God’s desire that the sinner become righteous. God’s wrath is expressed in God’s withdrawal from the sinner, which is, for Anselm, always in response to and in perfect proportionality with the sinner’s withdrawal from God.⁴⁶ The sinning creature experiences the wrath of God—that is, God-forsakenness—precisely in falling out of the beautiful order for which he was created. At the same moment when God the Son voluntarily endures God-forsakenness and death, he makes human participation in a divine-human economy of gift possible, for it is God in Christ that acts in human sacramental action when that action is performed in Christ’s name. And it is thus that such action can serve as the offer of satisfaction to God.⁴⁷

In grounding sacramentality, Christ himself endures God-forsakenness, and Anselm argues that he does so both voluntarily and obediently. Indeed, when Anselm reflects on this in II: 11, he breaks form and refers explicitly to Christ’s life, in which the divine quality of the God-Man—which allows the God-Man to consent to his death—is perfectly integrated with expression of the human quality, which is expressed in his

⁴⁶ The perfect proportionality of divine wrath is key to its role in maintaining in the post-lapsarian order. Anselm was surely informed in his judgment by the Vulgate’s usage of the *derelinquo* family of verbs.

⁴⁷ This does not make Christian sacramentality externalizable in the *do ut des* fashion of pagan sacrifice, for the hiddenness of the work of the Holy Spirit renders the visibility of sacramental action paradoxical in nature.

obedience. The obedience of Christ is not formless, nor is it summed up exclusively in his death. Christ lived

in the company of human beings and, while he was teaching them verbally how they ought to live...present[ed] himself as an example...How was he to present himself to weak and mortal human beings as an example of the fact that they should not depart from righteousness on account of injustices, insults, pain or death if they were not aware that he himself had experience of all these things? (*CDH*, II: 11).

By actually suffering these things, Christ becomes the example, and by suffering by his own decision, Christ shows himself sovereign over all necessity.

Thus for Anselm, Christ's death is the intervention of the one God on behalf of humankind, and a truly Trinitarian work. Anselm writes, when "Christ gave himself up to death for the sake of God's honour...the offering he made of himself was to his own honour as well as to the Father and the Holy Spirit" (*CDH*, II: 18). In this work, Christ simultaneously performs, as a man, that obedience which no other human being performs, and, beyond that, by setting aside his divinity through a mysterious and grace-ful, but nonetheless *fitting* act of will, pays the debt that all humankind owed to God on account of sin. Christ thus becomes the exemplar for true human life, and that sacrament of atonement with God that makes a happy and fully human life possible (*CDH*, II: 18). Thus in *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm describes the way in which *sacramentum* completes *exemplum* and vice versa in the self-offering of the God-Man.

Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* manages to describe the way Christ's sinlessness gives his work the quality of being *beyond* any that could be performed by any other human being, even as Christ nonetheless remains exemplary in performing it—for in pursuing righteousness even unto death he displays the kind of obedience appropriate for all

members of his race. This allows Christ's life to be ethically informative even as, beyond this, Christ's life can be described as uniquely offered *for* or *on behalf of* humankind. Anselm formulates a description of the way in which Christ's work uniquely allows for reconciliation with God in and through the way it addresses human sin both God-wardly, since Christ is the obedient human being that fulfills God's intention for all humankind, and man-wardly,⁴⁸ since Christ becomes the example the members of his race may follow in themselves coming to participate in the divine order for which they were created. In this way, Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* is able to give a logical account of the way the death of Christ, while offensive to some, is actually supremely fitting for God's purpose, in that it allows Christ to become the sacrament of which all Christians partake in the Eucharist.⁴⁹

Anselm and Luther: Alternative Augustinianisms?

Whereas the *Cur Deus Homo* is clearly the *locus classicus* for Anselm's atonement theology, Luther addresses the Cross on many different occasions, and in many different ways throughout his works. As a result, Luther's atonement theology is rather diffuse, which makes the differences between Anselm and Luther somewhat

⁴⁸ Although this terminology, which construes the atonement as being directed toward God and toward man derives from Gustaf Aulén's classic, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1937), my usage of it is polemical against the categorical distinctions between "theories" that Aulén draws in his work.

⁴⁹ Here George Huntson Williams' description of Anselm's atonement theology as "penitential-eucharistic" is clearly on point. See Williams, 245.

difficult to pin down, at least initially.⁵⁰ In treating the theme of the Cross, which is ever-present in Luther's scriptural commentaries, sermons, disputations, and treatises, Luther seems to avail himself of whatever tradition is closest to hand and most appropriate to the occasion. For example, in his *Lectures on Hebrews* and quite typically, Luther narrates the Cross in strikingly Augustinian terms; like Augustine, Luther pictures the Cross as a cosmic drama within which God's redemptive work is completed by the devil's own self-overreaching desire.⁵¹ This does not prevent Luther from using the language of "satisfaction" throughout his works, despite the fact that Anselm developed this language precisely in order to show how Christ's obedience (and that of human beings that, in penitence, imitate him) was offered in submission to the Father, and not as payment of a ransom to the devil.

That Luther does in fact take and combine these seemingly divergent approaches to describing the Cross—describing Christ's work alternately as "satisfaction" of God's demand for righteousness, and as that which redeems human beings from the devil—is itself informative. Burnell Eckardt argues, "we may be certain that Luther had a well-

⁵⁰ Kenneth Hagen remarks, "Years ago when lecturing on Luther, I was asked what Luther's theory of atonement was. My immediate reply was that Luther had no theory of atonement. See "Luther on Atonement—Reconfigured," *Concordian Theological Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (October 1997): 252 n. 3.

⁵¹ "[Christ] destroyed the devil, not by a work of God but by a work of the devil himself. For this is the most glorious kind of victory, namely, to pierce the adversary with his own weapon and to slay him with his own sword...In this way God promotes and completes His work by means of an alien deed, and by His wonderful wisdom He compels the devil to work through death nothing else than life." *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), vol. 29, p. 135. In all subsequent references, *Luther's Works* will be cited as *LW*, and citations will be made by volume and page number.

informed awareness of Anselm.”⁵² Further, six of the eight explicit references to Anselm found in the index of the *Weimarer Ausgabe* are positive.⁵³ Eckardt also notes that Luther made a “brief and tidy” summary of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* at some point between 1513 and 1516, and that Luther cites Anselm positively both early, in 1518’s “Sermon on Penitence,”⁵⁴ and late, in 1542’s “The *Pro Licentia* Disputation of Heinrich Schmedenstede.”⁵⁵ It is clear, however, that Luther would rather claim an Augustinian⁵⁶ than an Anselmian heritage when it comes to his atonement theology. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Luther would consider Anselm to be among the “theologians of glory” he describes in the “Heidelberg Disputation.”⁵⁷ According to Luther, even the penitential works that would issue from Anselm’s insistence that sinners offer satisfaction are to be numbered among those “works of man” that, “always seem attractive and good, [but] are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.”⁵⁸ Indeed, it is precisely the fact that acts of penitence are enjoined, valued and accounted attractive that makes them dangerous: for Luther it is “the unattractive works which God does in us, that is, those which are humble and devout [that] are really eternal.”⁵⁹ Luther understands this emphasis on the inner springs of an act’s motivation to be that which makes his account

⁵² Burnell F. Eckardt, *Anselm and Luther on the Atonement: Was It “Necessary”?* (San Francisco : Lewiston, NY, USA: Mellen Research University Press ; Order fulfillment, E. Mellen Press, 1992), 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883), vol. 1: pp. 319ff. In all subsequent references to this work, the *Weimarer Ausgabe* will be cited as *WA*, and made by volume and page number.

⁵⁵ *WA*, 39^{II}: 199

⁵⁶ Luther cites Augustine nine times in the “Heidelberg Disputation” and calls him the “most trustworthy interpreter” of Paul” (*LW*, 31: 39).

⁵⁷ *LW*, 31: 35-70.

⁵⁸ *LW*, 31: 43.

⁵⁹ *LW*, 31: 44.

of the way in which works ought to be valued (or rather the way in which all works other than Christ's ought to be devalued) Augustinian.⁶⁰ Since Anselm also considers himself an Augustinian, and since I have given reasons, above, why this claim may be justified, it will be helpful to compare the way Anselm and Luther understand divine wrath and satisfaction. This will also be helpful in clarifying the way they each understand the relation God's will bears to the violence of the crucifixion.

To recap what has been demonstrated above, Anselm narrates the Cross in a way that revokes any legitimacy for the devil's claim to lordship over human beings: "whatever was demanded from man, his debt was to God, not to the devil" (*CDH*, II:19). He does so in order to clear up the ambiguities that cause soteriological formulations like Augustine's to seem to "lack cogency and to resemble pictures" (*CDH*, I:4), and to demonstrate that hell and the devil are still within God's power. Although one may say that God's resolution to save humankind in the way God did issues from the necessity that humankind be made righteous—for an unrighteous humanity would 'unfittingly' impugn God's honor—the suggestion that some other force (sin, for example) *determined* God's resolution to save humankind in the way God did simply does not follow. On the contrary:

in the event that God plans that he is unalterably going to do something, even though, in the time preceding his action, what he has in mind is not going to happen, there is in him no necessity for action or impossibility of inaction, since in him it is the will alone which is operative (*CDH*, II: 17).

⁶⁰ See particularly the way Luther cites Augustine with regard to the sense in which human actions arise from the active capacity of the will in *LW*, 31: 48-50.

In other words, despite sin, God alone remains the author of necessity, and this is no less the case when Christ offers himself up in obedience to the Father.

For Anselm, Christ's action may be described as "satisfaction" of the Father's demand and the payment of a debt owed to the Father only in that Christ's suffering fully satisfies the divine demand that human beings be righteous. It is Christ's perseverance through and voluntary experience of suffering that allows Christ, as man, to give some gift to God that, while being apart from God, still exceeds in value everything which is inferior to God (*CDH*, II: 6). That Christ died violently—on the Cross—owes to Christ's resolution to lay his own person aside not out of obligation, but as a gift.⁶¹ The debt owed to God for sin is therefore not merely paid, but cancelled in view of the gift. It follows that divine wrath may therefore be said to rest on the Son according to Anselm only in that the Son experiences the abandonment by God experienced by sinners; the death of Christ turns away wrath not because God the Father's fury is vented on God the Son, but because the Son, as man, both fulfills the divine demand for righteousness and gives a gift to the Father through his deed of supererogation. If there is a moment of violence to be detected between the Father and the Son in the crucifixion, it is to be found here: the Son willingly undergoes God-forsakenness despite being sinless. Anselm gives full play to this paradox. But by this means Christ reconciles humankind with God; Christ thereby

⁶¹ In order to illustrate how it may be that Christ was not obliged to give up his person but that his choice to die was nonetheless both voluntary and the highest fulfillment of righteousness, Anselm argues that God may grant human beings "two options, under such terms that, although one option may be better, neither is definitely demanded." The example Anselm gives is that of virginity: "although virginity is better than marriage, neither is definitely demanded from a human being" (*CDH*, II:18). Although his readers undoubtedly interpreted this otherwise, Anselm clearly intended this to be strictly illustrative; he does not suggest that the gift of virginity is a supererogatory gift with reconciliatory effect.

becomes the high priest whose intercession allows sinners to approach God “with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb 10:22)⁶² to offer their satisfaction.

Luther On God’s Alien and Proper Work

For Luther as for Anselm, the atonement remains a miraculous revelation of God’s love, and thus the attempt to reduce it to a formula purged of mystery is a dangerous temptation. But if we are to understand the relation God’s will bears to the violence of the Cross in Luther’s conception, we must explore the way Luther understands God’s work in Christ as taking place under a kind of constraint.

According to Theodosius Harnack, Luther draws a distinction between God’s relation to himself and his relation to creation.⁶³ God relates to himself as love eternally. Likewise, love is God’s natural or proper work in his relation to creation. Human sin, however, drives God also to relate to his creatures in wrath, which terrifies and condemns them rather than consoling and saving them. Luther calls the terrifying and condemning work in which God engages due to sin God’s “*opus alienum*,” and it will be helpful to explore the relationship between these works of God and God’s “*opus proprium*”—God’s proper work. Luther develops this distinction on the basis of Isaiah 28:21: “The Lord will rise up as on Mount Perazim, he will rage as in the valley of Gibeon to do his deed—

⁶² It seems to me that while David Brown is certainly right to suggest that biblical sources influenced Anselm to a much greater extent than is commonly assumed, he does not become specific enough in his treatment of which sources were of particular significance for Anselm. To my mind, Hebrews is the great hidden influence on the soteriology of *Cur Deus Homo*; if Anselm is, as I have suggested, seeking a genuinely biblical concept of sacrifice—that is, one that interprets Old Testament sacrifice Christologically—what source could have been of greater value to Anselm than Hebrews?

⁶³ I owe this summary of Harnack’s interpretation of Luther to Egil Grislis’ essay, “Luther’s Understanding of the Wrath of God,” *The Journal of Religion* 41, no. 4 (October 1, 1961): 278.

strange is his deed!—and to his work—alien is his work!” This work is alien “because it is called forth, as it were, indirectly, since sin does not directly offend God’s relation to himself, but rather the eternally determined relation of God to the world.”⁶⁴ The eternally determined relation of God to the world is ultimately one of love. This love, however, which Luther understands to derive from God’s love of his own righteousness, may express itself either in love or in wrath because of sin. God’s alien work ultimately serves God’s proper work. Recognizing this, however, means affirming that the alien work of God, which issues from divine wrath and can only be an unbearable and terrible reality for human beings—this is nonetheless God’s work.

Luther deploys the distinction between God’s alien and proper work perhaps most often in interpreting the way in which the Mosaic Law is both a gift given to humankind by God for a divine purpose, and yet a terrible and terrifying reality for humankind in its sinfulness. In his commentary on Galatians, Luther refers to the role Paul ascribes to Moses in II Corinthians 3: “[Paul] says that Moses...has the ministry of the Law, which he calls a ministry of sin, wrath, death and damnation.”⁶⁵ The law was given in order that sin would be revealed and recognized as sin. This revelation, however, can only cause the sinner terror at the realization that death awaits him, for law condemns the sinner to death for unrighteousness. As the minister of the law, then, Moses performs a *divine*

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *LW*, 26:147.

service in terrifying sinners.⁶⁶ Indeed, Luther emphasizes the divine impetus of Moses' actions, and states openly,

God indeed also claims for Himself the work of slaying man...God's 'alien' works are these: to judge, to condemn, and to punish those who are impenitent and do not believe. God is compelled to resort to such 'alien' works and to call them His own because of our pride.⁶⁷

Only when the sinner's conscience is roused from its slumber by the experience of suffering is pride replaced with humility, and despair with faith. Despair is the great temptation for all who experience God's wrath: "the conscience...declares: 'You have sinned; therefore God is angry with you. If He is angry, He will kill you and damn you eternally.' And this is why many who cannot endure the wrath and judgment of God commit suicide."⁶⁸ Law, therefore, as an expression of God's wrath and judgment,⁶⁹ may drive the sinner away from God. The despair produced by this alien work of God nonetheless has a particular form, which allows it to serve his proper work, despite its strangeness. Indeed, the very strangeness of God's work and the hiddenness of the wisdom of God's "wonderful plan"⁷⁰ allow God's work to remain God's own, that is, work that remains miraculous.

Luther's *fröliche Wechsel*: The Exchange of Places

The Cross is the highest instance of God's alien work being turned to the purpose of his proper work; in this instance one form of God's alien work—law—is overcome by

⁶⁶ See *LW*, 13:79 on the same theme.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *LW*, 26:150.

⁶⁹ *LW*, 26:72.

⁷⁰ *LW*, 11:236.

another alien work—crucifixion—all for the purpose of God’s proper work—the salvation of humankind. While these are clearly alien works, they are nonetheless conducive to God’s proper work in that, by them, Christ makes satisfaction for sinners. Here again, the particular shape of God’s alien work allows it to conduce to God’s proper work. Paul Althaus summarizes Luther’s articulation: “Christ makes satisfaction for sinners in a twofold way. He fulfills the will of God expressed in the law; he suffers the punishment of sin, the wrath of God.”⁷¹ This two-fold satisfaction is consummated in the cross. Christ completely fulfills the law, which is otherwise a source of terror for humankind. This reveals the graceful purpose of the divine and “alien” gift of the law; Christ’s righteousness displays the aim of the law. The revelation of the law’s fulfillment could further terrify the sinner, however, in that it specifies the degree to which the sinner has fallen short of the righteousness that the law demands. This is why it is crucial for Luther that Christ completely satisfy divine righteousness by also suffering “the punishment which the law pronounces over transgressors.”⁷² According to Luther, God’s forgiveness of sins “has not been effected without cause—without satisfaction having been rendered to his righteousness.”⁷³ According to Luther, divine holiness and righteousness will not allow human sin to go unpunished: “justice must first be satisfied to the fullest extent.”⁷⁴ Christ absorbs the punishment due for sin, and in this way

⁷¹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1996), 203.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Martin Luther, “Second Christmas Sermon.—God’s Grace Received and Good Works to Our Neighbor. Titus 3:4,” in *Luther’s Epistle Sermons: Advent and Christmas Season*, trans. John Nicholas Lenker, vol. I (Minneapolis, MN: Luther Press, 1908), 161.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

completes the satisfaction that sinners owe to God on their behalf. Christ fulfills the law and suffers the punishment “in [the sinner’s] place and for [the sinner’s] benefit.”⁷⁵

In his commentary on Galatians 3:13, Luther finds grounds for the punitive dimension of divine wrath. Any attempt to soften the claim made in Galatians 3:13 that Christ was accursed, for example, by saying that Christ was only *accounted* accursed by men, and not by God, is illegitimate. While those who would soften this claim attempt to do so in order to defend the honour of Christ, they in fact dishonour him by distorting the significance of his act as it is given in the plain sense of scripture; Luther claims that the crucial words of Galatians 3:13, “he became a curse for us,” ought to be interpreted through Isaiah 53.12: “[He] was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” According to Luther, Paul claims in Galatians that the law finds Christ among sinners and actually and, one may even say justly, in its way, convicts and kills Christ for sin.⁷⁶ But in bearing sin, Christ actually takes away the curse that would otherwise fall upon sinners. To fail in affirming that it was by divine love that sin was laid upon Christ,⁷⁷ and that the Father commanded the Son before the Son was sent, “see to it that You pay and make satisfaction for them,”⁷⁸ and that Christ does in fact pay the price of human iniquity—failure in affirming all this implies that the curse of the law, which issues from God’s wrath, still rests on sinners. This can only cause the sinner to despair and to fall deeper into sin.

⁷⁵ Althaus, 203.

⁷⁶ *LW*, 26:278.

⁷⁷ *LW*, 26: 279.

⁷⁸ *LW*, 26: 280.

For Luther, the wrath of God is indeed the other side of the love of God, but it is real wrath; it is not simply an experience undergone by unrighteous humanity. God's wrath is God's *zornige Liebe*—a love that destroys in order to recreate that which is loved by freeing it from the limits that it imposes upon itself unto its own destruction.⁷⁹ In the Cross, the complex movement of divine love is given display; this is a love which passes through alien and destructive works (law, crucifixion) and destroys all that is earthly in humankind in order to recreate that which is higher in them. This love remains perpetually active—indeed, it must remain so, for according to Luther, human beings remain sinful even after being cleansed from original sin in baptism.⁸⁰ The vision of the Cross, which remains unsettling even for one as righteous as St. Bernard,⁸¹ is perfectly adapted for its divine purpose: it confronts the sinner with his sin even as it simultaneously offers the grounds for sin's remission and displays the highest expression of the divine love that perpetually remit sins.

One of the deep differences between Anselm and Luther comes into focus when one examines Luther's description of the way the crucifixion functions as the grounds for the remission of sin. According to Luther, Christ's death on the cross takes place outside of us⁸² and objectively, and it is on account of Christ that God does not impute sin to the

⁷⁹ Egil Grislis, 280-282.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Luther's "Disputation Concerning Justification": "Forgiveness of sins begins in baptism and remains with us all the way to death, until we arise from the dead." Martin Luther, "Disputation Concerning Justification," trans. Lewis. W. Spitz, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 34:164.

⁸¹ Martin Luther, "A Meditation on Christ's Passion" trans. Martin H. Bertram, in *LW*, 42: 9.

⁸² *LW*, 35: 177-178.

sinner. On the contrary, “‘God has laid on Him the iniquity of us all,’”⁸³ in order that when God looked out upon the whole world he would only see sin resting on Jesus Christ, while the rest of the world appears as cleansed and as righteous.⁸⁴ The sinner is justified by Christ’s blood. This justification does not consist in sin’s not existing,⁸⁵ but in its being imputed to Christ rather than to the sinner: “here...Christ marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him.”⁸⁶ This is Luther’s famous *fröliche Wechsel*: “the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner. God sees the sinner as one with Christ...The righteousness granted to the sinner is not his own produced by himself but an ‘alien’ righteousness belonging to Christ.”⁸⁷ What appears as man’s righteousness is therefore in fact God’s mercy, for human beings remain passive in receiving justification. In the same way, human righteousness is never active but only passive, as it issues not from any action undertaken by sinner himself but from the gift of faith divinely bestowed: as Paul Althaus puts it, “God justifies a man by giving him faith.”⁸⁸ By faith the sinner is found in Christ and appropriates the gift of justification that is made possible through the two-fold work of satisfaction performed by Christ on the cross.

⁸³ *LW*, 26: 278

⁸⁴ *LW*, 26: 280.

⁸⁵ “Sin is forgiven not so that it does not exist, but so that it is not imputed.” *LW*, 34:164.

⁸⁶ *LW*, 31. 352.

⁸⁷ Althaus, 227.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which Luther developed his own doctrine of satisfaction in direct conversation with Anselm's. Luther understands the punitive dimension of divine wrath in a way that makes the violence of the cross register differently than in Anselm's articulation. Anselm's account assumes the existence of a cosmic hierarchy that consigns evil to those lower and chaotic regions of creation that lack the ordering power of divine love. Anselm therefore understands the Son's descent into the world and, indeed, the underworld, as God's entry into a field of relative violence, and Christ's death as owing to his having submitted himself to the worst forms of the violence experienced by those who put themselves far from God. Here one sees Anselm's Augustinianism on full display. Luther, by contrast, assumes the existence of no such hierarchy; according to Luther the claim that the creation and sustenance of such an order is proper to God's nature can only be speculation. Luther therefore prefers to emphasize the way divine sovereignty is exercised in God's manipulation of all historical forces, even those which lead to Christ's death. Indeed, with Luther one can say that it is the blood of Christ that satisfies divine wrath and allows God to account the sinner justified. While Anselm would admit that the suffering of Christ an important aspect of the atonement, it is not that the suffering of Christ functions as a ground for the reconciliation of the world to God. The suggestion that divine wrath was stilled by the sacrifice of the innocent Christ according to a well-established sacrificial calculus would work against Anselm's purpose, which is, to establish, *contra* the Jews (and Muslims) the necessity, uniqueness, and ultimacy of Christ's priestly intercession.

A Logic of Redemption

If we are to understand the reasons why Anselm and Luther assess the significance of the violence involved in the crucifixion differently, it is crucial that we take note of the way the ground underneath the atonement theological question has shifted between these two theologians.

Anselm contents himself in *Cur Deus Homo* with showing that Christ's work does indeed save humankind and that Christ actually removes the effects of sin such that human beings may again assume their place within the good order for which they were created. While Anselm insists that sinners must make satisfaction in this life for their sin, and describes the way Christ's work allows acts of penitence to satisfy God, he does not specify the conditions under which such action has salvific efficacy. Anselm simply assumes that the sinner's offer of satisfaction is offered sincerely, and leaves open the question of how this is received within the divine council. To put it another way, in *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm does not spell out what could be called an eschatology of redemption; he neither attempts to describe the extent to which human beings become regenerate in this life nor does he assess the degree to which human historical action participates in divine action.

Like Aquinas and Scotus, and many of the other theologians that worked in the period between Anselm and himself, Luther retains the language of satisfaction. But subtle shifts in the usage of the term, and the coincident elaboration of the concept of merit served to obscure Anselm's own doctrine of satisfaction—or perhaps to make it

more specific than it had been in Anselm's own conception. In *Cur Deus Homo* II: 19, Anselm calls the reward by which the debt of humankind for sin is cancelled "well-merited." This became the point of departure for the Scholastic theology of merit. By the time of Scotus, a clear theoretical distinction between satisfaction and merit had developed that explained not *that* Christ's work was salvific, but *how* and *why* Christ's work was indeed salvific. For Scotus, 'satisfaction' is "the voluntary return of equivalent for equivalent," and 'merit' is that to which God gives a reward.⁸⁹ He then spells out a logic that makes sense of Christ's work. For Scotus, because Christ's death was voluntarily undertaken, Christ simultaneously makes satisfaction—since equivalent (infinite gift) is given for equivalent (infinite debt)—and merits the remission of sins.⁹⁰ Scotus disagrees with Anselm on two critical points. First, Scotus disputes Anselm's claim that *each* human sin creates an infinite debt; Scotus claims that Adam's sin creates only a finite offense, which means, since satisfaction requires only equivalence, that a finite agent can make also satisfaction. Second, Scotus argues that "some of our acts are *supererogatory*; and these can make satisfaction."⁹¹ Thus whereas for Anselm, a sinner's penitence can only register as that sinner's attempt to make satisfaction in view of Christ's meritorious gift, for Scotus, the acts that a penitent sinner undertakes to make satisfaction are understood as *meriting* forgiveness. Furthermore, whereas Anselm's articulation simultaneously makes use of economic language (for example, of debt and repayment) and *abrogates* the adequacy of this language in describing Christ's atoning

⁸⁹ Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 130.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

work, Scotus, in his effort to console anxious sinners, articulates a salvific logic that is fully commensurable with economic language.

When Luther picks up terminology that looks Anselmian, he does so when working within a problematic the terms of which are set by arguments like Scotus'. This means that the orientation of Luther's atonement theological reflection differs dramatically from Anselm's. Anselm is rightly credited with setting the stage for the development of Scholasticism and of late-medieval apparatus of Sacraments, spiritual manuals, penitential practices and casuistic reasoning. For although the *Cur Deus Homo* does not specify if or how the sinner's offer of satisfaction impacts the way in which God judges sinners at the end of days, the fact that Anselm insists that the sinner's offer of satisfaction befits the sinner's status as a creature of God and as one intended for a place within the divine hierarchy suggests that the sinner's offer of satisfaction brings the sinner into closer communion with God.

The *Cur Deus Homo* leaves wanting an account of how the sinner's offer of satisfaction is related to this closer communion, and Scholasticism worked to provide such an account by means of the development of the vocabulary of merit. So, whereas Anselm reasons back in *a posteriori* fashion from the actuality of the atonement to an account of the actions appropriate for sinners, Scotus asks, what are the principles according to which the divine intelligence acts when forgiving human sin? Scotus' question allows the formulation of an account of those actions that sinners can undertake in order that they may arrive at judgment day confident of their reward. Scotus' theology therefore differs from Anselm's in that whereas Anselm can only assume that God

defines justice, Scotus can explain *why* God’s actions are just. Scotus generates an abstract and univocal concept of justice that may be predicated of God. This grants human ratiocination the kind of autonomy that characterizes Scholasticism—and does not characterize Anselmian theology as represented above in the *Cur Deus Homo*. It also helps to explain how the question shifted from being one regarding *God’s* atoning action to one regarding *the sinner’s* justification before God.

Luther’s use of “Satisfaction”

When Luther finds the vocabulary of satisfaction useful, it is in expressing the actuality of the atonement—that is, the certainty with which the Christian can cling to the crucifixion as the event that establishes the grounds for his justification. Christ has fully satisfied God on behalf of his fellow human beings. Luther finds the vocabulary of satisfaction inadequate when Anselm’s notion of satisfaction comes into a constellation with medieval penitential practices and the Scholastic theorization of these practices. Ironically, in his “Disputation on Justification,”⁹² Luther is actually restoring an Anselmian valuation of the uniqueness of Christ’s salvific work—despite the fact that he understands himself to be arguing against Anselm. Throughout the “Disputation” Luther more or less identifies Anselm with the Scholastics and papists. This identification is particularly clear in the discussion of Argument XXVI⁹³: the Hamburg manuscript copy of Luther’s response names Anselm explicitly as the author of an inadequate (because

⁹² *LW*, 34: 145-197.

⁹³ *LW*, 34: 185-186.

overly positive) view of human nature, one that is identified in Luther's later response as the scholastics' and papists' position. Luther criticizes Anselm for claiming that original sin is the "lack of original righteousness" rather than admitting that original sin is a kind of "innate evil [that] make[s] us guilty of eternal death,"⁹⁴ because such optimism seems to admit of Pelagian interpretation. But for Anselm, a lack of original righteousness names the disorder of the human will, i.e. that in view of which the human being is less capable of partaking in God's good order. Furthermore, Anselm's insistence that the sinner's offer of satisfaction would only ever be a work of obedience (and thus not a 'satisfying' work) except for Christ's intercession likewise rules out the Pelagian interpretation that worries Luther. Luther, then, agrees with Anselm despite himself in arguing that penitence is a work that issues *from* faith in Christ and from God's gift.

Luther decries the way that the Scholastic theories of merit have made penitential practices "works" by means of which sinners can lay hold of the righteousness of Christ⁹⁵—not in the sense of becoming obedient like Christ, but in the sense of being "considered righteous on account of Christ." But in insisting, at the same time and *with* the Scholastics, that the primary question regards justification rather than atonement, Luther does not actually banish the ends-calculative logic that is his more fundamental objection. Luther does indeed challenge the Scholastic doctrine of acceptance, according to which the sinner's offer of penitence merits forgiveness. But when Luther revises this doctrine by arguing that God accepts or accounts the sinner righteous on account of

⁹⁴ *LW*, 34: 185.

⁹⁵ *LW*, 34: 153.

Christ⁹⁶ he presumes, no less than Scotus did, to offer an account of the logic with which the divine council operates in judging humanity.

So while Luther intends, in formulating his Theology of the Cross, to abrogate human judgment as to the inner meaning of human actions, he must make highly confident claims about the inner meaning of the central event of divine revelation. Moreover, in arguing that the satisfaction Christ offers on behalf of sinners is two-fold (Christ perfects righteousness and suffers punishment), Luther effectively splits the soteriological and ethical dimensions of Christ's death; the violent nature of Christ's death owes as much to the punitive nature of divine wrath as it does to the will of the historical actors who put Jesus to death. Indeed, according to Luther's doctrine of divine sovereignty, it is by an alien work of God that the wills of the historical actors involved in the crucifixion were so turned that they put Christ to death. And while one could argue that God's alien work in their satanic work does conduce to God's proper work in that Christ's violent death grounds justification, this very argument reinforces the disjunction Luther's articulation introduces between the soteriological and ethical dimensions of Christ's death.

This is not to suggest that Luther does not also understand the ethical dimension of Christ's death to be important. In addition to finding the language of "satisfaction" inadequate when it comes into a constellation with medieval penitential practices and the Scholastic theology of merit that became the popular means of their interpretation, Luther

⁹⁶ *LW*, 26:132.

finds this language “too weak to fully express the grace of Christ and [it] does not adequately honor his suffering.”⁹⁷ Christ’s suffering must be honored for the way it informs the affective piety of the true Christian; the scriptural presentation of Christ’s suffering illuminates the nature of the sinner’s existence under divine wrath. Christ’s suffering helps the Christian to understand his own experience of temptation; Luther ultimately interprets *Anfechtungen*—including his own—through the lens of Christ’s suffering, as grace. For *Anfechtungen* specify the true path and the faith necessary for perseverance on it. When earnestly contemplated, “Christ’s passion performs its natural and noble work, strangling the old Adam and banishing all joy, delight and confidence which man could derive from other creatures.”⁹⁸ When the sinner becomes a Christian by recognizing that he is pardoned by God through Christ, joy takes hold, and “Christ’s passion [can] from that day on become a pattern for [the Christian’s] entire life.”⁹⁹ Thus the Christian is strengthened against all temptation, and the Christian appropriates the benefits of Christ’s work in becoming united with Christ.

Luther and Devotional Spirituality

If Anselm’s theology marks a turning point between a baptismal atonement theology and a penitential-eucharistic atonement theology,¹⁰⁰ it seems that Luther’s atonement theology marks a similar turning point in the interpretation of the death of Christ. Luther’s interpretation of Christ’s death presupposes and arises out of daily

⁹⁷ WA, 21:264. This is Robert C. Schultz’s translation in Althaus, 202, n.5.

⁹⁸ LW, 42: 11.

⁹⁹ LW, 42: 13.

¹⁰⁰ Williams (see n. 4).

devotional practice; it is an interpretation expressly designed to further deepen the intimacy between the believer and Christ. It is easy to underestimate the extent to which this makes it polemical against the reigning Catholic sacramentality. Luther and other reformers like him viewed this sacramentality and the “equilibrium” of sacred and profane times to which it gave structure as a “bad compromise”¹⁰¹; in naming sacred certain spaces (cathedrals), objects (relics), actions (prayers, pilgrimages), and people (saints), Catholicism seemed to tolerate idolatry while also failing to sacralize the mundane. According to Luther, human existence is a paradox illuminated best and, really, only by the Cross: each human being is simultaneously under wrath and yet justified. This paradox and its interpretation through the Cross sets into motion a dynamic spiritual life, one in which the Christ’s humanity becomes the lens through which the believer understands his experience of suffering and temptation. In this life, faith names not belief in certain theological propositions or the logical rationale for certain ritualized actions. Rather, it names an immediate and affective connection with Christ, which sets this-worldly and otherworldly concerns into their order. To recognize that one is both a sinner and yet justified by Christ prevents one from having confidence in any action or doctrine—and precisely this is salvation. While one can argue (perhaps with Weber¹⁰²) that this induces anxiety, one can equally argue (with Kierkegaard¹⁰³) that this is a saving anxiety. Regardless, for Luther, one is freed from the greater dangers that

¹⁰¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 77.

¹⁰² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London, UK: Routledge Classics, 2001).

¹⁰³ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*.

threaten; one is freed, on the one hand, from the dangerous belief that one must save oneself—which induces fear that one has not done enough to earn salvation, and, on the other, from spiritual complacency, which is equally dangerous. Luther’s interpretation of the death of Christ brings wrath and justification into a dialectical relationship such that they can give structure to the Christian’s deepening inner life of faith.

Satisfaction and Punishment

If one finds an emphasis on the punitive dimension of divine wrath in Luther’s interpretation of the death of Christ, and, an account that understands satisfaction as economic calculation of equivalent human work for equivalent offense in Scotus’, one finds the confluence of these two elements in Calvin’s atonement theology. Like Luther, Calvin rejects the notion that human works are capable of meriting the forgiveness of sin, and Calvin also retains Luther’s two-fold notion of satisfaction, according to which some human being should “satisfy God’s judgment” both through obedience and by “pay[ing] the penalties for sin.”¹⁰⁴ His description of Christ’s work sounds similar to Luther’s: Calvin writes, “He offered as a sacrifice the flesh he received from us, that he might wipe out our guilt by his act of expiation and appease the Father’s righteous wrath.” But in its context in the *Institutes*, this description registers rather differently. Calvin’s emphasis in Book II of the *Institutes* is on the underlying “covenantal” unity of both Law and Gospel¹⁰⁵ despite the fact that the two covenants “differ in the mode of dispensation”

¹⁰⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), Vol I: 466. Subsequent references to this text will be made parenthetically by book, chapter, and paragraph number.

¹⁰⁵ See particularly *ICR*, II, xi. 4.

(*ICR*, II, x. 2). Against “that wonderful rascal Servetus and certain madmen of the Anabaptist sect” (*ICR*, II, x. 1), Calvin claims that “God’s people have never had any other rule of reverence and piety” than one which hopes in “a common salvation...by the grace of the same Mediator” (*ICR*, II, x. 1). Christ ratifies and finally confirms the eternal and never-perishing covenant that was, under divine appointment, symbolized in Moses’ ceremonies (*ICR*, II, xi. 4). When Calvin describes the new covenant, with Luke 22:20, as “sealed by [Christ’s] blood,” and the trans-testamental covenant as “new and eternal only after it was consecrated and established by the blood of Christ” (*ICR*, II, xi. 4), Calvin suggests that the mechanism by which Christ propitiates the Father’s wrath is analogous to that of the sacrificial animals. Even when he derides those who “hope for expiation of sin from the blood of a slaughtered beast” (*ICR*, II, xi. 10), he does so on the basis of Christ’s blood, to which he has ascribed a rather new role.

The role Christ’s blood assumes in Calvin’s articulation of Christ’s mediatorship is structured by a notion of expiation that is not, like Luther’s, punitive, but rather retributive.

God’s righteous curse bars our access to him, and God in his capacity as judge is angry toward us. Hence, an expiation must intervene in order that Christ as priest may obtain God’s favor for us and appease his wrath. Thus Christ to perform this office had to come forward with a sacrifice. For under the law, also, the priest was forbidden to enter the sanctuary without blood [Heb. 9:7], that believers might know, even though the priest as their advocate stood between them and God, that they could not propitiate God unless their sins were expiated [Lev. 16:2-3]. (*ICR*, II, xvi. 6).

Calvin insists that the sacrifice with which Christ came forward 1) is directly analogous with the blood sacrifice brought forward by the priest on the day of atonement and 2) that this blood is indeed Christ’s own: “we must begin from the death of Christ in order that the efficacy and benefit of his priesthood may reach us” (*ICR*, II, xvi. 6). While Calvin

insists upon this analogousness in order to show that Christ's sacrifice alone suffices for sin's forgiveness, Christ's sacrifice makes this forgiveness possible by "render[ing] the Father favorable and propitious toward us by an eternal law of reconciliation" (*ICR*, II, xvi. 6).

The retributive nature of this "eternal law"—and the disjunction between Calvin and Anselm on this point—becomes clear when Calvin argues, "if Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual. No—it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment" (*ICR*, II, xvi. 10). Indeed, Calvin goes on to interpret the statements from Isaiah 53 regarding the Suffering Servant's wounds and bruises as evidence that Christ's bodily suffering itself frees the wicked from the wrath that would otherwise have been inflicted upon them by divine wrath. And further, Calvin argues that just as Christ's bodily suffering makes it clear to humankind that "Christ's body was given as the price of our redemption" (*ICR*, II, xvi. 10), so the Apostles' Creed's statement that Christ descended into hell makes clear that Christ "paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man" (*ICR*, II, xvi. 10). Unless Christ had suffered this greater torment, "he would have been the Redeemer of bodies alone" (*ICR*, II: xvii. 12).

Christ's redemption of humankind is therefore complete because he suffered; his work reconciles because it appeases God's wrath. Calvin insists that the word "appeasing" (*Placatio*) (*ICR*, II, xvii. 2) is very important; it is Christ's *sacrifice* which wins free justification from God on behalf of humankind. Whereas Anselm mines

Hebrews for the way Christ's sacrifice overcomes and relativizes animal sacrifice, Calvin finds the metaphors of animal sacrifice entirely suitable for explaining the substitutionary way in which Christ's death has "the power of expiating, appeasing, and making satisfaction" (*ICR*, II, xvii. 4), and Calvin insists, "[Christ's] blood corresponds to satisfaction for us" (*ICR*, II, xvii. 5). Calvin interprets Luke 24:26 "it was necessary that the Christ should suffer" (*ICR*, II, xvi. 6) as confirming not the logical consequence of the revelation of righteousness among a wicked generation, but the logic according to which the suffering of Christ propitiates God and makes God favorable toward humankind.

Rather than meditating on the sense in which Christ's obedience is the means by which Christ "truly acquired and merited grace for us with his Father" (*ICR*, II, xvii. 3), Calvin consistently moves to verbal formulae that emphasize the suffering, blood, and death of Christ. As a consequence, Calvin's doctrine of God takes on a shape that looks rather worrisome; if the "ineffable" in Calvin's admission that "in some ineffable way, God loved us and yet was angry toward us at the same time" (*ICR*, II, xvii. 2) does not admit rather quickly of explanation in terms quite different than those in which he explains the atonement, the distinction between divine wrath and the vengefulness of a pagan deity collapses. And the possible collapse of this distinction is only made more worrying by the fact Calvin's account claims that suffering is the means by which God is made propitious toward humankind, and that "punishment [is] exactly matched by punishment."¹⁰⁶ Ironically, Calvin's claim that it was not by "simple or absolute

¹⁰⁶ Brown, p. 296. The accuracy of Brown's summary is confirmed by Calvin's reintroduction of the language of merit.

necessity,” but by God’s own “heavenly decree” (*ICR*, II, xii. 1) that Christ suffered threatens to make the supposition named by Boso in *Cur Deus Homo*, I, 10 “surprising” for every Christian: “it is a surprising supposition that God takes delight in, or is in need of the blood of an innocent man, so as to be unwilling or unable to spare the guilty except in the event that the innocent has been killed.”

As was the case with Luther, however, Calvin is concerned less with the potentially worrisome ways in which his doctrine of God can be interpreted and more with the way that his atonement theology charts a path between anxious self-doubt and unthinking confidence in salvation. Indeed, Calvin hopes his emphasis on the anger of God, on the one hand, will underline human sinfulness such that the sinner will be driven to repent, and that his emphasis on Christ’s having made satisfaction, on the other hand, will highlight divine grace such that the sinner can recognize this grace as revealed in Christ’s death and intended for his own salvation. In describing the human subject as caught between the twin dangers of melancholy despair and “facile, unthinking confidence,”¹⁰⁷ the doctrine of justification allows Calvin and his fellow Reformers to institute a new spiritual discipline, one within which Eucharist takes on a subordinate role: Christians are charged with “building the right inner attitude.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Taylor, p. 83.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

This new sacramentality sets the stage for the development of a new kind of subjectivity. The fact that the task of criticizing the doctrine of justification has been taken up as often by philosophers as theologians is actually quite unsurprising; Luther and Calvin are rightly seen within a “long-term vector in Latin Christendom moving steadily over a half millennium towards more personal, committed religious devotion and practice.”¹⁰⁹ This means that their atonement theology provided accounts of this practice that were relevant not only for post-Reformation-era spiritual athletes, but also for those whose piety took more conventional forms. The uncompromising and, in certain way, medieval¹¹⁰ terms in which Luther and Calvin articulated their theologies of justification became fodder for those critics who were offended by such medievalism or who, like Luther himself in his day, saw extant practice not as evidence of a misinterpretation of the reigning soteriology but as invalidating it. All this is not to suggest that Anselm’s formulation would have been better able to cope with the particularly modern challenges leveled against post-Lutheran atonement theology; indeed, one could argue that by tying *sacramentum* and *exemplum* so closely together in his atonement theology Anselm himself opened the door for a more devotional spirituality. Further, it is difficult to deny that his *remoto Christo* style was paradigm-making for Scholasticism both in terms of method and the apparent relation between tradition and reason within theological debate.

¹⁰⁹ Taylor, p. 532.

¹¹⁰ “‘Making up enough’ can...for Calvin no longer be compensatory and so potentially different in kind...it must be exactly the same sort of thing: punishment exactly matched by punishment...that is why Calvin can be seen as in some ways more truly medieval than Anselm.” Brown, p. 296.

The Reformers' appeals to the perspicacity of scripture neither sufficed to end debate with Catholics nor to solve the problems they diagnosed within Catholic spirituality (moral slackness, false piety, spiritual anxiety, etc.) in their own churches. One may say that Scholastic parsimony and the impulse to specify the means of grace eventually transform criticism of church doctrine—and the authorities that bear it—into something of a spiritual discipline. The impetus of Reform was democratized:

The anthropocentric turn in modern Christianity, followed by the unbelief that emerges from it, push this line farther and farther. It portrays the older forms of Christian faith, and eventually religion as such as a false spiritual perfectionism which sacrifices real, healthy, breathing, loving human beings enjoying their normal fulfillment on the altars of false Gods. All religion is ultimately Moloch drinking blood from the skulls of the slain.¹¹¹

As the debate about the image of God and the nature of divine wrath intensified, it outstripped the available traditional resources for explaining the relationship between the suffering of sinners and that of Christ on the Cross. Taylor further argues that it is through the very pursuit of the “vector” cited above that the specifically the modern self came into being, a self that is “buffered” rather than inherently open to transcendence and “porous.”¹¹² For modern selves, affirmation of divine violence as a trial or purification could only be a kind of self-mutilation; celebration of the Crucifixion with gratitude and love a repellant and frightening self-delusion.¹¹³

This theological and sacramental history sets the stage for the cultural movement Nietzsche diagnoses in *Genealogy of Morals*: the ascetic ideal within Christianity undoes

¹¹¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 648.

¹¹² Taylor, pp. 37-38.

¹¹³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 650.

Christianity itself. As Nietzsche puts it, “unconditional honest atheism...is only one of the latest phases of the [ascetic ideal’s] evolution...the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself *the lie involved in believing in God*” (*GoM*, III, §27). If one may, in Nietzschean fashion, call the metaphysics of the *Cur Deus Homo*, which assumes that God *defines* beauty, goodness, and wisdom, “the lie involved in belief in God,” one can see how Nietzsche’s claim rings true in the history of medieval to post-Lutheran atonement theology: the intellect, out of fidelity to truth, forbids itself this lie.

The fact that Nietzsche calls the secularizing movement that culminates in “unconditional honest atheism” an “awe-inspiring *catastrophe*” suggests that Nietzsche sees some value in what “dies” when this lie is forbidden. In order to assess the way his otherwise anti-Christian *Umwertung aller Werte* responds to the problematic defined in this chapter I turn now to an examination of his dealings with Christian topics, specifically, his account of memnotechnics and priestly psychology in *Genealogy of Morals*, his interpretation of the death of Christ in *Antichrist*, and his parody of the Gospel genre in *Zarathustra*.

CHAPTER TWO

Nietzsche's Critique of Atonement Theology

Introduction

Throughout Christian history, Christians have understood the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth to be the central event of world history. Theologically considered, the death of Christ is the means by which God saves, and his death therefore has implications for individuals, for the church, and for the entire cosmos in that it, respectively, fundamentally reconfigures Christian existentiality, grounds all churchly sacramentality, and keys any theology of history by bringing the present moment into relation with the *eschaton*. As historical, however, this event is open to interpretations of all kinds, and as its interpretation varies so does the way in which its ultimate significance is assessed. Friedrich Nietzsche radically challenges traditional Christian understandings of Jesus' death by situating them—and the rise of a Christian morality that bases itself upon what they say the death of Jesus has accomplished—on a historical trajectory that has led not to the salvation of humankind, but to decadence and degeneration. Indeed, for Nietzsche, atonement theology is precisely anti-salvific in that it arises from a moral impulse—*ressentiment*—that deepens human suffering by enmeshing the subject in a thought-world that is inherently life-denying.

Nietzsche argues that Christianity actively forestalls the development of a truly sovereign mode of human existence, an existence in which full expression is given to that which is noble in humankind. Recovery of a healthy mode of life requires the revaluation of those values that have caused this ill health. Nietzsche attempts such a revaluation by providing a theory of religion, an account of the relation between Christianity and

Judaism, and an interpretation of Jesus' life that simultaneously precludes it from appearing in a Christian redemptive economy *and* allows its measure of nobility to be legible. By these means, Nietzsche would undermine the ultimacy of the Christian *mythos*, first, by unmasking it as a *mythos*, and then by showing how a Christian understanding of divine judgment—with its apparatus of concepts like sin and wrath, and “states of soul” like guilt and bad conscience—issues in a self-slaying mode of life that leaves the Christian unfit for sovereignty, and thus incapable of the highest kind of human responsibility.

This chapter will examine the one work of Nietzsche's “revaluation of all values” that Nietzsche completed—*Antichrist*—and will look more broadly through his other works, paying particular attention to his late works, *Genealogy of Morals*, and *Thus Spake Zarathustra* for the way they contribute to this revaluation. This chapter will analyze Nietzsche's account of the origins of the Christian hermeneutic of Jesus' death and will attend to the way Nietzsche frames the Christian doctrine of the atonement such that it is intelligible and that it points, despite itself, to its own overcoming in Nietzsche's philosophy of the will to power and his alternative Dionysian religiosity.

Healthy and Unhealthy Religion

In order to understand the particular malignancy of the theological interpretation of Jesus' death—which sees it as making atonement for sin—it will be helpful to seek in Nietzsche's works the characteristics of Christianity's opposite number, that is, what could be called healthy religion. Nietzsche examines the history of Israel because it is

“the typical history of all *denaturing* of natural values” (A, §25). In the history of Israel one sees both an originary, healthful religiosity and the stages in a degenerating movement toward an unhealthy mode of political and religious life.

Nietzsche writes, “originally, especially at the time of the kings, Israel...stood in the right, that is, the natural, relationship to all things. Its Yahweh was the expression of a consciousness of power, of joy in oneself, of hope for oneself.” (A, §25). Israel’s theology expressed its good conscience and its gratitude for the “destinies which raised them to the top” (A, §25). Gratitude and self-affirmation are among the chief aristocratic virtues that underpin all healthy human life. Religion itself, as a human phenomenon, arises not out of a human response to a divine address, but rather in a twofold process of *self-reverence*, and—only subsequently—*projection* of a god that may be worshipped. An ascendant people “projects...its feeling of power into a being to whom [it] offers thanks. Whoever is rich wants to give of his riches; a proud people needs a god: it wants to *sacrifice*” (A, §16). According to Nietzsche, this desire to sacrifice arises from the fact that the living generation recognizes the debt it owes to previous generations, without whose sacrifices the tribe would not exist. “The conviction reigns...that one has to *pay them back* with sacrifices and accomplishments” (*GoM*, II, 19). Indeed, the efficacy of such worship is proven in that the worshipper comes more and more to embody the noble qualities of the ancestors and of the god that he worships (*GoM*, II, 19).

The arbitrariness of the god worshipped in healthy religion, and the constructed nature of its rites is no objection against its authenticity. On the contrary, according to Nietzsche the particularity of a people’s mode of worship and of the virtues that such

worship cultivates is evidence of their vitality. The immediacy with which ritual action recalls the history that gave it birth is a crucial determinant in its ability to function in inculcating the virtues present in that history; the greater this immediacy, the more vital are the virtues inculcated.

The philosopher's questions, "what is virtue?" and "can virtue be taught" are therefore wrong-headed if they seek to arrive upon some account of virtue's inherent self-consistency, and of its being teachable on account of its being self-consistent (and accessible, say, by way of recollection). Indeed, Nietzsche calls the philosophers, with their drive to conceptualize and to abstract, "those who serve conceptual idols" (*Götzendiener*) (*TI*, "Reason in Philosophy," §1).¹ The philosopher's 'analysis of the essence of virtue' issues from a kind of sacrificial drive; the philosopher's 'analysis' involves the sacrifice of some virtues for the sake of those the philosopher prizes. In thus sacrificing some virtues for others from what is an inherently irreducible plurality, philosophers follow a principle of victim-selection no less arbitrary and historically-constituted than that followed by those who selected particular totemic animals for sacrifice. And this spiritualization of the sacrificial impulse cannot, according to Nietzsche, be considered progress in religion. On the contrary, the philosopher's formulation and worship of the "highest concepts" (*TI*, "Reason," §5) actually obscures the irreducibility of the plurality of virtue, and philosophical reason unwittingly frustrates the realization of its end precisely in seeking an essence of virtue; virtues are

¹ My translation.

only knowable in their function in enabling participation in a particular mode of religious and political life.

According to Nietzsche, all mythologies and theologies must therefore be understood as human products arising from the experience and needs of human communities.

The fear of the ancestor and his power, the consciousness of indebtedness to him, increases...in exactly the same measure as the power of the tribe itself increases...in the end the ancestor must necessarily be transfigured into a god. Perhaps this is even the origin of gods, an origin therefore out of *fear!* (*GoM*, II, 19).

These claims will necessarily be scandalous to those that understand theology to be unassailable due to its origination in divine revelation. Indeed, to such as these it would appear that Nietzsche's arguments that religion arises out of a human sentiment as low and unavowable as fear, and that religion is an expression of a basic consciousness of indebtedness (Schleiermacher aside!)—these arguments could only culminate in a *reductio* of all religiosity. Nietzsche argues, to the contrary, that the dignity proper to human piety is only legible when the sense in which all theologies are political is grasped. “The entire history of ethnic struggle, victory, reconciliation, fusion, everything that precedes the definitive ordering of rank of the different national elements in every great racial synthesis is reflected in the confused genealogies of their gods” (*GoM*, II, 20). That is, theologies function politically in erecting standards of good and bad, and images of virtue, and they work in tandem with laws in summarizing the “experience, prudence and experimental morality of many centuries” (*A*, §57). Theologies and law codes both arise at a moment in the life of a people when “the most circumspect stratum declares the

experience according to which one should live—that is, *can* live—to be concluded.” At this moment this “most circumspect stratum” erects a double wall of tradition and revelation against any further innovation, and it founds the authority of the law on the theses “God *gave* it, the forefathers *lived* it” (A, §57). Nietzsche argues that in later stages of cultural development the apotheosized ancestor becomes a god, and that god becomes God. Theologies function in guaranteeing the continuation of a particular way of life, inasmuch as that is possible.

While most would account the apotheosizing movement (through which the ancestor becomes a god, and a god becomes God) a theological advance, Nietzsche’s evaluation is different. According to Nietzsche, the impulse toward monotheism reflects changes in a people’s political situation. For example, Israel initially worshipped Yahweh because “through him nature was trusted to give what the people needed—above all, rain” (A, §25). Accordingly, Israel’s worship was henotheistic rather than monotheistic. When conditions changed and Israel’s sovereignty was undermined by “anarchy within [and] the Assyrian without...they changed his concept—they denatured his concept: at this price they held on to him.” At this point, Yahweh became, according to Nietzsche, “the god of ‘justice’—no longer one with Israel, an expression of the self-confidence of the people” (A, §25). The movement by which Yahweh becomes the god of justice is also a movement through which the *original* sense of justice is effaced—this original sense of justice being a condition in which (in this case) Israel is victorious. Indeed, this is what is at stake in the “therefore” of Nietzsche’s statement, “originally...Yahweh is the god of Israel and therefore the god of justice” (A, §25). With

this ‘denaturing’, the god that was Israel’s ally and that celebrated Israel’s virtues was put to death and another god was invented—a god that demanded to be called God, and that set a pan-human standard of justice that applied even to His own worshippers.

For Nietzsche, the movement away from a perspectival justice and toward a monotheistic, “priestly” conception of justice does not owe to the movement of the Spirit in history; rather, it is a contingent fact of history, one that has its origins in the activity of particular human beings at crucial historical moments. Most importantly for Nietzsche, this movement may admit of reversal. The first two essays of *Genealogy of Morals* seek to show, first, that the priestly conception of justice is no less the expression of the perspective of a particular type of human being (despite that type’s claims to the contrary), and, second, that the process of breeding responsibility into the human animal remains incomplete to the extent that Christianity’s moral concepts—guilt, bad conscience and the like—are confused with the moral as such.

The unique feature of Israel’s religiosity that makes it unhealthy—and that makes for the underlying unity of Judaism and Christianity (as we shall later see)—becomes apparent, for Nietzsche, when one examines the moment when the priestly aristocracy of Israel held onto Yahweh despite going into exile. Nietzsche argues that all etymologies of ‘good’ lead back to “‘noble,’ ‘aristocratic’ in the social sense”, and that this ‘goodness’ is opposed to that which is ‘bad’—i.e. ‘plebian’ and ‘low’—and inheres in those who call themselves good in view of their political superiority, their ability to command, their “truthfulness,” or their success in battle (*GoM*, I, 4-5). The priestly aristocracy of Israel is not necessarily an exception to this rule; the crucial difference is that their caste’s sense of

‘good’ “calls to mind its priestly function,” which actually (latently) relativizes political station as the criterion of superiority, as it rather foregrounds the concepts “pure” and “impure” as designations of station (*GoM*, I, 6). But, Nietzsche argues, “there is from the first something *unhealthy* in priestly aristocracies and in the habits ruling in them which turn them away from action and alternate between brooding and emotional explosions” (*GoM*, I, 6). This ill health manifests itself no less in the “cures” devised by the priests—among these Nietzsche names dieting, fasting, sexual continence, and flights into the wilderness. All of these ‘cures’ manifest an “antisensualistic metaphysic... [and] make men indolent and overrefined” (*GoM*, I, 6). So, whereas “every step toward the decline of a tribe...always *diminishes* fear of the spirit of its founder” (*GoM*, II, 19) in every aristocratic form of religion, the exile is rather interpreted precisely as the *faithfulness* of its God by Israel’s priests.

Nietzsche highlights the sense in which this interpretation of Israel’s exile is a wholesale reinterpretation of Israel’s past. In *Antichrist*, Nietzsche argues that “a people that still believes in itself retains its own god” (A, §16). But the priests’ interpretation of exile did away with the ideal of “a king who is a good soldier and severe judge” (A, §25), and a god that “represent[s]... everything aggressive and power-thirsty in the soul of a people” (A, §16). In Israel’s case, the king is replaced with the “pure” priest and the victorious, violent god is replaced with the “good” god, even the “god of love”. The priests therefore anachronistically project a God more in keeping with their own self-image back into the history of Israel; thus do the priests indeed express *their* belief in themselves.

Nietzsche asserts that “the priestly mode of valuation can branch off from the knightly-aristocratic and then develop into its opposite; this is particularly likely when the priestly caste and the warrior caste are in jealous opposition to one another” (*GoM*, I, 7). To elaborate this opposition apropos of the history of Israel, if the priestly mode of valuation was held in check by the supremacy of the king in ancient Israel, the exile made this “branching” nearly inevitable, for Israel then became not only a nation without a king and *with* priests, but such a nation in a condition of subjugation. Israel therefore becomes, for Nietzsche, the priestly nation *par excellence* (*GoM*, I, 16).

Framing Life: Degeneration and Convalescence

Nietzsche makes pains to place this transformation within a frame that makes evident the senses in which this is and is not a degeneration. In *Antichrist*, Nietzsche notes,

psychologically considered, the Jewish people are a people endowed with the toughest vital energy, who, placed in impossible circumstances, voluntarily and out of the most profound prudence of self-preservation, take sides with all the instincts of decadence—*not* as mastered by them, but because they divined a power in these instincts with which one could prevail against ‘the world’ (A, §24).

In acting in accord with this “profound prudence of self-preservation,” the priests affirm themselves and thus act like every other animal. For, according to Nietzsche, “every animal...instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can expend all its strength and achieve its maximal feeling of power” (*GoM*, III, 7). And indeed, if this change is viewed within the frame of the changes human nature has undergone through history, it is not a degeneration, for “it was on the soil of this

essentially dangerous form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became *an interesting animal*, that only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire *depth* and become *evil*" (*GoM*, I, 6). Human nature is knowable only in its evolving forms, and in acquiring depth by way of priestly asceticism, new possibilities for human existence come into view.

The sense in which the Jewish expression of the ascetic ideal is, for Nietzsche, the expression of a decidedly partial ideal—and of a degenerating one at that—should be clear from the above description. Nietzsche calls the priestly form of existence “dangerous” and an alliance with “all the instincts of decadence,” and he interprets this alliance as the means by which the priests attempt to “prevail against ‘the world.’” Rather than descending from God or the gods or the self-evident structure of reason itself with imperious objectivity, Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* pictures priestly ideals arising from the swamp and muck of a primordial battlefield on which the noble, healthy, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded masters battle against ignoble, unhealthy, impotent, low-stationed—but ever-so-clever slaves. The former affirm themselves and call themselves “good” out of “the lordly right of giving names.” When they say “‘this *is* this and this,’ they seal every thing and event with a sound and, as it were, take possession of it” (*GoM*, I, 2). The slaves, finding themselves oppressed by the masters, come to recognize, first, their inability to escape subjugation within the terms of the conflict set by the masters, and, second, the fact that only subversion or rather *revaluation* of those terms can provide them with the opportunity not only to escape subjugation, but to make their own ascent to a ruling position possible. Nietzsche argues, “it is because of their impotence that in them

hatred grows to monstrous and uncanny proportions.” Out of this hatred, they enact “the revaluation of their enemies’ values, that is to say, an act of the *most spiritual revenge*” (*GoM*, I, 7).

Nietzsche argues that at an earlier point the “aristocratic value-equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God)” (*GoM*, I, 7) held sway. Later, however, Jewish hatred of all masters—what Nietzsche terms *ressentiment*—became creative, and it “fused ‘rich,’ ‘godless,’ ‘evil,’ violent,’ and ‘sensual’ into one” (*BG&E*, 195). Nietzsche’s gloss of the Beatitudes displays quite succinctly how he sees this hatred of masters coming to expression. Nietzsche summarizes the Beatitudes thus: “the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good” (*GoM*, I, 7). Whereas the primordial moral scheme (in which ‘good’ opposes ‘bad’) arises from the nobles’ self-affirmation, the slaves’ moral scheme (in which ‘good’ opposes ‘evil’) arises when the “oppressed, downtrodden, outraged exhort one another with the vengeful cunning of impotence: ‘let us be different from the evil, namely good! And he is good who does not outrage...who does not attack...who leaves revenge to God’” (*GoM*, I, 13).

This cleverness further insinuates itself into the nascent subjectivity of the master by suggesting that perhaps the very feelings by which the master judges himself noble—his boldness, his boundless energy, his appetite for activity, his refusal of any slackening—believe a lack of freedom in the master. Thus do the slaves “demand of strength that it should not express itself as strength” and, as ‘lambs,’ seduce the ‘bird of prey’ [*Raubvogel*] into becoming “*accountable* for being a bird of prey” (*GoM*, I, 13). Through such conceptual revaluation and through the invention of notions like “true

freedom” and “common humanity,” slavish *ressentiment* succeeds in making rarer and rarer the “pathos of distance” (*GoM*, I, 2) that characterizes all noble human beings.

To suggest a reversion “*back* to the innocent conscience of the beast of prey [*Raubthier*]” (*GoM*, I, 11) is utterly impossible, however, for the subjectivity of the “masters” who were overcome by the *original* slaves was very nascent indeed. The very fact that the slave revolt was successful by means of what must seem to Nietzsche’s reader (insofar as he follows Nietzsche’s interpretation of this imagined conflict) an obvious ploy indicates the extent to which Nietzsche’s readers are themselves the products of the process of intellectual deepening that began with the priestly races’ slave revolt in morality.

Nietzsche calls that force that all life obeys in seeking its “maximal feeling of power” (*GoM*, III, 7), and in creating the conditions for the same, “Will to Power.” Because Nietzsche regards all grammar that would make metaphysical entities out of what are in fact natural processes—one sees such grammar in expressions such as “force moves” (*GoM*, I, 13)—a better term for will to power may be “life.”² According to Nietzsche,

² For this reason, Stanley Rosen suggests that “will to power” can only be an “exoteric notion” (141) in *The Mask of Enlightenment*. Deleuze thinks the notion can stand on its own, and defines it thus: “The will to power is not force but the differential element which simultaneously determines the relation of forces (quantity) and the respective qualities of related forces.” Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, 2nd ed (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London, UK: Athlone Press, 1983), 197. Deleuze’s interpretation has the virtue of purging the notion of the will to power of the vitalistic elements that would otherwise prevent “life” from being adequate to Nietzsche’s conception, but for just that reason loses connection with the organic and inner nature of the relations of the forces in their interaction in will to power. See also

life operates *essentially* that is in its basic functions, through injury, assault, exploitation, destruction...The will of life is bent on power, and [all particular societal conditions] are subordinate to its total goal as a single means: namely, as a means of creating *greater* units of power... (*GoM*, II, 11).

Nietzsche goes on: “all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ are necessarily obscured or even obliterated” (*GoM*, II, 12). The rise of the priestly type must be understood, then as a moment in the life of life through which life creates the conditions for a unit of power of a yet-higher rank.

Indeed, this is the answer Nietzsche arrives upon in the third essay of *Genealogy of Morals*, which asks the question, “What is the meaning of Ascetic Ideals?”: “*the ascetic ideal springs from the protective instinct of a degenerating life...life wrestles in [this ideal] and through it with death and against death; the ascetic ideal is an artifice for the preservation of life*” (*GoM*, III, 13). So, while the priest and his morality³ are themselves “*life-inimical*” (*GoM*, III, 11), they effect life’s own ultimate flourishing and

Michel Haar, “Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language,” in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison, 1st MIT Press pbk. ed (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985), 10.

³ It must be emphasized that morality becomes an unavoidable category for human beings that have “deepened” by way of the ascetic ideal. That is, the priest’s invention of his particular (degenerate) morality enables, post-facto, the articulation of the moral scheme in reaction to which the priest’s morality was invented. Indeed, this is Nietzsche’s aim in the first essay of *Genealogy of Morals*; he seeks to articulate the way the moral scheme “good and bad” arises as the expression of noble instincts and the moral scheme “good and evil” arises from ignoble ones. Thus although Bruce Ellis Benson follows Nietzsche’s *language*, he misrepresents Nietzsche’s conception of the nature of any particular morality in its relation to instinct and to morality as a category when he claims “since morality is inherently against nature (according to Nietzsche), any moral system is inherently against the instincts.” See Bruce Ellis Benson, *Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 126.

prosperity. The priestly phase of culture—what Nietzsche otherwise calls decadence—must be understood as a transitional period and a preparation for a higher and fuller form of flourishing, one that only finds its fulfillment in the latter. The slave-revolt in morals inaugurated such a transitional period; by way of this process, humankind became self-conscious. Nietzsche argues that by way of becoming self-conscious, the sovereign individual may come to be, one “like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral.” Only in such an individual is there “a sensation of mankind come to completion” (*GoM*, II, 2). Just as, for Plato, only the just man can know the superiority of a life lived according to justice rather than injustice,⁴ so, for Nietzsche, only such a sovereign individual can know the sense in which all other forms of human life are in fact servile.

Religion, Sovereignty, and Sovereign Violence

Nietzsche argues that the violence that characterizes all life has played a constant and crucial role in humankind’s journey to completion—to that mode of existence that Nietzsche calls “beyond good and evil.” This is no less the case in the institution of the morality within which human beings now dwell, what Nietzsche calls a “morality of custom” [*Sittlichkeit der Sitte*]; the beginnings of “the moral conceptual world of ‘guilt,’ ‘bad conscience,’ ‘duty,’ ‘sacredness of duty’ ... were, like everything great on earth, soaked in blood thoroughly and for a long time” (*GoM*, II, 6). Nietzsche begins essay II

⁴ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W.C. Helmbold (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985).

of *Genealogy of Morals* by describing how responsibility originated, analyzing this process into a number of stages.

In order to become capable of retaining memory, human beings first needed to be made calculable, necessary, and uniform through a severe process of social straightjacketing (*GoM*, II, 2). Nietzsche argues that forgetting ought to be considered a human faculty even more innate than memory. Forgetfulness could only be overcome through a “fearful and uncanny” process that Nietzsche calls “*mnemotechnics*. ‘If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory’” (*GoM*, II, 3). Nietzsche continues,

man could never do without blood, torture, and sacrifices when he felt the need to create a memory for himself; the most dreadful sacrifices and pledges (sacrifices of the first-born among them)...all this had its origin in the instinct that realized that pain is the most powerful aid in mnemonics (*GoM*, II, 3).

Violence serves to focus the primitive mind upon a particular reality and to make it unforgettable. The severity of a penal code may serve to indicate just how primitive is the mind that would be reshaped by the rite; in the rite, the subject that could only forget is overcome by something higher. On Nietzsche’s reading, the religious, political, and commercial spheres are all highly ritualized theatres of violence in which dramas between creditors and debtors play out. If the debtor forgets his debt or lacks the means to repay it, the creditor—whether that be God, the sovereign, or the literal creditor—receives “recompense in the form of a kind of *pleasure*—the pleasure of being allowed to vent his power freely upon one who is powerless” (*GoM*, II, 5). By way of these dramas, rank is established or reinforced, and structure is given to both society and to the soul.

This violent “labor performed by man upon himself” made memory possible, and thus also brought into being the idea of a promise. And with the possibility of promising, a morality of custom also becomes possible, for a morality of custom merely capitalizes on the anxiety that can arise when one becomes conscious a) that one must stand security for one’s own future (*GoM*, II, 1), and b) that there exists a possible future in which one may fail to do so. A morality of custom sets limits to this anxiety by enshrining norms that specify the extent to which one may expect a future fulfillment or default to be remembered or forgotten.⁵ Precisely in doing this, however, a morality of custom stops short of allowing a *truly responsible* human being to come into existence. For a morality of custom asks all human beings to obey *the same* norms and imposes the same received wisdom upon all—irrespective of the fact that few human beings are capable of delivering on the promises they are expected to make. In order to have a legitimate right to make promises, Nietzsche argues, one must “have learned to distinguish necessary events from chance ones, to think causally, to see and anticipate distant eventualities as if they belonged to the present” (*GoM*, II, 1), and to “have power over oneself and over fate” (*GoM*, II, 2). For Nietzsche, only the sovereign human being possesses the dominating instinct for self-mastery which is rightly called conscience.

In illustrating the true nature of conscience, Nietzsche describes one that would attempt to attain to such sovereignty and that falls back into the decadent safety of a morality of custom in one of Zarathustra’s discourses from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

⁵ See *Daybreak*, I, 9.

entitled “The Pale Criminal.” Nietzsche imagines a criminal reminiscent of Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. A member of society commits murder not out of self-interest or for gain, but simply “because his soul wanted blood...he thirsted after the bliss of the knife” (*TSZ*, I). In the moment of the murder, the transgressor “was equal to the deed.” While such a transgressor may rightly be judged guilty before society’s laws, it does not follow that he should be considered guilty before what *Nietzsche* would call his conscience. Zarathustra continues,

he could not bear its image after it was done...his poor reason...persuaded him: ‘what matters blood?’ it asked; ‘don’t you want at least to commit a robbery with it? To take revenge?’ And he listened to his poor reason...so he robbed when he murdered. He did not want to be ashamed of his madness.

This moment of so-called madness could have been a moment of sovereign violence if the pale criminal had *remained* equal to the deed and not yielded to his “poor reason.”⁶ This poor reason—reason that is in fact madness, on Zarathustra’s terms—is that which declares the pale criminal’s desire to obey his ‘thirst for the bliss of the knife’ “madness.” And it is this poor reason that causes the pale criminal to become pale after committing the murder, to then rob after committing the murder, and thereupon to offer himself as a sacrifice in maintenance of the morality of custom that reigns in him. If the pale criminal deserves execution, it is not for having robbed and murdered—as the “red judge” of this section claims—but because he ascended the sublime heights of human sovereignty and then sank back into the “baseness” of a morality of custom. Whereas an execution under

⁶ Consider a parallel aphorism in *TI*, “Arrows and Epigrams,” §10.

the red judge's rationale would be revenge and a killing that fails to justify life, the execution to which *Zarathustra* exhorts *his* judges would arise from pity: "Your sadness shall be love of the overman: thus you shall justify your living on."

All moralities of custom are characterized by an exercise of violence that is sacrificial, and this is in one way fitting, because life itself operates through violence. But in their endurance, moralities of custom tend to decadence in that they prevent a higher interpretation of sacrificial violence from coming into existence; if "all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation" (*GoM*, II, 12), moralities of custom array themselves against further expressions of this impulse—which is life's own, according to Nietzsche—in claiming that direct access to the moral as such is guaranteed in and through participation in a particular sacrificial cult. Put in terms of "The Pale Criminal," the red judge's execution of the Pale Criminal is both a sacrifice and an execution that takes revenge because whereas the Pale Criminal's crime ought to invalidate the scales of the red judge's justice, the red judge prevents it from doing so by making it conform to the judgment made by all that could be called red judges—which is summarized in the words "the criminal deserves punishment *because* he could have acted differently" (*GoM*, II, 4). In wielding their sacrificial knives, then, red judges perform their interpretation of the Pale Criminal's action, and take up the human custom of wounding those they deem to be mad, a custom that is no less structured by norms deriving from creditor/debtor relationships even in its new, judicial adaptation.

Jesus' Nobility

In his discussion of Jesus of Nazareth in *Antichrist*, Nietzsche offers an even more extended discussion of the way a noble human being is doubly wronged by the priestly sacrificial impulse: Jesus is put to death and the legibility of his nobility effaced by the interpretations offered by the Gospel writers and the Apostle Paul. Nietzsche undertakes to remedy this by supplying terms that will reveal this nobility—in keeping with Nietzsche's broader revaluation of all values. Indeed, just as *Genealogy of Morals* inquires into the process by which responsibility was bred into the human animal (*GoM*, II, 3), *Antichrist* asks after “what type of man shall be *bred*, shall be *willed*, for being higher in value, worthier of life, more certain of a future” (A, §3). If Jesus is to reveal something about the type of human being that ought to be bred, it must be shown how he is “good”—that is, how his existence “heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself,” and how his happiness is related to true happiness, which is “not contentedness but more power; not peace but war; not virtue but fitness (Renaissance virtue, *virtú*, virtue that is moraline-free)” (A, §2).

This is particularly necessary because Christianity “has waged deadly war against this higher type of man”—Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (A, §4)—and the Gospels have portrayed Jesus not as good on Nietzsche's criteria, but have portrayed him as what Nietzsche would call “bad,” as “born of weakness,” as a “failure,” and as one that would encourage the development of a virtue “more harmful than any vice [—namely,] active pity for all the failures and all the weak” (A, §2). Whereas Jesus could (in certain ways in spite of himself, as we shall see) counteract the corruption of the human species in that he

lives his life in immediacy to instinct, and whereas Jesus' life could show the sense in which "the supreme values of mankind *lack* this will [the will to power]" and are thus "nihilistic values" (A, §6), Christianity's narration of his life prevents it from doing either of these.

Nietzsche confesses, "I read few books with as many difficulties as the Gospels" (A, §28). But in mining these texts to provide his alternative to the Christian narration of Jesus' life in *Antichrist*, Nietzsche does not perform the work of a philologist—precisely because a philological analysis would require sources on Jesus' life other than those that are currently extant. Nietzsche rather offers an account of the "*psychology of the redeemer*" (A, §28), which would explain how the different accounts of his life have arisen. Nietzsche suggests that the redeemer "type" "could be contained "in the Gospels despite the Gospels, however mutilated or overloaded with alien features: just as Francis of Assisi is preserved in his legends, despite his legends" (A, §29). The reference to Francis is hardly accidental, as there appear to be many affinities between his existence and Jesus':

just the opposite of all wrestling, of all feeling-oneself-in-a-struggle, has here become instinct: the incapacity for resistance becomes morality here ('resist not evil'—the most profound word of the Gospels, their key in a certain sense), blessedness in peace, in gentleness, in not *being able* to be an enemy (A, §29).

To the extent that Jesus is portrayed as "a judging, quarrelling, angry, malignantly sophisticated theologian" (A, §31), Nietzsche argues, the type has been "*coarsened.*" *That* it would be coarsened was nearly inevitable, because Jesus was so quickly made to function within the political economy of the first community, which "*created* its God according to

its needs” and “enriched [the type] retroactively, with features which are comprehensible only in terms of later polemics and propaganda purposes” (A, §31). Nietzsche argues that Jesus “moved as a foreign figure” in the milieu of which he bears the traces, and that he bears greater similarity to Prince Myshkin of Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* (A, §29, § 31) and the Buddha (A, §31) than to the forms of which the Gospel writers availed themselves, namely, “prophet, the Messiah, the future judge, the moral teacher, the miracle man, John the Baptist—each another chance to misconstrue the type” (A, §31).

What makes Nietzsche’s portrayal of Jesus quite dizzying is that Nietzsche both a) wants to purify the type of the “accretions” that would seem to make Jesus more like a figure that would be, on Nietzsche’s terms, “good”—for the warrior type is the noble type, for Nietzsche—and b) claims that it is as *not* a warrior that Jesus is informative as to the nature of true goodness. What Nietzsche finds praiseworthy in Jesus is the absence of the *ressentiment* that characterizes all priestly types. Whereas the Jews indeed fulfilled the destiny set out for them in Exodus 19:6 by becoming a nation of priests—that is, on Nietzsche’s terms, a race characterized by an unparalleled desire for revenge upon their superiors—Jesus’ maintains an immediacy to instinct in his mode of being that is diametrically opposed to the ends-calculative and power-seeking ways of those whom he offended and those who claim him as the “author and perfecter of their faith” (Heb 12:2).

Nietzsche understands Jesus as possessed of the same weakness that is characteristic of his oppressed race, but as relating to it honestly, and as seeing it as his own virtue. Jesus is “*not able* to be an enemy” (A, §29) not by virtue of his recognition that engaging in battle would be imprudent given his weakness, but by virtue of an

“extreme capacity for suffering and excitement which no longer wants any contact at all because it feels every contact too deeply” (A, §30). In Jesus, this extreme excitability immediately issues in a kind of defense mechanism by which he “finds blessedness (pleasure) only in no longer offering any resistance to anybody, neither to evil nor to him who is evil” (A, §30). While a way of life characterized by Jesus’ love is, to be sure, decadent in the extreme (“love as the only, as that *last* possible, way of life”) (A, §30), it is also one that has its own nobility despite its apolitical nature.

Nietzsche contrasts Jesus’ ‘charming’ way of life with the increasingly doctrinal and “sophistical” religion that issues from the Gospels, setting off the naïve idiocy of the Redeemer type against the shrewd sectarians who “unscrupulous[ly] construct their own *apology* out of their master” (A, §31). Jesus’ existence is not an apology for anything, in Nietzsche’s view; Jesus’ is an entirely straightforward and original existence, a simple case, physiologically, of “an infantilism that has receded into the spiritual” (A, §32). Nietzsche’s Jesus is *constitutionally* incapable of formulating the concepts and models Christians employed in interpreting his life, for these concepts and models would be too much of the world to be tolerated by him. Jesus’ “proofs are inner ‘lights,’ inner feelings of pleasure and self-affirmations, all of them ‘proofs of strength’” (A, §32).

Nietzsche thus finds Jesus’ independence of an “outer world”—appeal to which could justify Jesus’ way of life—both objectionable and noble at the same time. Precisely because Jesus naïvely “cannot even imagine a contradictory judgment” (A, §32) and rather absents himself from the *agon* of existence, Jesus lives a life that is not divided against itself. Although Nietzsche argues that his readers “should translate [Jesus’]

physiological *habitus* into its ultimate consequence—an instinctive hatred of every reality, a flight into ‘what cannot be grasped,’ ‘the incomprehensible,’ an aversion to every formula, to every concept of time and space” (A, §29), they should also realize that this “hatred” appears as hatred neither in Jesus own subjectivity nor in his relation to “the world” (A, §32); indeed, only if one has fully grasped what is at play in Jesus from a physiological standpoint can one discover the sense in which it is hatred.

Jesus ‘flight into the incomprehensible’ therefore does not pose a direct threat to the natural masters. On the contrary, Jesus’ psychology in fact resembles the masters’ insofar as it is characterized by a lack of *ressentiment*. In Jesus, the aforementioned defense mechanism functions perfectly; his physiological over-excitement is completely consumed in a purgative practice of selfless and nonresistant love, and Jesus finds pleasure and self-affirmation in this practice. Jesus is, for Nietzsche, a “great symbolist.” According to Nietzsche, “he accepted only *inner* realities as realities, as ‘truths’...he understood the rest, everything natural, temporal, spatial, historical, only as signs, as occasions for parables.” (A, §34). In his practice of existence, Jesus’ so-called “hatred of reality” works itself out creatively; rather than finding a force that would hinder his action in the hardness of reality and its suffering, Jesus joyfully forgets this hardness and rather performs a relativization of the world such that it is “only useful insofar as it furnishes signs” (A, §34) According to Nietzsche, then, “the ‘hour of death is *no* Christian concept—an ‘hour,’ time, physical life and its crises do not even exist for the teacher of the ‘glad tidings’” (A, §34). Jesus completely spiritualizes away the solidity of every reality with which his adversaries could confront him, not out of a self-preserving or self-

interested desire—indeed, “he takes no step which might ward off the worst” (A, §35).

And Jesus’ “legacy to mankind” is his practice, which in itself expresses an “aversion...to all that is solid, custom, institution, church” (A, §29). Nor does Jesus conduct this spiritualization primarily discursively; according to Nietzsche, the polemical terms in which Jesus’ teachings are couched in the Gospels reflect the Gospel writers’ interests, not the true nature of the Redeemer’s praxis.

Prophetic Agency in Jesus and Zarathustra

While a full description of the points of contact between Jesus and Zarathustra would be beyond the scope of the current project, the comparison will illuminate the way in which Jesus’ teaching can be non-competitive and part of a practice that is free from the *ressentiment* that characterizes Christianity.

At the end of book II of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the title character is confronted by his disciples, as at the end of book I, and the conversation turns to the question of the status of Zarathustra’s teaching. When one of his disciples asks Zarathustra why he says that the poets lie too much, he asks the disciple why he asks this question, saying “I am not one of those whom one may ask about their why. Is my experience but of yesterday?... Zarathustra too is a poet. Do you now believe that he spoke the truth here?” (TSZ, II, “On Poets”). When the disciple answers in the affirmative because he ‘believes in Zarathustra,’ Zarathustra chides him for believing that such faith could make one blessed and calls into question the status of his own teaching *as teaching*. Zarathustra thereby undercuts the disciple’s orientation to both Zarathustra’s person and his work.

Zarathustra then has a dream by which he is disturbed and vexed (246-247), and when his disciple interprets it in a way that again suggests that Zarathustra plays a quasi-salvific role (247-248), Zarathustra shakes his head at the dream interpreter (249) and is nearly overcome with melancholy at being perpetually misunderstood.

Just when Zarathustra is about to yield to this temptation to melancholy in “The stillest Hour,” he is addressed by a voice that speaks “without voice” and that calls upon Zarathustra, “speak your word and break!” (258). Zarathustra answers, “‘Alas, is it *my* word? Who am I?’” (258). This response makes clear that although Zarathustra preaches the will to power, he is, in a certain way, just as confused about his status as prophet of the will to power as his disciples are. According to the voice, Zarathustra’s success as prophet depends on his ‘speaking’ the words of his prophecy as a burden that he has received—and ‘breaking,’ for only thus will he be obedient in a way that will also allow him to command.

The voice says, “‘Thoughts that come on doves’ feet guide the world. O Zarathustra, you shall go as a shadow of that which must come: thus you will command and, commanding, lead the way’” (258-259). Zarathustra answers, “‘I am ashamed,’” and he later asks, “‘Why do I not give it? Am I stingy?’” (259). Zarathustra’s shame and stinginess indicate how deep his desire is that his prophecy be the product of his all-too-human genius and his mission be one that celebrates his own agency. It also indicates and how offended he is that “life required even the rabble” and that the rabble “had *esprit*” (TSZ, “On the Rabble,” 209). Thus the voice chides Zarathustra for lacking the abandon that must characterize one that would act in immediacy to instinct; only if

Zarathustra “become[s] as a child and without shame” (259) and recognizes that his prophecy issues from a force that exceeds his own subjectivity and personhood—a force that has no regard for Zarathustra—will Zarathustra become capable of commanding in a way that leads.

In *Antichrist*, Nietzsche describes Jesus’ immediacy to instinct in a way that seems to complete the movement Zarathustra attempts to make in “The stillest Hour”:

This ‘bringer of glad tidings’ died as he had lived, as he had taught—not to ‘redeem men’ but to show how one must live. This practice is his legacy to mankind: his behavior before the judges...before all kinds of slander and scorn—his behavior on the *cross*...*Not* to resist, *not* to be angry, *not* to hold responsible—but to resist not even the evil one—to *love* him (A, §35).

Nietzsche insists that in going to his death, Jesus shows how one must live because Jesus has no regard for himself and is rather fully obedient to those “*inner* realities” that impressed themselves upon him and to those instincts that guide one as to “how one must *live*, in order to feel oneself ‘in heaven’” (§33). Jesus’ teachings likewise do not resist alternative teachings, but are rather articulations of his own way of relating to his own instincts. Rather than being propositions, the truth of which can and ought to be “recognized” as “objective” or “verifiable,” say, with reference to some text, Jesus’ teachings are more akin to poetry, which unhides that which is hidden in the world and in the self, poetry that makes that which is unhidden unforgettable.

Thus, while the parabolic form of Jesus’ teachings could be said to issue from the above-cited “aversion to all formulas” (A, §29), it is clear that it could equally arise from the concern marked out by Zarathustra when he claims, “whoever writes in blood and

aphorisms does not want to be read but to be learned by heart” (I, “On Reading and Writing,” 152). Such learning could not be further from rote repetition. Indeed, this becomes clear in Part III when Zarathustra repeatedly calls his animals “buffoons and barrel organs” (330, 332) and calls their speech “chatter” (329) when they repeat back to him even some of his most profound teachings regarding the eternal return; as *doctrines* they have no value, despite their profundity. Zarathustra would rather that his animals practice what Nietzsche elsewhere calls “inpsychation” (*GoM*, II, 1), an art analogous to the process of digestion, in which that which is taken in is stripped of its particularities—and in which those particularities are *forgotten* in order that that which is taken in can serve as nourishment for life. Indeed, despite the fact that Nietzsche offers sections 29-40 in *Antichrist* as an account of the “psychology of the Redeemer” (§28) and of the “*genuine* history of Christianity” (§39) these sections often read instead like an extended discussion of Jesus’ would-be followers’ inability to practice this art.

Jesus’ Instincts; Christian Instincts

About this “*genuine* history,” Nietzsche insists that “there was only *one* Christian, and he died on the cross” (A, §39). Nietzsche distinguishes between Christian practice and Christianity as a religion. Whereas the former is “a life such as he *lived* who died on the cross” and may indeed be Christian, the latter is only a misunderstanding, and, by implication, unchristian or even anti-Christian.⁷ Nietzsche argues that the former, a

⁷ It is more than a felicitous coincidence that in the German, *Antichrist* can translate as both “Antichrist” and “the Anti-Christian.”

Christ-like life, “is still possible today, for certain people even necessary: genuine, original Christianity will be possible at all times” (A, §39). That Nietzsche suggests that such a life is “necessary” *for certain people* further elucidates the nature of Jesus’ nobility. When interpreting Nietzsche’s claim that Jesus displays an “instinctive hatred of every reality,” it is crucial that one considers what kinds of “realities” Nietzsche has in view. Even as Jesus “hates” the realities of what could be called an “outer world” and negates them, Jesus does not do so out of *ressentiment*. This negation is better understood as arising out of his deep love for his “inner” realities, for “the deep instinct for how one must *live*, in order to feel oneself ‘in heaven,’ to feel ‘eternal’” (A, §34). It follows that those who have similar instincts, or those who learn to be obedient to their instincts in Jesus’ own manner could indeed be Christian without having anything to do with Christianity. On this reading, the phenomenon otherwise known as conversion becomes a matter of matching one’s psychology with one’s physiological disposition.

The same applies to faith; here too, psychology must match physiology. When discussing faith, however, it is crucial to recognize the way the set of instincts in view fundamentally changes the meaning of the term. When Jesus’ instincts or instincts like Jesus’ are in view, “faith” names one’s enactment of a way of life like unto Jesus’ own—that is, a doing or “another state of *being*” (A, §39). But when *Christian* instincts are in view, “faith” names a set of “states of consciousness” and is understood as a matter of “considering something true” (A, §39), or assent to propositions—despite the fact that these are “fifth-rank matters of complete indifference compared to the value of the instincts” (A, §39). For those that would be called “the faithful” in this second sense,

Nietzsche argues, “faith [is] at all times...only a cloak, a pretext, a *screen* behind which the instincts played their game—a shrewd *blindness* about the dominance of *certain* instincts” (A, §39). In this context, Nietzsche cites Luther, whose “faith” allowed “that thoroughly plebian...*ressentiment* movement called the Reformation” (GoM, III, 23) to triumph over the Renaissance’s attempt at revivifying the noble and ennobling classical ideal. When Luther speaks of “reason” as ‘Mistress Clever, the clever whore’” (GoM, III, 9), he demonstrates his intolerance of that “reverential etiquette of the hieratic taste which permits only the more initiated and silent into the holy of holies and closes it to louts” (GoM, III, 22). Luther’s attacks on other forms of rank-ordering (saints over sinners, pope over priests, priests over laity) only give more evidence for the fact that the state called “faith in Christ” is in fact an epiphenomenon of a person’s relation to a certain set of instincts, instincts that “attempt...to employ force to block up the wells of force” and in obedience to which “physiological well-being itself is viewed askance, and especially the outward expression of this well-being, beauty and joy; while pleasure is felt and *sought* in ill-constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice” (GoM, III, 11). Indeed, although this is Nietzsche’s general description of the ascetic priest, it immediately calls to mind a young Luther.

The First Christian and his Instincts

In the nearly imperceptible moment when “faith” becomes “faith in,” faith is transformed from a verb (a “doing”) to a noun, and the ascetic ideal intrudes upon a noble way of life. Who is responsible for this moment? According to Nietzsche, Paul is “the

first Christian” (*D*, I, 68). If it is not Jesus but Paul that defines the Christian type, his instincts also deserve examination.

In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche takes an approach similar to that taken in *Antichrist*; he suggests that if one reads the writings of Paul “with a free and honest exercise of one’s own spirit and without thinking all the time of [one’s] own personal needs” one sees how revealing the text is—not of the divine logic in allowing Christ to be crucified, but of Paul’s psychology.⁸ According to Nietzsche, Paul was stricken with a “*fixed question* which was always present to him...what is the Jewish *law* really concerned with? and, in particular, what is the *fulfillment of this law*?” (*D*, I, 68). Nietzsche openly likens Paul to Luther; just as Paul was “voracious for this highest distinction the Jews were able to conceive”—namely, one that fulfils the law, so Luther “wanted in his monastery to become the perfect man of the spiritual ideal.” Yet Paul and Luther each felt incapable of attaining their respective goals. Just as Luther “one day began to hate the spiritual ideal and the Pope and the saints and the whole clergy,” so for Paul the law itself became a source of torment: “The law was a cross to which he felt himself nailed: how he hated it! how he had to drag it along! how he sought about for a means of *destroying* it – and no longer to fulfil it!” (*D*, I, 68). This incapacity generates a desire for revenge in both Paul and Luther, one essential to the Christian type. Gilles Deleuze argues that according to Nietzsche, men of *ressentiment* are characterized by the “inability to admire, respect or

⁸ On the Psychology of Paul, see also *WP*, 171.

love,” by “passivity,” and by “perpetual accusation.”⁹ In the face of his incapacity to fulfill the law, Paul exhibits each of these characteristics: he does not admire the law’s imperious objectivity, he wants relief from it, and so he hates the law and portrays it as originally flawed.

The law is indeed flawed as it interacts with Paul’s nature, but this speaks both to his inability to self-legislate and to the other essential characteristics of his nature, namely, the shameless “importunity of his soul” and his “extravagant lust for power” (*D*, I, 68). Paul’s importunity shows itself in his belief that his reverence for the law should, more or less of necessity, prevent the seed of transgressive desire from germinating. His own experience shows the contrary; he finds that the law rather sharpens this desire in him.¹⁰ “Paul [becomes] the fanatical defender and chaperone of this God and his law, and [is]...harsh and malicious towards [transgressors] and doubters” (*D*, I, 68). Paul reasons that some means for the simultaneous fulfillment of the law and the destruction of the law’s power to bring forth sin needed to be found for two reasons. First, anyone that desires to fulfill the law ought to be able to do so—and yet he finds himself unable to do so. And second, only through the destruction of the law will Paul himself find relief from the law. So Paul finds both the law’s fulfillment and its destruction in Christ, and specifically, in the death of Christ. Nietzsche continues his exposition of the Pauline logic: “God could never have resolved on the death of Christ if a fulfillment of the law

⁹ Indeed, Gilles Deleuze’s account of the “Characteristics of *Ressentiment*” is a particularly helpful guide to Nietzsche’s ‘diagnosis’ of the Pauline psychology. Deleuze, 116-119.

¹⁰ Romans 7:8-10.

had been possible without his death; now not only has all guilt been taken away, guilt as such has been destroyed” (*D*, I, 68). According to Nietzsche’s interpretation, this resolution to Paul’s very personal “fixed question” intoxicates Paul: “with the idea of becoming one with Christ, all shame, all subordination, all bounds are taken from [Paul’s importunate soul], and the intractable lust for power reveals itself as an anticipatory reveling in *divine* glories” (*D*, I, 68).

Nietzsche objects, above all, to Paul’s assumption that his own failure is informative as to the human condition as a whole. On precisely the topic of Christian and ascetic importunity, Nietzsche offers the following in *GoM*, III, 22: “How can one make such a fuss about one’s little lapses as these pious little men do! Who gives a damn? Certainly not God.” This remark, which Nietzsche makes specifically with reference to the tone of the New Testament, deserves interpretation through the three Pauline instincts just analyzed.

Nietzsche’s interpretation of the way Paul makes such a fuss about his little lapses is helpfully illuminated by way of comparison with Kant. In *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant argues with an implacable logic that if God gives humankind the command to be obedient to law *and* imputes guilt for transgression to sinners, self-legislation must be a capacity native to all human beings.¹¹ In Romans 7,

¹¹ See, for example 6:21 (emphasis added): “By ‘nature of the human being’ [as good or evil] we only understand here the subjective ground—wherever it may lie—of the exercise of the human being’s freedom in general (under objective moral laws) antecedent to every deed that falls within the scope of the senses. But this subjective ground must, in turn, itself always be a deed of freedom (*for otherwise the use or abuse of the human being’s power of choice with respect to freedom could not be imputed to him, nor could the good or evil in him be called ‘moral’*).” Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere*

Paul argues that his own case reveals the opposite; human beings require grace precisely because they lack this capacity. Further, God's prevenient grace offers atonement for sin in Jesus Christ. What Kant and Paul share is a conception of divine justice that assumes that a common humanity exists and that all are equal before God's law. This allows both Paul and Kant each to enact the slaves' distinction between good and evil (rather than good and bad) human beings; regardless of whether one is judged evil because one does not avail oneself of grace and divine forgiveness (as for Paul) or because one allows one's desire to lead one into adopting faulty maxims (as for Kant), the problem lies in the will. Nietzsche, however, denies the existence of a common humanity from the outset: according to Nietzsche there obtains a qualitative distinction between the good, those who are truly sovereign masters (of themselves and their circumstances), and the bad, those who are impotent slaves (again, of themselves and their circumstances).

This denial enables Nietzsche to discover the sense in which there remains in Kant's moral philosophy the seed of an aristocratic impulse, despite the fact that Kant's theologians' instincts (A, §8-11) prevent him from owning it. Nietzsche argues that "the categorical imperative smells of cruelty" (*GoM*, II, 6) because the very objectivity and self-evidence of the categorical imperative makes legitimate a political economy in which the good may vent their fury on the evil without pity, the latter sentiment being one that Kant judged worthless, as Nietzsche notes in the Preface of *Genealogy of Morals* (A, §5). Paul, by contrast, lacks this aristocratic impulse, but is so importunate and desirous of

Reason and Other Writings, trans. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

power that he turns his own inability to self-legislate into the defining characteristic of humankind as a whole.

This is a remarkable moment of self-affirmation, one that gives rise to kind of spiritual scorched-earth policy: “no *other* perspective is conceded any further value once one’s own has been made sacrosanct with the names of ‘God,’ ‘redemption,’ and ‘eternity’ ... [the theologian’s] most basic instinct of self-preservation forbids him to respect reality at any point” (A, §9).¹² The most basic “reality” that Paul and other theologians disrespect is that of the “law of development, which is the law of *selection*” (A, §7). By inventing a God that so pities humanity that he offers redemption through Christ and eternal life, Paul becomes the first Christian: “How much this dysangelist sacrificed to hatred! Above all, the Redeemer: he nailed him to *his own* cross” (A, §42).

Paul’s Sacrifice of Israel and the Law

Nietzsche alternates between claiming that “the ship of Christianity threw overboard a good part of the Jewish ballast” (D, I, 68) and that Christianity is the completion of the gesture in which Judaism “takes sides with all the instincts of decadence” (A, §24). In *Antichrist*, Nietzsche describes a division within Judaism itself between, on the one hand, “the good and the just” and the “saints of Israel” and, on the other, those that follow the “holy anarchist” that led a rebellion “against the hierarchy of society—not against its corruption, but against caste, privilege, order, and formula” (A,

¹² See also *GoM*, III, 22 on the “monstrous” power of the priest’s universalism.

§27). Nietzsche places Paul as the successor of the latter, sectarian group and as the leader of the Christians.

The similarities between the way Nietzsche describes Paul's own personal epiphany in *Daybreak* and the Christian community's sectarian epiphany in *Antichrist* are striking. In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche describes Paul's thinking in this way: "Hitherto that shameful death had counted with him as the principal argument against the 'Messiahdom' of which the followers of the new teaching spoke: but what if it were *necessary* for the *abolition* of the law!" (*D*, I, 68). Likewise in *Antichrist*, Nietzsche argues that "the fate of the Gospel was decided with the death—it hung on the cross" (*A*, §40).¹³ In both cases, the ignobility of Jesus' manner of death seems an objection, but, Nietzsche writes in *Antichrist*, "a disciple's love knows no accident" (§40): Jesus' death is immediately taken up into a hermeneutic that expresses the Christian convert's hatred of that which is higher and more refined. In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche argues that Paul interprets Jesus' death as God's own means of destroying the law. In *Antichrist*, Nietzsche argues that the first Christians are initially afraid that Jesus' death "might represent the *refutation* of the cause" but quickly move past this to ask, "*Who* killed him? *Who* was his natural enemy?...Answer: *ruling* Jewry, its highest class" (*A*, §40). At this point it becomes evident that "the small community did *not* understand the main point, the exemplary

¹³ *KSA*, 6: 213. "Das Verhängniss des Evangeliums entchied sich mit dem Tode, – es hing am ‚Kreuz‘."

character of [Jesus'] kind of death, the freedom, the superiority over any feeling of *ressentiment*" (A, §40).

In a noble human being, *ressentiment* "consummates and exhausts itself in an immediate reaction" (*GoM*, I, 10). Weak and impotent human beings are unable to act directly, however, and "compensate themselves with an imaginary image" (*GoM*, I, 10). Nietzsche describes the 'epiphany' of Paul in precisely this way in both *Daybreak* and *Antichrist*.

The tremendous consequences of th[e] notion [that Jesus' death could have been *necessary* for the *abolition* of the law]...whirl before his eyes, all at once he is the happiest of men—the destiny of the Jews—no, of all mankind—seems to him to be tied to this notion, to this second of his sudden enlightenment, he possesses the idea of ideas, the key of keys, the light of lights; henceforth history revolves around him! (*D*, I, 68).

The priestly instinct of the Jew committed the same great crime against history...he falsified the history of Israel once more so that it might appear as the prehistory of *his* deed (A, §42).

By means of this double "falsification" (of the meaning of the death of Christ, and of the history of Israel), Paul inaugurates a new phase of decadence. In seeing how this is so, it will serve us to recall Nietzsche's argument (cited above in *Healthy and Unhealthy Religion*) that the law invented by the Judaic priests cultivates an unhealthy mode of political life because it latently relativizes political station as the criterion of superiority and expresses an antisensualistic metaphysic (*GoM*, I, 6). Despite its antisensualism, the Jewish law need not amount to a hatred of reality. For, as Deleuze points out, "the fact that something, no matter what it is, is obeyed...means that a certain *activity*, a certain active force is exercised on man and is given the task of training him."¹⁴ That is to say,

¹⁴ Deleuze, 133.

the Jewish law—sometimes despite itself, as with Kant—gives society structure such that “good and evil” does not completely overcome “good and bad.” Precisely in being operative in the history of the Jewish people, the distinctions enshrined in the law enrich the “vital energy” of the Jews and work for their self-preservation. So even in their decadence, the law and the “ruling Jewry” can be what Deleuze calls “active forces.”

Paul’s decadence differs in that it remains reactive—that is, it brings to completion not the aristocratic but the decadent aspects of the Judaic priest’s law-making impulse. Paul follows the Judaic priest in projecting a fictive, inverted image of reality in which he represents himself as superior. But he also goes beyond the Judaic priest in that *his* falsification of reality hallows his own personal will—rather than the will of a people—to such an extent that history, law, Messiah, and the destinies of the chosen people and of the human race itself only figure as tokens relative to what is unfolding in him.

Paul’s personal problem—that of fulfilling the law—becomes the problem for the human being as such. Deleuze describes this succinctly: “*Ressentiment* said ‘it is your fault,’ bad conscience says ‘it is my fault.’”¹⁵ Whereas there was an ambivalence to the law in that it was simultaneously the law of the Jews for the Jews *against* the world, and God’s law *against* the Jews, Paul’s “dysangel” preserves only God against the world, a God that convicts the world of sin. Paul redirects the will to power inward. Nietzsche describes this concisely in *GoM*, III, 15:

¹⁵ Deleuze, 132.

“‘I suffer: some one must be to blame for it’—thus thinks every sickly sheep. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, tells him: ‘Quite so, my sheep! someone must be to blame for it: but you alone are this someone, you alone are to blame for it—*you alone are to blame for yourself!*’—This is brazen and false enough: but one thing is at least achieved by it, the direction of *ressentiment* is altered.”

Thus redirected, the will to power lacks an object on which to vent itself, which means that it becomes impossible for it to be consummated and exhausted in an immediate reaction (see *GoM*, I, 10). *Ressentiment* therefore poisons and develops into bad conscience and guilt, feelings completely alien to Jesus’ own subjectivity. It thus makes the Christian suspicious of precisely the “inner lights” (instincts) by which Jesus was guided.

Paul’s Sacrifice of Christ

The priestly interpretation of Israel’s exile and Paul’s interpretation of the crucifixion both arise from bad conscience, and these interpretations also help to foster bad conscience in those who come to believe that these events reveal God’s judgment of humankind. If Israel’s unrighteousness had not aroused God’s wrath, so the argument goes, Israel may not have gone into exile. Likewise, if human sin had not aroused God’s wrath, Jesus could simply have revealed God’s will for humankind and his death may not even have figured in his biography.

Nietzsche, however, insists that Paul, stricken with bad conscience, rather *sacrifices* Jesus:

Paul...transposed the center of gravity of [Jesus’] whole existence *after* this existence—in the *lie* of the ‘resurrected’ Jesus. At bottom, he had no use at all for the life of the Redeemer—he needed the death on the cross *and* a little more (*A*, §42).

Jesus' life and death threaten Paul's priestly way of life. For Jesus did not hew to an external standard of goodness; he was not concerned in the least that he should be named among the "good." And Jesus did not die in order to satisfy a condition in a hidden economy of salvation; rather, "he died as he had lived"—and precisely for this reason he "show[s] how one must live" (A, §35). By means of this "transposition," Paul depotentiates Jesus' challenging witness, looping it up into an economy of sin, guilt and expiation.

Although Paul must falsify Jesus' existence in order for it to figure in such an economy, this falsification does enable him to perform his function as an ascetic priest, which is "to fight off a certain weariness and heaviness grown to epidemic proportions" (*GoM*, III, 17). In order to combat this weariness, some means must be invented for producing an "orgy of feeling" (*GoM*, III, 19). Nietzsche continues, "priestly inventiveness in thinking through this single question—'how can one produce an orgy of feeling'—has been virtually inexhaustible" (*GoM*, III, 19). It is clear that Nietzsche regards Paul as just such an ascetic priest and analyzes his falsification of Jesus life in exactly this way:

Paul starts from the need for a mystery felt by the broad, religiously excited masses: he seeks a sacrifice, a bloody phantasmagoria which will stand up in competition with the images of mystery cults: God on the cross, blood-drinking, the *unio mystica* with the 'sacrifice'" (*WP*, 167).

Nietzsche intentionally evokes the imagery of the pagan festival in his description of Paul's new religiosity here in order to assimilate the latter to the former, and to suggest that a single human phenomenon is taking place in both: "[Paul] seeks to bring the

afterlife as resurrection into a causal relationship with the sacrifice (after the type of Dionysus, Mithras, Osiris)” (*WP*, 167). All religions invent a spiritual causality to deal with a pathological weakness. Mystery religions do so in a particular way, one that generates “a new faith, a faith in a miraculous transformation (‘redemption’ through faith)” (*WP*, 167). Once it becomes instinctual for human beings to interpret reality through this order of spiritual causes, the “phantasmagoria” Nietzsche mentions becomes possible. The religious event then produces an orgy of feeling, and the “weariness or heaviness” is dealt with. Indeed, the stability of religious ritual depends upon its ability to perform precisely this function.

The crucifixion is an event particularly well-adapted for producing such an orgy of feeling. The violence of the event evokes passions in the “excited masses” that are indeed powerful; the exposed body on the cross evokes pity for the crucified one, fear at being similarly crucified, a dizzying dual identification with the mob and with the one crucified. According to Nietzsche, it is Paul’s genius to concentrate his focus upon this event, for the strength of the passions it evokes enables it to put the question of a Christian interpretation of existence to the would-be Christian in a most pressing way. On Paul’s interpretation, the crucifixion becomes an exceptional event that irrupts within the flow of time that also splits time into the profane time after the crucifixion (*chronos*) and the time of fullness (*kairos*)—with the center of gravity being “transposed” into the latter rather than the former. And the crucifixion becomes the exceptional event also in its relativization of a this-worldly logic, reason, nature, and a this-worldly relation to custom; incarnation, the death of God in Christ, resurrection, and communion (blood-

drinking), are each names for offenses against the true causality, of which Paul is intolerant and against which he takes revenge.

Once this exceptional event becomes the moment that forms the conditions for vision, a new “faith” emerges. By the image of God on the cross—“the Crucified”, as Nietzsche styles it elsewhere (see *WP*, 1052)—the Christian is made to feel guilty, responsible for the death of Christ. The Christian is made to feel a debtor, for in becoming the sacrificial victim, Christ forgives the sinner and miraculously removes that which would lead to future sin.¹⁶ Indeed, Christian impotence is given a highly favorable interpretation. If human beings were able to resist evil, Christ would not have been sacrificed. However, acknowledgment of one’s own inability to resist evil is also a condition for being among those saved by the event: “Christianity presupposes that man does not know, *cannot* know what is good for him, what evil: he believes in God, who alone knows it” (*TI*, “Skirmishes of an untimely man,” §5). Herein lies the difference between the Christian conception of conscience and Nietzsche’s (see “Religion, Sovereignty, and Sovereign Violence,” above). For the Christian, sovereignty consists in acknowledging one’s sinfulness, subjecting oneself to the divine will, and participating in—or perhaps *submitting to*—God’s sovereign direction of history. For Nietzsche, by contrast, one is only sovereign if one “ha[s] power over oneself and over fate” (*GoM*, II, 2), for existence is not providentially ordered, but rather has the character of a dice throw.

¹⁶ See *GoM*, II, 20: “The advent of the Christian God, as the maximum god attained so far was therefore accompanied by the maximum feeling of guilty indebtedness on earth”

Suffering, and Meaning in History

Providence is a scheme by which Christian morality takes revenge against becoming. If the meaning of history must be revealed, apocalyptically, either at the end of history, or in its midst, with the crucifixion and resurrection, this suggests that history is somehow incomplete as it stands. This very incompleteness makes history itself a guilty subject; it suggests that if one is to assess that which is in becoming properly, one must judge it according to hidden and anti-natural criteria—criteria that can only be divinely revealed. Throughout *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, the figure of the “spider” and the image of the “spider’s web” recur as symbols of a moralizing reading of existence that insists on the ultimate purposefulness of history. For example, Zarathustra enthuses, “O heaven over me, pure and high! That is what your purity is to me now, that there is no eternal spider or spider web of reason; that you are to me a dance floor for divine accidents” (*TSZ*, I, “Before Sunrise,” 278). Even to claim that heaven is such a “dance floor” is to run the risk of violating heaven (““did you blush? Did I speak the unspeakable””) by generating an anti-natural account of her,¹⁷ claiming that she can *only* be so understood. One can praise and bless heaven only as her lover and in private (hence the title of this section of *Zarathustra*); in the light of day, such blessings and praise lose

¹⁷ That Zarathustra construes his relation to heaven (and eternity, and life, etc.) erotically is obvious and justifies the feminine pronoun here. The “spirit of gravity” and other life-destroying notions, by comparison, deserve (and are given, in *Zarathustra*) male pronouns because they figure as erotic rivals for Zarathustra. See also Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 25–27. Giles Fraser correctly notes that Nietzsche’s “sensitivity to style and rhetoric is not mere *decoration*” (25) in instances such as this one, in which he describes heaven as a woman (Fraser cites *BG&E*, preface). Fraser’s reliance upon the conceptions of philosophical rhetoric and its “function” suggested by his interlocutors (Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum) leads him to fail to give adequate play to the way transcendence is in play in these erotic relations, for Nietzsche.

their reference to the *eros* that alone makes them true, and they become doctrines to be promulgated in violation of the beloved. Under the wrong conditions, a yes-saying blessing becomes a no-saying curse.

Nietzsche argues that the only way the “yes” of a teaching can remain a “yes” is if one learns not merely to accept, but to actively affirm that which has been and to see in it the seeds not of something entirely different and “revealed,” but, regardless of what it is, as something that demands both reverent celebration and joyful overcoming. Taking this disposition toward existence leads to Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal return, a doctrine that restores to existence its own center of gravity as opposed to the one falsely generated by the ingenuity of the priests. *Genealogy of Morals* itself is a good example of this in that it is the attempt to see how “our old morality too is *part of the comedy*” (*GoM*, Preface, 7). If “the earth is a table for the gods and trembles with creative new words and gods’ [dice] throws” (*TSZ*, III, “The Seven Seals,” 3, 341), affirming this involves affirming both chance (the number the dice happen to show) and necessity (that there was no past moment when their showing this number was not a future event).¹⁸

According to Nietzsche, this does not quash creativity, but rather fosters it, for affirming, on the one hand, that all things take place by chance and, on the other, that all things eternally recur can play out in the affirmation that the fragmented nature of the present will admit of some future integration. Indeed, Nietzsche engages in precisely this kind of integration in showing how the slave revolt in morals prepares human beings for

¹⁸ On the distinction between chance and necessity, see also Deleuze, 26.

sovereignty in *Genealogy of Morals*. By Nietzsche's lights, it is rather an insistence on the purposefulness of all things that quashes creativity, for all things become servile if the end all things seek in becoming is pre-determined. Zarathustra says, "'By Chance'—that is the ancient nobility of the world, and this I restored to all things: I delivered them from their bondage under Purpose" (*TSZ*, III, "Before Sunrise," 278). Indeed, only if one disjoins necessity from purpose can that which becomes again become *as a gift* rather than as something already bent to some purpose external to itself and hidden from view.

Nietzsche's claim that all things are by chance and also necessary allows him to explain the rise of the notion that all suffering is or must be meaningful as the expression of the attempt—made by those unwilling to bear suffering proudly—to "abolish hidden, undetected, unwitnessed suffering from the world" (*GoM*, II, 7). Though Nietzsche admits this solution was effective for a time (see *GoM*, III, 21), the fact that it has not improved humankind as a whole means that it must be overcome.

Overcoming Blindness: Redemption

A section in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* informatively entitled "On Redemption" may contain Nietzsche's most concise treatment of the means of salvation he would wish for those who desire a "miraculous transformation" and it greatly elucidates Nietzsche's account of how the Christian understanding of sin, guilt, sacrifice and redemption can be overcome.

This section opens with Zarathustra surrounded by cripples and beggars. A hunchback emerges and says that Zarathustra's doctrine will only be entirely believable if

he can convince the hunchbacks and cripples. Further, he says that the “right way” to convince them would be to “heal the blind and make the lame walk” (*TSZ*, “On Redemption,” 249). Zarathustra refuses to seize this “opportunity” since he aims not merely to restore the body, but to restore his fellow human beings to wholeness. The condition of hunchbacks and cripples is less distressing to Zarathustra than that of the “inverse cripples” who “lack everything, except one thing of which they have too much” (240). “I walk among men as among the fragments and limbs of men...when my eyes flee from the now to the past, they always find the same: fragments and limbs and dreadful accidents—but no human beings” (250). The hunchbacks and cripples are aware of what they lack. This makes them better off than the “inverse cripples.” The inverse cripples’ ignorance makes them ignorant also of how they should live because one can only know how to live if one can see “that which must come” and if one is “a seer, a willer, a creator, a future himself and a bridge to the future” (250-251). The cripple’s self-knowledge can allow him to become such a bridge and “a creator and guesser of riddles and redeemer of accidents” (251). Indeed, Zarathustra would “redeem” the hunchbacks and cripples by liberating them from their desire for a “miraculous transformation” (*WP*, 167). He summarizes his doctrine of redemption thus: “To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’—that alone should I call redemption” (251).

This scene in *Zarathustra* has a rather rigorous reference to a scene in the Gospel of John in which Jesus is confronted with a blind man. In John 9, Jesus comes upon a man blind from birth, and his disciples ask him “Who sinned, this man or his parents,

that he was born blind?” (9:1-2) Jesus immediately calls into question the premise of their question, namely, that the man’s blindness is punishment for sin, rather stating, “he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (9:3b). Thus far, Jesus’ response conforms entirely to Nietzsche’s representation of him; Jesus’ response suggests that the blind man is less blind than those who attribute his blindness to the wrath of God at sin. Jesus immediately heals the man, however, by spreading a mud paste on the man’s eyes and telling him to wash at the pool of Siloam (9:6-7). From Jesus’ response, it is not immediately apparent whether the healing was intended to be literal or figurative. John represents the healing as literal, however, and as the story continues, the controversy that develops concerns whether a sinner could have performed such a miracle. When the Pharisees ask the healed man himself, his response is telling: “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (9:25).

A Nietzschean reading of this exchange would suggest that the Pharisees and Jesus’ own disciples are “reverse cripples”; their belief in a kind of spiritual causality generates a narrative according to which the man suffers because of sin, and its miraculous healing is either possible because Jesus is divine, or impossible because Jesus is a sinner. Although this narrative makes the blind man’s suffering and its healing explicable, the true “healing” of the blind man would consist, for Nietzsche, in his *not* being healed in the sense suggested by the passage itself. According to Nietzsche, blindness generally, and specifically the blindness of the Pharisees and Jesus’ disciples, consists rather in subscribing to such a spiritual causality. Support for such a claim could be found in Jesus’ words to the Pharisees: “If you were blind, you would not have sin.

But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains’” (John 9:41). A Nietzschean reading of this scene would insist that if Jesus had literally healed the man’s sight he would have retroactively made him sinful; God’s works are revealed precisely in the blind’s man remaining literally blind. For in this way, the blind man can overcome, by an act of will, the condition of blindness to discover his own dignity and, further, come to understand an existence that includes his own blindness as justified.

If redemption consists in hallowing and overcoming that which is through an act of will, it follows that only a *Pharisaical* narrative could represent Jesus as providing redemption by acting as a sacrifice for sin. This becomes clear in a subsequent section of *Zarathustra*, which further plays out the connection between Pharisaism and blindness:

One man once saw into the hearts of the good and the just and said, ‘They are the pharisees.’ But he was not understood. The good and the just themselves were not permitted to understand him: their spirit is imprisoned in their good conscience. The stupidity of the good is unfathomably shrewd. This, however, is the truth: the good *must* be pharisees—they have no choice. The good *must* crucify him who invents his own virtue. That is the truth! (*TSZ*, III, “On the Spirit of Gravity,” 26, 324).

Pharisaism is a way of life utterly insensitive to the movement of life. In the vocabulary of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*¹⁹, “spirit” (*Geist*) is that in the human being which is internally related to movement of the will to power. Yet the Pharisees’ good conscience prevents them from being attuned to this and prevents them from discerning its movement in others. Their “stupid” goodness is also “shrewd,” however, because the very fact that

¹⁹ Rosen helpfully clarifies Nietzsche’s use of this vocabulary: “Normally, *Geist* refers to the general life force...The enjoyment of spirit [*Geist*] is not that of civilized intercourse, conversation, or *Bildung*. It is a turning inward and, through that turning, a return to nature.” Rosen also notes that spirit is to be distinguished from the soul and the heart, which are more related, respectively, to the human personality, and to the human being as a social and affective being. See Rosen, 24.

it makes them unable to discern this movement in others allows them to sacrifice (“crucify”) those others in good conscience. Were they more sensitive—more spiritual, in the positive sense of that term found in *Zarathustra*—the Pharisees would recognize the brokenness of their own particular mode of evaluating others.

Zarathustra’s narration of the crucifixion of this “one man” therefore echoes and undoes²⁰ the Gospels’ own treatment of the theme of blindness. Whereas in the Gospels, it is those that fail to recognize Jesus as the Christ that are blind, in *Zarathustra* it is those that sacrifice the one man—literally (high-ranking Jewry) or figuratively (Paul)—that are blind. And Nietzsche, ever mindful of the variety of perspectives from which an event can be viewed, suggests that insofar as Jesus *does* attack the “Jewish church,” the bearer of “the toughest life-will which has ever existed in any people on earth,” he did indeed die “for *his* guilt” (A, §27). On this narration, which is also present in *Zarathustra*, (I, “On Free Death,” 185), Jesus himself is blind to the higher movement of the will to power in those forces that crucified him. Zarathustra says, “[Jesus] died too early; he himself would have recanted his teaching, had he reached my age. Noble enough was he to recant.” Blindness *is* blindness to the will to power.

²⁰ I mean “undoing” Ian Hacking’s specialized sense of the term: “There are two ways in which to criticize a proposal, doctrine, or dogma. One is to argue that it is false. Another is to argue that it is not even a candidate for truth or falsehood. Call the former *denial*, and the latter *undoing*” (57). The influence of Nietzsche (by way of Foucault) on Hacking is palpable in this volume of essays, and the affinities between “undoing” and Nietzsche’s own term—“revaluation”—would deserve exploration in another context. Ian Hacking, “Two Kinds of Historicism,” in *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 57.

Coming to Maturity: Bearing Tragedy

Nietzsche contrasts Zarathustra with Jesus in both this section from “On Free Death” and the above-cited section from “On the Spirit of Gravity.” The “one man” of the latter section is succeeded by another, one who is not overcome by the shrewd stupidity of the good, but rather recognizes that it is “the *creator* they hate most...for the good are *unable* to create” (324-325). Thus whereas the “one man” merely says “they are pharisees” and is crucified for speaking this truth, his successor—likely Zarathustra himself—is able to diagnose the sacrificial, crucifying drive of the Pharisees as part of the decadent phase of the will to power and is able to resist it. The former death is inferior to the latter: “He that consummates his life dies his death victoriously, surrounded by those who hope and promise...to die thus is best; second to this, however, is to die fighting and to squander a great soul” (183-184). Jesus dies this ‘second-best’ death—he squanders a soul imperfectly attuned to the will to power.

There is, then, a structural similarity to be discerned in the cases of the “pale criminal” discussed above, Jesus, and Zarathustra. In all three cases, a noble inner obedience to that which is in becoming is on display, and all three make similar gestures at sovereignty. The pale criminal does differ greatly from Jesus and Zarathustra in that he finds a sovereign mode of existence too “mad” and dizzying to pursue to the end—which leads him to think himself deserving of execution. And the pale criminal and Jesus both differ from Zarathustra in that their “transgressions” are misunderstood, overridden, and falsified after the fact by those that would pronounce themselves good, whereas Zarathustra remains the master of his circumstances.

This is not to say that Zarathustra's nobility consists in his ability to avoid pain or historical mischance. On the contrary, Nietzsche patterns Zarathustra's "going under" after both Christ's "descent" described by Paul in Philippians 2, and Socrates' descent into Piraeus in Plato's *Republic*. It is "the good" (Paul, the Pharisees, etc.), with their importunate desire for eternal life, that wrongly believe that life is something other than tragic. Zarathustra openly heralds one who will come after even himself, actively searches for him in Book IV, and works creatively to formulate terms that would make this *Übermensch's* appearance intelligible in a way that shows how the higher men of his own age are "bridges" over which this future being will stride (*TSZ*, IV, "The Welcome," 395). This activity is not Zarathustra's attempt to become immortal; it is rather his affirmation of himself in light of his own finitude.

This is Zarathustra's gift to his fellow higher men: to show them, in a gesture of love that is mixed equally with contempt,²¹ the measure of their inadequacy relative to the overman. Zarathustra gives this gift not in order to shame his fellow higher men, but in order that they would enter into an agonistic friendship with him and with his teaching such that they would overcome themselves. Zarathustra's teaching must be as severe as possible, because if he celebrates the virtues of his fellow men rather than offending them, they may take Zarathustra for a savior. Zarathustra's prophetic mission does not aim at creating the good, those who constantly ask, "how is man to be preserved best, longest, most agreeably?" (*TSZ*, IV, "On the Higher Man," 3, 399). For in answering

²¹ See *TSZ*, III, "On Virtue That Makes Small," 284, for the way love and contempt coincide in true neighbour-love.

their own question, the good always impose their own fixed ideas upon others and surreptitiously aggrandize themselves. Zarathustra rather aims at creating a creator—one who is aware that one acts “for the neighbor” in being “pregnant only with one’s own child” (*TSZ*, IV, “On the Higher Man,” 11, 402-403).

According to Nietzsche, such an agonistic mode of engagement, which hallows one’s own instincts, would ironically *vindicate* the gods even as it overcomes every theology.²² For if the gods are part of the history of the movement of the will to power, engagement even in the silliest religious rites may express a deeper realism and love of the earth. Indeed, the section in part IV of *Zarathustra* entitled “The Ass Festival” makes this point abundantly clear; Zarathustra rejoices with the higher men when he realizes that their worship of the ass is part of their convalescence rather than their taking ill. At the same time, such worship courts decadence. All piety unmask itself as the spirit of revenge when it insists upon a particular configuration of the will to power rather than celebrating the ring of recurrence which *is* the movement of the will to power. Nietzsche’s philosophy of the will to power inverts the Platonic formula: impiety alone is loved by the gods.²³ The god-creator bears the violence of life’s perpetual self-overcoming precisely in transgressing the well-constructed order erected by the good in a

²² Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 253.

²³ Plato, *Plato: Euthyphro: Text, with Introduction, Commentary and Vocabulary*, ed. Chris J Emlyn-Jones (London, UK: Bristol Classical Press, 1991), 9e.

decadent phase in the will to power. For Nietzsche, the transgressor is the true theologian and the Antichrist alone the herald of Christ.

Dionysus and the Crucified

Religion need not be decadent, and in Nietzsche's late works the figure of Dionysus and the pagan cult become more and more the image of a healthy religiosity. In a late, famous fragment from the *Nachlass* Nietzsche develops a contrast between two forms of life and religiosity under the heading "Dionysus and the Crucified" (*WP*, §1052). The reasons why Nietzsche chooses "the Crucified" rather than "Jesus" should be clear by now; Paul and the Gospel writers "redeem"—that is, falsify—Jesus' existence in constructing the image of the Crucified one. Witnesses to the Crucified are condemned to hatred of themselves and of life. At its best, the piety of such witnesses expresses itself in kenosis, dispossession, mortification and service of others. But Nietzsche judges that such piety comes at the expense of any sense for what justifies existence, and of the natural rank-ordering that inheres in being. Put another way, such piety celebrates and cultivates sickness, servility, and ill-constitutedness, and sees this as true human fulfillment.

While most religious types are similarly decadent, Nietzsche claims that the worshipper of Dionysus—the noble pagan—rather affirms life, and is "the type of a well-constituted and ecstatically overflowing spirit" (*WP*, §1052). In Nietzsche's image, the pagan is reconciled with existence and, unlike the Christian, does not grasp importunately at a miraculous transformation or at an otherworldly eternity. As the god of drunken and

sexual ecstasy, Dionysus is the proper object of pagan worship: “typical—that the sexual act arouses profundity, mystery, reverence” (*WP*, §1052).

For the Christian, profundity, mystery, and reverence are keyed not by the sexual act or experienced in drunkenness, but by the vision of the Crucified. Nietzsche argues that what is at stake between Dionysus and the Crucified “is *not* a difference in regard to their martyrdom...it is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic one.” Whereas the suffering of the Crucified expresses the ecstasy of a movement of kenotic love, Dionysian suffering expresses the ecstasy of a magnanimous fullness: “The god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life; Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction” (*WP*, §1052). According to Nietzsche, Dionysus is the referent for the death of each god, and Dionysus rises in the atonement effected by every sacrifice.

Conclusion

The adequacy of a Christian response to Nietzsche’s critique of atonement theology will be determined by the extent to which its author is what Nietzsche would term a proud nature: “[proud natures] take delight only at the sight of unbroken persons who could become their enemies and at the sight of all possessions that are hard to come by” (*GS*, I, 13). Even on Nietzsche’s own terms, an imaginative retrieval of Christian atonement theology may be possible—indeed, Christian atonement theology itself may be the “possession” hardest to come by. Such an atonement theology could only be the possession of an author that refuses equally the comfort of a false humility and an

interpretation of Nietzsche that would make easy prey of him. And such an atonement theology can only arise from the creative and imaginative activity of the author, for to fail to become responsible for the creative aspect of the theological task is to become subject to Nietzsche's critique of the theologian's dishonesty. The next two chapters will seek to discover such a response in the works of René Girard and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

CHAPTER THREE

Christ and Dionysus:
Girard on Mimesis, Identification, and Victimization

Introduction

The proximity of Dionysus and Christ is a recurrent theme throughout Christian thought. From late antiquity, Dionysus figures as the “leading pagan antagonist of Christ.”¹ For this reason it is somewhat less surprising than it might first appear that as Girard’s thought becomes less theoretical and formal, as in *Violence and the Sacred*, and more avowedly “apologetic”² with *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Nietzsche comes to figure more and more prominently. Nietzsche articulates an anthropology for which ecstatic and transgressive self-surrender is the religious posture *par excellence*; for Nietzsche, the “real man” is neither the “man of culture” nor “our well-groomed fictitious shepherd” but “the bearded satyr, who cried out with joy to his god” (*BT*, 8). Given the prominence the sacrificial moment in culture has in Girard’s thought, the difference between the Dionysiac’s cry of joy and Jesus’ cry of dereliction should prove revealing. This chapter therefore aims to situate Girard’s response to Nietzsche’s critique of atonement theology within the broader context of Girard’s anthropological thought, first, to show the polemical thrust of his engagement with Nietzsche and to draw out its social theoretical upshot, and second, to assess the extent to which Girard is true to the terms he develops in the course of interpreting Jesus’ crucifixion in his response to Nietzsche.

¹ A. Henrichs, “Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 88 (1984): 212.

² “The present book can define itself as a defense of our Judaic and Christian tradition, as an *apology* of Christianity rooted in what amounts to a Gospel-inspired breakthrough in the field of social science, not of theology.” René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 3.

Girard and Nietzsche, Eye to Eye

As a disciple of Freud and a kind of social scientist, Girard would likely rather describe his work as theoretical or critical (in the sense of literary critical) than poetic, and he would likely prefer that his theoretical position be characterized as “anti-structuralist”³ in that while his theory remains “*morphogenetic*”⁴—concerned with the origin of forms (*morphē*)—it does not understand itself as broadly historical or genealogical.⁵ This chapter will expose the sense in which Girard’s engagement with Nietzsche offers Girard a kind of accountability quite different than that more commonly offered by his anthropologically or theologically-minded interlocutors.

The reasons for the comparison are myriad: both Girard and Nietzsche attempt to reframe the death of Jesus in ways that pay greater attention to Jesus’ form of willing. Nietzsche does so not in order to enshrine Jesus’ practice of non-violent neighbour-love as ultimate but in order to highlight the *form* of Jesus’ life, his self-creation by way of his fidelity to and hallowing of his own instincts. It is in this sense that Jesus is worthy of imitation. Girard reframes the death of Christ in order to highlight the mimetic possibilities that were brought into being by the divine Christ, who was not obliged to

³ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, “Totalization and Misrecognition,” in *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, ed. Paul Dumouchel, trans. Mark R. Anspach (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 75.

⁴ Girard describes his own theory “morphological.” “I am looking for structures and proposing a hypothesis on the evolution of culture that historians...could help to corroborate.” René Girard, João Cezar de Castro Rocha, and Pierpaolo Antonello, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2007), 184.

⁵ Indeed, Girard describes the kind of “coherence” he seeks in a text: “the fact that th[e] logic I discern in the text] can seem abstract and foreign to history only serves to bring out more clearly its status as a logic.” René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 210.

violence for anything, but who nonetheless entered into the space of the victim and, in so doing, revealed the possibility and actuality of the non-violent way of love. Furthermore, both Girard and Nietzsche see Jesus, specifically in his death, as providing a kind of critique of routine religiosity; both Nietzsche and Girard argue that Jesus reveals the paltriness of the spirituality of Jesus' priestly/apostolic epigones, and that Jesus' life and death enable the diagnosis of cultural decadence, a cultural process into which Jesus was drawn after his death. For Nietzsche, Jesus thus plays a crucial role in life's own self-overcoming—which is a return from decadence to flourishing. In similar fashion, Girard argues that Jesus does not participate in sacrificial religion, but rather interrupts it, and that Jesus thus makes a demythologizing reading of human culture and the history of religion possible. Moreover, Girard explicitly identifies Nietzsche as both a participant in this demythologization and as a figure whose opposition to it is the most resolute.

This comparison should prove fruitful because whereas Girard attempts to formulate an account of the death of Jesus that understands it as alien to violence, on Nietzsche's terms any such account will involve violence both to the event itself and to those who would receive it. Nietzsche would ask Girard whether and how deeply his mode of argument differs from that of the *dysangelist* Paul, the original interpreter of the life and death of Jesus. Nietzsche would hold Girard accountable for the ways he erects and promulgates standards of good and bad human behaviour by way of an analysis of human nature. And Nietzsche would likely highlight the fact that Girard erects these standards in a way that Nietzsche would find methodologically problematic both because Girard finds theoretical criteria for evaluating anthropological data (myths, rituals) in a

source (the Judaeo-Christian scriptures) that itself should be used for data, and because that source can be read in precisely the opposite way.

One gets the distinct impression that Nietzsche would give Girard the same treatment he gives the English psychologists in the first essay of *Genealogy of Morals*. Despite their best efforts to gaze into the moral history of humankind, these psychologists end up finding in the subjects of their analysis the same plebeian sentiments that dwell within their own hearts. Nietzsche would argue that Girard, even in his noble attempt to get beyond conventional moral criteria of evaluation,⁶ ends up replicating them by ultimately taking the side of the slaughtered (Nietzsche would not call them victims), forgetting that the situation in which the natural masters are oppressed poses a much greater danger to humankind. Indeed, the reading of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures Nietzsche offers in section 45 of *Antichrist* (a section in which Nietzsche also refers his reader to the aforementioned first essay of *Genealogy of Morals*⁷) could well be addressed, proleptically, to Girard. In the former section, Nietzsche quotes a number of the most famous passages of Christian scripture, many of which invoke divine judgment against the worldly and powerful, including “Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor 1:20). Nietzsche argues that they express Christianity’s “chandala morality.” On Nietzsche’s reading, these texts show Christian morality to be “born” not of love and identification with the victim but “of *ressentiment* and impotent

⁶ In a rather dizzying moment early in *Violence and the Sacred* (204), Girard suggests that he and his readers must “renounce the gambit of ‘good’ and ‘bad’—even in its inverted form.”

⁷ One might cite specifically section 15 of the first essay of *Genealogy of Morals* as a significant parallel to *Antichrist* 45 in that Nietzsche cites Christian sources at length in both of these sections before suggesting that the authors of these sources were much more bloody-minded than is commonly assumed.

vengefulness.” Nietzsche dons the mask of *Antichrist* neither to herald the Antichrist as the savior of humankind—the patient reader will recall that Zarathustra remains Nietzsche’s hero—nor to make war against Christianity, but to unmask the violence that blesses itself with the name “Good News.”

Girard’s reading holds that the Judaeo-Christian texts were written in opposition to all violence, including and especially that sacrificial violence done by the so-called “religious.” For Girard, the Judaeo-Christian texts are both religious in that they structure the shared life of a religious community, and profoundly anti-religious in that they comment on human religion in a way that unmasks religious violence, including the violence of what he calls “sacrificial Christianity” (*TH*). Patrick Kirwan thus argues that Girard offers not a mythic soteriology, in which the substitution of the sacrificial victim saves the community, but an “anti-soteriology.”⁸ Girard thus enacts a gesture like unto Nietzsche’s own in that he reframes and revalues divine wrath and judgment such that they can assume a place in the narrative of Jesus’ saving action that militates against sacrificial violence rather than fostering it. Indeed, Girard argues that the perspective developed in these texts—which Nietzsche interprets as violent—are actually able to expose the violence of the Nietzschean perspective. For Girard, Nietzsche’s pagan religiosity is another iteration of the violent religion that seeks to secure fruitfulness and cultural creativity by way of violent sacrifice.

⁸ Michael Kirwan SJ, “Being Saved From Salvation: Rene Girard and the Victims of Religion,” *Communio Viatorum* 52, no. 1 (2010): 30.

Any reader familiar with Girard's reading of the dynamics of rivalry will at this point recognize the sense in which Nietzsche and Girard are locked in a mimetic conflict: both of these thinkers seek to unmask religious violence that masquerades as divine. This mimetic conflict would seem to require a sacrificial decision in favour of one set of criteria over another—Nietzsche's will to power or Girard's non-rivalrous love, a decision that would necessarily result in the unacknowledged forgetting or displacement of certain aspects of their antagonism. If the sacrificial misrecognition that would attend such a decision is to be avoided, an account of the ground shared by Nietzsche and Girard is needed. Only if the sense in which they are mimetic doubles is exposed will the object of their rivalry become clear. In order to show a) how Girard's reading of these texts is credible in the face of Nietzsche's opposed reading, and b) how Girard's major works offer a non-retrogressive response to Nietzsche, I will offer accounts of Girard's theory of religion, the relation between Judaism and Christianity, and his interpretation of Jesus' life and death that parallel those of Nietzsche offered in chapter 2.

Blindness and Mimesis

Although the absence of full knowledge of self is a perennial theme in philosophy, this theme receives renewed and urgent attention in Girard's anthropological thought. Girard addresses the theme of blindness to self by way of his mimetic theory, and its religio-political correlate, sacrificial blindness, by way of his theory of the scapegoat mechanism (to which I will return below).

As mentioned above, Girard develops his account of human nature in conversation with Freud, and Girard engages Freud's description of the Oedipus complex and of psychological mechanisms, and Freud's philosophy of the unconscious directly and indirectly throughout his work. Like Freud, Girard concerns himself with the *origin* of desire, and with the *form* desire takes—indeed, Girard's theory is morphogenetic in precisely this sense. According to Freud's well-known argument, (male) desire originates and is formed in relation to the basic relationships a child has to its father and mother. The child is initiated into normal desire, and thus becomes 'well-adjusted' when the child's unconscious desires for patricide and incest are sublimated and those violent energies are redirected toward appropriate objects. This process of maturation is hidden even to the one in whom it is taking place. It is the psychoanalyst's responsibility to name the natural desires of the *analysand* and to help the *analysand* come to terms with these desires and with the way they may have been dealt with maladaptively by, for example, being repressed rather than sublimated. The patricidal desire originates, for Freud, in the irrepressible sexual desire of the id. Because the father has sexual access to the mother, his murder comes to represent the fulfillment of the fantasy of immature desire. Desire for violence arises, for Freud, from rivalry for the object of sexual desire, namely, the mother.

While Girard's mimetic theory remains concerned with the origins and form of desire, and Freud's notion of unconscious processes is tremendously important for Girard, Girard ultimately marginalizes the Oedipus complex. For Girard, paternal identification does not lead to violence directly because of the disciple's innate desire for possession of

the model's object of sexual desire. On the contrary, Girard argues that "the model-disciple relationship precludes by its very nature that sense of equality that would permit the disciple to see himself as a possible rival to the model. The disciple's position is like that of a worshiper before his god" (*V&TS*, 174). In order for patricidal and incestuous desire to develop in the son, the model-disciple relationship must *already* have eroded. As Girard puts it, "Freud does not realize that the control of sexual relations is part of the more fundamental question of violence" (*TH*, 86). The question of how the model-disciple social relationship erodes such that aberrant desire can develop in the disciple is more basic and more revealing, for Girard, than Freud's "theory of suppressed desires" (*V&TS*, 118). Girard seeks to understand the erosion of good mimesis because it opens up lines of questioning related not only to desire, the psyche, and its structure, but to the social and legal orders (even if the latter is rather undeveloped and takes only the form of prohibitions), and, further, to religion with its attendant myths and rituals.

Rather than elaborating unconscious processes, Girard develops his mimetic theory with reference to concrete social practices and anthropological research. While the primary mimetic relationships are obviously those found within the family, shifting the terms of reference from Oedipal triangles to model-disciple relations allows Girard to cast a wider net when attempting to understand the formation of desire—and it allows Girard to inquire into the genesis of desire in a way that does not assume that the child possesses an innate sexual desire for the mother. This is not to say that mimetic theory does not have its own theory of unconscious processes. Indeed, Girard's above-cited claim that the model holds a position like unto that of a god for the model suggests that the disciple

does not, and indeed cannot understand the proximity between his own potential and that of the model. The disciple admires and respects the model, and “inevitably he lacks the necessary ‘distance’ to put what is happening to him ‘in perspective’” (*TH*, 290). Girard argues that the model is able to hold the disciple in thrall because the model represents himself as possessed of being by virtue of his relation to a certain person (sexual partner/friend) or set of people (family/tribe/etc), certain property or goods, a certain cultural role, etc. The disciple patterns his own desires after those of the model and thus desires that in virtue of which the model appears to him to be possessed of being. The disciple “desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which [the model] seems to possess...It is not through words...but by the example of his own desire that the model conveys to the [disciple] the supreme desirability of the object” (*V&TS*, 146). As a result of the plurality of desirable objects, there are many such differentiations within society. “The model considers himself too far above the disciple, the disciple considers himself too far below the model, for either of them even fleetingly to entertain the notion that their desires are identical” (*V&TS*, 146-147). Thus according to Girard, inequality rather than equality enables peace in society (*V&TS*, 49), for the cultural enshrinement and protection of inequality ensures that models and disciples do not become rivals by having their desires converge on the same object.

From Mimetic Blindness to Sacrificial Blindness

The rise of violence is made nearly inevitable by the internal dynamics of mimesis. Indeed, the very injunction the model directs at his disciple, “imitate me!” immediately issues in “an inexplicable counterorder: ‘Don’t imitate me’ (which really

means, ‘Do not appropriate *my* object’)” (V&TS, 147). This double imperative is necessary because the better the model serves as model and the more diligent the disciple is in being a disciple, the more the distance between the model and disciple will collapse. And the more apparent it becomes to both model and disciple that the model himself is unoriginal—does not “bear the secret of life, of true being” (V&TS, 147)—and rather imitates the desires of others, the more the disciple will become suspicious of the model and seek to become a rival to the model. Likewise, the more diligent the disciple is in acquiring the virtues of the model, the more the model will find his status as model threatened by the disciple. Thus rivalry develops between model and disciple, and it becomes apparent that “only the role of disciple is truly essential” (V&TS, 147). Each patterns his desire on the desire of the other, and each becomes, for the other, the “model-obstacle.” Each rival, as model for the other, attempts to forestall violence by assuring the other, ‘I possess being in virtue of *some other object*.’ At the same time each rival, as disciple of the other, seeks to possess the other’s object and each becomes fascinated by his model, who parades an array of desiderata before his disciple in his attempt to remain the model.

As this rivalrous reciprocity escalates, both become blind to the way they are affected by the other and to the fact that they employ the same tactics in attempting to misdirect the other. And as the rivals become more and more identical, the violence by means of which one comes to possess the object that seems to make one possessed of being becomes the desired object for both parties. Ultimately, violence triumphant becomes the *desideratum par excellence*. As Girard puts it, “Violent opposition is the

signifier of ultimate desire, of divine self-sufficiency, of that ‘beautiful totality’ whose beauty depends on its being inaccessible and impenetrable” (*V&TS*, 148). Since each party within the struggle hopes the next blow will be victorious, each is driven to strike with ever escalating force. “Desire clings to violence...because violence is...the signifier of divinity” (*V&TS*, 151).

When rivalry escalates in this fashion, violence becomes a kind of pollution. The blindness of the rivals to the nature of their rivalry and to the insubstantiality of the *kudos* that cycle between them allows this violence to spread, and to unsettle other relationships. Whereas the integration of society and the close interrelations between social roles tend to the fruitfulness of the earth and social stability in normal circumstances,⁹ this integration allows the contagion of violence to spread rapidly when violence appears as the ultimately desirable object, as the ubiquity of mimetic modeling (fathers are not only models for sons, but rulers for subjects, etc.) causes other roles and distinctions to begin to break down. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard elaborates this apropos of *Oedipus the King*, highlighting the way mimetic blindness manifests itself in the conflict between Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresius. In the tragedy, each claims impartiality in attempting to arbitrate the dispute over the plague’s origin while refusing to admit—or even refusing to see—that “the ‘reasons’ on both sides of a dispute are equally valid—which is to say that *violence operates without reason*” (*V&TS*, 46). For Girard, Sophocles’ tragedy is not a

⁹ “Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another’s throats” (*V&TS*, 49).

drama that spins out a primordial psychological structure. It rather depicts a political philosophical reality: once rivalry has taken hold and violence becomes that which is ultimately desirable, rivals become mimetic doubles, blind to their own inability to establish the heroic difference over against the rival.¹⁰

Girard calls this situation, in which rivals are locked in unendingly reciprocal violence the “sacrificial crisis.”¹¹ The sacrificial crisis is a crisis in two senses. First, the sacrificial order comes to a crisis. That is, in such a situation, the sacrificial order that previously held sway loses its ability to structure society. Here the difference between impure violence (which upsets cultural distinctions) and purifying violence (which maintains these distinctions) is effaced, and reciprocal violence spreads rapidly through the community, unimpeded by the sacredness of custom, law, or institution. Second, the crisis of the sacrificial order leads to a sacrificial event, which one could describe as a crisis in a slightly different sense, an event capable of founding a new religio-political order. Girard argues that when the previously-existent sacrificial order comes to a crisis, it issues in a new sacrifice, one that gives rise to a new sacrificial order.

The blindness that reigns in the former moment, wherein the sacrificial order dissolves, differs from the blindness that comes to reign in the latter moment. I will elaborate these moments in turn. Within the situation of mimetic rivalry, the combatants

¹⁰ Girard argues that Sophocles, unlike Freud, actually grasps precisely this point: “Sophocles treats the essential elusiveness of the heroic difference with relentless irony, making it plain that the most conspicuous examples of ‘individuality’ are put in doubt at the very moment when they seem strongest and most valid—when, in short, they are brought into violent opposition with another individual who turns out to be almost identical” (*V&TS*, 204).

¹¹ Consider *V&TS*, 49.

are blind to their role in escalating the violence in play, and each believes that the violence he bears is sovereign. Despite the brokenness of the sacrificial order, the violence in play often receives a theological interpretation. Girard takes note of the subtle shift in the locus of the model's virtue. Whereas in situations of social stability, the model is righteous and just and *thus* favoured by the gods, within rivalry the current victor is favoured by the gods in virtue of his triumphant violence.¹² Girard argues that the concept of *kudos* is vital to understanding the Homeric conception of the relationship between violence, desire and divinity. "*Kudos* is defined in terms of semidivine prestige, of mystical election attained by military victory... *Kudos* passes to the victor of the moment... It is the gods who confer *kudos* on men and the gods who take it away" (*V&TS*, 152). Each mimetic rival may articulate a theology which describes the cosmic order that must obtain and which makes his own victory intelligible. Ultimately, however, the vicissitudes of the conflict strain and eventually efface these theologies as the violence over which each momentarily victorious combatant (hubristically) claims mastery inevitably escapes his grasp. As violence spreads and as all involved suffer its effects, violence comes more and more to resemble a plague.

Girard argues that the difference between these moments within the sacrificial crisis can be seen in differences between Homeric *kudos* and the violence in Euripides' *Bacchae*. Briefly, Homer depicts rivalry, and Euripides crisis. To elaborate, whereas in

¹² The question of the source of the model's virtue and its relation to violence suggests that it would be fruitful to read Plato's *Euthyphro* through Girard's theory of the scapegoat mechanism. Is the successful brigand's violence to be identified as evidence of virtue? Or righteousness? Or piety?

Homer the play of the deities with the fates of human beings does more to situate human conduct in a cosmic frame than to explain the actual motivations of the human actors involved, in Euripides' *Bacchae*, Dionysus becomes a possessing force that incarnates violence and rules over the subject such that Pentheus perceives only what Dionysus wants him to perceive (*V&TS*, 162). In this situation the formerly sacrosanct differences between, for example, human being and animal, or between man and woman are obscured or muddied—or combined such that only monstrous creatures remain; Dionysus appears to Pentheus as both man and a bull, Pentheus is the image of both his father and his mother, etc. (*V&TS*, 162-163). As the deity's involvement intensifies, the human actor's blindness increases and his sense of self recedes. With regard to this narrative in particular, Girard suggests that the phenomenon of Dionysian ecstasy is a mythic or theological narration of the effects of human violence within the political community (*V&TS*, 165-166).

Although Girard resists reducing *all* narratives that attribute human actions to the efficacy to the god's power to nescient descriptions of the sacrificial crisis, Girard does argue that the sacred always appears within the frame of human violence; myths issue from sacrificial resolutions to crises of mimetic violence. If all parties involved in mimetic rivalry are blind to the mimetic nature of the rivalry and to the sense in which the crisis issues from their own violence, it is natural for them to seek some external cause for the rivalry. Indeed, the apparent intractability of the sacrificial crisis makes the appearance of a sacrificial victim or scapegoat seem miraculous to all within the crisis. For the end of the plague of violence depends upon someone being found whose guilt

would seem obvious to all, and whose subsequent punishment, banishment, or sacrifice would not arouse further reprisals. The appearance of such a scapegoat marks the transition from one sacrificial order to another. When all parties involved in the conflict vent their fury upon the scapegoat unanimously, the scapegoat mediates a transformation in those that become polarized against the scapegoat; whereas all were formerly at war with one another, the scapegoat's appearance transforms them all into a unified mob. After the sacrifice, those that make up the mob find themselves united with their former enemies in their belief in the guilt of the scapegoat and thus in enmity against the victim. And they find that the sacrifice has quelled the violent passions that had been enflamed by mimetic rivalry.

The movement from polarization of all against all to polarization of all against one is so coordinated, and its effects so pervasive for society with its different domains, (economy, education, politics, etc.), and this movement is so transformative for the political community and its members' social relations and motivations that the community cannot imagine it to have been the result of their own modes of social interrelation. Thus super-human agencies are charged with having orchestrated the sacrificial events. In particular, the sacrificial victim is charged with having been the transgressive (monstrous) destroyer of the previous sacrificial order and the divine revealer of a new sacrificial order. Girard accounts for the Janus-faced character of many deities in this way: the apparently contradictory attributes of the divine—wrathful at one moment and benevolent at another—originate in different moments in the sacrificial

process. Across religions, according to Girard, divine sovereignty *is* super-human mastery over the dynamics of violence.

According to Girard, myth originates in the collective experience of the apparent necessity of the collective murder. The collective murder is, by definition, collectively willed. However, the fact that it issues from a shared blindness means that it bears a unique relation to the intentionality of those that perform it. The very real nature of the violence in play prior to the sacrifice sensitizes all to the benefit of the appearance of the potential victim, but some moment of indirection is necessary for the sacrificial decision to take place. The nature of this moment of indirection is infinitely various, but the result is the same:

The violence directed against the surrogate victim [is] radically generative in that, by putting an end to the vicious and destructive cycle of violence, it simultaneously initiates another and constructive cycle, that of the sacrificial rite—which protects the community from that same violence and allows culture to flourish (*V&TS*, 93).

Since all ritual orders originate with the scapegoat mechanism, Girard argues, mythic depictions of violence can be traced back to original sacrificial events. Indeed, it is only by tracing myths back to their historical origins that any clarity at all about the blindness that reigns at the origin of all culture can be gained. For according to Girard, culture originates in a double displacement of violence: in the scapegoat mechanism, one victim, reckoned guilty by all, stands in for guilt of the entire community, and the death of the victim enables peace. And in the ritual recollection of the sacrificial event, a ritual victim sufficiently similar to the original victim stands in for the original victim.

The ritual serves to secure the generative effects of the sacrificial event. This is not to say that the ritual event is devoid of violence. On the contrary, Girard insists, “a trace of real violence persists in the rite” (*V&TS*, 103). But the violence that remains is always “a lesser violence, proffered as a bulwark against a far more virulent violence” (*V&TS*, 103). The violence simultaneously serves “to banish the evil emanations that accumulate within the community and to recapture the freshness of this original experience” (*V&TS*, 103). Girard’s analysis shows how religion serves a vital social function in managing the violence that perpetually threatens to destroy society.

(Mis)remembering the Origin

Girard’s thesis that ritual orders originate in real sacrificial crises that myths both remember and misremember may seem questionable. Against those that would object that his methodology involves eisegesis, however, Girard counters, “if the victims of the medieval witch-hunts are real, why wouldn’t the victims of these myths also be?” (*ISS*, 75). Here Girard’s affinities with Freud become quite informative. If the genesis of a sacrificial order through the scapegoat mechanism is an event like unto the genesis of desire in the child through the Oedipus complex precisely in that both processes feature a similar blindness,¹³ Girard’s reading of mythic texts can function as a kind of psychoanalysis of culture—just as Freud’s reading of Jewish history does in *Moses and Monotheism*.¹⁴ Indeed, Girard’s psychoanalysis of culture becomes particularly

¹³ Girard openly draws an analogy between “religious misapprehensions” and the misapprehensions dealt with by psychoanalysis in *V&TS*, 310.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

informative as he gives special attention to the violent impulses contained in these texts, and as he attends to the way founding violence is selectively forgotten with successive revisions of myths.

In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard claims that he is simply completing the project of cultural psychoanalysis Freud left unfinished with *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* (*V&TS*, 216-217), and in *Things Hidden*, Girard praises Freud for attending to the traces of founding violence in the Jewish text (*TH*, 65). What Girard finds particularly important in Freud's analysis is the way he uncovers the work of culture, which is to consign liminal phenomena like founding violence to the margins of human experience. Through this process, ritual systems and the cultural norms and roles that they construct are routinized and entrenched. There is therefore a cultural logic implicit in the development of all theologies, for Girard.

This cultural logic derives from the dangerous similarity between reciprocal violence, that is, the violence that leads to mimetic crisis, and ritualized violence, which is the violence that fortifies a religio-cultural order. Culture must institutionalize the latter kind of violence such that the energies that would otherwise fuel the former are expended, absorbed, or channelled in non-threatening ways. Ritual and myth together serve to revivify the cultural moment when a decision was made distinguishing the two kinds of violence from one another. However, as just mentioned, "a trace of real violence persists in the rite" (*V&TS*, 103) precisely because myth must recall and ritual must re-enact violent events in order to enshrine good violence and distinguish it from bad. Revivifying the moment of cultural decision means revivifying the moment of sacrificial ambiguity,

and this ambiguity threatens to undo the distinction between the two kinds of violence. From this arises the impulse to sanitize myth and ritual of the violence that gives rise to sacrificial ambiguity.

Girard therefore argues, “the evolution of mythology is governed by the determination to eliminate any representation of violence” (TS, 76). This elimination takes place in a number of stages, and in a number of ways according to Girard. Whereas the universal nature of mimetic antagonism leads to founding violence that is collective in nature, mythic recollections tend to replace this violence with *individual* violence—either that of a victim-god that arouses all of society against himself, or, later, of a hero who kills a victim-monster on behalf of society. Four major reasons can be given for the replacement of collective violence by individual violence in myth.

1) *The sacrificers write history*: Myths issue from the perspective of those who participate in the new sacrificial order generated by the resolution to the sacrificial crisis. Myths therefore represent the sacrificial crisis as it was experienced by those participants. If participants in the sacrificial crisis are blind to the true nature of the crisis, it follows that the myths the participants author will have gaps in their representation of the crisis—and false presences as well; the victim will appear as central in all mythic narratives, and will be represented, typically, as guilty prior to the sacrifice and as god-like after it.

2) *Representations of collective violence threaten the ritual order’s stability*:

While certain myths do retain collective violence, the chaotic and unstructured nature of this violence seems threatening after the fact. Ritual ought to erect and sustain a cultural

order. If myth openly represents that order as having originated in a process characterized by reciprocal violence between agents whose agency is compromised to the extent that those agents are blind to the nature of their rivalry, engagement in ritual may serve just as easily to unsettle a cultural order as to entrench it. The eventual nature of the resolution to the sacrificial crisis may make it appear arbitrary. Moreover, the blindness that is ingredient to sacrificial violence may not appear as an orthodox representation would want it to appear—namely, as inevitable or necessary, given the involvement of the super-human intelligence that is orchestrating the events. It may rather appear as the product of a vicious ignorance on the part of those manipulated by this intelligence.

3) *Individual violence makes collective violent reaction seem appropriate*: By replacing collective violence with individual violence, the persecutors’/persecutor’s perspective *vis-à-vis* the sacrificial victim is made to seem inevitable. Violence in narratives with a single transgressive individual (a victim-god to whom the spread of the contagion of violence can be attributed) will appear less threatening because interaction with the transgressive individual can appear to manage the violence in play. Moreover, opposition to this individual—even opposition that is extremely violent in nature—can appear to issue from an appropriate understanding of the moral distinctions in view rather than from ignorance of or blindness to the true nature of the conflict.

4) *Individual violence offers a social and historical focal point*: the presence of the transgressive individual also concentrates the order-giving power necessary for sustaining society in a particular source or person. Although Girard does not speculate as to the reasons for the efficacy of the scapegoat mechanism, if the transgressive individual

lords over the community as a deity after the sacrifice, it is easier for chiefs, kings and other leaders to consolidate their authority by claiming a privileged relation to this god. Individual rather than collective violence therefore provides conditions more felicitous for the development of symbolic authority within a social body.

Girard elaborates the process by which collective violence is replaced with individual violence in a chapter entitled “The Crimes of the Gods” in *The Scapegoat*, using Plato’s treatment of the poets and myth in *Republic* as an example. Girard claims that Plato objects against the poets in *Republic* not because he is concerned that they depict Kronos as violent and prone to sexual misconduct, but because they have lied by ascribing collective murder and general societal disorder to a single monstrous individual (god). Girard writes, “it is not collective murder that shocks Plato...but the individual violence that has taken its place” (TS, 76). According to Girard, Plato’s argument is that bald-faced reference to founding violence and to its collective nature is necessary if the sacred is to maintain its integrity and to function in forming a unified political body. Plato insists that the surrogate victim be costly and that the tales of Kronos be recollected and “revealed [only] in a mystery” not in order to suppress the stories of Kronos’ immorality but to situate that immorality within the sacrificial crisis that threatened the entire community. For Girard, Plato wants to *renew* myth and the sacrificial economy rather than to transcend it through reason.

Girard argues that although Plato’s recommended “censorship” (TS, 77) of the poets was never imposed directly, his argument served to found a philosophical culture that gradually purified the gods of any moral ambiguity. Girard argues that Plato was

conscious of the coincidence of evil and good in the gods in the theology of the poets, but that a change took place after Plato condemned mythology's celebration of the gods' immorality. "From now on gods must be neither criminals nor victims and, because they are not recognized as scapegoats, their acts of violence and criminality—the signs that point to them as victims—including the crisis itself, must be gradually eliminated" (*TS*, 78-79). The loss of the criminal aspect of the gods is key to what Girard calls "the disintegration of the primitive notion of the sacred" (*TS*, 79)—this "primitive sacred" being a ritual order that had not lost its reference to the paroxysm of violence that was established through sacrifice. The gods that emerge from the reform efforts of Euripides, Plato, and others are, by contrast, utterly beneficent, and free of involvement in crime and reciprocal violence.

This leads to the next step in Girard's account of the cultural logic of theological development. As memory of the original crimes that gave rise to collective violence is eventually effaced, "the victim's transcendence [eventually] fragments into a good and divine power on the one side and a bad demoniacal power on the other" (*TS*, 81). The primal victim-god's ambiguity is split, and hero and monster come to oppose one another, with "the monster inherit[ing] all that is detestable in the episode, the *crisis*, the *crime*, the *criteria* for choosing a victim, the first three stereotypes of persecution. The hero incarnates the fourth stereotype only: murder, the sacrificial decision" (*TS*, 82). For Girard, the Oedipus myth is particularly important as an example of a myth that originates at an earlier stage in this purification (*TS*, 81). Whereas Thebes was in fact subject to the plague of *generalized* mimetic violence, this violence was attributed to the monstrous

Sphinx, whose presence oppressed the city. When Oedipus comes to solve the riddle of the generalized mimetic violence—which the Thebans claimed had been caused by the monstrous Sphinx—Oedipus unwittingly offers himself as the victim through whom the citizens of Thebes could be reconciled, and by which they can come to terms with the plague. This is a typical case: the plague of reciprocal violence cannot be reckoned with rationally until some cause can be found. It follows that the moment when the victim is also the moment when reason comes into existence. As Girard puts it, specifically in reference to his analyses of the myths of Oedipus and Dionysus, “the origin of symbolic thought lies in the mechanism of the surrogate victim...It is a fundamental instance of ‘arbitration’ that gives rise to the dual presence of the *arbitrary* and the *true* in all symbolic systems” (*V&TS*, 235).¹⁵ Thus, for Girard, all cultural change is to be viewed through the lens of religion. Although the forms religions take are indeed infinitely various, this change is explicable in light of their level of immediacy to the sacrificial event, and the reigning theology of a given cultural day is informative as to the cultural problematic of that day, as the example mentioned above illustrates; Homer depicts rivalry and Euripides crisis.

On the Possibility of Recognizing Violence

Although logic has its own kind of autonomy, one who wants to perform logical

¹⁵ When, at a 1983 conference held in Girard’s honour, the suggestion was made that the scapegoat mechanism figured in his thought as an *idée fixe*, Girard was only too happy to turn this around on his interlocutors: “I stand revealed...as a man of few ideas, so simple in their principle that perhaps they amount to no more than a single idea...an ‘*idée fixe*.’...It seems appropriate to call the surrogate victim mechanism an *idée fixe* in that it is what fixes all ideas.” René Girard, “The Founding Murder in the Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche” in *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard* (see n. 3), 227.

analysis must pay fastidious attention to the practices of naming held in common by those who share the bond of history and interest that unites a social body. For Girard, sacrifice is the event that gives rise to the social practice that does the most to determine the way a community will describe its common life; at this moment, a culture articulates the account of things human and things divine that it will hold to be normative. According to the Girard of *Violence and the Sacred*, it is also a key political philosophical moment in that it distinguishes friend from enemy, the former being those that recognize sacrificial and ritual violence as, respectively, necessary and appropriate. Girard therefore seeks, in *Violence and the Sacred*, to show how social institutions like monarchy, government, and the judicial system originate in this “generative violence” (*V&TS*, 298), how capital punishment echoes sacrifice, and how the aleatory character of legal punishment points to the contingent arrival of a new ritual order.

An almost parenthetical statement Girard makes just prior to the conclusion of this book is, however, highly revealing as to the future trajectory of his work, and, indeed, to the very criteria he is using when describing sacrifice as violent.

In the evolution from ritual to secular institutions men gradually draw away from violence and eventually lose sight of it; but an actual break with violence never takes place. That is why violence can always stage a stunning, catastrophic comeback. The possibility of such an occurrence conforms to the dire predictions of divine vengeance that are to be found in every religious system (307).

For Girard, disenchantment and the secularization of religious institutions are particular instances and further elaborations of the process considered above, through which good and evil gods eventually replace ambiguous victim-gods. Girard argues, however, that the same violent passions and the same psycho-social mechanisms drive the social

processes that operate beneath the secular veneer of contemporary culture. From Girard's argument that a society's inattention to the religious domain makes its descent into sacrificial blindness and violent reciprocity more likely, it follows that contemporary culture is much more fragile than is commonly supposed. Historically, predictions of divine vengeance were premised upon one of two notions: neglect of the god will either cause the god's protective agency to waste away, leaving the community exposed to disaster, or it will cause the god to "descend among men and lay claim to his nourishment with unexampled cruelty and ferocity" (*V&TS*, 266). Girard seeks simultaneously to demythologize this religious insight and to retain its wisdom by re-grounding it in his mimetic theory and his theory of the victimage mechanism,

Girard consistently analyzes divine wrath as a projection of human violence. Regardless of whether or not one would consider Girard an anti-realist about wrath, however, religion retains its historic exigency. For it follows from Girard's theory of the scapegoat mechanism that neglect of the ritual observances that manage human beings' violent impulses allows human violence to erupt—and, indeed, to erupt in ways that can only be understood, after the fact, by way of the hypostatization that is at the ground of every theology. The logic that can make intelligible the succession of ritual orders, religious forms, of ambiguous divinities and "purified" divinities, Girard says,

can only be expressed, for want of the naked truth, in terms of optimum *distance*. If the community comes too near the sacred it risks being devoured by it; if...the community drifts too far away, out of range of the sacred's therapeutic threats and warnings, the effects of its fecund presence are lost (*V&TS*, 268).

Girard sees the violence of the twentieth century as issuing from a failure to maintain this optimum distance. In light of the logic just articulated, the widely-held belief that one

can carefully weigh and scientifically calibrate (especially military) violence such that it serves only one's own interest appears to bear a striking resemblance to the hubristic attempt to incarnate an agency like unto that of a primitive divinity. Whereas theories of secularization see the historical overcoming of religion as preparing the way for a new era of freedom from dogmatism, Girard sees these theories and the unintelligibility of religion and religious observance in the contemporary West as portending the appearance of “limitless violence...absolute vengeance” (*V&TS*, 240), that is, a form of violence unrestrained by any sacrificial boundaries. For Girard, the Cold War, with its “awesome and horrific form of technological weaponry” (*V&TS*, 240) arose because of the failure to understand the mechanisms of social unity—mimesis and the scapegoat mechanism. Moreover, the violence of the twentieth century also drives humankind to a decision “between total destruction and the total renunciation of violence” (*V&TS*, 240). Indeed, it is clear that Girard has this part of twentieth-century history in mind when he returns to the problem of modern warfare in his recent book on Clausewitz, entitled *Battling to the End* (*BttE*).

It is unclear, however, how the Girard of *Violence and the Sacred* imagines such a “total renunciation of violence” if, as he claims, “the best men can hope for is the unanimity-minus-one of the surrogate victim” (*V&TS*, 259). If the latter claim is true it seems that even calling sacrificial violence “violent” involves Girard in positing a distinction without a difference. If a war of all against all is violent and the war of the mob against a scapegoat is violent, the only differences in view are the number of perpetrators and victims, and the frequency and the ferocity of conflict. It appears that

Girard's point in positing this distinction is to highlight the relative nature of the peace secured by sacrificial violence. However, if sacrificial violence remains violent, and if it is "the best man can hope for," the attempt at a total renunciation of violence that Girard advocates seems deeply imprudent, as it would lead not to global peace (as Girard seems to suppose) but to a renewed war of all against all.

To anticipate our engagement with Nietzsche, the view of humankind's 'best religious hope' that Girard articulates at the conclusion of *Violence and the Sacred* bears a striking and strange resemblance to Nietzsche's—except that Nietzsche would question whether religion could ever *not* be violent. If Girard would defend his claim in *Violence and the Sacred* that one can judge sacrificial violence *as violent* in a way that leads one to counsel the total renunciation of violence, it is crucial that he establish the principles of such judgment and their superiority over against Nietzsche's own, which would distinguish not between violent and nonviolent ways of life but among different nobler and more ignoble *varieties* of sacrifice.

Unmasking Violence: the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures

At the conclusion of *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard states that he must leave off a full consideration of the Judaeo-Christian narratives in light of his theory for another study.¹⁶ When he takes this up in the second of the four parts of *Things Hidden Since the*

¹⁶ He does appear, at this point, to interpret the Hebrew Bible's book of Jonah as being in broad continuity with other myths: for Girard, Jonah is selected for expulsion just as other scapegoats are selected—despite his admission of culpability (*V&TS*, 312-313), and this moment is significant, for the other sailors on this ship, as the moment when they came to acknowledge a new God (Jonah's).

Foundation of the World, it becomes clear that Girard's argument for a distinction between reciprocal and sacrificial violence on the one hand and a non-violent mode of sociality depends on a distinction between myth and Gospel that arises from these narratives. Indeed, Girard suggests that it is these very narratives that have always already been the condition for *any* recognition of the mythic sacred and its violence, and that these narratives alone demythologize the mythic sacred:

The most *improbable* source of our demythologizing is religion itself, and in our world, more particularly, [Christianity]...I propose that if today we are capable of breaking down and analyzing cultural mechanisms, it is because of the indirect and unperceived but formidably constraining influence of the Christian scriptures...The revelation of the surrogate victim as the founding agent in all religion and culture is something that neither our world as a whole nor any one particularly 'gifted' individual can claim to have discovered. *Everything is already revealed*. That is the claim of the Gospels at the moment of the Passion. To understand that the victimage mechanism constitutes an essential dimension of that revelation...we need only give our fullest attention to the letter of the [Judaeo-Christian] text (*TH*, 138).

Girard argues that his own 'discovery' of the scapegoat mechanism would not have been possible if the sacrificial veil—that is, the persecutor's mythic description of the sacrifice—had not already been torn. Girard argues that it is not he himself that tore the sacrificial veil, but that he is, on the contrary, merely bearing witness to the possibility of a perspective on the victim that is both anti-mythic and already fully realized in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. This is a perspective on the victim that recognizes the victim's innocence and *thus* the arbitrariness of the victim's selection.

After examining the earliest Old Testament¹⁷ narratives and demonstrating the presence of the stages in the ritual process outlined in his theory of religion (sacrificial

¹⁷ Girard consistently refers to the Old Testament rather than to the Hebrew Bible, and I follow his usage here. Consider *TH*, 141.

crisis, polarization against the victim, development of the mythico-ritual order), Girard contrasts the ways founding violence is presented in myth and in the Old Testament. Whereas the Roman myth presents Romulus' murder of Remus as justified because of Remus' guilt, and as the act that founds Rome, Genesis presents Cain's murder of Abel as unjustified due to Abel's innocence. And despite the fact that Cain, like Romulus, founds a city, Genesis presents Cain as a "vulgar murderer" (*TH*, 147) and his violence as worthy of condemnation. For Girard, Max Weber's "explanation" of this is inadequate: Weber argues that the Jewish tendency to defend the victim against the persecutor is merely "characteristic of a particular cultural atmosphere peculiar to Judaism" (*TH*, 147), and that this atmosphere that could not have come into being if the Jews had had the imperial success characteristic of their Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian and other neighbours. For Girard, this explanation fails to recognize the sense in which the Jews' peculiar "tendency" is, in its context, a critique of the dominant mythology¹⁸ and a new imagining of the nature of ritual, interdictions, and religious transcendence (*TH*, 148), and also, looking back from a theoretical perspective, something of an anthropological breakthrough.

Here, for the first time, the victimage mechanism appears *as a mechanism*, and the truth about founding violence, the victim's arbitrary selection and the sacrificers' blindness appears openly. Whereas in *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard argues that "the unanimity-minus-one of the surrogate victim" (*V&TS*, 259) was only means for managing

¹⁸ "With the Joseph story, the biblical authors have recast a pre-existent mythology, adapting it in the spirit of their special concerns" (*TH*, 151).

violence, in *Things Hidden* Girard argues that the Judaeo-Christian text shows that “culture founded on murder retains a thoroughly murderous character that in the end becomes self-destructive” (*TH*, 149). Girard can now give an account of the way mythic recollections and ritual reenactments of sacrificial violence retain their character as violence despite the fact that they provide a measure of social stability in light of an alternative non-violent mode of sociality. This account of the role of violence in maintaining social unity allows Girard to explain the cultural logic that operates in the progressive polarization of deities and the effacement of the trace of collective violence, and to argue that this movement reveals the actual instability of the order of mythic religion.

Despite the breakthrough, Girard is careful to recognize and highlight continuity between biblical myths and world mythology (*TH*, 141-144), especially inasmuch as the three phases of the mythic cycle (crisis, collective violence, and sacred revelation) are present in both. But in providing his comparative analysis, Girard highlights a difference in perspective he regards as crucial, one that is significantly elided by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*—in a way typical of other positivist ethnology. According to Girard, Frazer treats the Gospel as “a piece of on-the-spot reporting” and draws analogies between the bare events recorded there and in other ethnographic sources that appear, to Girard, to be designed to discredit the claims of the Gospels (*TH*, 169). Girard argues, however, that there is something more profound happening in the Gospels; Frazer, he argues, overlooks the way the Gospels’ presentation of the Passion makes clear their rejection of the “sacralizing act of transference” (*TH*, 169) that takes place within the

primitive sacred when “the victim inherits all the violence from which the community has been exonerated” (*TH*, 169).

Girard shows that other texts within the New Testament openly depict similar attempts at sacralizing acts of transference, precisely in order to show how badly they are mistaken about the true nature of the events. In *Things Hidden*, he refers to the stoning of Stephen of Acts 7, and to the aftermath of Herod’s execution of John the Baptist. In the former case, after they have heard Stephen’s prayer, the mob ““cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. They cast him out of the city and stoned him”” (Acts 7 in *TH*, 171). Likewise Girard notes that Matthew and Mark both highlight a revealing delusion that conforms to the logic of the scapegoat mechanism; Herod is taken captive by the notion that John the Baptist, whom Herod executed in a spectacularly mimetic scene (analyzed in *TS*, chapter 11), has been resurrected in Jesus. Girard argues that these Gospels record Herod’s delusion in order to “situate the false resurrection in direct continuity with the violent death, which appears as a founding death” (*ISS*, 134). These two incidents depict the two moments in the operation of the scapegoat mechanism. The former (Stephen’s stoning) depicts the sacrificial moment, wherein the crowd unanimously kills one against whom they are polarized when the victim commits a characteristic crime; Stephen’s “blasphemous” prayer obscures the distinction between God and man, in the eyes of the mob, thus justifying their unanimous violence. The latter incident (John’s beheading) depicts the apotheosizing moment of the scapegoat mechanism, wherein the sacrificial victim comes to reign over his sacrificers as a deity; it appears that Herod fears that John the Baptist will continue to hold him

accountable for his rivalry with his brother from beyond the grave. In both cases, the Gospels depict those who do violence to the victim as blind to the hidden realities that are actually determinative; the stoning mob does not recognize that Stephen's vision is genuine, and Herod does not see what John the Baptist sees and denounces, namely the mimetic conflict between Herod and his brother over Herodias (See *TS*, chapter 11).

The statement that does the most, for Girard, to suggest that the Gospels intend to identify the scapegoat mechanism and to make the movement of sacralizing transference impossible is contained in the Gospel of John, chapter 11. Caiaphas states, "it is better for one man to die for the people, than for the whole nation to be destroyed." John claims explicitly that Caiaphas makes this statement not in his own person but as high priest, and calls it a "prophecy," that Jesus' death will "gather together in unity the scattered children of God" (John 11: 53 in *TS*, 112). Girard sees the Caiaphas that appears in John's Gospel as attempting to exercise a kind of *realpolitik* (*TS*, 113) in availing himself of the scapegoat mechanism. Indeed, the very fact that Caiaphas explicitly identifies the principle at the heart of the mechanism suggests that Judaism had already begun to demystify it and thus to lessen its effectiveness; if the chief priests must *decide* to find Jesus guilty of order-destroying crimes, this obviously dulls the spontaneity of their subsequent sacrificial decision. It does not undermine the unanimity of the "coalition of all the worldly powers" which is "found at the origin of all myths" (*TS*, 115), and which represented, in John's Gospel, by Caiaphas and the chief priests. The way this "coalition" appears in the Gospels is unique, however. The Gospels present this coalition not in order to bow before its judgment but "to denounce its total mistake" (*TS*, 115).

According to Girard, by identifying the coalition of worldly powers and denouncing its mistake, the Gospels found a religious form that is a genuine alternative to the mythic.

Jesus: The Triumphant Victim

As I discussed in chapter two, Nietzsche identifies the moment when the priestly aristocracy of Israel held onto Yahweh despite going into exile as the moment when Israel's religion becomes unhealthy. For in this moment, their theology underwent a dramatic revision; for Nietzsche, the God whose love for Israel expresses itself in wrath—in Israel's abandonment to the worldly powers—could not differ more starkly from the God that is “the expression of [Israel's] consciousness of power, of joy in oneself, of hope for oneself” (A, §25). While Girard is likewise concerned with showing how such a conception of wrath is the residue of a form of religion that is being overcome, he locates the continuity between Judaism and Christianity quite differently. Whereas Nietzsche sees the moment when Yahweh becomes “the god of ‘justice’” (A, §25) as a kind of fall, Girard sees the continuity between the God of the Old Testament and the New precisely in the discovery that “love” has always been at the heart of Yahweh's “justice”—even to the effacement of that justice insofar as it is understood in strictly legal and sacrificial terms.

Girard argues that scripture has always aimed to reveal the divine nature as love. This is clear, for Girard, because the Old Testament begins the movement that eventually culminates in the revelation of the founding murder that is hidden in all mythology. The revelation of the scapegoat mechanism makes identification with victims obligatory;

indeed, Israel's long history with God culminates in the believer's identification with Christ, the paradigmatic victim. Different books and different sets of literature within the Old Testament have different levels of clarity about the trajectory of scripture.

In the first books of the Bible, the founding mechanism shows through the texts here and there...never completely and unambiguously...By contrast, the prophetic books offer us a group of astonishing texts that are all integrally related as well as being remarkably explicit (*TH*, 155).

In a conversation with Walter Burkert, Jonathan Z. Smith and others, Girard thus calls the Hebrew Bible¹⁹ a “text in travail”: just as the stories of Genesis and Exodus subvert mythic forms so subtly as to make it difficult to argue for the singularity of the Bible *vis-à-vis* myth (*TH*, 154), Girard argues that the “archaic legal prescriptions” of Leviticus and Deuteronomy seem to evince the same anxiety about preserving differences characteristic of legal codes that derive from myth. According to Girard, however, the prophetic books of the Old Testament work to interpret these legal prescriptions in a way that mitigates their “obsessional” (*TH*, 154) tendencies and points them toward their goal, which is the establishment and maintenance of harmonious relationships within the community. Girard consistently singles out Isaiah as the prophetic book *par excellence*, as the “Suffering Servant” passages²⁰ from Isaiah vividly depict a Messianic scapegoat figure along with the ambiguous role ascribed to Yahweh in the Old Testament. The innocence of the scapegoat is affirmed, and responsibility for his death is ascribed to human beings, and yet his death is a “saving death” (*TH*, 157). Isaiah is typical of the Old Testament,

¹⁹ René Girard, Walter Burkert, and Smith, *Violent Origins : Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. Robert G Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 141.

²⁰ Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-11, 52: 12-13, and 53:1-12.

however. The fact that divine responsibility for the scapegoat's death is denied shows that the image of God is being progressively "divested of the violence characteristic of primitive deities" (*TH*, 157); the fact that it is denied *only implicitly* shows that this process is incomplete.

On Girard's interpretation, the Gospels serve to draw out that which was implicit in the Old Testament's understanding of the scapegoat. Girard argues that within the Gospels, the Pharisees understand the Mosaic law in quasi-mythic fashion; law enshrines and preserves differences that separate members of society from one another, and it underwrites the practice of sacrifice. The Pharisees therefore represent that party that would preserve "the system of misrecognition on which they rely as a community" (*TH*, 164). Jesus' contestation of the Pharisees' "ritualism" provides Girard with justification for rereading the Gospels in a way that highlights the difference between the anti-sacrificial message of the text and the sacrificial reading of it. For Girard, Jesus' contestation with the Pharisees represents a strike against the religio-mythical system that Judaism *is*, on some level. It follows that Girard, who endeavors to take up Jesus' gesture in attempting to discern the Gospel spirit in the Gospel text must contend against the sacrificial construals of Jesus' death that Christians have historically offered in answering the "ritualistic" demands placed upon them by their cultural situations. This is Girard's self-imposed task: to give a non-sacrificial reading of the text—"whatever definition (expiation, substitution, etc.) we may give for that sacrifice" (*TH*, 180). This reading should be capable of explaining simultaneously a) the way in which Jesus' death provides salvation and b) the non-violence of God despite the apparent violence of the crucifixion.

According to Girard, “the gospel text contains an explicit revelation of the foundations of all religions in victimage, and this revelation takes place thanks to a non-violent deity—the Father of Jesus” (*TH*, 184). For Girard, the crucifixion is not a moment that confirms the violence of God and the actuality of the sacralizing transference of common guilt to the sacrificial victim. It is rather the moment when the sacrificial strategy of the coalition of the worldly powers collapses in upon itself:

it is at the very moment when they apparently triumph...that these powers, believing themselves to be victorious once again, have in fact been vanquished...The secret of their operations, which has never before been revealed, becomes inscribed quite explicitly in the gospel text (*TH*, 191).

The death of Jesus fulfills the crowd’s demand, not the demand of a violent God wroth at the contravention of his law. Against those that would play the Gospels’ non-violence off against the sacrificially-minded letters of Paul,²¹ Girard claims that Paul sees the Cross as efficacious in revealing the founding mechanism (*TH*, 192) rather than in hiding it, and Girard quotes passages from Paul approvingly (Col 2:13-15, and 1 Cor 2:8 in *TH*, 192-193). These passages show that Jesus’ death was not a defeat, but a triumph. This triumph consisted in exposing sacrificial blindness as subjection to the powers of evil. Girard argues that “God ironically outplayed the calculations of the powers” (*TH*, 193) in allowing the powers to crucify Jesus. Here Girard echoes Luther, Augustine, and scripture itself; as Paul puts it in I Corinthians 2:8, “none of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory.” The death of Jesus does indeed function apocalyptically, though not in revealing a new order

²¹ Jean-Michel Oughourlian mentions Renan explicitly in *TH*, 185, but Nietzsche’s *Antichrist* employs a rhetorical strategy fitting this description equally well.

of the sacred. On the contrary, it rather depopulates the pagan sky, according to Girard: “We know that we are by ourselves, with no father in the sky to punish us and interfere with our paltry business” (*TH*, 195). Indeed, this shows, for Girard, that Christianity offers a more resolutely demythologized account of human sociality than modern scepticism to the extent that the latter remains “strangely attached” to a mythic vision of divine punishment (*TH*, 195).

According to Girard, *this* “apocalyptic” moment leads not to a violent “Day of the Lord” but to the renunciation of the principle of retribution. On this day, the victim is universally recognized as innocent and the Kingdom of God arrives; illusions are dispelled, violence is renounced, and love of enemies replaces mimetic rivalry. Such a proposal may seem utopian, but Girard argues that it is possible: “The decision to [adopt the single rule of the Kingdom of God] must come from each individual *separately*, however; for once, others are not involved” (*TH*, 199). Girard argues that this is the “complete liquidation of the sacrificial for the first time” (*TH*, 200).²² This becomes possible not strictly through an intellectual development, but through a socio-cultural metamorphosis that came to visibility in the movement between Old Testament and Gospel (*TH*, 201); the Old Testament prepared the Jews “to throw themselves into the great adventure of the Kingdom” (*TH*, 201). The kingdom’s arrival remains dependent upon the response of Jesus’ audience. This means that refusal may obscure it, but it also

²² Girard continues to hold this position on Christianity’s “demystification” of religion and the correlative withering of religious ritual. In *Battling to the End*, Girard describes the revelatory impact of Christianity upon humankind: “Rituals had slowly educated them; from then on, humans had to do without” (x).

remains a permanent possibility for those that embrace it—“precisely because this possibility is not in the least illusory” (*TH*, 201). In fact, Girard argues, the darkening that comes with refusal now only serves to defer the full revelation of the scapegoat mechanism: “by remaining faithful to violence...men have deferred the revelation and compelled it to take the terrible path of incalculable violence” (*TH*, 203).

The Scapegoat Mechanism as Hermeneutical Principle

Girard argues that all subsequent religious thought can be understood in terms of whether it tends to reveal or to hide the scapegoat mechanism and whether it leads to the renunciation of violence or to further reciprocal violence. This becomes particularly evident when one examines the way Girard brings his hermeneutic of the Cross to bear upon two deeply contrasting alternative readings, namely that of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and that of Nietzsche.

Hebrews

The text of the Epistle to the Hebrews would seem a good source for those (sacrificial Christians and non-Christians alike) who would want to claim that Christianity itself understands Jesus’ death in sacrificial terms. Girard claims that the medieval theologians interpreted Hebrews in precisely this sacrificial way; according to Girard, the medieval theologians present God as “requir[ing] a new victim...the victim who is most dear to him, his very son” (*TH*, 182). Girard says this line of reasoning has “done more than anything else to discredit Christianity in the eyes of people of goodwill in the modern world,” and “has become intolerable for us” (*TH*, 182). Fortunately, Girard

argues, when one looks back to the Gospels themselves one finds that all the texts that “relate specifically to the Father of Jesus...contain nothing which would justify attributing the least amount of violence to the deity” (*TH*, 182). Two things follow from this: first, that according to the Gospel message, being a son (or daughter, presumably) of the Father of Jesus means being strictly non-violent—for it is in their rejection of violence that “the Gospels are fulfilling the work of the Old Testament” (*TH*, 182). Second, and correlatively, “reconciliation with God can take place unreservedly and with no sacrificial intermediary” (*TH*, 183).

Hebrews is a problematic letter for Girard, then, because it is part of the New Testament and yet it seems at variance with what he calls the “gospel spirit” (*TH*, 189) that otherwise characterizes the New Testament. Girard argues that this is made plain by the way “blood” figures in the imagination of the epistle; for Hebrews, “the new bond with God, like the old one, is inaugurated by blood” (*TH*, 228). Hebrews 10: 11-14 does indeed explicitly contrast the animal sacrifices offered by the priests with the work of sanctification that was effected “through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10). Moreover, Hebrews 9:14 claims that Christ’s blood is able to accomplish what the blood of the animals sacrificed according to Old Testament laws could not—namely, the removal of sins, and the subsequent verses show that it is this difference that makes Christ’s sacrifice, offered on behalf of all humanity, unique, perfect, and final. The way this “offering on behalf” is to be interpreted is crucial: Girard insists that when the author of Hebrews inserts the verse from Psalm 40 into Hebrews 10:7, “Then I said, ‘Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God,’” the author of Hebrews

interprets this verse as a “sacrificial dialogue” (*TH*, 229) between Jesus and God. This demonstrates, for Girard, the extent to which “the Epistle to the Hebrews...restates God’s responsibility for the death of the victim” (*TH*, 231) in such a way as to enable rather than to prevent the development of the sacrificial reading. For if the Father and the Son could be understood to be making arrangements in order to manipulate some sort of sacrificial machinery, the implied theology of Hebrews falls well short of being Christian. Indeed, for Girard the “sacrificial theology [of Hebrews] is on the same level as the theology implied in the second Isaiah” (*TH*, 231)—despite it having been authored *after* the death of Christ. This makes Hebrews a dangerously retrogressive book. This is only intelligible, Girard argues, because the author of Hebrews “takes no account of the scapegoat mechanism. As long as the Christian difference is defined in sacrificial terms...it will eventually be effaced” (*TH*, 228). This judgment demonstrates the extent to which awareness of the scapegoat mechanism is the criterion by which Girard assesses any commentator’s interpretation of the Cross.

Analyzing Hebrews provides an occasion for Girard to sharpen his anti-sacrificial reading. Girard claims that although Hebrews is correct to highlight the ultimacy of Jesus’ death, the terms in which it frames its ultimacy are inadequate. It is not ultimate because Jesus’ sinlessness makes him the only victim capable of satisfying a divine bloodlust, for it is the crowd rather than God that demands satisfaction. Christ’s perfection as victim consists rather in his being “a man who is not obliged to violence for anything” (*TH*, 218). *This* perfection allows the revelation of human sacrificial violence as “hatred without cause” (*ISS*, 127ff.). For whereas all other victims bear some measure

of guilt due to their mimetic entanglement with their fellow human beings (even if not their particular persecutors), Jesus' sinlessness keeps him free of such guilt. Girard understands this as Jesus' triumph over those who believe they can secure social unity by means of violence. In the Gospels this triumph has global significance; it is not merely a triumph over particular agents. It is the triumph over a spiritual power that holds these particular agents in thrall, which the New Testament texts alternatively call "Satan" or the "powers of heaven." Girard sees these names as shorthand for the social effect of mimetic and sacralizing violence. Those over whom Christ triumphs believe they owe their social unity—and thus *everything*, their senses of identity, their prosperity, their social cohesion—to violence. As Girard puts it, "violence is the controlling agent in every form of mythic or cultural structure, and Christ is the only agent who is capable of escaping from these structures and freeing us from their dominance" (*TH*, 219). Thus whereas the powers strip human beings of their autonomy and their freedom of moral vision, Christ restores these. The Gospels therefore provide an account of the function of sacrificial violence and they explain its pervasive influence.

The Gospels also chart a path beyond it that retains its ultimacy in spite of the refusal of some to follow this path and the apparent triumph of violence within history. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard draws attention to the etymology of "martyr," which means "witness" (209). Rather than being a witness for the ultimacy of violence, the martyr's integrity, and the martyr's prayer, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (*TS*, 199) function in witnessing to brokenness of violence and to the reality of the alternative path, and thus to the original triumph of Jesus.

Nietzsche

In the context of his analysis of New Testament texts in *Things Hidden*, Girard insists, against a plainly Nietzschean objection, that this interpretation is not “a kind of imaginary revenge, a kind of ‘sublimation’ of...failure” (*TH*, 191). The contours of this objection should be familiar from chapter two. Nietzsche argues that by framing Jesus’ death within an economy of sin, guilt and expiation, Paul falsifies the facts of the matter, which are that Jesus “died as he had lived” (*A*, §35) and that Jesus’ execution is simply a matter of the “law of selection” (*A*, §7), which dictates that “the weak and the failures shall perish” (*A*, §2). It bears noting that this objection arises from premises different than those held by those Girard is typically addressing. For whereas those to whom Girard typically offers his anti-sacrificial interpretation find Christianity discredited by the sacrificial interpretation (*TH*, 182) because they find sacrifice intolerable, Nietzsche does not find the sacrificial interpretation problematic because sacrifice is offensive. On the contrary, Nietzsche sees sacrifice is inevitable rather than offensive. Nor does Nietzsche find the sacrificial interpretation problematic because it is inaccurate. Nietzsche finds the sacrificial interpretation offensive because it is dishonest about the nature of the human condition; the notion that the sacrifice of Christ pays the debt humanity owes on account of its sin construes humankind as a mass rather than stratified into natural masters and slaves, as sinful rather than innocent, prankish, and joyful, and as providentially cared for rather than engaging in self-creation under a godless sky. Nietzsche therefore attempts to show how the deployment of the sacrificial interpretation

is a violent power play that allows the ignoble many—and especially their representatives, the priests—to oppress the noble few.

Girard finds it important to insist that the Christian interpretation of Jesus' death does not arise from *ressentiment*, because Nietzsche's argument (which *does* arise from *ressentiment*, according to Girard) obscures the presence, in Paul's authentic letters, of a non-sacrificial reading of Christ's death. Girard claims that "Resentment is merely an illegitimate heir, certainly not the father of Judeo-Christian Scripture."²³ For Girard, the more fundamental falsification is that by which Jesus' death comes to enable scapegoating violence rather than ending it. Girard sees Nietzsche as taking the opportunity provided by the sacrificial language drawn from Hebrews to claim a) that there is no non-sacrificial reading of Christ's death and b) that the sacrificial interpretation of Christ's death is worthy of rejection due to its status as a product of priestly dishonesty. For Girard, Paul is better described as paying attention not only to the bare facts of the matter, but to the dramatic significance of those facts from a mimetic standpoint.

Furthermore, from Girard's standpoint, Nietzsche's attempt to unmask Christianity as violent involves a certain wilful avoidance of the sense in which the very discovery of a sacrificial mentality—and thus of the nature of human violence in the broadest terms—depends upon the Gospels themselves. Girard writes, "our boldest

²³ René Girard, *Job, the Victim of His People*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 108.

thoughts in this domain [of unmasking] are still based, however unconsciously, on the Gospels” (*TH*, 191-192). This must register as a highly polemical comment against Nietzsche, the consummate practitioner of unmasking. Girard claims that the Gospel perspective on Jesus’ death reveals—once, for all—who is rightly judged violent and who peaceful. For Girard, Jesus’ death reveals the simultaneous proximity and abysmal distance between the violent transcendence of the scapegoat and the peaceful transcendence of Christ, to show the actuality of the latter, and thus to show the possibility—for all—of a total conversion from one form of life to another (*TH*, 217). Thus, for Girard, insight into the nature of mimetic effects is inseparable from one’s adoption of a perspective upon scapegoating like unto that of the Gospels. What is at stake between Girard and Nietzsche is the sense in which the non-sacrificial death of Christ is ultimate, or, in the language of Hebrews 10:10, “once, for all.”

Nietzsche and Demythologization

Girard suggests that Nietzsche himself plays a part in the demythologizing of sacrifice precisely in his opposition to this revelation. Girard sees Nietzsche’s resistance to Christian atonement theology as part of two parallel processes. First, as demythologization, Nietzsche’s argument is part of the Gospels’ own effect. Nietzsche functions as part of the historico-cultural movement through which the springs of primitive religion are exposed. Second, however, Nietzsche’s argument is also intelligible as a product of Nietzsche’s own encounter with the truth of anti-sacrificial Christianity and of a value judgment against it. Nietzsche is important for Girard because Girard sees Nietzsche’s resistance to the Gospels’ historical effect as both typical of such

modern resistance and the highest instance of it—because Nietzsche is so sensitive to the nature of the truth that is being rejected. Girard also sees Nietzsche as important because the *case* of Nietzsche dramatically portrays the consequences of such resistance.

According to Girard, Nietzsche is more clear-sighted than modern positivists and postmodern nihilists because he recognizes the way “Judaism and Christianity destroy [sacrificial] unanimity in order to defend the victims unjustly condemned” (*ISS*, 171). To this effect, Girard cites Nietzsche’s statement from *Will to Power*, “Christianity wants it established that *no one should be sacrificed* (Nietzsche in *ISS*, 174). Girard argues, however, that in tracing the genesis of Christian identification with victims to an *unconscious* activity—the psychological principle of *ressentiment*—rather than to a *conscious* activity—that of “heroic resistance to violent contagion” (*ISS*, 173)—Nietzsche wilfully blinds himself to the truth he has grasped. It is telling indeed that whereas Nietzsche protests against the way Christian charity weakens humankind, Girard sees it as precisely Christianity’s virtue to have made a concern for the victim contemporary society’s principal concern (*ISS*, chapter 13).

Girard sees evidence that Nietzsche recognizes the sense in which Christianity ends sacrifice in Nietzsche’s insistence upon the sacrificial nature of the death of God. Girard analyzes the famous “death of God” section from *The Gay Science* (§125) and finds that those aspects that are most conversant with his own theory of the origin of religion are precisely those marginalized by Heidegger and other interpreters of Nietzsche. Nietzsche follows the announcement of the death of God by insisting that this God has not merely died, but that he has been murdered: “What was holiest and most

powerful of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives.”²⁴

Although Girard judges this insistence on the sacrificial nature of God’s death “in very bad taste” he seeks to understand its logic, and, in his way, finds it appropriate:

“[Nietzsche] can guess his readers’ desire to escape the murder.”²⁵ Girard argues that Nietzsche has a better grasp of the origin and end of religion than do interpreters like Heidegger who focus rather strictly on the death of God (in “The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God is dead’”²⁶). Indeed, Girard demonstrates that in this section of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche describes a situation like the sacrificial crisis, with the abolition of differences: Nietzsche writes, “what did we do to unchain the earth from its sun? Where is the planet spinning now?” etc. The very form in which these abolished differences are presented—as questions—indicates how vertiginous this cultural moment is, for Nietzsche. Girard then describes Nietzsche as moving, in section 125, from a sacrificial crisis to a renewed ritual order: “‘How shall we, murderers among murderers, comfort ourselves?... Who will wipe the blood from our hands? What lustral water is there to cleanse us? What ceremonies of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?’”²⁷ With the ritualization of the collective murder, a new religion is born. The final stage in the ritual process takes place after Nietzsche’s madman falls silent, when the crowd fails to recognize the truth of the madman’s words. Girard summarizes: “The crowd knows

²⁴ Nietzsche in René Girard, “The Founding Murder in the Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche,” (see n. 13), 233.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God Is Dead,’” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 53–114. See also Stijn Latré careful parsing of Heidegger and Girard on Nietzsche’s “word” in “Nietzsche, Heidegger, Girard on ‘The Death of God,’” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 57, no. 2 (June 2001): 299–305.

²⁷ Nietzsche in René Girard, “The Founding Murder,” 236.

nothing of the murder, yet it is itself the perpetrator...The natural death of God is the alibi of the murderers who deny the reality of the murder.”²⁸ Girard shows that Nietzsche’s grasp of the relationship between violence and the sacred is much subtler than that of his commentators. Indeed, this subtlety is on display, for Girard, when Nietzsche has his madman enact precisely the gesture of all religious figures: Girard writes, “[Nietzsche’s] madman is the object of a properly religious expulsion. It is impossible to call up the forces which weaken or destroy religions without simultaneously calling up those which restore it.”²⁹ Nietzsche is, for Girard, the ultimate demystifier of religion precisely because he interprets the death/murder of the Christian God in light of Christian revelation.

According to Girard, Christian revelation works best as demystification when the rhetorical strategies used to cover over the founding murder are unmasked *as strategies* and their violence is exposed. This makes Nietzsche’s insistence that his madman announce the sacrificial murder (rather than the mere death) of God readily intelligible, for Girard. By this means, Nietzsche argues that there is no alternative to sacrificial violence. Indeed, by this means Nietzsche reasserts and valorizes the conditions that would justify the murder of God, and once these conditions are in place, the murder appears, at worst, as necessary—or simply as inevitable. In other words, violence is concealed. Nietzsche’s resistance to the truth of Christianity goes so far as to attempt to immunize post-Christian culture from the demystifying effects of Christianity. As Girard

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 240.

puts it, “Nietzsche’s entire tragedy is *to have seen but to have not wished to understand* the undermining performed by the Bible” (*BttE*, 96).

Girard on Nietzsche’s Resistance to the Gospel Revelation

For Girard, Nietzsche’s resistance to *Christian* demythologization is truly fateful.

In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* Girard argues,

“[in order] to escape the consequences of his own discovery and persist in a desperate negation of the biblical truth of the victim, Nietzsche resorts to an evasion so gross, so unworthy of his best thinking, that his mind could not hold out against it (*ISS*, 173).

Although the very notion of making a value judgment against truth might seem suspect to the average Anglo-American philosopher, Nietzsche would be the last to object. Indeed, Nietzsche would claim that the irreducibility of perspective makes such value judgments against truth not only possible, but routine. Girard, however, argues that the effort of choosing against the truth that Nietzsche had discovered drove Nietzsche insane.

Girard contextualizes Nietzsche’s decision against truth by reading Nietzsche’s relationship with Wagner through the lens of mimetic theory. In his essay “Superman in the Underground: Strategies of Madness—Nietzsche, Wagner, and Dostoyevsky”³⁰ Girard shows that Nietzsche’s relationship with Wagner follows the familiar mimetic pattern. Initially Nietzsche worships Wagner as a model, and Wagner functions as a mediator in the development of Nietzsche’s desire, initiating Nietzsche into desiring precisely that which Wagner himself desires. Later, Nietzsche becomes fascinated and

³⁰ René Girard, “Superman in the Underground: Strategies of Madness-Nietzsche, Wagner, and Dostoevsky,” *Modern Language Notes* 91, no. 6 (December 1, 1976): 1161–1185.

obsessed with Wagner as a rival and an obstacle to the fulfillment of his own desire. Girard argues that Nietzsche therefore attempts to outstrip Wagner, both in the literary arena by viciously attacking Wagner in his books, and even in directly erotic relations; Nietzsche “expects to receive Cosima [Wagner] from his hands, just as Richard Wagner had received Cosima.”³¹ The tendency of rivalry to escalate is further illustrated in the quasi-theological articulation Nietzsche gives this rivalrous love triangle, as he likens Wagner to Theseus, Cosima to Ariadne, and himself to Dionysus. Girard summarizes, “The possession of divinity and the possession of the woman go together.”³² Girard correctly sees that for Nietzsche, expression of the higher will to power is “one and the same thing” as identification with Dionysus. This means the stakes of Nietzsche’s rivalry with Wagner are no less than divinity and divine power.

The terms of mimetic theory suggest to Girard that Nietzsche’s attempt at identification with Dionysus can also be seen as expressing a kind of self-destructive blindness, one that issues in the Quixotic patterns of self-aggrandizement and self-delusion³³ to which Nietzsche seems subject. Girard argues that Nietzsche underestimates the extent to which mimetic rivals actually mistake the mimetic force that does indeed transcend them within rivalry for a divine force.

To examine Nietzsche’s own text independent of Girard for a moment, Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner in *Genealogy of Morals* arises significantly from what

³¹ Ibid., 1164.

³² Ibid., 1164.

³³ Ibid., 1173.

Nietzsche perceives as Wagner's failure to renounce himself. He writes of *Parsifal*, "I...wish that...*Parsifal* were intended as a prank—as the epilogue and satyr play, as it were, with which the tragedian Wagner wanted to say farewell...to us, to himself, and above all *to tragedy*" (*GoM*, III, 3). Had *Parsifal* been thus intended, Nietzsche argues, it would not have been such a complete betrayal of the ideals he had previously held—and, shared—with Nietzsche. As a satyr play, *Parsifal* could have been, Nietzsche argues, the moment in which Wagner overcomes both nostalgia for Christianity and himself; this would have been a gesture like unto Zarathustra's "going under." This evaluation of *Parsifal* is premised upon the distinction, developed in *Nietzsche contra Wagner*,³⁴ between two kinds of sufferers and their respective art forms. On the one hand, there are those that "suffer from *overfullness* of life," and joyously embrace tragic and Dionysian art. On the other hand, there are those that suffer from "*impoverishment* of life" and that therefore desire art that calms and comforts them in their weakened state. Nietzsche argues in *Genealogy of Morals* that whereas Wagner's other operas celebrate an overfullness of life, *Parsifal* issues from the latter impoverishment of life, and that Wagner thus slanders life in offering such comfort. Beyond the vague Christianity of the opera itself, the gesture Wagner makes with *Parsifal* offends Nietzsche; it smacks of the same importunate attachment to one's selfhood that characterizes the typical Christian, the Apostle Paul above all. *Parsifal* thus appears to Nietzsche as the gesture in which Wagner finally identifies neither with Dionysus nor even with Jesus, who ecstatically

³⁴ Girard cites Nietzsche's *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 669 in "Nietzsche and Contradiction," 54.

overcomes himself in living in obedience to his inner lights. With *Parsifal*, Wagner rather identifies with what Nietzsche later calls “The Crucified,” and thus, for Nietzsche, loses all nobility of soul.

Girard perceives the nature of Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner with great clarity in “Nietzsche and Contradiction.” When commenting upon it, however, Girard argues that Nietzsche’s critique, which Nietzsche portrays as a “no-saying” [*Neinsagen*] that issues from the yes-saying *ecstasis* of the will to power, is neither a form of self-transcendence nor a gesture in which Nietzsche relates himself to the transcendent. Rather, Girard sees the vehemence with which Nietzsche attacks Wagner in his works as evidence that “the victim [Nietzsche] realizes that he himself consented and connived in the unjust triumph of the mediator [Wagner].”³⁵ In other words, Nietzsche recommends and himself undertakes precisely a form of willing that involves subjecting oneself to possession by the mimetic rival. Girard represents such willing as issuing from a kind of pathological compulsion: “the will-to-power mystique might be called the *ideology* of mimetic desire, if it is true that ideologies are actively engaged in furthering ends that are best furthered by not acknowledging their true nature.”³⁶ Mimetic theory teaches one to be suspicious of vehemence such as Nietzsche displays over against Wagner, as it tends to indicate the presence of the kind of dangerous instability that leads to violence.

³⁵ Girard, “Superman in the Underground” (see n. 27), 1163.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1176.

Girard presents further evidence that Nietzsche was driven insane by his resistance to the Gospel revelation by analyzing a passage from Nietzsche's *Daybreak*. Girard reads this passage as a kind of manic prayer: "Make me insane, I beg you, o divine power. Insane, so that I may finally believe in myself. Give me delirium and convulsions, moments of lucidity and the darkness that comes suddenly."³⁷ Girard comments on this passage: "Outwardly... this text still subscribes to the old romantic notion of insanity as a sign of election, a proof of kinship with 'the divine powers.'"³⁸ Girard interprets the 'prayer' of the madman as yet another mask of Nietzsche himself. He argues that it can only be taken at face value by those who subscribe to similar and similarly outdated "notions" as the Romantic one which sees insanity as a sign of election. Girard thus differentiates himself from those who would read the passage according the sense in which it was originally intended. The point of the passage—which Girard sees as latently present in the passage itself—is only accessible by way of a theoretical vantage point that Girard regards as superior to that of Romanticism, namely that of mimetic theory. The passage displays, for Girard, the truth that "in the absence of a mediator...the madman is surrounded by thunderbolts and phantoms. He is performing vertiginous acrobatics for reasons that remain vague and mysterious."³⁹ For Girard, the passage actually makes a point that lies "behind these [Romantic] lyrical frills," namely, that "the madman's wishes correspond to the evolution of Nietzsche's illness."⁴⁰ Mimetic

³⁷ Nietzsche *The Dawn*, I, 14, quoted in René Girard, "Superman in the Underground," 1176.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1177.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

theory both accounts for the genesis of the ‘prayer’ in the blindness of mimetic reciprocity and it decodes its ultimate meaning, which the ‘prayer’ bears despite itself and against its author’s wishes.

For Girard, it is no coincidence that Nietzsche’s rivalry with Wagner becomes acute as it comes to relate to Christianity. Girard cites a fragment from the Nietzsche *Nachlass* that appears to contain Nietzsche’s initial reaction to *Parsifal*.⁴¹ In the fragment Nietzsche marvels at the opera and describes it as “the greatest gift I have received in a long time.” Nietzsche describes it as such a gift not because it confirms or conforms to his own philosophy of existence, but because it contradicts his own:

[It is] as if...someone finally addressed the problems that truly concern me, not to echo once again the answers that I always have ready to hand, but to provide the Christian answers, which have been the answers of souls stronger than those produced by the last two centuries. Yes, when this music is heard, we brush aside Protestantism as if it were a misunderstanding.⁴²

Interestingly, Nietzsche does not describe *Parsifal* as a gift in the agonistic sense that is so often present in his works; that is, he does not take up the Dionysian yes-saying mask that celebrates the rival’s advent as an occasion for war. Nietzsche appears to find, in *Parsifal*, a presentation of Christianity that is fully conversant with the best formulations of the “answers that [he] always ha[s] ready to hand.” Nietzsche calls *Parsifal* “the greatest masterpiece of the sublime that I know, power and rigor in apprehending a dreadful certainty, an indescribable expression of greatness in the compassion towards

⁴¹ Girard, “Nietzsche and Contradiction.” 60. It appears in *Nachlaß*, Summer 1886—Fall 1887, *KGA*, VIII.5[41].

⁴² Nietzsche in *ibid.*, 60.

it.”⁴³ Nietzsche finds that *Parsifal* generates passions—he names “compassion” [*Mitgefühl*] specifically—in himself that are deeply at odds with those he otherwise prizes. And here Nietzsche speaks of the “dreadful certainty” that evades him as long as he holds the mask of *The Gay Science*’s madman at a distance from his own subjectivity. This fragment is particularly revealing when viewed in the context of Nietzsche’s remarks on the necessity of a “rebirth of German myth”⁴⁴ and of his earlier hopes that Wagner could facilitate the same. If Nietzsche believes *Parsifal* could “brush aside Protestantism as if it were a misunderstanding” Girard’s claim that in Nietzsche’s writings “the official voice is becoming louder and louder as in an unsuccessful effort to silence the pro-Wagnerian voice”⁴⁵ seems well justified—especially since the latter is a voice that resounds with the Gospel truth that Nietzsche himself had discovered.

Girard and the Mythologization of Nietzsche

Girard’s discovery of this fragment is also informative as to why he believes that the “number-one Nietzschean question” is not the difference between the active and reactive will to power but “the difference between the Dionysian and the Christian.”⁴⁶ For if the latter distinction is primary, then Nietzsche’s works should be read as recognizing the possibility of a break with violence. This is precisely the way Girard interprets the famous section 1052 of Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*, which discusses the antithesis Dionysus versus the Crucified. To Girard, this section reads as a moment in

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See *BT*, §23.

⁴⁵ Girard, “Nietzsche and Contradiction,” 58.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 63.

Nietzsche like unto Nietzsche's vehement opposition to Wagner's *Parsifal* in *Genealogy of Morals* and elsewhere. Here Nietzsche compensates for the vulnerability engendered by his own recognition that Dionysian religion has been disarmed and slandered by Christianity by hiding this recognition from his readers and himself and by arguing that Christianity originates in a "hidden act of *ressentiment*."⁴⁷

In "Nietzsche and Contradiction," Girard connects these ideas quite succinctly:

The will to power acquires its significance through the difference Dionysus and the Crucified, which is the difference between Nietzsche and Wagner, and the plunge into madness is the final confusion of that difference...when this difference collapses, Nietzsche goes mad.⁴⁸

In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard clearly suggests that Nietzsche's collapse into insanity functions as a kind of objection to his philosophy. "By insanely condemning the real greatness of our world, not only did Nietzsche destroy himself, but he suggested the terrible destruction that was later done by National Socialism" (*ISS*, 175). In his essays on Nietzsche, however, Girard takes a slightly different view. Girard says this about Nietzsche's gesture in abandoning himself to Dionysus: "The greatness of Nietzsche is not that he was right in any sense but that he paid so dearly for being wrong. He never got away with anything, which is the closest thing to being right."⁴⁹ To the same point, Girard writes in another essay, "The greatness of Nietzsche is that he committed himself totally to that process and he paid for his commitment literally with his life."⁵⁰ The "process" Girard has in mind is that of "reviving...the primitive sacred."⁵¹ Despite the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ "Superman in the Underground," 1178.

⁵⁰ René Girard, "Dionysus Versus the Crucified," *Modern Language Notes* 99, no. 4 (September 1, 1984): 828.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 827.

fact that Girard does not elaborate on these remarks, that Girard finds Nietzsche's efforts to this end "great" in *any* way is informative as to the metaphysics of agency that remains implicit in Girard's thought.

The consistency with which Girard claims that Nietzsche's rejection of biblical truth of the victim led⁵² him into insanity raises the question whether this movement is necessary or merely a contingent fact about Nietzsche's biography. It is clear from the above-cited statements that in Girard's view, Nietzsche's subscription to Romantic notions of the coincidence of election and insanity cannot have helped Nietzsche maintain his sanity. Moreover, Girard's analysis of Nietzsche's rivalry with Wagner shows that mimetic theory understands Nietzsche's unstable condition as a loss of self and agency, as a descent into blindness and captivity to the force of rivalry. Yet it is equally clear that Girard understands Nietzsche's descent into madness to have been mediated by a decision to cover over the break with violence that Nietzsche recognizes as an accomplished fact with Jesus. Girard seems to suggest, in the case of the Nietzsche-Wagner rivalry, that Nietzsche strips himself of the fuller agency that he could have had had he related to his impulse toward rivalry differently. The relationship between the voluntary and involuntary is complex in Nietzsche's case, but goes largely unexplored by Girard despite the fact that the formal possibility of a worldwide renunciation of violence hangs in the

⁵² In using the past tense, I am following Girard's usage. Although I will not analyze the rhetoric of Girard's choice of the past tense when dealing with Nietzsche, I think it would confirm the larger claim that I am making.

balance: if Nietzsche's psycho-physiological condition were such that he could not have decided to embrace nonviolence, it stands to reason that the same would be true of others.

If Nietzsche's insanity is indeed mediated by his decision to reject the Gospels' perspective on victims—as Girard seems to insist, given his emphasis on the 'greatness of his commitment to the process of reviving the primitive sacred'⁵³—it appears that Girard sees Nietzsche's insanity as following quite directly from the order that inheres in the universe. This is why Girard rails against the tendency of Nietzsche scholars to see Nietzsche's insanity as uninformative. For Girard, this tendency is evidence of the degree to which Nietzsche was successful, as a writer, in hiding the trace of his oscillation between identification with Dionysus and the Crucified. Girard therefore sees fit to interpret this scholarly tendency as a kind of mythmaking: "This censorship of the madness in Nietzsche, or this idea that the madness is unrelated to the essential Nietzsche, is part and parcel of the philosophical myth that...has always dominated Nietzsche-interpretation."⁵⁴ Just as those who formulate myths hide the violence of the sacrificial event, so Nietzsche scholars hide Nietzsche's "pendular movement between the two antithetical thoughts [(Dionysus and the Crucified)] that we are investigating."⁵⁵ On Girard's interpretation of the Nietzsche-myth, commentators sacrifice the "tragic and religious"⁵⁶ moments in Nietzsche in order that Nietzsche the philosopher can continue to reign as the benevolent spirit over post-Nietzschean philosophy. The fact of Nietzsche's

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 827-828.

⁵⁴ "Nietzsche and Contradiction," 65.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

insanity confirms, for Girard, the danger of subscribing to “the myths in which Nietzsche himself did not believe, even though he launched them.”⁵⁷

In his most charitable moments, Girard argues, as stated above, that Nietzsche makes a value judgment against the Gospels’ concern for victims when he argues that *ressentiment* is more dangerous than pure vengeance. This value judgment is “untenable” for Girard, because Nietzsche “did not see that the evil he was fighting [*ressentiment*] was a relatively minor evil compared to the more violent forms of vengeance.”⁵⁸ Girard here deploys a kind of historicizing argument: according to Girard, Nietzsche’s understanding of *ressentiment* is born of a certain kind of societal luxury. Girard argues that the return of vengeance could only seem preferable to *ressentiment* in a context like Nietzsche’s—in which Christianity has already successfully squelched violent rivalry.⁵⁹ According to Girard, then, Nietzsche’s judgment is premised upon a failure to understand the perennial exigency of religion. Just as “the powers would not have crucified the Lord of Glory” if they had known that their calculations would be outplayed by divine providence, so Nietzsche would not have disregarded the urgency of the Gospel message with such impunity if he had foreseen the return of “real vengeance”⁶⁰ in the twentieth century with its World Wars and Cold War. Nietzsche’s insanity and the history that has unfolded subsequent to Nietzsche’s death therefore set the exegetical terms for Girard’s examination of Nietzsche’s value judgment.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Dionysus Versus the Crucified,” (see n. 47), 825.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

The Rhetoric of Theory and the Expulsion of Nietzsche

While one could press Girard for making arguments that look fallacious on *ad hominem* or *ad consequentiam* grounds, it will be much more revealing to analyze Girard's engagement with Nietzsche in Girardian terms, treating his engagement with Nietzsche as a rhetorical event. Girard consistently presents his mimetic theory as a hypothesis that can only be disproven by falsification. And he sets it up and tests it over against other theories; for example, in *Violence and the Sacred* Girard spends significant time addressing the shortcomings of Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Levi-Strauss' structuralist theory as these are exposed through mimetic theory's analysis of similar data sources. The question of whether mimetic theory is strictly a method of data analysis or whether it rather constitutes a set of interrelated normative claims has been raised since the earliest formulations of Girard's theory. In his 1978 review of the English translation of *Violence and The Sacred* (first published in 1977) Hayden White writes, "beneath the rhetoric of Girard's demystification of the myths of modern social thought, beneath his professions of objectivity and scientific rigor, there is another myth."⁶¹ White makes this judgment without the benefit of Girard's subsequent work (*TH* and following), but it seems appropriate nonetheless. The tasks of drawing a distinction between myth and gospel, and judging the former violent and the latter capable of unmasking violence—these tasks require Girard to articulate criteria acceptable to his audience and apposite to these aims. Girard can only justify the explanatory role he grants mimetic theory by

⁶¹ Hayden White, "Ethnological 'Lie' and Mythical 'Truth'," *Diacritics* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 3.

showing it capable of outnarrating other extant theories that would otherwise be considered authoritative.

This is precisely the task Girard undertakes in “Superman in the Underground.” Girard does not engage in an immanent critique of Nietzsche’s on his own terms; he rather treats Nietzsche as a *phenomenon* in order to display (to great effect, it bears noting) the extent to which Freud would have to twist the Oedipus complex into “normal” and “abnormal” contortions to explain the phenomena of Nietzsche’s rivalry with Wagner. Indeed, Girard explicitly eschews an engagement with Nietzsche’s own elaboration of what Girard calls “the will to power mystique” because “a comparison between this mystique and the mimetic process will provide a more radical critique.”⁶² But in comparing his own theory’s ability to explain the phenomena of Nietzsche’s relation to Wagner with that of Freud’s theory, Girard smuggles in criteria for evaluating Nietzsche’s philosophy. Consider: Girard’s aim in “Superman in the Underground” is to show that mimetic theory works, like psychoanalysis, by exposing hidden motivations and, like psychoanalysis, it aims at a recovery of mental health and peaceful social relations. Because mimetic theory offers “a far more efficient, more intelligible, and better integrated organization of *more data*”⁶³ relative to Freud’s theory, Girard argues, it can better work toward such a recovery. In subjecting Nietzsche to such analysis,

⁶² Girard, “Superman in the Underground,” 1174.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1184.

however, Girard treats Nietzsche as something other than healthy, which is ironic given the extent to which “health” is a theme in Nietzsche’s own philosophy.

Indeed, there is a certain note of condescension that sounds in Girard’s willingness to recognize a kind of greatness in Nietzsche’s insanity, a note of condescension similar to the one that sounds in Nietzsche’s treatment of Jesus; Nietzsche suggests that Jesus’ (idiotic) nobility is also his error, and that he did not fail to pay the price for his error. But whereas Nietzsche is unsettled by Jesus—and even by Christianity, as becomes clear by way of *Parsifal*, as Girard himself recognizes—Girard is not unsettled at all by Nietzsche. On the contrary, Girard thinks one can only go on “pretending today that Nietzsche makes sense as a teacher of ethics, or of history, or as a philosopher, or as a guide for some kind of ‘lifestyle’” by thinking “frivolously.” Such frivolous thought puts humankind in a highly precarious position, for the reappearance of real vengeance in our time would involve a worldwide apocalypse.⁶⁴ *Ressentiment* may cheapen the earth, but to act as though *ressentiment* is a greater danger than vengeance—when vengeance that could destroy the earth—is, for Girard, a dangerous distortion of the contemporary situation.

Girard’s refusal to address Nietzsche’s analysis of *ressentiment* except through the lens of mimetic theory makes clear the extent to which Girard hopes to drive his reader to a decision about the set of criteria for understanding and evaluating human existence he or she will consider ultimate. This refusal also registers as a refusal to engage Nietzsche

⁶⁴ “Dionysus Versus the Crucified,” 827.

in the straightforward way that Nietzsche would demand, namely, as an enemy. And this should not be interpreted as a gesture of charity on Girard's part—even on Girard's own terms. For whereas self-abasing love serves to dispel sacrificial ambiguity and blindness by de-escalating rivalry and violence, Girard's approach to Nietzsche rather heightens this ambiguity.

The heightening obscurity that results from Girard's approach to Nietzsche is nowhere more evident than in Girard's treatment of Nietzsche's "manic prayer" from *Daybreak*. In "Superman in the Underground," Girard understands the madman's mania at having killed the law and his desire for certainty by way of insanity through Freudian rather than Nietzschean categories. For Freud and Girard, law is an inherently repressive force designed to rein in violent unconscious desires, and a force subject to historical death.⁶⁵ And for Girard, Nietzsche figures in the historical trajectory of the law's death as one that would attempt to do away with the remaining vestiges of the law that still structure Western culture, thus hastening the arrival of the apocalypse. In its context, however, it is obvious that in the section from *Daybreak* Nietzsche is offering not his own prayer, but "the [recipe] for becoming a medicine-man among the Indians, a saint among the Christians of the Middle Ages, an angekok among Greenlanders" etc. (*D*, I, 14). Nietzsche's typical manic supplicant does not find himself on a trajectory toward the death of the law but in relation to transcendence. Indeed the supplicant's prayer addresses a force beyond law that would justify the supplicant's authorship of a *new* law:

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1183-84.

“I have killed the law, the law anguishes me as a corpse does a living man: if I am not *more* than the law I am the most condemned of all men.”⁶⁶ Nietzsche here observes not the death of the law, but the way a higher sanity has been sought, historically, through creativity, and the way this higher sanity exposes sanity under the old law as insane. As Nietzsche says, “the new idea...[breaks] the spell of a venerated use and superstition” (*D*, I, 14). Ironically, Nietzsche cites this “recipe” not to denigrate it, but in order to point out how often “this fervour achieved its goal” (*D*, I, 14). If, as Nietzsche argues elsewhere, “all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation” (*GoM*, II, 12), the ascetics’ gesture is one of obedience to transcendence rather than mere madness.

Girard’s preference for the sober posture of the objective human scientist means that he rarely assumes the manic posture of Nietzsche’s supplicant. Nonetheless it is fair to say that Girard casts himself in a prophetic role; he assumes a similar responsibility for catalyzing action in a state of crisis—albeit action authorized on the basis of science rather than an existential relation to transcendence. Girard sees the crisis he faces unfolding on numerous societal levels. He sees a crisis in discourse and history with the failure of psychoanalytic theory and structuralism, the impossibility of an overview in anthropology, and the dangerous arrival of postmodern nihilism. He sees a crisis in society with the withering of law and the debasing of institutions. And he sees a crisis in

⁶⁶ *D*, I, 14. Translation altered. Girard’s translation is “most reprobate.” Hollingdale’s is “vilest.” Neither adequately captures the quasi-judicial resonance of “*Verworfenste*” in this context.

politics: Girard consistently invokes the threat of nuclear annihilation⁶⁷ in connection with his conception of the apocalyptic “escalation to extremes” (*BttE*, Chapter 1). Other dimensions could be mentioned. And this crisis is in some way related to the desacralizing movement that is part of the gospels’ effect, and the contemporary failure to understand the sense in which this movement is the reason for the crisis is part of the crisis itself. Girard writes,

the urgency of the gospel message can no longer be disregarded with impunity. Those thinkers who, like Nietzsche, unthinkingly appealed to real vengeance in their itch to get rid of *ressentiment* resemble those foolish characters in fairy tales who make the wrong wish and come to grief when it is true.⁶⁸

Girard writes, “the price to be paid,” for resistance to the gospel message like Nietzsche’s “is the price any historical era must pay for avoiding its real issues, a certain barrenness of the spirit and a growing sterility in all its ‘cultural activities.’”⁶⁹ Girard seeks to intervene so that the work of culture can continue—and raise itself to a conscious awareness of the process that is unfolding within it, to which the sacrificial Christian and unthinking atheist are similarly blind. In order to do so, Girard must also engage Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity, for (as we recall from the ending of chapter two), Nietzsche’s “revaluation” seeks to make a metaphorical “possession” of a traditional Christian memory of the crucifixion-event quite difficult indeed.

⁶⁷ “Our military men love to give mythological names to their nuclear missiles, Pluto, Poseidon, Ariadne, and the like. Too bad they never resorted to Dionysus himself but really it does not matter.” “Dionysus Versus the Crucified,” 827.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 826.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

The approach Girard takes in intervening prevents him from fully realizing his own best insights. Girard seeks to intervene by first establishing the legitimacy of his theory on scientific grounds. Once this is established, he believes he can make the normative claims that are bound up with mimetic theory's optics of the victim. Girard is quite blind to the way that in taking the approach to Nietzsche that he does, he himself becomes a subject *within* the scapegoating process he describes on the discursive level and turns away from those aspects of Nietzsche's thought that could actually further his own. For there is obvious and strong overlap between Girard's emphasis on the way events in the politico-religious life of a community (especially sacrificial and ritual events) establish the principles of political and ethical judgment and Nietzsche's similar account of the history of the values.

Girard is seeking to establish principles of judgment within a crisis that will allow for escape from the crisis. In order to do so—in order to dramatically display the way these principles of judgment operate, and to show their appropriateness, he formulates a myth of Nietzsche according to which Nietzsche is guilty of the only characteristic crimes that remain. As this takes place on the level of discourse, Girard nowhere accuses Nietzsche of a violent crime like murder, a sexual crime like rape or incest, or a religious crime “such as the profanation of the host” (*TS*, 15). But the deeper point is this; just as foreigners become targets for victimization because “foreigners are incapable of respecting ‘real’ differences; they are lacking in culture or in taste, as the case may be” (*TS*, 22) so Girard judges Nietzsche guilty for appearing to counsel violence against victims, and for assuming a perspective on victims different than the one Girard finds in

the gospels. Moreover, Nietzsche is condemned not because he possesses the *physical* characteristics of the scapegoat—though Girard does name “madness” (*TS*, 18) among the characteristic physical marks of the scapegoat. Rather, Nietzsche is condemned because his philosophy appears “mad” *vis-à-vis* the “sanity” of mimetic theory. And finally, Nietzsche could well be described as a “marginal insider” (*TS*, 18) in that he occupies a prominent position in modern and contemporary thought. Just as the crowd “turn[s] on those who originally h[old] exceptional power over them”—especially when their exercise of such power fails to prevent the onset of crisis—so Nietzsche’s position appears more and more dubious in Girard’s narration.

It would obviously be difficult for Girard to claim that Nietzsche’s influence led directly to the many-faceted crisis into which he seeks to intervene. But Girard’s selection of Nietzsche as exemplary modern is far from accidental. Girard states, “the victims are chosen not for the crimes they are accused of but for the victim’s signs they bear, for everything that suggests their guilty relationship with the crisis” (*TS*, 24). In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* Girard consistently avoids the direct implication that National Socialism appropriated Nietzsche’s thought faithfully. But the fact of Nietzsche’s appropriation by the Nazis suggests a guilty relationship with the crisis.⁷⁰ Likewise, Girard consistently avoids stating that Nietzsche’s insanity is exclusively the result of his resistance to Christian truth. But it too suggests a guilty relationship with the

⁷⁰ Girard writes, “Nietzsche shared with many intellectuals...a passion for irresponsible rhetoric...But philosophers...are not the only people in the world. Genuinely mad and frantic people are all around them and do them the worst turn of all: they take them at their word” (*ISS*, 175).

crisis. Although Girard refuses a theological voice in his work, much suggests that the choice “between total destruction and the total renunciation of violence” (*V&TS*, 240) is one posed by a divine agency: “if the escalation to extremes continues a little longer, it will lead straight to the extinction of all life on the planet” (*BttE*, xiv). While the God that allows human beings to experience the consequences of their own refusal to follow the example of Christ need not be the “cruel God” Girard says is imagined by fundamentalists (*BttE*, xvi), it does not follow that this God—the God that continues to reign within Girard’s crisis—cannot be described as wrathful. Such a description of God would only be inappropriate if one insists that divine wrath can only manifest itself in punishment *for* sin rather than punishment *by* sin—that is, if such punishment is something added on to the transgression itself rather than being the transgression itself.

Rehabilitating Nietzsche, the Victim

Interestingly, Girard’s account of Nietzsche’s mimetic entanglement with Wagner seems to leave an opening for such a conception of punishment by sin. In *Battling to the End*, Girard makes remarks that may illuminate Girard’s relation to Nietzsche as much as that between Nietzsche and Wagner. Girard writes, “only Christ makes it possible to find [the right] distance [from the other]...To imitate Christ by keeping the other at the right distance is to escape the mimetic whirlpool” (*BttE*, 134). Imitation of Christ enables identification with the other in ways not structured by rivalrous mimesis. Thus when Nietzsche loses his sense of self and agency he does so because he finds himself fascinated by his rival; he finds in Wagner an obstacle to the realization of his own desire. Because Nietzsche is thus fascinated Girard argues that Nietzsche cannot be considered a

victor over Wagner in any sense. Moreover, this defeat is appropriate, because Nietzsche consigns himself to his own mimetic nightmare by his own engagement with Wagner. It is a failure of imitation. But Girard's own logic suggest that Girard will impoverish his own thought to the extent that he allows himself to be fascinated by Nietzsche as a rival. Indeed, Girard's attempt to make a discursive victim of Nietzsche seems perfectly explicable by this logic.

One sees this impoverishment in Girard's judgment of Nietzsche as a failure. Girard makes his judgment of Nietzsche on the basis of the more visible phenomena of victory,⁷¹ and he makes this judgment in order to argue that Nietzsche posits a distinction without a difference in differentiating between *ressentiment* and authentic expression of the will to power.⁷² Here again, Nietzsche could be helpful, however, because Nietzsche recognizes the importance of the inner life, and the deep complications that mar any straightforward assessment of who may be called a master and who a slave. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche argues that it is not the noble types that are suspicious of even self-sacrificial magnanimity, but those of a common nature: "if [the common person] becomes...convinced of the absence of selfish intentions and gains, they view the noble person as a kind of fool; they despise him in his pleasure...[and ask], 'How can one enjoy being at a disadvantage?'" (*GS*, I: §3). Thus, for Nietzsche, the nobility of the noble person can find its best expression in his triumph not only over his rival, but over *ressentiment* in himself. Insofar as this triumph over *ressentiment* is what *defines* Jesus'

⁷¹ Girard, "Superman in the Underground," 1176.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1171.

victory, for Nietzsche, Girard and Nietzsche reach a surprising agreement: just as Girard argues that imitation of Christ ennobles by allowing one to overcome mimetic entanglement and thereby to rediscover both one's own agency and the face of the other (*BtE*, 100), so Nietzsche argues that an existence like unto Jesus' would necessarily involve overcoming *ressentiment*.

It must be said that Nietzsche dons masks in his writings in such a profligate manner that he fairly invites the kinds of misinterpretations found in Girard's reading of him. On Nietzsche's own terms, however, this is part of the task of identification with Dionysus. Girard's assessment of Nietzsche as a deeply "unsuccessful"⁷³ man arises from his sense of the disjunction between Nietzsche's biography and his description of the "undefeated champions of the will to power"⁷⁴ and Girard's own belief that someone that prizes the "will-to-power mystique" the way Nietzsche does must have believed himself such a champion. For Girard, this is evidence of the way rivalry distorts Nietzsche's self-image. But Nietzsche's subversively generous assessment of the posture of the ascetics (an assessment displayed in Nietzsche's description of the "manic prayer") and the fact that he creates Zarathustra as his exemplar serve to complicate this image. For in *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes "Homer would not have created Achilles and Goethe would not have created Faust, if Homer had been an Achilles and Goethe a Faust" (*GoM*, III, 4). The playful tone of Nietzsche's bold self-affirmation in *Ecce Homo* stands in sharp contrast to the sobriety of *Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche's *Genealogy*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1176.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1171.

makes his self-presentation in *Ecce Homo* intelligible, however, not as Quixotic or as the expression of self-deception and a worsening psycho-physiological condition, as Girard would likely suggest. In presenting himself thus Nietzsche dons a mask; here Nietzsche enacts a critique of the posture of every ascetic in a way that is simultaneously a form of ascetic self-limitation. Nietzsche aspires, like the ascetics, “to become master not over something in life but over life itself, over its most profound, powerful, and basic conditions” (*GoM*, III, 11). But unlike them, he seeks to do so self-consciously and not in order to point to himself as the model, but in order that he might become the first and only apologist for such asceticism. Ascending the heights of hyperbole in self-praise serves Nietzsche’s purpose because by doing so he courts the ridicule of his reader and thus *dissuades* the reader from venerating him.

Indeed, *Ecce Homo* seems precisely Nietzsche’s own “secret, superior laugh at himself” (*GoM*, III, 3), precisely the laugh that Nietzsche sees Wagner to have failed to laugh with *Parsifal*, and the laugh which would have been impossible for Paul with his importunate self-regard. Moreover, by openly “striv[ing] for the forbidden”⁷⁵ Nietzsche attempts to shock his reader into an encounter with the otherwise unquestioned limits of the licensed and unlicensed. For Nietzsche, the moment of such an encounter is the temporal site of a “subduing” and a “becoming master”; here, life *lives* in the overcoming of decadence. And it is by willingly suffering in service of this overcoming that

⁷⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Judith Norman in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Preface, 3. “*Nitimus in Vetitum.*”

Nietzsche identifies with Dionysus. For Nietzsche, the most spiritual forms of asceticism must demonstrate a similar “sublimity, discipline and rigor of the spirit” (*GoM*, III, 4).

Conclusion

Precisely such sublimity, discipline and rigor of the spirit would seem the attributes most necessary for Girard both in forming his assessment of Nietzsche and his own interpretation of the atonement. Girard gives some indication that he is willing to allow for more subtlety in the development of his theory beyond *Things Hidden*. As noted above, Girard saw Hebrews as a dangerously retrogressive book because he saw in it a narration of Jesus’ death that could only understand Jesus’ own enactment as masochism and Christianity’s appropriation of Jesus’ act as mired in an incomplete break with the archaic sacrificial logic. Later, however, and as a result of his engagement with Raymund Schwager,⁷⁶ Girard reverses his judgment upon Hebrews; he argues that one does not find in Hebrews a “divine re-employment of the scapegoat mechanism”⁷⁷; on the contrary, “The Epistle...accomplishes something important by portraying the death of Christ as the perfect sacrifice, [that is, it] makes...any further sacrificial undertaking unacceptable” (*TS*, 200).⁷⁸ As Wolfgang Palaver notes, Girard recalls his earlier

⁷⁶ See especially Schwager’s , *Must There Be Scapegoats?: Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. Maria L. Assad (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978).

⁷⁷ René Girard, *Celui Par Qui Le Scandale Arrive* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001), 80 cited in Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory*, trans. Gabriel Borrud, Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 242.

⁷⁸ Girard gives an account of this reversal in in an essay for Schwager’s *Festschrift* called “Mimetische Theorie und Theologie,” in *Vom Fluch und Segen der Sündenböcke: Raymund Schwager zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Wolfgang Palaver, trans. Józef Niewiadomski (Thaur, Austria: Kulturverlag, 1995). It was subsequently published in the original French in Girard, *Celui Par Qui Le Scandale Arrive*.

interpretation (from *TH*, 237-243) of the judgment Solomon rendered between the two harlots of I Kings 3: 16-27: “the [good harlot] *sacrifices* rivalry for the sake of her own child (1) whereas the other *sacrifices* her child for the sake of rivalry (2).”⁷⁹ Girard thus suggests that in this way, one can use the term sacrifice in describing Jesus’ death or even the self-giving of a Christian without undermining the distinction between archaic and biblical religion. Girard explains his reversal in terms of his having erroneously claimed, in *Things Hidden*, to have grasped an “essential,” anti-sacrificial Christianity over against “historical Christianity” (*BttE*, 35). Girard thus suggests, “absolute knowledge is not possible. We are forced to remain at the heart of history” (*BttE*, 35). It would follow from this that one must take care, lest one confuse the self-sacrifice that arises from one’s captivity by rivalry with sacrifice that is like unto Christ’s own, which sacrifices rivalry for the sake of the other.

Girard does not soften his interpretation of the conflict between Nietzsche and Wagner, however.⁸⁰ Girard seems to find it necessary to maintain the severe attitude he takes toward Nietzsche that he displays throughout his works because Nietzsche’s works seem to cultivate precisely the blindness from which the Gospels promise release. As he

⁷⁹ Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, trans. Gabriel Borrud, Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 242. The reference in Girard is to “Mimetische Theorie und Theologie,” 27–28.

⁸⁰ In an interesting section in *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 79, Jacob Taubes suggests that Nietzsche’s vehement opposition to Christianity derives from Nietzsche’s *envy* of Paul, whose supraglobal influence derives (on Nietzsche’s account) from *Paul’s* project of revaluation. Although Girard initially developed his account of the Nietzsche-Wagner antagonism to show how mimetic theory outstrips Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, if he were to develop his criticism of Nietzsche on mimetic terms this would be a more fruitful place to start.

puts it in *Battling to the End*, “seeking to imitate Dionysus, to become a ‘Dionysiac philosopher,’ as Nietzsche tried to become, is to adopt a Christian attitude in order to do the exact opposite of what Christianity invites us to do.” (101). For Girard it matters not that Nietzsche’s destabilization of the piety of “the good” issues from his suspicion that their piety is decadent; it is enough that Nietzsche’s higher morality appears directly incompatible with the attitude of love and non-violence, and that it appears to conceal what the Gospels reveal, namely, the truth of scapegoating violence.

Despite the criticism that this chapter has visited upon Girard’s engagement with Nietzsche, his analysis of the biblical text nonetheless captures a crucial aspect of the life and death of Jesus, which is his identification with victims. In this, the proximity and antagonism between Dionysus and Christ manifests itself once again. For the Dionysiac’s laugh at himself also serves to distance him from others, and can be read as a moment in which the Dionysiac places limits upon the degree to which he is willing to surrender himself. Here Christ figures as a transgressor even of the higher sanity of the Dionysiac. The Dionysiac’s “secret, superior laugh,” which invites the misunderstanding and reveals the one deceived as an inadequate interlocutor—this laugh figures as a failure to serve the one who is taken in by the ruse. While this chapter has examined the shortcomings of Girard’s engagement with Nietzsche as these are exposed by Nietzsche’s terms, it is ultimately not Nietzsche but Christ as mediated by Girard’s theory that exposes Girard’s approach to Nietzsche as flawed. For Nietzsche would say,

as knowers let us not be ungrateful towards such resolute reversals of familiar perspectives and valuations...to see differently, and to want to see differently to that degree, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect ‘objectivity’—the latter understood...as *having in our power* the

ability to engage and disengage our ‘pros’ and ‘cons’: we can use the *difference* in perspectives and affective interpretations for knowledge (*GoM*, III, 12).

Although Girard’s expulsion of Nietzsche would not be judged by the victim as problematic on moral grounds, the terms of Girard’s own theory do unmask it as a form of discursive violence. To put it in Girardian terms, this violence is not unmasked because Nietzsche identifies with Christ in being expelled; it is rather that Christ’s paradigmatic identification with all victims exposes the violence done when Nietzsche becomes a victim.

Girard’s terms do expose this violence, however, in a way that one can trace quite directly to Girard’s engagements with the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion. Girard thus mediates a vision of Christ crucified that reopens the question of the ultimacy of Zarathustra’s agency and contests it on the grounds that Zarathustra is unwilling to surrender himself in gift-giving. While Girard’s thought does insist, against Nietzsche, that the human race is a unity and that Jesus’ prophetic revelation bears a message for all humankind, the high demands this revelation makes upon humankind complicate Nietzsche’s claim that it arises from *ressentiment*. That Girard’s engagement with Nietzsche becomes explicable on mimetic terms indicates the deep difficulties faced by those who would attempt to *apply* the Gospel criteria in judging who is peaceful and who violent. For as long as their imitation of Christ remains imperfect, they themselves remain at risk of becoming subject to those criteria, and, indeed, subject also to the diagnosis that serves, unwittingly, to mediate them, namely, Nietzsche’s diagnosis of *ressentiment*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Von Balthasar on the Mystery of the Atonement:
Divine Infinity and Divine Kenosis

Introduction

If one dares to ask the question of the meaning of an event as polyvalent as the death of Jesus of Nazareth, one inevitably finds oneself making reference to a horizon or a framework of meaning. In fact, even the act of framing Jesus' death as an event and as historical already represents a serious hermeneutical decision. That Nietzsche does treat Jesus' death thus and does explicitly engage the question of its meaning (most famously in *Will To Power* §1052) justifies a comparison of Nietzsche's interpretation of Jesus' death with that given by von Balthasar, who approaches Jesus' death having made the same hermeneutical decisions and with the same question in mind, namely, as to the meaning of the event. This may raise the objection that Nietzsche only made these hermeneutical decisions while wearing a mask, and that I am unfairly affixing that mask to his face in performing this comparison. But the fact that that he dons this mask at all is informative. For if Nietzsche acknowledges by his mode of procedure¹ that one can only know anything by way the mask, and if "everything deep loves the mask"² and the death of Jesus may be called "deep" in at least this sense, an examination of this mask and that which it mediates deserve examination.

This chapter will therefore examine von Balthasar's atonement theology (in *Theo-Drama*) in order to illuminate his treatment of Nietzsche (in *Apokalypse der deutschen*

¹ Consider the way Nietzsche dons the mask of English psychologist at the beginning of *Genealogy of Morals*, for example. It has become obvious that he is revaluing the persona of the genealogist—a title he first bestows upon Dr. Paul Rée (*GoM*, Preface, §4)—by way of his good-hearted polemical engagement with Rée and the other English psychologists.

² "Alles was tief ist, liebt die Maske." Nietzsche, *GoM*, §40.

Seele). This, in turn, will throw light upon the question raised in chapter 2, which reads as follows: does von Balthasar perform an imaginative retrieval of Christian atonement theology that bears up under the Nietzschean critique in a way that gives expression not to instincts Nietzsche calls *Christian*, but to instincts like unto Jesus' own?

Any affirmative answer to this question runs many risks. Recall that according to Nietzsche, Jesus is “unable to be an enemy” (A, §29) yet he witnesses, despite his “idiotic” (A, §51-53) immaturity and naïveté, to a noble kind of life. Fear of falling into *ressentiment* could dissuade von Balthasar from any contestation with Nietzsche. This, however, would stand as a failure to give expression even to the kind of self-affirmation Jesus himself displayed, and would thus become subject to precisely the critique of nihilism that Nietzsche articulates. Or a desire to imitate Jesus' way of life in responding to Nietzsche could lead him to engage in this contestation, but to shift the criteria for any legitimate interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' death such that Nietzsche's interpretation is consigned to irrelevance. This, however, would register as an evasion of the Nietzschean critique in its full measure.

If von Balthasar's response is to ‘bear up’ under the Nietzschean critique, then, how can von Balthasar remain something other than an enemy? More pointedly, how can von Balthasar engage in this agonism non-imperially³ and yet not nihilistically? The task of this chapter is to develop an articulation of von Balthasar's response to Nietzsche that

³ David L. Schindler, “The Significance of Hans Urs von Balthasar in the Contemporary Cultural Situation,” in *Glory, Grace, and Culture: The Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Ed Block (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 20.

a) shows that von Balthasar does not succumb to any of the aforementioned temptations and b) evaluates the avenue of response that von Balthasar *does* take; that is, it will examine von Balthasar’s theological contestation of the Nietzschean (tragic and Dionysian) horizon for the interpretation of Jesus’ death.

Theo-Drama as a Failure of Solidarity?

The impossibly wide scope of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological and literary *oeuvre* is enough to give the critic ample reason for pause. When this pause is taken and critical comment undertaken, however, such comment often takes the form of an attack upon von Balthasar’s hermeneutic.⁴ Von Balthasar, it is claimed, approaches the vast array of figures he interprets with an all-too-Olympian security. That is, von Balthasar writes as though he were entirely above the fray of existence—as though he did not find himself mired in the depths out of which *his* higher men write their more partial testimonies. Without declaring upon the tenability of this particular claim, the very often architectonic nature of von Balthasar’s writing will raise many questions for all who feel the normative thrust of Nietzsche’s “arrow”: “I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity” (*TI*, “Arrows and Maxims,” 26). From Nietzsche’s standpoint, a systematic theological trilogy of the scale of von Balthasar’s could only stand as evidence of its author’s all-too-Socratic optimism. In a certain sense,

⁴ Two recent books that engage von Balthasar’s thought and level this kind of critique against it are Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, Interventions (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012) and Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

this chapter engages precisely the question of whether this arrow ought rightly to pierce von Balthasar.

In *Theo-Drama*, von Balthasar undertakes a treatment of the usual systematic theological topics: “a Christology, a doctrine of the Trinity, an ecclesial and Christian doctrine of how to live” (*TD*, I: 9). His innovation, however, is to allow these topics to emerge not systematically, but rather obliquely, within the context of a consideration of salvation history read through the categories of dramatic theory. Von Balthasar stages a grand re-narration of all history within the terms provided by the terminology of the “structured performance” (*TD*, I: 9) of theatrical representation: Author/Actor/Director, Actor/Role, Presentation/Audience/Horizon, Dramatic time/Action/ Meaning. His intention is to “show how theology underlies [the whole phenomenon of theatre] and how all the elements of the drama can be rendered fruitful for theology” (*TD*, I: 9). Hence *Theo-Drama*.

This dramatic approach presents a significant advantage for von Balthasar over more traditional approaches to systematic theology, namely, that it brings the dynamic character of the truth of doctrine to the fore. Traditional approaches do indeed present doctrine in an ordered fashion, but the ordering principles that typically structure traditional systematic theologies are logical, static, and independent of history; Nietzsche would see an unwitting alliance between philosophers and theologians to “show respect” for God by dehistoricizing God and turning God into a conceptual mummy (*TI*, “Reason in Philosophy,” §1). Often the only dramatic moments found in systematic theologies written on this pattern are those during which the theologian finds it necessary to break

from a synchronic mode into a diachronic excursus on the development and/or transmission of a given doctrine within the tradition of Christian thought.⁵ Those who have become aware of this tendency in systematic theology have gone to the other extreme, by depotentiating God in a different way, namely by so historicizing God that God appears as yet another character in the narrative of scripture. For von Balthasar, such an approach falls short of a truly Christian approach in that it fails to recognize the sovereignty of God and thus to see God as the agent responsible for the existence of scripture (which Aidan Nichols admirably calls “the libretto of God’s saving drama”⁶), for the history that is its material precondition, and, most importantly, for the meaning this history bears. Von Balthasar believes a dramatic approach, which makes use of the categories of the theatre, including especially the trio of author/director/actor, gives fuller play both to God’s triune involvement in history as Father, Son and Spirit, and his infinite transcendence of history. Von Balthasar argues that while God involves himself in history, he is not absorbed into the stream of becoming, nor does the Trinity acquire its dynamism from its relation to sin, Cross and hell (*TD*, IV: 326). On the contrary, God’s primal dynamism grounds history.

⁵ Indeed, for precisely this reason, when contemporary systematic theologies are written, they often intend to reshape the presuppositions grounding systematic theology, above all, by being more keenly aware of the historicity of particular doctrines. While a diachronic systematic theology would be something of a contradiction in terms, the field seems to be headed in that direction.

⁶ Aidan Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth: a Guide through Balthasar’s Dramatics* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 7. There are limits to this conception, of course, for although scripture is undoubtedly indispensable and a privileged source for the interpretation of the drama, scripture is part of the drama itself, moving along with it” (*TD*, II: 112). It thus cannot be considered the “finished stage text governing the enacting of real history” (*TD*, II: 103).

A “theodramatic” approach is also more attuned to the dynamic character of the truth of doctrine in that it invites comparison between the human speech that issues from the activity of the Holy Spirit in the church and humankind’s speech about itself as the latter speech presents itself in theatre. The theatre is a fruitful site for von Balthasar because “in the theatre man attempts a kind of transcendence, endeavoring both to observe and judge his own truth, in virtue of a transformation...by which he can gain clarity about himself” (*TD*, I: 12). Von Balthasar assumes that art (perhaps drama particularly) serves equally in expressing and shaping the human self-image. The theologian receives his task as a summons to a similar form of self-transcendence and transformation by which he can gain clarity about himself, and the similarity between the dramatist’s task and the theologian’s enables comparison between the horizons offered by dramatists and the horizon that the theologian discerns in revelation. In the use of theatre’s “dialectic of the concealing-revealing mask,” von Balthasar sees man “beckon[ing], invit[ing] the approach of a revelation about himself. Thus, parabolically, a door can open to the truth of the real revelation” (*TD*, I: 12).

Von Balthasar claims that this distinction between mission and role plays a structuring role in marking out different conceptions of human agency. In the first volume of *Theo-Drama* (which functions as a theoretical prolegomena to the work as a whole), von Balthasar tracks the ways these different conceptions of agency come to expression in theatre. The ultimacy of a revealed horizon is, for von Balthasar, the precondition for a judgment of a relative horizon as relative, and thus for the judgment that one’s task is an all-consuming *mission* rather than a partial role. And if one may be said to don a mask

only in order to accomplish a task appropriate to a role—i.e. a task of relative rather than absolute significance—it is the revealed horizon that makes the distinction between mask and face possible. It follows, for von Balthasar, that the play of masks only has meaning *as a play* insofar as it unfolds within this tension between relative and absolute horizons.

According to von Balthasar, the tension between absolute and relative horizons gradually dissolves in modern drama. This has significant consequences for the conceptions of human agency implicit in modern theatre. Indeed, for von Balthasar, it is the immanentist orientation that defines and unifies the conceptions of agency present in the modern works to which he contrasts the theological conception of agency. Von Balthasar makes this point through his analysis of modern drama. Within theatre,

two questions are never solved: How is the transitory role related to the eternal God (if, with Calderon, we regard God as the author [of the drama])? And what is God's relation to the role-play? Is he merely its inventor, spectator and final judge? (TD, I: 178).

In *Theo-Drama* volume I, von Balthasar tracks the way the answers given by representative modern authors change through the Baroque, Romantic, Idealist, and Enlightenment periods. He takes particular note of the way the “author” of the drama comes to bear less and less resemblance to Calderon's God.⁷ To offer an example that offers entrée into the von Balthasar's encounter with Nietzsche, von Balthasar argues that Romanticism intended to “transform the theatre of spectres into a living theatre [by having] ‘The theatre's roof...lifted off’” (TD, I: 189) such that fusion between being and

⁷ “The puppet play...replace[s Calderon's] image of the world stage. Quite early on, the puppet play was used to describe the unreality of court life, and later it was applied in criticism of false social conventions; now increasingly it expresses the feeling that our very existence has been rendered unreal by some unknown, uncanny fate that is pulling the strings—like the Hegelian *Weltgeist*, which cunningly uses individuals for its own ends” (TD, I: 185-186).

becoming is achieved in the acting human subject. Von Balthasar argues, however, that “late romanticism was not in a place to clothe this program in an adequate form” (*TD*, I: 189). This lack of an adequate form for a Romantic account of the divinization of the human subject leads to the paradigmatically modern turn taken by Goethe; “Faust, together with Prometheus, is the genius of the century: the claim to totality” (*TD*, I: 191). That is, Faust expresses the Promethean tendency to make the claim to totality by placing the acts of creating and destining into the human ambit.

According to von Balthasar, this Promethean tendency comes to even fuller flower in Nietzsche’s work; von Balthasar describes with great precision the way Nietzsche contributes to the dissolution of the dramatic framework provided by the “world theatre.” For Nietzsche, when Christians and philosophers attempt to attune themselves to eternal reality and being by reasoning back beyond appearances to the appearances’ necessarily-existing causes, they attempt to redeem themselves from appearances by recourse to other appearances. Nietzsche sees this as an inherently misguided and thus futile endeavor, because “the ‘apparent’ is itself part of reality, a form of its being” (*TD*, I: 233).⁸ Von Balthasar claims, however, that there is an inherently unstable quality to Nietzsche’s perpetual “unmasking”: “*Nietzsche* needs to distinguish the actor from his mask—for his art is essentially that of ‘seeing through’—yet he cannot maintain the distinction because life is essentially a ‘seeming’” (*TD*, I: 233). Von Balthasar sees Nietzsche’s insistence that one can only seek respite from the abyss of existence by recourse to the mask

⁸ The reference is to Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner, trans. Kate Sturge, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14: 93, p. 250.

(“Another mask! Give me a second mask!”)⁹ as evidence of the poverty of the Nietzschean project of revaluation. This project can never issue in a new table of values, von Balthasar argues, because “life, striving upward and exercising its will to power, can only produce naked and negating masks of itself; its striving, as such, is decadence; its will to impress reveal its ennui” (*TD*, I: 235). On this reading, Nietzsche’s paradoxical utterances are not those of a prophet spurring his hearers to cast about for new categories; on the contrary, the impossibility of an unequivocal utterance turns Nietzsche into a sophist, who eternally goes beyond himself, but gets no further (*TD*, I: 235).

When von Balthasar claims that Nietzsche’s starting point is plagued by logical contradictions, however, von Balthasar stands in danger of becoming the Christian of Nietzsche’s caricature; intolerant of becoming, insistent that the last concepts (Being, the Unconditioned, etc.) must (logically) be the most firmly established, distrustful of the senses and of sensuality, etc. (see *TI*, “Reason in Philosophy”). Nietzsche uses the symbol of a “spider’s web” at this point (§4) and throughout his works for a rational hermeneutic employed by the weak in order to subjugate others. Nietzsche argues that Christianity spins such a spider’s web with its moralizing reading of existence; that the priest’s claim that all history serves a particular revealed (or otherwise knowable) purpose represents the priest’s covert assertion of power—one that draws those caught in the ‘web’ into a self-mortifying form of existence. In chapter two I argued that Nietzsche intends, by revaluing the figure of “the Crucified,” to tear down the spider’s web formed by the priestly interpretation of Jesus’ death. This particular instance of Nietzsche’s

⁹ Nietzsche, (*BG&E*, §278) cited by von Balthasar in *TD*: I, 234.

worship of Dionysus opposes the formalism of this particular (Christian) form of Apollonian religiosity. It would be a mistake, however, to see Nietzsche as limiting himself to the destruction of only this particular spider's web; by his eternal provocation and mask wearing, Nietzsche intends not to mediate a doctrine but to enact and to catalyze a life-affirming way to live. In chapter two I also argued that an adequate response to Nietzsche could only be one authored by one whom Nietzsche would term a "proud nature"—that is, one unwilling to allow himself the comfort of presenting Nietzsche as broken or as easily defeated. Given this, von Balthasar finds himself in a precarious position. Insofar as von Balthasar insists that the "internal contradictions" (*TD*, I: 235) of Nietzsche's starting point render Nietzsche's philosophy incapable of signifying anything—much less catalyzing a particular way of living—von Balthasar ironically runs the risk of de-dramatizing Nietzsche's thought by transforming it into a doctrine. In such a case, von Balthasar would become subject to precisely the critique that Nietzsche levels against every priestly discourse; von Balthasar would, on this reading, be one more priest who surreptitiously asserts a discourse of strength under the cover of Christic weakness.

Some interpreters of von Balthasar suggest that one can simply overlook the Nietzschean critique of dishonesty because it is entirely unclear what honesty actually looks like within a Nietzschean perspective. Indeed, David Schindler suggests that it is precisely the weak strength of von Balthasar's position that makes von Balthasar's work

so significant.¹⁰ For von Balthasar embraces Jesus as God’s scandalously particular self-revelation. This enables the recovery of “the truly infinite and transcendent God,” and with it, a sense for “the true depth of things.” Of perhaps equal importance is that it allows von Balthasar to chart a path beyond the “‘bad infinity’ of liberalism that Nietzsche himself decried.”¹¹ Schindler thus uses von Balthasar as a source for arguments that a) diagnose Nietzsche’s project as a failed attempt at overcoming a failed modernity and b) allow *genuinely postmodern* Catholics to return, in good conscience, to the ecclesial mediations of the transcendent Nietzsche so viciously attacks.¹²

The problem with this line of interpretation is that if this is indeed the dominant hermeneutic operative in *Theo-Drama*,¹³ von Balthasar would have ruled out in advance any true contestation between his own account of how to live and those offered by Nietzsche and others. This would undermine the development of any true agonism between the modern dramatists’ and von Balthasar’s Christian understanding of the drama of history in the work. Further, this would render von Balthasar’s exposition of the systematic theological topics epic rather than fully dramatic.¹⁴ It bears noting that Ben Quash highlights this issue as a problem in his assessment of the significance of the first

¹⁰ Schindler, “The Significance of Hans Urs von Balthasar in the Contemporary Cultural Situation.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, 32–33.

¹³ In “The Significance of Hans Urs Von Balthasar in the Contemporary Cultural Situation,” Schindler does not refer to *Theo-Drama*. But see Schindler’s much fuller treatment of this question in *Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth: a Philosophical Investigation*, 1st ed, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy no. 34 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ See Ben Quash’s very lucid and succinct section on this distinction in “‘Between the Brutely Given, and the Brutally, Banally Free’: Von Balthasar’s Theology of Drama in Dialogue with Hegel,” *Modern Theology* 13, no. 3 (July 1997): 294–295.

volume of *Theo-Drama* for the work as a whole. Quash asks the rhetorical question, “how integral [are the *litterati* of volume I] in actual fact to his ‘dramatic’ conception of divine revelation and the Christian life”? He responds: “not very.”¹⁵ If Quash’s assessment is correct, von Balthasar may be said to have failed in realizing the promise of the work as a whole—which Quash estimably describes as a “live performance in solidarity with others of Christ’s all-encompassing mission to the world”¹⁶; by avoiding the challenge posed by Nietzsche, von Balthasar may be said to have failed in following this all-encompassing mission to the depths to which it might go.

On the other hand, von Balthasar’s apparent failure may simply be the expression of an interpretive demand he makes of the reader. If Quash’s description of *Theo-Drama* as a “performance in solidarity” is apt, then the relative¹⁷ paucity of reference to the dramatists and poets in the later volumes of *Theo-Drama* may not express a failure to integrate their perspectives with the subject matter of the doctrines; it may rather express an invitation to the reader him or herself to enter into the dramatic performance and to continue the interpretive work. The remainder of this chapter will follow the latter interpretive trajectory. By drawing upon von Balthasar’s treatment of Nietzsche in *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele* (which I will call *Apocalypse*), I will develop a reading of von Balthasar’s *Theo-Drama* that addresses his apparent failure of solidarity.

¹⁵ Ben Quash, “The Theodrama,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 146.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁷ I must insist that it is only a relative paucity, citing the evidence that a quick glance at the index of persons in each volume would provide the reader.

The Gesture of von Balthasar's Response

It will serve us well to anticipate the shape of the argument briefly here. Alois M. Haas is undoubtedly correct that the “theological *a priori*” of this early work by von Balthasar “defines the pattern of questions, and is the light in which the work analyzes and interprets literary, philosophical, and religiously shaped text.”¹⁸ But while some¹⁹ have argued that this renders the scholarly merit of his treatment of Nietzsche in *Apocalypse* dubious, I will show how it illuminates the full shape (scholarly or otherwise) of von Balthasar's response to Nietzsche. To put it as plainly as possible, *Apocalypse* and *Theo-Drama* contain von Balthasar's response to Nietzsche as an act of doxological witness. By reading *Apocalypse* and *Theo-Drama* together, one can see how von Balthasar's full response to Nietzsche does not depend upon the discursive argument that by his ‘illogic’ Nietzsche *excludes himself* from prophetic comment upon how one should live or upon his ability to rhetorically out-narrate Nietzsche. Von Balthasar's response rather seeks to contest the Nietzschean interpretation of Jesus' death and the Nietzschean horizon by attending to the way they frame the art of human existence, and by suggesting that the Christian interpretation of Jesus' death allows one to engage in this art more truthfully because of the way it frames the human experiences of deserved and undeserved suffering, alienation from God and others, and the anxiety of the moment.

¹⁸ Alois M. Haas, “Hans Urs von Balthasar's ‘Apocalypse of the German Soul’: At the Intersection of German Literature, Philosophy, and Theology,” in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler, trans. Michael Waldstein (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 51.

¹⁹ Peter Köster, *Kontroversen um Nietzsche: Untersuchungen zur theologischen Rezeption* (Zürich: TVZ Theologischer Verlag, 2003).

Although the *Theo-Drama*'s mode of exposition does make von Balthasar's engagement in this contestation oblique indeed, the dramatic frame within which von Balthasar offers his atonement theology shows that he, like Nietzsche, is aware of the temptation to believe that a doctrine can allow one to elide the problem of decision.

This characterization of von Balthasar's response is important on von Balthasar's own terms. For von Balthasar argues in *Apocalypse* that it is in the dramatic depths that the soul finds its apocalypse, and he sets himself the task of following Nietzsche (and his Zarathustra) into those depths. Von Balthasar's *Theo-Drama* can be understood as a continuation of this project—a descent into the dramatic depths where the soul finds its apocalypse. For in *Theo-Drama* von Balthasar presents the Crucifixion as the central event of the drama of history—the historical event through which the meaning of all drama is disclosed. Thus to present it as admitting of exhaustive and frictionless theological account (i.e. an account purged of mystery), would be to render it undramatic and to make soteriology into a system, which would be another failure on von Balthasar's terms. Thus there must always remain a sacramental *more* to von Balthasar's atonement theology, for both polemical and theological reasons. In order to understand what such an undramatic and systematic soteriology looks like, for von Balthasar, a brief excursus into von Balthasar's analysis of Hegel will be necessary.

Von Balthasar, Hegel, and Drama

Von Balthasar argues that the tendency to nihilism that comes to expression in modern drama (consider Beckett's trash cans) originates in the loss of the framework for drama provided by a Christian understanding of the tensions between finite and infinite,

relative and absolute, immanent and transcendent. When all is finite, relative, and immanent, it becomes difficult to construe the moment as having meaning or a non-arbitrary relation to the end (the latter being represented by death, fate, or destiny). Von Balthasar's full genealogy of this tendency traces the loss of the Christian dramatic framework back to its origin *within* theology; for von Balthasar, the interrelation between the two senses of apocalypse—the axiological (the apocalypse of each moment) and teleological (the apocalypse of history's "end") performs a structuring role for drama. The coincidence of these two notions was lost in the (gnostically-tinged) theology of John Duns Scotus and in the temporalizing apocalypticism of Joachim de Fiore (*AddS*, I: 25-26).²⁰ In *Theo-Drama*, von Balthasar tracks the consequences of this loss for theatre by attending to the ways the disjuncture between material reality and the ideal is described either implicitly within dramatic works themselves or explicitly in works of aesthetics that analyze this relationship.

Hegel's *Aesthetics* is a crucial work for von Balthasar because Hegel there claims that "Christianity replaces art" (*TD*, I: 62). Indeed, von Balthasar quotes Hegel: "'art, taken purely as art, becomes to a certain extent superfluous.'²¹" The corollary of this claim is nothing short of the death of drama. This is obviously the antithesis of von Balthasar's own claim, which is that Christianity provides the best framework for

²⁰ Aidan Nichols, *Scattering the Seed: A Guide through Balthasar's Early Writings on Philosophy and the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 42.

²¹ Hegel in *TD*, I: 61.

understanding history as dramatic and for understanding drama as drama—rather than providing the conditions for its abolition.

Von Balthasar explains the disjuncture between his own perspective and Hegel's by showing the import of Hegel's claim that "Jesus Christ is only the *image* of the absolute history of Spirit" (*TD*, I: 61). For von Balthasar, this claim dissolves the apocalyptic tension between material and ideal that renders historical and fictional action dramatic and replaces analogical relations between the absolute and the finite with relations of identity (*TD*, I: 61-62). As Aidan Nichols puts it, "Balthasar thinks that Hegel came to his conclusion that drama...is dead, only because he has thrown out of the window the genuinely dramatic – indeed, super-dramatic – elements in Christianity itself."²² In Hegel's thought, history becomes "the play of a self-alienated God who returns to his identity." This means, however, that "Christology has been superseded by philosophy...and the doctrine of the Trinity is equally undermined" and that "the difference between tragedy as play and the Christian Passion as seriousness is abolished" (*TD*, I: 66). Within this horizon, the Christian Passion ceases to be the action of God on behalf of all men and instead facilitates "the levelling-down of everything, Christian or non-Christian, under the universal, impersonal, dialectical law of 'die and become'" (*TD*, I: 68). From von Balthasar's perspective, Hegel is right to recognize that the action of Christ in his individuality serves as a measure for all individual action. But the fact that Hegel's recognition of this is based on Hegel's putative knowledge of the absolute history of Spirit rather than on the revealed claim that Jesus is the Christ and the Son sent of the

²² Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth*, 18.

Father is problematic. It is also problematic because it allows the construction of a framework that allows an exhaustive description of Christ's death—such that Christ's death unfolds a perspicacious *logic* of reconciliation.²³ Von Balthasar asserts, to the contrary, that

dramatic action is ultimately only meaningful when seen against the background of a given, absolute meaning—albeit in the wake of Hegel such meaning can no longer be rationally adumbrated and demonstrated in concepts. In Christian terms such absolute meaning can only be grasped in the leap of faith" (*TD*, I: 72).

Although this absolute meaning can only be grasped in this way, it is nonetheless graspable.

Von Balthasar argues that the absoluteness of this absolute meaning can only be grasped within the lived reality of mission. Von Balthasar describes mission as follows: it is a way of life, 1) in which a particular Christian appropriates for him or herself the import of his or her devotion to God; 2) in which the individual realizes his or her particular calling in relation to God's mission through the church; 3) which is particular, but which bears universal content both within the church and for the world; 4) which participates in the mission of Christ; and 5) which figures as God's own involvement in the drama (*TD*, I: 68-69). Hegel's claim that Christian mission could be absorbed into the ambit of the bureaucratic office follows directly from his claim that the logic of reconciliation could be demonstrated in concepts. But for von Balthasar, this involves a 'levelling-down' not only of Christianity—with its claim that revelation is heterogeneous

²³ Von Balthasar quotes Hegel: "In tragedy the Eternally Substantial goes out like a victor, reconciling, sweeping aside what is merely the false oneness of conflicting individuality and upholding the positive in its full affirmative form, no longer split." *TD*, I: 72.

to other human discourse—but of all other human horizons as well. Von Balthasar claims that recognition of the truth of revelation can only be the gift of the Spirit and grasped in mission by divine grace.

This does not exempt the thus-engraced Christian from the task of discernment, however. On the contrary, precisely because a strictly conceptual mediation of the absolute horizon is not forthcoming, this discernment becomes all the more deeply necessary. To put it another way, although the Christian horizon is absolute, for von Balthasar, its absoluteness cannot be grasped except through contestation with alternative viewpoints; he mentions Marxism and Nietzschean thought as such alternative “horizons” after comparing the death of the young comrade in Brecht’s *Didactic Play of Baden* with Jesus’ death, which he regards as similar in that absolute obedience even unto death is demanded in both cases (*TD*, I: 84).²⁴ Christianity must vie with other systems of meaning in the interpretation of drama and the interpretation of history as drama. In what would have to be considered an ironic turn *vis-à-vis* Hegel, for von Balthasar it is precisely in and through this contestation that the true dignity of human systems of meaning comes into view.

Drama only dies, according to von Balthasar, when the disjunction between action and horizon is undermined either when the horizon is rendered undramatic or when it is irrevocably shattered. Hegel represents, for von Balthasar, the former modality, and Nietzsche represents the latter; in the pessimistic realism of Nietzsche, the question of the

²⁴ Von Balthasar engages Brecht in greater depth a later excursus which compares him with Ionesco. See *TD*, I: 324-343.

meaning of an individual's life is "mowed down. Privatized destiny no longer has any right to appear on the world stage" (*TD*, I: 82). For von Balthasar, however, Hegel's idealism is the necessary precondition for Nietzsche's valorization of the shattered framework. Indeed, von Balthasar argues that the demise of Hegel's system sets the terms for Nietzsche's thought by leaving a gnostic framework in place—in which the material (and its meaning) is alienated from the ideal. Nietzsche's opposed impulses—to celebrate the coming *Übermensch* and soberly to insist upon eternal recurrence—both issue from his attempt to unmask this gnostic contradiction (*TD*, I: 82). Indeed, in this respect, the unsystematic character of Nietzsche's philosophy registers as evidence of his sensitivity to the reality of finitude, and thus, to the inappropriateness of the Hegelian gesture of totalization.

Von Balthasar actually takes some cues from Nietzsche in terms of his methodological approach. With Nietzsche and against Hegel, von Balthasar insists that there cannot be an external standpoint from which one can report on the crucifixion. Thus although von Balthasar and Hegel agree that the crucifixion is the event through which God made the tragic situation of human existence into his own (*TD*, II: 54), von Balthasar's standpoint is like unto Nietzsche's in that von Balthasar recognizes the sense in which making this claim about the event involves staking *himself* in the event's dramatic post-history.

Here the difference between Hegel's conception of dramatic agency and von Balthasar's becomes clear; for von Balthasar, the discourse of the dramatic agent joins together both lyric (the discourse of awed contemplative receptivity—which typically

would come to expression in spirituality) and epic (the discourse of objective externality—which typically would come to expression in theology) not from the standpoint of one who observes the dramatic action’s realization but from the standpoint of one caught up in its passage.²⁵ For von Balthasar, Hegel’s attempt to offer a final (conceptual) vocabulary for the logic of reconciliation is premised upon an illegitimately-claimed knowledge of the relations between finite and infinite, and between the moment and the end. Such complete knowledge, von Balthasar argues, is not forthcoming; one can, at best, receive one’s orientation to such knowledge (without possessing it) as a gift of the Spirit, and, confessing it, one can live it in obedient mission.

For von Balthasar, the reason why such knowledge is not forthcoming is that the framework—against which human action is measured—is itself dynamic. Indeed, von Balthasar’s concept of *theodrama* presupposes an encounter between divine freedom and human freedom in which God irrevocably involves himself. Von Balthasar sees Hegel as falling short of describing *theodrama* because Hegel insists that Christ’s contribution must be subsumed to the universal salvific process lest his action be construed as self-seeking (here there are anticipations of Nietzsche’s subsequent critique of the importunity involved in desiring one’s own resurrection) (*TD*, I: 65). According to von Balthasar, Hegel’s simplification of the intra-trinitarian relations allows for a misconstrual of God’s involvement in history and of the salvific process; on Hegel’s account, God the Father ceases to be an agent over against the divine plan of salvation and God the Son ceases to

²⁵ Quash, “‘Between the Brutely Given, and the Brutally, Banally Free’: Von Balthasar’s Theology of Drama in Dialogue with Hegel,” 298–299.

be—as the Son in mission—a personal participant in it. Hegel’s thought renders grace part of the world-process itself.

Von Balthasar argues that this misconstrual is typical of modern ‘Titanic’ post-Christian paganism, which balks at the notion of divine sovereignty and thus “[reduces] He-who-is-eternally...to the level of an ossified relic of the past [and enthrones] the Eternally-becoming, the authentically living force” (*TD*, II: 420). Theologically considered, however, this ‘enthronement,’ which arises from the drive toward “straightforward intelligibility and utility,” culminates in a domestication of God.

Against this significantly Hegelian background, von Balthasar remarks,

there is only one way to approach the Trinitarian life in God: on the basis of what is manifest in God’s kenosis in the theology of the covenant—and thence in the theology of the Cross—we must feel our way back to the mystery of the absolute, employing a negative theology that excludes from God all intramundane experience and suffering, while at the same time presupposing that the possibility of such experience and suffering—up to and including its christological and trinitarian implications—is grounded in God (*TD*, IV: 324).

In this statement, von Balthasar explains his conception of the interrelation between the problems of drama and theology. Hegel’s construal of divine kenosis leads to the death of drama through a kind of philosophical *kataphasis* which collapses the distances²⁶ both between the Triune persons and between God and history. Von Balthasar thus seeks to restore drama—or, rather, to explain drama’s ineliminability—through a theological

²⁶ Von Balthasar already makes use of the metaphor of distance in “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” trans. Edward T. Oakes, *Communio* 24 (Summer 1997): 355, which was originally published as “Patristik, Scholastik und wir,” *Theologie der Zeit*, (Wein) 3 (1939): 65-104. When articulating the metaphor of “distance” in *Theo-Drama* (II: 178), however, von Balthasar draws upon Karl Barth: “‘Without this distance between [God] and man’, there could be ‘no genuine intercourse’, ‘no dialogue’ and hence ‘no drama’ between God and man. Thus the heaven/earth tension is the presupposition of all theodramatic action, both from God’s side and from man’s.” Von Balthasar here refers to Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: Volume III: The Doctrine of Creation, Part 3*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F Torrance, trans. R.J. Ehrlich (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 432.

apophysis which seeks to restore both of these distances such that a) the movements of the Trinitarian persons remain both distinct and yet mutually related to one another and b) God's involvement in history abrogates neither divine nor human freedom. Von Balthasar seeks to do so through a Trinitarian account of the drama of history, focused specifically on the unsurpassably dramatic event of the Crucifixion, especially as it stands against two backgrounds; immediately, that of the theology of the covenant, and, ultimately, that of divine kenosis. To this I will now turn.

Von Balthasar's Redescription of Divine Sovereignty:

I: On Infinite and Finite Freedom

Von Balthasar undertakes his articulation of theodrama in light of the way theology of history, which presupposes the doctrine of providence and divine sovereignty, has been supplanted, in modern thought, by philosophy of history. Von Balthasar thus recognizes the delicacy of his task in redescribing divine sovereignty. It is delicate precisely because it means attempting to discern a constant will behind the diverse phenomena of history, including the biblical record of divine involvement in it, and the reality of human suffering. And making this attempt means running headlong into conflict with modern accounts of freedom, including that of the "Titanic" Prometheanism of Hegel (and Nietzsche, in certain significant ways), which so desires to give full play to human freedom that it culminates in a (Luciferian) *non serviam*.²⁷ Indeed, that Hegel's philosophy of history poses an obstacle for von Balthasar is clear from Hegel's insistence

²⁷ Von Balthasar cites Fritz von Baader's analysis of Hegel in *AddS*, I: 623. See also Nichols, *Scattering the Seed: A Guide through Balthasar's Early Writings on Philosophy and the Arts*, 122.

upon translating (even the highest, divine-human) love into love as ‘idea’ (*AddS*, I: 611), and translating the Christian doctrine of the Church into secular terms as a doctrine of civil society; in both of these, Hegel exhibits the Promethean tendency, which, as Aidan Nichols puts it, “wants power over what is highest.”²⁸ Von Balthasar wants to show that a Christian conception of divine sovereignty does not require of human beings a servile assent to domination—Paul’s rhetoric of ‘slavery’ notwithstanding. On the contrary, von Balthasar argues that history is better understood as the perpetually renewed dramatic interaction between human freedom and divine freedom.

For von Balthasar, moments of divine self-disclosure do not abrogate the exercise of human freedom. These moments rather throw into relief two aspects of human freedom, which von Balthasar calls “freedom as autonomous motion” (*TD*, II: 213) and “freedom as consent” (*TD*, II: 227). Recognition of the former sense of freedom derives especially from one’s immediate presence to self, that is, one’s recognition that one possesses the ability to act in particular ways for self-chosen ends in some degree of independence of somatic and emotional drives, the latter of which are equally part of oneself. Von Balthasar sees the latter form of freedom—that of consent—as actually logically prior to the freedom of self-possession; for in order to recognize oneself and one’s own ‘being-out-of-oneself’ (*autexousia*) as good, one must open oneself to the good—not merely to one’s own good, or to what *seems* good. True freedom requires that one ascend to “an elevated position of ‘indifference’” (*TD*, II: 227-228). This position is akin to a mystical state. In this state, which is “indivisibly intellectual and volitive” (*TD*,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

II: 210), one recognizes the good and affirms it without insisting upon appropriating it for oneself (*TD*, II: 211)—not because the good is not desirable but because, in the position of indifference, one “articulates [one]self only *in and with* the universal opening of all being (*TD*, II: 211). In other words, one consents to one’s own givenness within being. Divine self-disclosure does not abrogate *this* freedom, but rather enriches one’s sense of “the universal opening of all beings.”

It also renders this “opening” dramatic by presenting the subject with a choice; one may either affirm the divine Other that manifests itself, finding one’s own self-realization in this affirmation, or one may reject it, insisting that, “for the purposes of self-realization, the whole area must remain completely open” (*TD*, II: 213). Affirmation of the divine Other can arise not only from the kind of desire for that Other that arises from the splendor and glory of the theophany itself, but from the recognition “that finite freedom, if it remains alone and absolute, is bound to become the hellish torment of a Tantalus if it is not permitted to attain full development in the self-warranting realm of absolute freedom” (*TD*, II: 213). It is in this sense that von Balthasar sees full human self-development becoming a genuine possibility through consent to theonomy and participation in divine freedom (*TD*, II: 230-231). Nichols summarizes von Balthasar’s argument aptly: “no ‘cunning’ can overmaster the mystery of gracious bestowal, for nothing can be more ultimate than the Holy Trinity, whose mystery this is.”²⁹

²⁹ Nichols, *Scattering the Seed: A Guide through Balthasar’s Early Writings on Philosophy and the Arts*, 122.

Von Balthasar clearly emphasizes the way this ordered difference (between divine freedom in bestowing and human freedom in being bestowed-upon) structures this relation. He does not, however, simply re-assert divine sovereignty in gift-giving in the manner of Calvin. Such a reassertion would appropriately emphasize divine impassibility, would preserve God's transcendence and freedom, and would grant human agents a correlative independence from divine initiative in a way that makes their own proper freedom readily intelligible. It would also, however, de-dynamize God's relation to history in a way as ill-suited to theodrama as it is intolerable to any reader of Hegel. Even more worrying, however, is that it would also attribute a kind of passivity to God, which seems to suggest a lack of divine risk for God in combating evil, and thus a lack of love for and solidarity with humankind.

Von Balthasar thus seeks to recover the dynamic character of the divine life (as both immanent and economic) by drawing attention to the significant moments in the drama of history. Von Balthasar contrasts the Old Testament's conception of divine freedom with the finite and anthropomorphic freedom of the Olympian gods and the freedom of the Neo-Platonic One. According to von Balthasar, the One, despite depending on nothing, remains limited in being unable to raise finite freedom to its own level. Von Balthasar thus argues that the "missing component" for a full conception of divine freedom is to be found uniquely in the Old Testament, where God creates man and endows him with freedom, and "steps beyond his divine realm in order to permeate and rule every aspect of the worldly realm" (*TD*, II: 243-244)—even to the point of allowing those who ask to participate in divine wisdom. The New Testament marks a new moment

in the drama in that the final “barrier, [namely the] lack of reciprocity” that characterizes the Old Testament “is broken down in Jesus Christ, who ‘penetrates all things’ in quite a different way from the wisdom of ‘Solomon’” (*TD*, II: 244). Von Balthasar continues: “Jesus Christ brings the Old Covenant to its completion; thus he is [both] the realization of God’s Yes, which was inherent in all his promises...and...the world’s answering Yes (Amen) to God” (*TD*, II: 252-253). This establishes the covenant between infinite and finite freedom; “the world as a whole now depends on God’s free good pleasure” (*TD*, II: 251).

Von Balthasar actually warns that the philosopher’s temptation to explain the origin of the world in something *other* than God’s good pleasure will lead into “idle speculation” and involves positing a “‘primal ground’ or ‘un-ground’ in God,³⁰ something that is prior to his knowledge and affirmation of himself or something that he has to master in some ‘process’ or other” (*TD*, II: 255). Von Balthasar cuts this line of speculation off: “this infinite Will is...final: there can be no appeal to any other court” (*TD*, II: 254). God, in infinite freedom and utterly self-possessed—which is to say, subject to no external necessity—wills to establish this covenant. Far from being passive, God, in sending Jesus, reveals the “blessed mystery...that love—self-surrender—is part of this bliss of absolute freedom” (*TD*, II: 256).

³⁰ Aidan Nichols sees here a reference to Meister Eckhart and the twentieth century Russian Orthodox religious philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev. See Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth*, 72.

From this revelation of the economic Trinity, von Balthasar argues that one can discern something of the nature of the immanent Trinity: if absolute freedom expresses itself thus,

there must be *areas of infinite freedom* that are *already there* and do not allow everything to be compressed into an airless unity and identity. The Father's act of surrender calls for its own area of freedom; the Son's act, whereby he receives himself from and acknowledges his indebtedness to the Father, requires its own area; and the act whereby the Spirit proceeds, illuminating the most intimate love of Father and Son, testifying to it and fanning it into flame, demands its area of freedom (*TD*, II: 257).

This argument, which depends upon the metaphor of “distance” mentioned above, allows a significant re-imagination of the nature of divine sovereignty. Whereas the common imagination of power and freedom holds that one expresses sovereignty in disposing of oneself and others according to one's own will, von Balthasar turns this argument on its head; each of the divine persons surrenders to the others in ordered, reciprocal, but uniquely *personal* love. Put in terms of the metaphor of distance, the infinite freedom of divine power expresses itself in the eternal traversal of the intra-Trinitarian distance by each of the divine persons. This is von Balthasar's articulation of the doctrine of *perichoresis*. Thus, far from being static, the inner life of the Trinity finds ultimate satisfaction and blessedness in eternal self-surrender.

And here von Balthasar's negative theological approach comes to bear: because God *is* infinite being, this ‘giving’ and ‘having’ takes place within a set of mutual relations unconditioned by the realities that prove so determinative of all human ‘giving’ and ‘having’—namely, antecedent wealth and subsequent poverty (*TD*, II: 257). As von Balthasar puts it, “The Father does not ‘lose’ himself to someone else in order thereby to ‘regain’ himself; for he *is always* himself by giving himself” (*TD*, II: 256). The same

infinity holds for the self-gifts of the Son and Spirit. Here Godhead is shared in a way that does not admit of description in terms of division, private possession, or loss; indeed, for von Balthasar, only a non-Christian and non-Trinitarian conception of Godhead *could* admit of description in such terms.

Von Balthasar's account of these immanent Trinitarian movements serves to clarify how human consent to theonomy differs from servile assent to domination. For von Balthasar, each of the persons of the Trinity attains full Godhead in and through self-surrender to the other persons in their ordered relations. The Son's proper activity is to respond eternally to the Father's begetting by "allowing himself to be generated and allowing the Father to do with him as he pleases" (*TD*, II: 256). This holds equally as a description of the Incarnation of the Son, by which God decisively seals the covenant with creation; citing John 5: 19-26, von Balthasar argues that the Incarnation is an act that is simultaneously the Son's own, and an act in which the Son obediently surrenders himself to the will of the Father (*TD*, II: 267). The life of the incarnate Son displays the way human beings attain the fullest expression of their self-activity (*autexousia*) in consenting to being bearers of the divine image: "[the creature] can only be what it is, that is, an image of infinite freedom...by getting in tune with the (trinitarian) 'law' of absolute freedom (of self-surrender); and this law is not foreign to it...but most authentically its own" (*TD*, II: 259). Just as there is no domination and no loss of self within the Trinity—but a fully shared freedom and omnipotence (*TD*, II: 257-258), so there is no domination in the human being's grateful receptivity to God and his affirmation of his

creatureliness—but instead, a raising of finite freedom to its origin and absolute goal in infinite freedom.

While this account of the relation between infinite and finite freedom goes much of the way in providing the needed redescription of divine sovereignty, it still stands in need of articulation in terms of the events of salvation history, lest it remain purely formal and lose sight of the drama with its specific shape, and the events through which the Son becomes the mediator between the infinite God and finite humanity. Thus, having discussed the premise and climax of the drama I now turn to the conflict and the plot.

II: Covenant, Wrath, and Judgment: Divine Dispossessions

For von Balthasar, the light of the Incarnation reveals what was at stake in God's creation of finite freedom. God, in infinite freedom, willed out of his own good pleasure to create a freedom other to his own. In doing so, God created others possessed of a finite power who could, if they willed, claim a certain kind of autonomy over against their creator. This is the origin of the dramatic tension that constitutes theodrama; freedom must lay hold of itself, but the free creature can do so either by unifying power and goodness, or by "set[ting] himself up as the standard of the good, thus subordinating goodness to his own exercise of power" (TD, IV: 151). Von Balthasar clearly believes that the theological axiom that God bears true power and goodness perfectly in his own being cuts off the Nietzschean objection that history (and especially the history of God's so-called chosen people) represents not the patient interaction of a benevolent God seeking to form and perfect the finite freedom of his creatures but the assertion of the will to power of the deeply subtle and clever priestly caste. But in order to make his case, von

Balthasar must deal with the appearances that lead to the Nietzschean objection; it is only if *God's* actions appear to be assertions of pure power—a power inimical to freedom—that the *priests'* theological assertions will seem to admit of reduction down to their status as tokens within the power-play of “life.” Thus von Balthasar’s task is to show how the saving drama aims not at the creation of “guilt, bad conscience, and the like” but reconciliation, and how it arises not out of a self-aggrandizing power but divine kenosis—which comes to expression in creation, covenant, Incarnation and crucifixion. Von Balthasar’s argument is that in each of these moments God’s omnipotence expresses itself not in the kind of humanly-modeled lordship which necessarily subjugates, but in a *loving* kind of lordship—one that befits an infinitely free God who eternally gives himself away, and whose pleasure it is to create finite freedom, with all that that entails.

In volume IV of *Theo-Drama*, von Balthasar describes the pathos of the drama of the human condition prior³¹ to divine intervention. Human beings are finite, subjected to death, free to commit evil, and, because implicated in the world’s suffering, also guilty. Von Balthasar argues that the human “attempt to manufacture a redeemed existence out of all this—and this is the attempt [that] all nonbiblical religions [make]—is bound to lead...to man’s self-dissolution... [and] to further involvement in guilt” (*TD*, IV: 201). While von Balthasar makes this remark about human life as construed by nonbiblical religions, this is equally the pathos of the human drama as it is envisioned by the philosophies of post-Christian paganism, which usurp something of the infinite for

³¹ Here “prior” is intended in a logical, rather than in a historical sense.

themselves (*TD*, IV: 159).³² Here the proximity of these two kinds of paganism points also to the difference between them; whereas pre-Christian paganism envisions humankind dying in the bosom of nature, post-Christian paganism ends with human beings pretending mastery while in fact being in subjection not to God but to a version of human being as idealized as it is unrealized (*TD*, II: 65). Von Balthasar sees Nietzsche as exemplary in this regard. Indeed, in Nietzsche's argument that human vitality is the creative store out of which all human projections of value originate, von Balthasar sees "an extreme development: the pole of human freedom that owes its existence to the grace imparted by infinite freedom now becomes a function, together with that very grace, of the autonomous self's exercise of ever-increasing power" (*TD*, IV: 158). *Contra* Nietzsche, von Balthasar argues that human beings stand in need of a grace they must *receive* if they are to attain their fulfillment.

It is against this background of human sinfulness in its origin and flowering that von Balthasar describes God's action in the drama. While original sin does not interrupt God's offer of grace from God's perspective, it does transform it—from the form of grace offered through the Son's mediatorship in creation to that offered through his mediatorship in redemption. Thus while God's offer of grace itself remains unchanged, "our common lack of an inner orientation to God and his grace...has caused [God] to make known to us a deeper and more painful form of his love" (*TD*, IV: 190-191). Von Balthasar outlines the shape of this "painful form of his love" by describing the

³² Von Balthasar argues that these philosophies are conditioned upon the high estimation of human dignity given in a Christian anthropology's account of the proximity between perfected finitude and divine infinitude (*TD*, IV: 159).

relationship between the form of redeeming love displayed in the Old Testament account of God's relation to Israel and that redeeming love displayed by Christ in the New Testament.

While von Balthasar's account of the theodramatic revelation of love obviously comes to a climax with the Incarnation (as noted above), von Balthasar resists the impulse to describe the drama in either optimistic terms, according to which the "Logos progressively enters into the history of mankind"—or pessimistic terms, which instead imagine "an ever-deteriorating relationship between mankind and God and a continual accumulation of sin" (*TD*, IV: 208). He rather discerns what he calls the "fundamental theodramatic law of world history: the greater the revelation of divine (ground-less) love, the more it elicits a groundless (Jn 15:25) hatred from man" (*TD*, IV: 338). It is this law that governs the escalating tension of the dramatic interaction of God and humankind—and it escalates, according to von Balthasar, precisely because God does not allow the offer of grace to expire with the fall. Indeed, for von Balthasar the Noachic covenant represents God's own foreclosure upon the possibility of utterly destroying humankind, and all manifestations of divine wrath and judgment ought to be viewed against the background of that covenant (*TD*, IV: 205).

Von Balthasar thus calls history after the Noachic covenant and prior to the Incarnation "the long patience of God" (*TD*, IV: 205). During this period, God elects Israel and interacts with her in a way that sets the pattern for Christ in two important ways; first, God's love expresses itself in kenotic self-limitation; and second, God's gracious acts on the world's behalf intend to bring humankind to repentance, but as they

become more obviously directed at reconciliation, they elicit more resistance from precisely those whom God intends to save.

Von Balthasar illustrates this with reference to God's gift of the Mosaic law and the history of its reception by Israel. God's election of Israel and covenant with her leads to the gift of the law. The commandments are given in order that by means of obedience to them, Israel could fulfill her election, drawing near to God (*TD*, IV: 207) and living peacefully in God's land. Correlatively, "failure to keep the law attracts God's curse" (*TD*, IV: 212). This is in keeping with God's original intention in making the covenant with Israel; von Balthasar positively quotes Zimmerli's summary of the function of the commandment; the commandment was given not in order "to hold on to the people at all costs...[but as] a holy fire that burns up the unholy" (*TD*, IV: 212-213). In this perspective, divine jealousy and anger stand as evidence of God's refusal to allow the to-and-fro rhythm of covenant breach and covenant faithfulness to be the truth of the covenant itself (*TD*, IV: 213). For the covenant was made in order that Israel could become righteous—not because God somehow needs human righteousness but because the meaning of human life is at stake. For human life takes on an air of tragedy and unfreedom insofar as this lack of righteousness persists. Thus as it was God's good pleasure to create finite freedom, so it is God's good pleasure to covenant with human beings to enable them to recover the freedom for which they were created.

The irruption of divine wrath at sin therefore cannot be said to introduce a dynamic utterly foreign to the tension of the unfolding drama (of covenant as it is kept and broken by Israel); wrath's appearance serves to explicate, dramatically, the way

revealed law comes to bear on human life. Indeed, von Balthasar pushes the origin of wrath back not only to law, but to covenant itself: “the covenant was designed as grace and salvation, yet it contained within it—since the people could not match up to a full response but continued to ‘wrestle’ with God—an element of wrath” (*TD*, IV: 217). Put another way, divine judgment and its attendant wrath serve to spell out the way covenant reconfigures the dramatic scene. For the covenant reveals an absolute norm for human action and being; human beings are to conform themselves to the likeness of their covenant partner, that is, to be true and good as God is true and good. Though divine order may be transgressed, this is only ever to the detriment of the transgressor, who, in transgressing, forsakes his own source of life, and indeed, *himself*.³³ When God punishes a breach of the covenant, this serves to increase the dramatic tension. At the same time, however, the objectivity of the divine order remains inviolate. The breach cannot dissolve the covenant, because the covenant depends not on human faithfulness, but on divine grace, which is “given freely and unconditionally on God’s side” (*TD*, IV: 228). The law therefore continues to stand as a witness to God’s love for the transgressor by continuing to direct the transgressor to his perfection. “Furthermore,” von Balthasar writes, “it is impossible for God to announce to the world a law of reward for the good and punishment for evil, and then let this law operate so to speak without his active participation” (*TD*, IV: 339). In the irruption of divine wrath, there is no separation of truth and goodness—such that truth would demand justice and goodness would demand

³³ As von Balthasar puts it, “self-absolutizing freedom...not only deprives finite freedom of its harmonious relation with absolute freedom: it also deprives it of such a relationship with itself” (*TD*, IV: 163).

mercy or forgiveness. On the contrary, it is precisely the unity of truth and goodness in God's (righteous/wrathful) action within theodrama that reveals how paltry the intramundane drama of passion, calculations, and power-relationships is (*TD*, IV: 112), and how far God comes from calculating whether such-and-such an divine expression of anger will manipulate human being such that they come under his power.

Von Balthasar explicitly contrasts the covenant God with the pagan image of God:

God

designates himself as the 'zealous' and 'jealous' [covenant] partner... 'Jealousy is the divine power that is put in the service of injured love; it indicates that righteousness that is essentially oriented to salvation.' The fact that God's love reacts violently to the violence done to it by men is explained by God's total investment of himself and by the utterly astonishing indifference, rejection and hardness of heart on man's part (*TD*, IV: 174)

Divine anger is ordered rather than capricious, but because it remains subject to the unsearchable omniscience of God, which punishes and shows mercy as is fitting, its manifestations cannot be calculated in advance. Thus, according to von Balthasar, the claim that the irruption of divine wrath can only represent a Titanic abrogation of human freedom presupposes a Promethean antagonism between human beings and God—rather than a relationship of love. Within this Promethean antagonism, human beings are condemned to an existence in which finite freedom can only be exercised in anxiety, separated from participation in the freedom of the gods, the latter of which falls short of the freedom of the Triune God in any case, according to von Balthasar. Further, this conception of divine wrath (as Titanic) imagines God as *not* suffering in the exercise of wrath, a notion that is utterly excluded in the betrothal imagery of Old Testament, particularly in the parabolic suffering of Hosea (*TD*, IV: 218-219). By his utter

commitment to his own righteousness and to the making-righteous (“rightwising”³⁴) of his betrothed, God decrees suffering for himself.

Von Balthasar thus quotes O. Michel, who describes “the period of ‘God’s wrath’ [as] the period of God’s patience and his waiting...of ‘postponement’ and restraint on God’s part” (*TD*, IV: 219, n11). Prior to the Incarnation, God, out of pity, suffers rejection in the form of Israel’s “refusal to attribute to God what it knows to be his work” (*TD*, IV: 216). When viewed from the standpoint of the Incarnation, the pathos of this period is keyed by God’s self-limitation in self-disclosure. Because the law testifies both to a covenant faith *and* to its lack of fulfillment—such that law can become a means of self-justification, a means of atheistic self-creation (*TD*, IV: 216), or even an irritant that provokes its own wrongful appropriation (*TD*, IV: 214 citing Rom 7.12ff)—the drama prior to the Incarnation is staged within a twilight space haunted by the absence of redemption. According to von Balthasar, the void of tragedy yawns here. In the absence of a divinely authored answer to the question of Messianic hope, human beings must simply await this answer in “open poverty,” or they must either construct philosophical bridges or conduct theurgic religious mediations in the absence of any expectation of a response from the other side (*TD*, IV: 220).

³⁴ This is R. Bultmann’s underrated translation of *δικαιοω*, which is more commonly translated as “justified.” See his *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel and Robert Morgan (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 274.

Beyond the Twilight: Von Balthasar on the Mystery of the Atonement

For von Balthasar, the openness of the question of Messianic hope constitutes the dramatic tension of the pre-Christian situation in much the same way as the question of Messianic filiation constitutes the dramatic situation after the Incarnation. Von Balthasar argues that it is impossible to reduce the unfolding drama to a single isolated concept—like Hegel’s “die and become” for example (*TD*, I: 68). Von Balthasar rather states, “there is God’s initiative, yet it cannot do without man’s cooperation; there is God’s reconciled love, yet the jealous and wrathful side of his love still call[s] for reconciliation” (*TD*, IV: 229). These realities together constitute the “pre-Christian impasse,” which von Balthasar insists cannot be “solved”; it is instead *addressed* by God with the “mystery of the atonement” (*TD*, IV: 229). It must remain a mystery, for von Balthasar, because of the content of the drama: as close as the “frenzied dance of religious projections” (*TD*, IV: 226) gets to true Christianity in the pre-Christian world, humanly speaking there is only the law of heightening opposition to God’s efforts at saving humankind, both in Israel, which feels the weight of its sinfulness but is unable to unburden itself, and in the nations, which feel a vague sense of guilt and seek ritualized and technical means of its alleviation (*TD*, IV: 227). Rather than taking any human movement of ascent for its point of departure, then, the “word of the cross” issues from an “hour” of incomprehension and scandal, when the “sheep” are “scattered,” and takes the form of a paradoxical wisdom that makes foolish the wisdom of the worldly-wise.

Von Balthasar thus argues that remaining adequate to the mystery itself requires a different kind of contestation from that between Christianity and alternative philosophical

or religious frameworks. Instead of approaching the meaning of Christianity by way of its interaction with alternative horizons of meaning, here von Balthasar recommends approaching the mystery of the atonement by holding in tension five distinct scriptural themes that have been alternately placed in the foreground or the background by those articulating the meaning of Christ's dramatic and saving action. According to von Balthasar (to summarize very briefly), Christ's death is rightly understood: 1) as a *sacrifice* in which Jesus simultaneously 'lays down his life' while being 'given up' or 'handed over' in a way that fulfills and "supersedes the whole sphere of previous ritual sacrifice" (*TD*, IV: 241); 2) as an *exchange*—a "heavenly bargain"—of human sinfulness for divine righteousness prior to the sinners' consent; 3) as *liberation* from oppression by sin/the devil/the worldly powers/the powers of darkness/the law/the law of sin and death—a liberation accomplished specifically by the death of Christ, which ransoms captive humankind by paying a debt (*TD*, IV: 242); 4) as the act by which God not only liberates humankind from these powers, but also *initiates man into the divine life* and into the power of the Spirit; and 5) as the expression of God's merciful *love*, which issues from God's covenant righteousness. Von Balthasar argues that the tension between these aspects of the mystery of the atonement cannot be resolved into something more basic or higher without loss of the meaning of the event itself. Rather than being slackened, this tension must be "endured" (*TD*, IV: 243). Indeed, in *Theo-Drama* volume IV von Balthasar recounts a history of the doctrine of the atonement and highlights examples of heterodoxy that result from a failure to keep these aspects in appropriate tension.

While it is indeed true that the contribution *Theo-Drama* makes to the history of atonement theology is significantly the synoptic vision von Balthasar presents of these five themes and the articulation he offers of their presence (or absence) in patristic, medieval, Reformation, and modern doctrines of the atonement, I shall focus on what might be said to be his original contribution to this tradition (though von Balthasar would undoubtedly be wary of calling it original). Von Balthasar seeks to remedy a strange state of affairs in atonement theology, namely, that the Cross has become an *undramatic* scene (*TD*, IV: 318). Von Balthasar seeks to restore a sense for the drama of this unsurpassably dramatic scene by highlighting the way the principles of divine sovereignty thus far articulated—God’s infinite self-offering—equally underpin the action in this scene. As he puts it succinctly, “in the ek-stasis of suffering on the Cross, we see God’s total self-giving in his triune life and in his love for his creatures” (*TD*, IV: 315-316). This also provides the key to von Balthasar’s response to Nietzsche. Von Balthasar wants to contest Nietzsche’s claim that only a tragic and Dionysian frame can prevent Jesus’ death from becoming a “curse on life.” Von Balthasar seeks to do so by showing how the depths of tragedy have been plumbed in the redemptive suffering of God in Christ. When Christ vicariously takes on man’s Godlessness and endures god-forsakenness, his experience of both of them is deeper and darker for the fact that he takes them on having known the highest human nearness to God (*TD*, IV: 324). For von Balthasar, this is the power of Christ’s atoning grace. Von Balthasar is aware of the way the complexity of the Old Testament picture of God (as both wrathful and loving) leads to the Nietzschean critique. But von Balthasar insists that Christ is capable of contesting with Dionysus

precisely as a martyr. Thus von Balthasar looks neither to replace the Old Testament God with Jesus' 'loving Father,' nor does he elide the violence of the crucifixion. To look for seeds of hope in the resurrected Christ (as Rahner does) rather than in the crucified is, for von Balthasar, to avoid the deepest agonism between Nietzsche and Christianity.

Von Balthasar, Luther, and Nietzsche

Von Balthasar thus formulates his atonement theology in light of Luther's theology of the Cross even as he seeks to address an aspect of it that leads to the Nietzschean critique. Specifically, von Balthasar addresses Luther's account of Christ's *Stellvertretung* (exchange of places). If Christ 'take the sinner's place' in a strictly external and forensic sense, this *Stellvertretung* lacks the inner, ontic effect that would be required to foster "genuine, original Christianity" on Nietzsche's terms (A, §39).³⁵ Thus in setting up his atonement theology, Von Balthasar draws attention to the way Luther's use of the metaphor of "exchange" disconnects the inner relation between exchange of human guilt for divine righteousness and incorporation into Christ. Von Balthasar argues that this inner relation is central for the Fathers (*TD*, IV: 246-254). In Luther, by contrast, "the aspect of divinization is relegated completely [and] the exchange is between the *sinner* and Christ" (*TD*, IV: 284).³⁶ While he is concerned by the "relegation" of divinization, Von Balthasar initially offers a charitable assessment of this use of the exchange metaphor, arguing that Luther simply emphasizes the *pro nobis* aspect of

³⁵ See also the section in Chapter 2 entitled "Jesus' Instincts, Christian Instincts".

³⁶ My italics. Von Balthasar argues that Luther's voluntarism is based on the "Scotus-Ockham speculations" (*TD*, II: 247). According to von Balthasar, Luther's relegation of divinization is consequent upon his commitment to preserving God's freedom. "Ultimately only God is free, and as the Grace-giver, he is such only if, in the face of his gift, all our gifts become as nothing" (*TD*, II: 248).

“substitution” and carries it to its extreme, “exclusive” conclusion. Von Balthasar highlights, however, the fact that Luther interprets 2 Cor 5:21 in the most literal sense: Christ is “made to be sin” *solely* in order to justify humankind—and here von Balthasar recalls that to justify, in the Lutheran lexicon, means *strictly* (and objectively) to change the status of human beings before the God whose justice requires that sin be punished (*TD*, IV: 288). Luther’s preaching of justification therefore sharpens the paradoxes of the economy of salvation. Von Balthasar quotes Luther: “‘Christ is more damned and forsaken than all the saints; he did not merely suffer...In all reality and truth, he submitted to God the Father’s eternal damnation for us’ (*LW*, 56: 298, 7ff). ‘He felt the anger of God, more than any other man. Indeed, he felt hell’s punishment’ (*LW*, 8: 87, 34ff)” (*TD*, IV: 285). According to von Balthasar, the *sub contrario* is to be found in all aspects of Luther’s soteriology: “grace appears only in wrath; ‘God cannot be God without first becoming a devil; we cannot get into heaven without first going to hell’” (*TD*, IV: 289 quoting *LW*, I: 249-250). Luther sharpens these paradoxes in order to sharpen the necessity of holding fast to faith; when the law terrifies sinners by exposing them to the naked demands of God’s majesty, this ought to drive them to seek refuge in Christ (*TD*, IV: 289). And von Balthasar does not object to this, *per se*, for Luther’s “reduction” of theology and anthropology to soteriology is “highly dramatic” (*TD*, IV: 290), which is indeed a good thing for the author of *Theo-Drama*.

Von Balthasar does, however, make five interrelated objections to Luther’s soteriology. 1) Luther “suppresses that *other* drama, which presupposes the existence of persons, with their proper being and constitution.” 2) Luther “makes no connection

between Christ's Incarnation and his 'becoming sin.'" 3) The lack of this connection causes "the entire traditional view of Christ as the Head of mankind [to fall] to the ground." 4) Luther makes "no place for the primary love of the redeemed for the person of the Redeemer," which "artificially, but very deliberately [tears asunder] the unity of grace—which justifies *and* sanctifies." And 5) Luther "obscures the entire horizon of God's self-disclosure in Christ, everything the Fathers understood by *oikonomia* and the 'divinization' of man through the grace of participation" (*TD*, IV: 290). Von Balthasar does not dwell on these criticisms. He rather compresses them into the space of less than a full page, which has led some to underestimate³⁷ their depth and importance. What von Balthasar shares with Luther's theology of the Cross is an unwillingness to elide the violence of the soteriological narrative. Indeed, far from minimizing it, von Balthasar goes on to highlight the sense in which the climactic moment of Christ's god-forsakenness even seems to be a moment of violence between the Father and Son. But in *Theo-Drama*, von Balthasar also aims to undo the soteriological "reduction" performed by Luther by renarrating the saving drama in a way that retains the apocalyptic depths explored by Luther while also providing the Trinitarian theology, the Christology, and the anthropology that is lacking in Luther.

³⁷ In a telling quotation, Alyssa Lyra Pitstick remarks, "Balthasar's [atonement] theology has strong Lutheran and Calvinistic tones and content...although he attempts to distinguish his doctrine from Calvin's...[Herzog's] summary of Luther's *decensus* doctrines...could almost serve as a summary for Balthasar's position, except it lacks Balthasar's Trinitarian focus and his emphasis on Christ's 'ever-greater' God-abandonment after death." Pitstick is right to note these caveats, but greatly underestimates their significance. For von Balthasar's Trinitarian focus completely and radically changes the theology of wrath. It is not enough to note, as Pitstick does in the same note, that "the extremes (of wrath and love, death and life) touch"; some account of their order and of the theology to which they give dramatic display is needful. Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 392 n. 102.

The problem with Luther's "reduction" of theology and anthropology to soteriology is that it strips Christianity of the theoretical resources necessary to engage the Nietzschean critique. To anticipate, while Luther's *sub contrario* approach to theology does arise from Luther's prayerful dwelling with scripture's soteriological narrative, it is, as it were, *lyric* rather than *dramatic*, to use the terms elaborated above, in that it is insufficiently tempered by the voice of epic distance which is capable of speaking *about* (*über*) God rather than out of the experience of addressing God as "Thou".³⁸ The consequence of this is that the Trinitarian shape of the drama is lost. Moreover, von Balthasar argues that in Luther's soteriology, the Son becomes "purely passive in the dramatic process" (*TD*, IV: 287). Von Balthasar, by contrast, wants to highlight the Son's *activity* in the theodrama for the way it reveals the inner coherence of the movements of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. This coherence is absolutely necessary for a theodramatic doctrine of redemption, which emphasizes the way that the covenant is completed *from both sides*.³⁹ Just as the Son eternally gives himself to the Father, so the incarnate Son gives himself up to God. Christ thereby divinizes humankind, becoming both the highest human exemplar and the sacrament reconciling man and God. This in no way mitigates the violence of the drama. It rather re-frames the violence, not by removing it from the sphere of divine power and lordship and placing it in that of divine kenosis and love, but by showing how divine kenosis and love are the center of God's power and lordship.

³⁸ Also see *TD*, IV: 62 regarding the relationship between epic and lyric theologies.

³⁹ Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth*, 100.

This re-framing is deeply necessary because Nietzsche is not content to accept Luther's resolution of the graceful terror of an encounter with God's law. While this encounter may lead one to encounter one's untruth and one's need for redemption, as for the Lutheran Kierkegaard (*AddS*, I: 725), the "Hyperborean"⁴⁰ Nietzsche finds the encounter with God *sub contrario* to be a labyrinth which blocks the way to happiness (*A*, §1). To put it another way, Luther's theological and anthropological minimalism opens the door for Nietzsche to see in the Christian God, which Luther discovers *sub contrario*, a God *against* development and flourishing, or a God that is only *for* what is *not* in man, but only in the redeemer. In Nietzsche, the figure of the redeemer is therefore not a bridge between finite and infinite (as for Kierkegaard) but, in his cultural role, a bulwark against the discovery that, according to Nietzsche, ennobles the individual and brings him to self-transcendence, namely, that "the bridge rather stretches out over the ocean until it collapses" (*AddS*, I: 711). Here the proximity between Dionysus and the Crucified again becomes visible. It is not the case that some experience analogous to the Lutheran experience of the abyss can be avoided, for Nietzsche, nor that a life that would attempt to avoid the violence of this experience would be a superior one. Von Balthasar quotes Nietzsche to the contrary: "'to live at all means to be in danger'" (*AddS*, I: 702).⁴¹ This indicates, to von Balthasar, how much the gesture of self-oblation or the collapse of the individual into a higher synthesis—not of love but of *power*—is, for Nietzsche, the

⁴⁰ See Timothy P. Bridgman, *Hyperboreans: Myth and History in Celtic-Hellenic Contacts*, Studies in Classics (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17ff. for a description of the Hyperboreans in Pindar, to whom Nietzsche refers in *Antichrist*, §1.

⁴¹ The Nietzsche reference is to *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 144.

gesture of all higher men. For in shattering (*zerbrechen*), the inner personal power (*Selbst-Mächtigkeit*) of the individual is revealed (*AddS*, I: 724). This is human self-transcendence in Nietzsche, and this goes a long way in revealing what von Balthasar himself means by the term “apocalypse of the soul.”⁴²

Examining a longer quotation from Nietzsche that von Balthasar cites in *Apokalypse* (*AddS*, I: 725) will further clarify the way Luther’s theology of the Cross figures in von Balthasar’s account of Nietzsche’s critique of Christian soteriology. Von Balthasar quotes from Nietzsche’s *Daybreak* (I: 91):

A god who is all-knowing and all-powerful does not even make sure that his creatures understand his intention – could that be a god of goodness? Who allows countless doubts and dubieties to persist, for thousands of years, as though the salvation of mankind were unaffected by them, and who on the other hand holds out the prospect of frightful consequences if any mistake is made as to the nature of the truth? Would he not be a cruel god if he possessed the truth and could behold mankind miserably tormenting itself over the truth? — But perhaps he is a god of goodness notwithstanding – and merely *could* not express himself more clearly! Did he perhaps lack the intelligence to do so? Or the eloquence? So much the worse! For then he was perhaps also in error as to that which he calls his ‘truth’, and is himself not so very far from being the ‘poor deluded devil’! Must he not then endure almost the torments of Hell to have to see his creatures suffer so, and to go on suffering even more through all eternity, for the sake of knowledge of him, and *not* be able to help and counsel them, except in the manner of a deaf-and-dumb man making all kinds of ambiguous signs when the most fearful danger is about to fall on his child or his dog?’

Here Nietzsche explicitly raises three questions; he asks 1) why the divine nature reveals itself *sub contrario* in history, 2) whether the “ambiguity” of this paradoxical appearance evinces divine cruelty when coupled with divine judgment, and 3) whether sin occasions divine suffering. Luther’s account of divine sovereignty and the function of law makes the first two questions *more pressing* because of the way it construes the relationship of finite and infinite freedom, to put it in von Balthasar’s preferred terms. In short, the

⁴² Nichols, *Scattering the Seed: A Guide through Balthasar’s Early Writings on Philosophy and the Arts*, 132.

means by which God reconciles humankind to himself initially appears to be an expression of divine power; only at a second moment can the sinner recognize it as issuing from divine love. For although God is in fact revealing the path to freedom, the sinner experiences the revelation of his sin through the law as “sickness unto death,” as von Balthasar admits (*AddS*, I: 720). While God thus gracefully invites the sinner to repentance and to seek redemption through Christ, the manner in which the question of decision is put to him feels like an expression of divine power.

Moreover, the sinner can only lay hold of his justification by way of faith—which involves the renunciation of his merely human reason (deceptive though the sinner-become-convert may recognize reason to be, retrospectively). This means that those reticent to renounce their reason—reticent because they require, say, the amount of proof that Nietzsche facetiously suggests a *truly* all-powerful, all-knowing and *good* God would provide—are judged as reprobate by the severe justice of God. And if God yet has sympathy for humankind, this can mean only suffering for God, suffering made all the worse by the ineffectiveness of God’s chosen means of self-revelation. Thus by erecting the image of a maximally-effective soul-saving god, a god whose glory is not at all dulled by the existence of the reprobate—for there are none!—Nietzsche levels an aesthetic critique of the Christian God, impugning the divine eloquence, and turning Luther’s famed “fishhook”⁴³ analogy inside out, such that it is not the devil but God whose infinite being and salvific economy are torn open by the infinite suffering of the God-man.

⁴³ Von Balthasar comments on Luther’s usage of this image succinctly in *TD*, IV: 286-287, and recites its history on *TD*, IV: 286 n. 13.

For von Balthasar, Nietzsche's contestation of the Christian soteriological narrative is salutary for Christianity precisely because by offering the image of this maximally-effective soul-saving god, Nietzsche throws into relief aspects of the mystery of salvation which would otherwise remain unthought. This specific passage—one among many in Nietzsche's works—provokes Christians to think through the extent to which they imagine God's justice as entailing cruelty, his infinite being as rendering him incapable of suffering, and his power as competitive with that of humankind. This is the value of what von Balthasar calls "that welcome contestation of horizons" (*TD*, I: 84) that von Balthasar engages in in *Theo-Drama*, as noted above. Von Balthasar places Nietzsche in a lineage of negative theologians, including Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and Angelus Silesius, and remarks,

Nietzsche indeed has his place within theology; his thought, which rigorously traces out the consequences of the *via negativa*, becomes the guardian of the purity of the god-concept...and, provided that the *eminentia* breaks through as a symbol of his actions against his will, his thought is, from time to time, the best negative theology" (*AddS*, II: 394).

The de-theologization of all world-concepts opens, through Nietzsche's "grand, constant no-saying" (*prachtvolle Nein-sagerei*) to a higher affirmation, a higher and more synthetic "Yes-saying" and to a religio-cultic *action* (*AddS*, II: 394). Thus even beyond the correction he offers by the god-image he facetiously erects, Nietzsche chastens the atonement theologian's desire for an *account* of the logic of salvation that detaches itself from the sacramental practice with which it is properly bound up. It is in this sense that Nietzsche, by pressing toward "the last, the absolute, the divine" (*AddS*, II: 395), assists in the recovery of a dramatic atonement theology from its dangerously epic or lyric moments, for von Balthasar.

Immanent Distance, Economic Suffering

Thus von Balthasar, as stated above, seeks to rediscover the horizon of God's self-disclosure in Christ which Luther obscures. Here von Balthasar looks to Sergei Bulgakov, who follows the Church Fathers in highlighting the way Christ's kenosis is the further out-working of the entire gesture of the divine life. Redemption begins in the Trinity with God the Father's self-dispossession in begetting the Son and generating the Spirit (*TD*, IV: 313). God's very being is in this way "*ek-static*": "The Father...*is* this movement of self-giving that holds nothing back" (*TD*, IV: 323). Moreover, the Father's self-gift "involves the positing of an absolute, infinite 'distance' that can contain and embrace all the other distances that are possible within the world of finitude, including the distance of sin" (*TD*, IV: 323). In opening this distance, there opens an intra-Trinitarian "Godlessness (of love)" (*TD*: IV: 324) which, when witnessed, enables an approach to God's Trinitarian life by way of the theology of the covenant and the theology of the Cross, according to von Balthasar. The intra-triune distance "*includes* and grounds every other separation" precisely because "the Father, in uttering and surrendering himself without reserve, does not lose himself" (*TD*, IV: 325). It is not the case that God must therefore make history 'turn out right' through his redemptive work in Christ, for the possibility of un-redemption is always already anticipated by God—indeed, the intra-Triune distance is the theodramatic precondition of un-redemption.

It is also not the case that history becomes an undramatic scene, however. Von Balthasar argues that the primal, intra-Trinitarian drama of infinite self-gift, receptivity and return only appears "'static', 'abstract', 'self-enclosed'" (*TD*, IV: 326) to those who

mistakenly assume the divine drama must conform to the pattern of God's interaction with creation, the drama of which indeed derives from the *agonal* form of grace. Against this, von Balthasar applies the negative theological stricture which excludes from God any "necessary" involvement in the world process or any (Hegelian) "development" in God by way of passage through the contradictions of the world (*TD*: IV: 327). Thus, while God's involvement in history fulfills nothing in God, it is still of the highest significance, for it leads to God's suffering, which the Son consciously undertakes in prolonging his *processio* from the Father in his *missio* (as Incarnate). As von Balthasar puts it,

there is something in God that can develop into suffering. This suffering occurs when the recklessness with which the Father gives away himself (and *all* that is his) encounters a freedom that, instead of responding in kind to this magnanimity, changes it into a calculating, cautious self-preservation. This contrasts with the essentially divine recklessness of the Son, who allows himself to be squandered, and of the Spirit, who accompanies him (*TD*, IV: 328).

The human movement, which absurdly arrogates divine nature to itself and thereby runs contrary to human nature (as an analogy and image of the divine)—is indeed productive, in a manner of speaking; it marks a new moment in the drama, one in which God's positive Godlessness produces a "real negative godlessness" (*TD*, IV: 329). But just as the lie depends upon the truth which overtakes it, so the No of humankind is always uttered "within the Son's all-embracing Yes to the Father, in the Spirit" (*TD*, IV: 329).

Thus the three kenotic movements of God cohere. In a first 'self-limitation' God endows creatures with freedom. In a second, God enters into a covenant which is indissoluble from God's side. In a third and equally Trinitarian self-limitation, God the Son becomes incarnate, and "manifests his eucharistic attitude" which is the attitude of

the entire Trinity (*TD*, IV: 331). Far from undermining it, God supports his initial gift of human freedom through these graceful interventions. Von Balthasar argues, contra Nietzsche, that God's decision to lead man to his goals rather than overwhelming him indicates no inability on God's part nor does it arise from an uncertainty that he can convince rebellious man. "It arises from the powerlessness that...is identical with his omnipotence: he is above the necessity to dominate, let alone use violence" (*TD*, IV: 331).

Christ as Head of Humankind: *Stellvertretung*

Having offered this account of the "Trinitarian substructure" of soteriology, von Balthasar explores the violence that God undergoes in Christ. Here von Balthasar addresses the second above-cited criticism of Luther's soteriology, namely the question of Christ's "representation" of sinners, which is linked to the way Christ's Incarnation and his 'becoming sin' are connected. Von Balthasar explores these issues by attending to the concrete, historical form that the Son's Yes takes, though he sees his task as primarily that of establishing negative limits; he wants to show that God is neither "'unmoved' by the events of the Cross" nor entangled by them such that God becomes "part of a mythology or cosmic tragedy" (as for Hegel) (*TD*, IV: 333). Von Balthasar argues that for Christ to be the 'head of humankind' and to represent sinners as the one who takes their place, he must dwell, as the man Jesus, both within his own *topos*—that is, in his absolute distinction from the Father—and within that "place" that has been darkened with the No of humankind (*TD*, IV: 334).

Von Balthasar thus argues that Jesus' Godforsakenness is therefore inseparable from his identity as scapegoat.⁴⁴ Indeed, von Balthasar positively cites Girard, who highlights the fact that "neither Christians, Jews, nor pagans are prepared to admit to being responsible" (*TD*, IV: 334). Von Balthasar calls this the "acme" of the God-man drama: "perverse finite freedom casts all its guilt on God, making him the sole accused, while God allows himself to be thoroughly affected by this, not only in the humanity of Christ but also in Christ's trinitarian mission" (*TD*, IV: 335). Because of his insistence that God is affected in bearing this guilt, however, von Balthasar refuses the further claims made by Girard, namely, that Jesus' *Stellvertretung* can be nothing other than a movement of solidarity with other scapegoats, and that the Father-God's powerlessness entails his demanding "nothing in the nature of an 'atoning sacrifice'" (*TD*, IV: 308-309). Jesus does not only experience the consequences of human sin in the form of scapegoating violence; von Balthasar argues that it is also appropriate to recognize the cup of suffering which Jesus drinks in his Passion, as the cup of *divine* wrath (*TD*, IV: 313).

Bearing human sin "calls for an *inner* appropriation of what is hostile to God, an identification with that darkness of alienation from God into which the sinner falls as a result of his No" (*TD*, IV: 334). In this sense, Christ's Passion is the acme of the God-man drama from both sides. Although he bears God's own Yes, Jesus suffers the wrath of God in God's withdrawal from him, which exposes him to the worst consequences of

⁴⁴ Von Balthasar notes, along with Girard, the two possible interpretations of Isaiah 53:6: "it remains an open question whether [the passage should be translated] 'God laid on him the iniquity of us all' or... 'yet the Lord permitted us to lay all our sins on him'" (*TD*, IV: 312).

humankind's No. Indeed, it is arguably more appropriate to say not '*although* he bears God's Yes, Jesus suffers' but '*because* he bears God's yes, he suffers', for here human resistance to divine grace reaches its highest point—the culmination of von Balthasar's above-cited "theodramatic law of world history". God's wrath also reaches its climactic expression; God allows those whom he wills to save to fall into their own abyss, and to crucify Christ—not because God is indifferent or unwilling to suffer. Rather, his withdrawal dramatically displays for humankind the consequences of *their own* indifference and self-protection.

And here Christ identifies with sinners more deeply than any sinner identifies with any other. For the fact that the Passion is a Trinitarian event means that God himself, in the Son, undergoes the suffering of alienation from God despite lacking the guilt by which sinners separate themselves from God. This is the kenosis described in Philippians 2:7. By assuming it, Christ reveals the form of man, and establishes the unity of the race in himself over against those who would obscure it. Jesus' betrayers are among the latter; they each believe that they can escape the infinite responsibility they bear as members of the race by untangling themselves from the net of their guilt, "Judas, by handing back the blood-money; the Jews, by invoking a law that calls for the death of Jesus; Pilate by washing his hands in token of his innocence" (*TD*, IV: 179). The Crucified "does not bear the burden as something external: he in no way distances himself from those who by rights should have to bear it" (*TD*, IV: 337).

This 'inner appropriation of what is hostile to God' nonetheless appears as endurance of *God's own* hostility. For although Jesus actively accepts "the hour" as the

will of the Father, the experience completely overwhelms him. Precisely because God does not allow the cup to pass from him, one cannot avoid the impression that the Father loads the Son with the sins of the world (*TD*, IV: 335). Von Balthasar in no way mitigates the apparent violence of this moment. On the contrary, he draws attention to the consistency of the plot within the Synoptic narratives; love is revealed, resistance heightens, and wrath increases (*TD*, IV: 342). As divine love and human resistance to it both come to a climax in the Passion, the Passion will also feature the most cataclysmic epiphany of wrath. Von Balthasar argues, however, that the biblical concept of wrath is neither anthropomorphic nor some ‘immutable quality’ of God but “rather an aspect of his personal engagement for creation and covenant,” and, further to this effect, von Balthasar cites Heschel’s description of divine anger as God’s “‘suspended love’” (*TD*, IV: 344). Christ thus takes on the mediatorial role assumed within the Old Testament by the prophets, who are those most sympathetically attuned to the pathos of God and charged with dramatically revealing it on God’s behalf. Just as God forbids Jeremiah from interceding when Israel’s resistance to God reaches its highest point prior to the exile, so in the Passion Jesus cannot even pray for God’s people, but “has to bear the ultimate consequence of his more-than-prophetic mediation” (*TD*, IV: 346). Christ displays the effects of God’s love in his own person—the greatest revelation of love through the greatest revelation of wrath: “this is where Christ ‘represents’ us, takes our place: what is ‘experienced’ is the opposite of what the facts indicate” (*TD*, IV: 335-336). Thus von Balthasar retains the Lutheran *sub contrario* by framing it neither in terms of the disjunction between law and gospel, nor the terrible majesty of God, but in terms of

the consistency of the divine character within the drama, including and especially covenant, which he takes to be key in the theodramatic revelation of the paradoxical unity of divine powerlessness and omnipotence.

In the Old Covenant, God holds back from revealing the full measure of Israel's "store of wrath" (Rom 2:5 cited on *TD* IV: 347). In rendering judgment upon the one human being capable of bearing it, God reveals both the depth and seriousness of human sin and the incalculable measure of his love for sinners. In allowing this wrath to descend upon Christ, then, God simultaneously reveals their store of wrath, and expiates it: "God's anger strikes [Christ] instead of the countless sinners, shattering him as lightning and distributing him among them" (IV: 348). The Son undergoes the deepest darkness—"in which God cannot be found" out of "pure obedience" (*TD* V: 267) in order to be the heretofore absent human being through whom God would receive "help in re-establishing righteousness" (*TD*, V: 266).

This remains a fully Trinitarian event. "God is confronted with God...opposed by God. So the Father allows the Son to endure dereliction among sinners; the Son, suffering at the Father's hand, cries out to him" (*TD*, IV: 349). Von Balthasar here integrates this formulation by the Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus into his own Trinitarian perspective such that the cry of dereliction stands as highest expression of the intra-Trinitarian distance, the Godlessness of God. The Father's withdrawal from the Son brings the Son's Eucharist to completion (*TD*, IV: 348) through the Spirit, who "maintains the infinite difference between them, seals it and, since he is the one Spirit of them both, bridges it" (*TD*, IV: 324). Von Balthasar meditates on the significance of the

cry of dereliction at length, integrating key formulations from Adrienne von Speyr's works:

‘The Son’s cry of dereliction on the Cross’, which demonstrates God’s triune love for the world, is ‘the loftiest assertion in the knowledge of God’ because... ‘it reveals the Father’s infinity’ and... ‘all is made plain,’ insofar as Father and Son, in the Spirit, reciprocally and infinitely ‘surpass each other in love’ (*TD*, V: 262).

Von Balthasar thus affirms that Christ’s cry of dereliction (Mk 15:34) can be read both literally, as an expression of his experience of alienation from God, and as a quotation expressing both the lament and the praise of Psalm 22, and his Trinitarian closeness to the Father.

On von Balthasar’s articulation, God’s wrath does not descend upon the Son in order to satisfy some antecedent condition in God—whether that be imagined in terms of a quasi-pagan bloodlust, or an abstract economy in which quantities of suffering are reckoned against individual transgressions. Its logic is rather theodramatic, the product of God’s free self-involvement in the saving drama, an involvement which ruptures the logic of calculation entirely. Von Balthasar writes, “there can be no weighing-up of the ‘for nothing’ of sin’s hatred and the ‘for nothing’ of the grace that gives and forgives” (*TD*, IV: 349). Just as God’s self-involvement in covenant leads to suffering for God and even sharpens the human rejection of God by provoking a decision, so God’s descent in Christ radicalizes the suffering, the rejection, and the provocation. But whereas the law functions in revealing sin, the word of the Cross functions in expiating it. And whereas the law would bind its hearer to a religious path that appears to stand among others, “Jesus relativizes all religion in the world, Jewish and Gentile” (*TD*, IV: 435). And whereas the word of judgment law contains seems uttered from an imperious position

above humankind, the word of the Cross is uttered from a position of the deepest solidarity. Precisely by offering God's own Yes on man's behalf, "the very One who has come, 'not to judge, but to save' utters that 'word' that judges those who reject it" (*TD*, IV: 435).

Self-transcendence: Divinization through the Son's Yes

Because Christ's *Stellvertretung* involves absorbing the No of humankind and the wrath of God, it can only overwhelm the Son, and thus can only be taken on by the Son as an act of obedience to the Father. But in von Balthasar's theodramatic perspective, the "shattering" of Christ is preparation for his Eucharistic distribution. By obediently bearing the sin of humankind, Christ simultaneously reveals the gravity of the human No and the divine answer to it in the form of his own *human* Yes. Further, von Balthasar writes, "since he was the absolute answer, he could make it the most *communicable* death: all can share in it" (*TD*, IV: 132). Jesus' does not undergo death passively, as in Luther, nor does he, in dying, separate himself off from the rest of the race such that God can only love what is in the Son and not humankind. Rather, Christ establishes the unity of the race by becoming its head through the representative Yes he offers on behalf of humankind.

The event of this Yes makes a "change...as abrupt as it is organic" (*TD*, IV: 361); the reconciliation enacted through this Trinitarian drama "lift[s the world's] fate to the level of the economic Trinity" (*TD*, IV: 362). Rather than functioning as a bulwark against human self-transcendence, as Nietzsche worries, Christ's enactment of his own self-transcendence allows the divinization of the immanent. Through his obedience,

Christ reveals the supernatural quality of the natural: “‘the world’ transcends itself at both ends, that is, at its origin and its goal...[it is] firmly embedded in this constitutive meaning (Logos)” (*TD*, IV: 471). Without Christ, however, the human race would have only had membership in the first Adam, who von Balthasar describes as “stubbornly determined to find his meaning within himself and develop it from his own potential and possibilities” (*TD*, IV: 472). Von Balthasar thus insists upon maintaining reference to the theodramatic restoration of this supernatural quality of the world and of humankind through the Second, heavenly Adam—rather than predicating it of created being in abstraction, as Rahner does with his concept of the ‘supernatural *existentiale*’ (*TD*, IV: 471). According to von Balthasar, such a predication would open the door for Prometheanism precisely in that it would license the claim that the human potentiality realized through Christ’s mediation—what human beings become *in Christ*—is a potentiality immanent in human being *without* Christ’s mediation.⁴⁵

Von Balthasar does not deny that the potential for human beings to transcend themselves is implanted in them; von Balthasar is not only familiar with Nietzsche’s “become what you are” (*GS*, §270), he affirms that it is the gesture of truly human

⁴⁵ Von Balthasar’s staurocentric Christology is at the heart of his resistance to Rahner’s tendency to emphasize humankind’s intrinsic openness to God. This is particularly evident in von Balthasar’s treatment of pre-Christian anticipations of the unique event of Christ. About Rahner’s “searching Christologies” von Balthasar remarks, “Why, when Christ appeared, was he not greeted by pagans, Jews and Christians as the Bringer of Salvation who had been found at long last? Surely because all ‘searching Christologies’ *did not want to find* precisely what God had kept ‘hidden for ages...the unsearchable riches of Christ’ in order to manifest it through the Church in the fullness of time (Eph 3)” (*TD*, IV: 222). He continues, “only with the greatest reticence...should we speak of ‘pre-Christian religions exercising a positive salvific function’” (citing Rahner explicitly), for the “kaleidoscope of forms...may be *logoi spermatikoi*, but this ‘seed’ can only germinate in Christian soil, and only after a ‘conversion that involves far more than the mere supplying of a missing element: what is required is the death and new birth that the Bible calls *metanoia*” (*TD*, IV: 226-227).

existence. For von Balthasar, self-transcendence is attained through a ruthless, often ascetic process that strips away one's attachment to self, and enables one to invest one's entire self into completing not merely the task set by one's role, but the absolute mission one receives. Von Balthasar argues that developing this self-transcending potential is "necessary" to humankind and that it "gives [human] existence meaning." But the principle in which self-transcendence originates makes all the difference, for von Balthasar. The course of the first Adam's self-transcendence is determined by his refusal to acknowledge an origin other than himself, and by this refusal, he obscures for himself his own goal. Because self-transcendence is "both a task and an achievement—[man] entrusts himself to its dynamic thrust, as if his goals could recapitulate it and underpin their origin" (*TD*, IV: 472-473). This mode of self-transcendence is a lure, however. This is revealed, for von Balthasar as a theologian, by the fact that Jesus transcends himself precisely through grateful acknowledgement of his origin—even a dispossessive relation to it (Phil 2:7). By holding nothing back and going to the Cross in obedience to the Father, Christ acknowledges his origin and enacts the gesture of truly human existence, which von Balthasar calls "*Hingabe*" or self-surrender.

In Christ's self-surrender, the account of finite freedom elaborated above (in the section entitled "On Infinite and Finite Freedom") receives its paradigmatic expression. The movements of consent and autonomous motion observable in all expressions of human freedom (to greater or lesser degrees) find perfect expression in Jesus, such that, in his own expression of finite freedom, he does not merely "develop" himself; he rather transcends himself and participates in infinite freedom. That this is a mode of self-

transcendence is made clear, for von Balthasar, through the descriptions of Jesus' consent in the scene on the Mount of Olives. "Jesus is 'set upon' by suffering, finds himself suddenly 'alienated' and is literally 'thrown to the ground'" (*TD*, IV: 315). The great agitation in which Jesus accepts the cup shows that "his adoption of our mortal fear...it is not merely simulated" (*TD*, IV: 252). Jesus so identifies with humankind that in this moment "his vision of the Father is veiled from him" according to von Balthasar (*TD*, IV: 315); he does not, in this moment of abandonment, "continu[e] to enjoy the beatific vision" (*TD*, IV: 333). On the contrary, in this moment his mission, which coincides perfectly with his person (*TD*, I: 646), takes him beyond what he can positively will for himself. For this reason von Balthasar sees the agency of the Spirit as essential in completing the Son's self-surrender: "the Spirit who mediates between God and the incarnate Son prevents any 'heteronomy'" (*TD*, I: 646). Indeed, the Spirit enables not only a *lack* of heteronomy; it rather allows the Son to live, in his earthly mission, with of the same recklessness, the same lack of self-regard that characterizes the triune life itself.

According to von Balthasar, human beings can come to share in this mode of freedom by dying and rising with Christ. The sacraments of baptism, penance, and Eucharist all converge on a movement like unto Christ's own, in which one dies to self and rises in the power of the Spirit. If reference to these practices was not enough to make this movement of dying and rising concrete, von Balthasar is careful to describe the form of life that is pursued through them. Christ "draws [redeemed human beings] into his destiny by communicating his Spirit to them" and Christ's filiation "enables them to participate in his own proceeding from the Father" (*TD*, IV: 366)—that is, in a mode of

receptivity and in a way that exposes one to the same sufferings faced by Christ precisely because they are engaged in the same struggle in which Christ was engaged. Their agency in the struggle is also like unto Christ's: "the martyrs can go to their deaths courageous and rejoicing because of the representation performed on the cross[,which] they owe...to the anguish of him who wrestled on the Mount of Olives" (*TD*, IV: 502). Christ's representation of humankind does not license indolence by giving his followers confidence in their salvation. It serves rather to provoke the redeemed to self-transcendence (*TD*, V: 117) and to the creative activity that appropriation of their mission entails (*TD*, V: 485-486) while sustaining them through the loneliness as they undergo the struggle that, by theodramatic necessity, attends their particular manifestation of goodness.

Ultimate Gestures

Von Balthasar recognizes at this point the objection; the Christian martyrs' relativization of death can only issue from a "self-enclosed cosmological and anthropological world view" that is "the product of an inflamed imagination or abstract wishful thinking" (*TD*, V: 117). Indeed, this mode of self-transcendence would only appear, to Nietzsche, as evidence that Paul was successful in "transpos[ing] the center of gravity register of [Jesus'] whole existence after this existence" (*A*, §42), and even a mode of revenge against those who hold sway within the sphere of becoming. In response, von Balthasar seems simply to recommend the leap: "In fact, this [the world, redeemed through Christ]—and not the self-enclosed cosmological and anthropological world views that have banished heaven—is the real world. Of course this can only be

grasped by faith” (*TD*, V: 117). Throughout *Theo-Drama*, however, von Balthasar has been working to connect the movement of faith to the exercise of finite freedom in a way that enables comparison with other ways of engaging the difficult paradox that human existence is, namely, “the endeavor to express the absolute through the relative” (*TD*, IV: 95). Indeed, his extended engagements with the materials of drama—time, death, destiny, the struggle for the good and alienation from it—are designed to show the place of faith within human existence. For von Balthasar,

all human drama is concerned with the discovery and appropriation of the point of balance (which is eternally unstable) between...what can be realized by the standards of the absolute, and...the fact of transitoriness. Human drama is concerned with what is valid, required and possible here and now” (*TD*, IV: 109).

Finding this balance—such that one is neither so dazzled by the absolute that one fails to play one’s part on the world stage nor so besieged by the mass of transitory norms—this is the human task. This anthropology is intrinsically open to the Nietzschean problematic. Indeed, Zarathustra’s erotic longing for eternity is evidence of Nietzsche’s sense for the way the loss of the absolute horizon would allow further descent into nihilism. Von Balthasar does not hesitate to recognize in Nietzsche’s own striving after the absolute a kind of non-Christian “holiness,” which he describes thus: “outside biblical religion and its environs, and as many people admire it, [holiness] is mostly a deliberate self-abandonment to the absolute; the dissolution of that human, finite, mortal shape that, in all its pathos as it stands and continues to stand in the face of the absolute, is, *after all*, *the truer shape*” (*TD*, IV: 109-110). If in *Theo-Drama* von Balthasar articulates Christian holiness as sharing in the unsurpassable holiness of Christ, *Apocalypse* articulates the proximity between Nietzsche’s religious problematic and that of Christianity. Indeed, in

his treatment of Nietzsche in *Apocalypse*, von Balthasar examines the extent to which Nietzsche's philosophy of existence leads one to this highest human gesture, namely, *Hingabe*.

Nietzsche's Dramatic Situation

Von Balthasar notes that Nietzsche's critics saw Nietzsche's oscillation between opposed and mutually exclusive conceptions of human being as evidence that Nietzsche was "eccentric" or "pathological" (*AddS*, II: 204-205). How could one see, for example, human consciousness as basically "superfluous" to human being (and thus man as a "window," transparently part of the world) at one moment and as the very "biological centre of the individual" (and thus man as a "mirror," reflective, and above all, self-reflective) at another? But von Balthasar quotes Nietzsche's riposte with great sympathy: "These men, who have no concept of my 'center', nor of the great passion [*Leidenschaft*] in the service of which I live, can hardly catch a glimpse of the center *out of* which I live—where I really *was ex-centric*" (*AddS*, II: 205). From the start, von Balthasar cuts off any easy recourse to a psychological reduction of Nietzsche's philosophy; on the contrary, Nietzsche's so-called "eccentricity" displays his sensitivity to the contradiction in existence that calls out for reconciliation. Von Balthasar argues that although Nietzsche regards the religious as themselves subject to a pathology, Nietzsche finds that the religious attitude surfaces out of the depths of the same contradiction that he recognizes, without claiming to resolve it on the immanent plane. For Nietzsche, von Balthasar writes,

“the final, redemptive image cannot as image be devised. It is withdrawn from view and can only be ‘believed’. In such faith, the pathos of existence achieves its own representation. Existence in a state of doubt about man’s ultimate possibility swings up onto the level of the superhuman [*Übermenschlichen*]. The contradiction between, on the one hand, the ‘for itself’ of spirit, which isolates him and dictates to him the law of power and, on the other, the worldly quality of this ‘for itself’, which binds him and prescribes to him the law of love, cannot be resolved on the level of the human. If man is true as a mirror then he is false as a window. If he is ‘good’ as an ego, then as a lover he is ‘evil’ (*AddS*, II: 205).⁴⁶

Because these antitheses—between the worldliness of the human spirit and its solipsism, between power and love—do not admit of *logical* resolution, ‘believing’ becomes the only means for the soul to free itself from the guilt of contradiction within the unsurveyable whole; this activity is the soul’s free and creative self-realization over against destiny (*AddS*, II: 206). The danger of this situation does not commend to Nietzsche a thoughtless fideism, however. At least two different attitudes are to be found throughout Nietzsche’s work; on the one hand, he valorizes an “almost Epicurean bent of knowledge...that will not let go of the questionable character of things.”⁴⁷ On the other he recognizes that “the hidden Yes...is stronger than all the Nos and Maybes with which [we] and [our] age is sickened and addicted” (*AddS*, II: 210).⁴⁸ Von Balthasar highlights the passivity that attends this opening of oneself to the “hidden Yes” which Nietzsche describes in *Ecce Homo*: “The idea of revelation, in the sense of something suddenly becoming *visible* and audible with unspeakable assurance ...something that throws you down and leaves you deeply shaken—this simply describes the facts of the case” (*AddS*, II: 211). Nietzsche’s honesty permits him to admit that in this situation “*man nimmt, man*

⁴⁶ Translation by Nichols, *Scattering the Seed: A Guide through Balthasar’s Early Writings on Philosophy and the Arts*, 155.

⁴⁷ *GS*, §375.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 2[207] p. 100.

fragt nicht.”⁴⁹ This reveals, for von Balthasar, the sense in which Nietzsche’s openness takes on a mystical dimension. Indeed, von Balthasar sees Nietzsche’s experience as pointing—beyond the contradiction of existence—to some version of the Scholastic “transcendentals”—the Good, the True, and the Beautiful—not disunited in the form in which knowledge encounters them, but in their superabundant unity. And von Balthasar, who in his *Theological Aesthetics* argues that the experience of transcendent beauty calls forth a grateful response, sees precisely this in Nietzsche’s account of his experience; encounter with the “totality of existence” (*Daseinsganzheit*) impels Nietzsche, von Balthasar argues, to his “practical goal,” which is to be at once a creative artist, a loving holy man, and a knowing philosopher (*AddS*, II: 211).

In his pursuit of this goal, however, Nietzsche refuses to follow the kind of elaboration of the being of the transcendentals developed by von Balthasar, preferring rather to seek “his own daybreak” (*D*, Preface, §1) not through Christ’s but through his *own* inner descent into hell (*AddS*, II: 215). Rather than seeing the brokenness of the world as the hidden presence of the absolute, as for Dostoyevsky (with whom von Balthasar compares Nietzsche throughout this section), Nietzsche responds to the “hollowness” of all this-worldly fullness with “two equally fundamental attitudes: reverence before the mysterious creativity of life, projecting its own horizon ever forward, and disdain that in this very creativity only appearance, lie, error emerge.”⁵⁰ According to von Balthasar, Nietzsche’s ambivalence issues from his will to see both

⁴⁹ “One receives, one does not ask.”

⁵⁰ Nichols, *Scattering the Seed: A Guide through Balthasar’s Early Writings on Philosophy and the Arts*, 158. Nichols refers to *AddS*, II: 224.

good and evil as anchored in life—as modalities of the superabundance of the vital. This leads Nietzsche into his perpetual unmasking, even to the point of seeing hate as resolving into fear, and love resolving into a demand made of the other (*AddS*, II: 225). “Nietzsche takes the ‘synthetic’ good beyond good and evil as a new Thesis and plunges it into the fire, so that the fire itself finally becomes the good” (*AddS*, II: 266). For his part, von Balthasar admits that while it is tempting to fasten onto Nietzsche’s contradictions, Nietzsche takes this “weapon” against him out of the hands of his enemies precisely by *grounding* his philosophy in contradiction, and by making his *deed* the criterion of truth.

Thus while Nietzsche “takes Heraclitus and Hegel as protective gods,” and is clearly in the tradition of Hegel in wanting to think existence through in a way that does not allow suffering to become an objection against the deity,⁵¹ “it is clearly not a question of a theoretical synthesis of the contradiction...Whoever would be consistent in putting Nietzsche into question would have to question the flame that offers itself in his existence” (*AddS*, II: 267). For von Balthasar, Nietzsche’s self-identification with this “flame” allows him to reflect the secret at the heart of Christ’s own poverty and futility better than nearly any other thinker of the 19th century (*AddS*, II: 269). Indeed, Nietzsche’s madness arises from his refusal of a this-worldly synthesis and from his self-abandonment to it. For von Balthasar, Nietzsche’s *Hingabe* consumes Nietzsche because he refuses the “indispensable” exit from schizophrenia provided by Christ’s mediation. By elevating “indifference”—a position that puts the soul in greatest danger, for

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

Dostoyevksy (*AddS*, II: 224)—and by resolving love into power, Nietzsche makes his own gesture at closure, according to von Balthasar, a gesture that is no less a movement of faith than that made by the Christian.

If Christian doctrine's complex of original sin and existential guilt blocks the way to self-discovery by insisting on a narrow conception of responsibility for Nietzsche (*TI*, "The Four Great Errors," §7), von Balthasar sees an even more formidable obstacle to self-discovery through self-transcendence in the abyss of indeterminacy that pervades the psyche of the one who refuses to await the divine *vocatio* in open poverty. This is the sense in which the "masculine" attitude (*männliche Verhaltung*) that pervades Nietzsche's philosophy (*AddS*, II: 381) leads him into a worldview even more 'self-enclosed' than that of the saints and martyrs, with their visions of eternity. Nietzsche's desire for eternity works itself out as a refusal of intimacy. Von Balthasar writes, "Nietzsche cannot be familiar [*kann nicht Du sagen*], he cannot love. Nietzsche says, the great man 'does not want a 'participating heart' ...he finds it tasteless when he becomes intimate.' Nietzsche pushed purity so far that all self-surrender [*Hingabe*] seemed to him impure" (*AddS*, II: 359). In this way, Nietzsche conforms to the pattern of the first Adam which von Balthasar describes in *Theo-Drama*.

Rather than allowing human beings to recognize themselves as members of a single race—in being united into the pattern of the Second Adam's own cruciform self-transcendence, the passion of the first Adam's self-transcendence separates individuals from one another. It does so (on the level of the individual) because it makes identifying one value (or set of values) or another as indicative of progress as a whole into a personal

imperative—lest one lack a mechanism for assessing one’s own progress. This choice has its own intellectual and cultural history, and complete clarity about this history would be necessary to the one who would successfully, as von Balthasar puts it, have his goals recapitulate the dynamic thrust of his self-transcendence and underpin their origin (*TD*, IV: 472-473). Since this clarity is lacking, those who ‘have membership’ in the First Adam will find themselves separated off into, at best, *races*.

Although the question of one’s manner of self-transcendence (a question of filiation, for von Balthasar) is a question faced by every human being, Von Balthasar sees this problem as particularly acute for those, like Nietzsche, who are capable of standing back and recognizing the plurality of existence, its the lack of an organizing center. Nietzsche’s refusal of the transcendent center that gives *itself* is indeed world-creating. In *Theo-Drama* von Balthasar describes it thus: “the world of Nietzsche...an aimless, chaotic and self-devouring nightmare” (*TD*, V: 486). This may seem like hyperbole, but von Balthasar points out that even the highest posture in Nietzsche—his elevated sense of ‘conscience’ as existence beyond good and evil—refuses to dwell in *receipt* of the infinite. Nietzsche’s highest severity with himself remains too much his own. In *Apocalypse*, then, von Balthasar diagnoses in Nietzsche’s final *Umwertungen* the ‘self-devouring’ chaos he describes in *Theo-Drama*: “‘Beauty’ (as justification of appearance), ‘power’ (as justification of evil), ‘sacrifice’ (as the overflowing of the highest wealth), ‘suffering’ [*Leiden*] (as the secret of desire and of the Will to power), ‘*amor fati*’ (as the ever-stronger ‘yet-again!’ to all of the terrors of the world)” (*AddS*, II:367-368). This chaos may be authentic, as it arises out of a deep immediacy to the contradiction within

existence. Further to the point, one *can live* out of this chaos. But one can only do so through a kind of oscillation, passing over the river by jumping from stone to stone—leaping forward just as each stone falls away from one’s foot, to borrow an image from Nietzsche.

(Theo)Dramatic Encounter as Gift Exchange

In von Balthasar’s judgment, the contradiction in existence that Nietzsche encounters is precisely that of the world in its opposition to God. This means that Christians cannot, in good conscience, avoid confronting the abyss that occasions Nietzsche’s existential posture; were they to do so, they would be avoiding what they must regard as a *dogmatic* fact. At the same time, however, von Balthasar argues that the world’s opposition to God is always already comprehended in the kenotic movement of divine creativity. Thus while Nietzsche’s self-abandonment in the face of the absolute—his willingness to endure scorn and isolation for dwelling eternally in contradiction—is indeed expressive of a kind of holiness, von Balthasar finds in it the refusal of that *higher*—because deeper—self-abandonment, one in which one allows oneself also to be *found* in the absolute. Von Balthasar writes,

although Nietzsche’s analysis of love, which has the temerity to equate love with power, has undoubtedly brought to light something closest to the center of certain Christian theories of love—their superficiality and sentimentality. But [his analysis] also forgets...that the form of ‘slavish’ love—which throws itself down and surrenders itself [*sich Hingeben*] is already immanent in the form of the divine, creative love insofar as this love makes itself known and parts with itself.” (*AddS*, II: 365).

One could read the whole of *Theo-Drama* as von Balthasar’s attempt to elaborate the way God’s equally ‘slavish’ and superabundant love *does* make itself known precisely in parting with itself concretely, in the Incarnation of the Son, and in the drama of history.

According to von Balthasar, this drama bears a *meaning*. Precisely through its tragedy, that-which-is means not power but love.

That it does have this meaning remains a decision, however, a decision that cannot be made solely through a process of rational adjudication. This decision is consequent, for von Balthasar, upon grace, including the grace that is borne through the kind of contestation of horizons into which Christianity comes as the drama of history continues to play out. The inner mystery of existence—the *whyllessness* of Being, the *mysterium iniquitatis*, etc.—requires that the church rehearse the truth that renders history dramatic on a stage in solidarity with others—perhaps even to a greater extent that von Balthasar himself seems to recognize.

As mentioned above, von Balthasar’s hermeneutic in approaching Nietzsche in *Apocalypse der deutschen Seele* is indelibly marked by his theological *a priori*, and it is indubitable that he frames Nietzsche’s work in ways that highlight the way he comments upon theological questions. Nonetheless, von Balthasar engages problems internal to Nietzsche’s thought with patience and subtlety. Moreover, von Balthasar takes Nietzsche’s refusal of grace—and its ground, namely Nietzsche’s “faithfulness to the earth” (*AddS*, II: 419)—with utter seriousness, and in a that way that gives full play to the strangeness of Nietzsche’s Dionysian “faithfulness.” In short, von Balthasar’s treatment of Nietzsche refuses to make a victim of Nietzsche, whether a victim of his own drive toward the absolute or a victim of his reception by Hitler and National Socialism or a victim of his own medical pathology. Thus von Balthasar’s treatment of Nietzsche gives display to an attitude that runs contrary to the image Nietzsche’s philosophy would likely

construct of the Swiss priest, namely, a refusal to take revenge, a recognition of Nietzsche's nobility—even holiness, as suggested above—precisely in Nietzsche's highly personal expression of his freedom.

The disjunction between von Balthasar's interpretation of Nietzsche in *Apocalypse* and his appropriation of the negative theological insights that seem to derive from Nietzsche in *Theo-Drama* raises important questions, however. Above all, the question it raises is, if Nietzsche's thought is so fruitful for thinking through the kenosis that is the manner of the Christian Godhead, why are there so few references to Nietzsche in *Theo-Drama*? It is clear that von Balthasar would rather draw upon the resources provided by negative theologians with a less problematic relation to the Christian tradition. Or—to put this objection in von Balthasar's own terms—it appears that in his treatment of Nietzsche in *Theo-Drama* von Balthasar fails to recognize how great a gift he has received in the provocation that Nietzsche's philosophy provides. This is nowhere more evident than in von Balthasar's treatment of God's divine wrath. For Nietzsche diagnoses the devastating consequences of the loss of a robust theology—the strange and distinctly modern situation in which God has become too intimate to terrify and too remote to draw Christians to himself. And Nietzsche dramatizes for von Balthasar the consequences of modern theology's metaphysical minimalism (in and beyond Luther)—or rather theology's failure to attend to the theological consequences of allowing an Idealist philosophical framework to ground theology. In this way Nietzsche (via Heidegger), prompts von Balthasar to address the problem of ontotheology by

undertaking a radical revision of systematic theological approach, one which approaches Being through the actions through which God gives himself.

At the conclusion of this chapter, no *rapprochement* between von Balthasar and Nietzsche is forthcoming. Nietzsche would undoubtedly find much in von Balthasar's work plainly intolerable—von Balthasar's Romanism, his architectonic style, and, above all, his insistence that Nietzsche's own message finds itself “enclosed within the curve of the word made man, which runs its pure course in God, from the birth of the Lord to his death” (*TD*, V: 107). Nietzsche would also delight in having found an enemy, however. For von Balthasar, Nietzsche's contestation would provide a further occasion for a dramatic re-presentation and for further explorations of aspects the theodrama in ways “ever so ambiguous, risky, precarious, and ambiguous” (*TD*, I: 112). And to the extent that the drama that ensued yielded conclusions consistent with those of theodrama, von Balthasar would have to regard his efforts as a success. Because, as von Balthasar puts it, “Love in general cannot be unmasked. Unmasking is only feasible for the masks of power (and impotence)” (*AddS*, II: 384).⁵²

⁵² *Ibid.*, 174.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation seeks to analyze the different ways von Balthasar and Girard respond to Nietzsche's critique of atonement theology, and, further, to show the sense in which all three figures respond to a soteriological problematic, the origins of which can be traced to changes in the metaphysical framework implicit in atonement theology from Anselm through the Reformers. As the title of this dissertation suggests, that problematic is defined by the notions of God's redeeming wrath and apocalyptic violence. Anselm, Luther, and Calvin all agree that God should be given maximum latitude to do with humankind what he wills; all three believe that God's action always bears grace for humankind, even when this grace appears in the form of its opposite—as wrath. This means that all three believe that the images of apocalyptic violence in the Old Testament and Revelation—wherein God pours out his anger upon unrighteousness—can be affirmed, for this revelation of divine wrath serves to redeem humankind.

As we saw in Anselm, when God subjects the sinner to torment by revoking the sinner's possible blessed happiness, this serves as testimony to the fact that that possibility of happiness was given in the first place, and it serves to instruct the sinner as to the right use of his freedom. Indeed, because God only exacts as payment that which the sinner has "violently seized from his own property" (*CDH*, I: 14), God does not revenge himself in punishing, but rather maintains good order. This should elicit the praise of the believer, according to Anselm. Further, because God also gives means of reconciliation other than punishment in the form of the Son, who gives himself as a supererogatory gift to the Father, the apparent violence of divine wrath is mitigated entirely. The sinner is pardoned in view of the sinner's repentance and the gift of the

God-Man. Anselm believes this economy of gift should inspire gratitude and reverence, as it testifies to God's prevenient grace in mercy and providential wisdom in justice.

The Reformers are then driven by their biblicism and their concentration on the gift of Christ and Christ's merits to strip away the notions of cosmic order, beauty, and proportionality central to Anselm's account. These concepts are crucial for understanding God's transcendence and serve to ensure that Anselm's conception of divine wrath bears a testimony to divine love rather than divine cruelty. The Reformers also insist upon a narrative construal of the irruption of wrath in both the sinner's life and in the violence of the Cross, a construal that is premised upon a notion of providence influenced by Scholastic voluntarism. These soteriological shifts serve to undermine the disjunction between divine and earthly authorities, a disjunction which allows Anselm's conception of divine justice to serve as a critique of the so-called justice of earthly authorities (in whom goodness and justice are *not* perfectly and indissolubly united). As adapted by the Reformers, Anselm's terms "satisfaction" and "honour" drive Christians to affirm, in principle, even the unjust excesses of these authorities. Thus while the Reformers believe that wrath serves a pedagogical function insofar as it directs sinners to reliance upon Christ and his merits, their conception of this pedagogical function is significantly different from Anselm's. Divine wrath appears less able to direct the sinner to his perfection in that its violence fails to reveal of proper order. Indeed, their narration of the order of salvation can come to appear perverse: God's punitive wrath terrifies the sinner into accepting a pardon mediated only by God in Christ, on whom God's punitive wrath expends itself entirely.

Luther and Calvin intended only to deepen Christian devotional practice by dramatizing the danger of sin and by offering assurance of salvation. However, by stripping themselves of the theological resources necessary to articulate the relation between divine justice and goodness over against critics of Christianity, they contributed to the crisis in justifying the violence of the crucifixion. These critics fastened onto the violence of the event and claimed that the crucifixion stands as evidence of the activity of a cruel deity, one who demands the blood of Jesus, and who consigns the unfaithful to hell. Further, they argued that the ascetic impulse in Christianity which arises from the vision of the Cross culminates in a self-slaying ethic and the sacrifice of natural human fulfillments like sensuality, the desire for knowledge, and aesthetic enjoyment.

Chapter 2 shows how Nietzsche articulates this critique in radical fashion. Nietzsche argues that divine cruelty is not God's own but that of the priests projected onto God. He argues that the Christian interpretation of the crucifixion and the doctrine of judgment that arises from it form a wish-image by which natural slaves console themselves and express their *ressentiment*—their hatred of all nobles and all higher values. Indeed he argues that this principle reveals both the unity of the Bible and the teleology implicit in the relation between Old Testament and New Testament, which comes to a crescendo of *ressentiment* in the paroxysm of hatred recorded in the book of Revelation (*GoM*, I, 15). And Nietzsche argues that Christian asceticism unfits Christians for sovereignty—the highest human pursuit. In short, Christianity's vision of the Crucified slanders life itself. Chapters 3 and 4 therefore have a dual focus; they each analyze the different ways Girard and von Balthasar respond to this soteriological

problematic as it has been shaped by the theological history outlined in chapter 1 and by Nietzsche. While the two contexts are separable in principle, this dissertation has, in a significant way, used the manner of Girard and von Balthasar's responses to Nietzsche as one of the measures of the adequacy of their responses to soteriological problem. Before offering a brief comment on this hermeneutical decision, I will compare and contrast the way they each respond to the soteriological problematic.

Girard and von Balthasar both want to reclaim a vision of the Cross as an instance of apocalyptic violence, but both want to redefine what it reveals and how it functions as a divine judgment upon unrighteousness. Both claim that it reveals something otherwise unknowable about the human condition, that it interprets the history of revelation, and that it radically alters the shape of human possibility; the Cross reveals salvation.

For Girard, the Cross saves by revealing the inner logic of the scapegoat mechanism. The Cross thus saves by curing human blindness. For Girard, there are two forms of blindness; blindness to mimetic rivalry, and blindness to sacrifice. Whereas prohibitions and rituals only limit the damage these forms of blindness do to humankind, the Cross simultaneously reveals both the dynamics of human rivalry and the way rivalry leads to sacrificial violence along with its ritual repetition. That is, the Cross reveals that rivalry comes from blindness and issues in sacrifice—and that sacrifice depends no less upon blindness and is thus no less violent in its ritualized (routinized, carefully regulated) form.¹ By openly displaying that which was hidden since the foundation of the world, the

¹ Indeed, Girard argues that modern forms of warfare, which institutionalize the sacrificial impulse, tend to lose the restraint of religious sacrifice, which were satisfied by a representative victim.

scapegoat mechanism, the Cross removes the condition of its operation, namely blindness.

The violence of the Cross is therefore revelatory in that repeats the scapegoating drama but, crucially, without the apotheosizing, reconciling movement that figures as the event's logical conclusion throughout world mythology. By entering into the space of the victim while having no obligation to violence, Jesus triumphs over the power of scapegoating and reveals that its promise to secure peace is a lie—while also enabling human beings to escape rivalrous mimetic entanglement through imitation of himself. This enables a new form of life: “To make the Revelation wholly good, and not threatening at all, humans have only to adopt the behavior recommended by Christ: abstain completely from retaliation, and renounce the escalation to extremes” (BTTE, xiv). Thus imitation of Jesus restores the distance between self and other and enables recognition of both oneself and the other (BTTE, 134). It also reveals the way the New Testament completes the movement begun in the Old. That is, the New Testament brings to completion neither movement of archaic sacrifice, which sought a victim that would satisfy a divine bloodlust, nor the movement of *ressentiment*, which Nietzsche saw in the Judaeo-Christian text. The Gospels fulfill the desacralizing movement initiated in the Old Testament, which progressively “divested [the conception of Yahweh] of the violence characteristic of primitive deities” (TH, 157). By absolving God of responsibility for the Crucifixion of Jesus, Girard argues, the Gospels reveal that sacred violence is an entirely

Modern warfare rather multiplies the victims and fosters the ever greater escalation towards extremes. See BTTE, xvi and 19)

human affair. The violence of the Cross is not justified because it manipulates some hidden sacral machinery, but because it interrupts the operation of that machinery once, for all.

Thus while Girard generally refuses a theological voice, his anthropological thought issues in a revised Christian soteriology that remains premised upon a doctrine of divine wrath and judgment. In the Gospels, God passes judgment upon archaic sacrifice and upon those who rely upon its mechanism not by pouring out wrath upon them but by allowing them to remain blind in their mimetic entanglements and captive within their sacrificial systems. For Girard this is no less the case within the modern world, which is threatened with destruction by modern nation-states blind to the mimetic nature of their military, economic, and territorial conflicts. Girard openly writes of a “price to be paid”² for the modern world’s resistance to the Gospel message, and sees it being exacted in the form of the Holocaust (*ISS*, Chapter 14), the threat of nuclear annihilation (*TH*, 256-257), and the threat posed by terrorism (*BTTE*, 211-217). This human suffering is illuminated by the doctrine of divine wrath that is implicit in Girard’s thought.

It is somewhat ironic, then, that Girard understands his own thought as a critique of divine wrath. Wrath, for Girard, is an attribute of the deities found in world mythology. Wrath consistently arises in the context of the sacrificial crisis. When mimetic rivals discover the sacrificial victim, they find themselves in agreement about the victim’s culpability; they agree, specifically that God’s wrath rightly falls upon the victim

² René Girard, “Dionysus Versus the Crucified,” *Modern Language Notes* 99, no. 4 (September 1, 1984): 826.

for the victim's transgression in order to justify their violence after the sacrifice. To attribute wrath to the Father of Jesus, or, worse yet, to see it as somehow in play in the events that lead to the Cross is to seek reconciliation through the scapegoat mechanism rather than through its overcoming.

Girard's reversal on Hebrews reflects a growing awareness in his work of the limits of his theorization. His admission, "I scapegoated Hebrews, and I scapegoated the word sacrifice"³ ought to open his hermeneutic up significantly to reconsideration of other religious concepts which his theory has tended to essentialize, and I submit that wrath should be one of these. By recognizing the implicit doctrine of wrath present in his own theory Girard could be clearer about the metaphysical premises implicit in his own conceptions of causality and cosmic order, and more conscious of the dangerous tendencies that attend any doctrine of wrath; in theological terms, the tendency to lose God's transcendence and to arrogate divine authority to oneself; in Girard's terms, the tendency to make scapegoats; in Nietzsche's terms, *ressentiment*.

For von Balthasar, the Cross figures as the realization of the human messianic hope, a way out of the existential guilt and abyssal freedom that characterizes human life in its finitude. Human beings suffer because they are free to commit evil. And precisely because their freedom is a divine gift, it is inalienable. But insofar as they attempt to master it, to 'live out of themselves' and for themselves exclusively without regard for their place within the opening of Being, human beings do not attain their goal, for their

³ Rebecca Adams and René Girard, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion & Literature* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 29.

goal exceeds their capacity; while human beings recognize that their actions aim at the Good, they lack the wisdom to discern it and the will to perform it. Indeed, as noble as the many human attempts to attain to such knowledge and self-discipline are, they culminate not in self-divinization, but in idolatry. In giving himself totally to the Father, Christ perfects human righteousness and reveals the righteousness of God, which eternally and infinitely gives itself away. Christ's infinite self-surrender thus judges humankind's Promethean striving as so many forms of self-protection, indifference to others and as opposition to God.

Von Balthasar argues that by undergoing the apocalyptic violence of the crucifixion, Christ reveals the form of man. He does so by identifying totally with humankind, by exchanging places with them. He thus undergoes the temptations and trials—the divine wrath—that all human beings experience in their alienation from God. Indeed, he experiences this wrath even more keenly because he lacks the sin and guilt that are otherwise wrath's precondition and preparation, and because he does not attempt to alleviate it through the technical or ritual means human beings use to silence their consciences. He rather bears the consequences of the human No in his own person and suffers at the hands of those whom God gives over to enslavement by their own idols. In this way Jesus is doubly abandoned, a scapegoat for humankind and the Son abandoned of the Father.

For von Balthasar, the Cross also reveals the continuity and difference between the Old and New Testaments by revealing the constancy of God's Triune love, which expresses itself in the intra-divine *processio* of Son and in his missions, creation and

Incarnation. In each of these movements God's omnipotence strikes a radical contrast with the false lordship of the gods and of humans who bear lordship in that it generates and creates free others. The Father begets the Son inseparable from himself and possessed of the same infinite measure of freedom, and God creates human beings, free to respond to God's gift with one befitting their own finite freedom. In the New Testament, God surrenders the reserve that characterized the way God directed Israel to her fulfillment in the Old. Whereas the law served only to reveal sin and put those who received it to a decision whether to obey or to disobey, the law's fulfillment, Christ, puts this decision to all humankind and in a much more radical way. And just as the law stands, even in its violation, as the revelation of divine love, so much more does the slain lamb do so. Thus von Balthasar redefines divine sovereignty in *kenotic* terms.

This does not mean that von Balthasar suggests that God does not reveal his wrath at unrighteousness. Indeed, for von Balthasar, if God were to fail to maintain the order that ordains that those who sin become alienated from God, that would bespeak divine indifference or capriciousness. God's wrath is therefore the means by which God passionately defends his creatures against their own unfulfillment; it is God's No to the No of humankind, and it is, in turn, taken up "within the Son's all-embracing Yes to the Father, in the Spirit" (*TD*, IV: 329).

The contrast between Girard and von Balthasar's responses to Nietzsche is captured most succinctly in terms of their willingness to ascribe wrath to God after the Nietzschean critique of *ressentiment*. Girard is unwilling to do so because he feels the Nietzschean critique too keenly, in a way, and thus, in his attempt to defend Christianity

in terms more easily acceptable, finds it necessary to purify Christianity's image of God of all violence. For von Balthasar, that is a dangerous strategy, for it too easily forsakes the message of the mystics, which is that "the more we know God, the less we know him. If the light grows in 'arithmetic' progression, the darkness grows in 'geometric' progression...All true approaches to God can be constructed only on the foundation of an ever more towering distance."⁴ Far from frightening, however, this 'cleft' between God and the creature is precious. It is precious because "only where there is non-identity is love possible...Even in the human sphere [of erotics,] how sad it would be if it were ever to turn out that the beloved *only* possessed our measure and form!"⁵ Ironically, it is von Balthasar's affirmation of this mystical sense of divine transcendence that puts von Balthasar back into conversation with Nietzsche. For Nietzsche's perpetual idol-smashing serves to shatter the masks of priestly power in order to re-establish contact with a more authentic transcendence. There is thus an affinity between Nietzsche's gesture and that of the Christian mystic. For even as the Christian mystic clings to Christ as the mediator, the mystic knows that God the Son is the image of Father who "dwells in inaccessible light" (1 Tim 16: 6), and that God cannot be "drag[ged]...down to the level of the here and now" even by genuine human love (*TD*, IV: 119).

The differing approaches taken by Girard and von Balthasar in responding to Nietzsche bespeak the danger inherent in Christian proclamation itself. Christians must proclaim the Gospel, but their desire to see it take hold leads them to weave what

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves," trans. Edward T. Oakes, *Communio* 24 (Summer 1997): 355.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Nietzsche calls spider's webs—closed systems of spiritual causality. As the tone of that proclamation becomes more shrill, the Christians doing the proclaiming come to resemble not Nietzsche's image of Jesus, a victor over *ressentiment*, but his image of Paul—who instead appears anxious, seeks assurances, is unwilling or unable to surrender himself. If the art of transgression practiced by Nietzsche mediates anything to his Christian respondents, it ought to be that the gesture of proclamation exceeds its discursive content. I have argued that the moments when Girard attempts to rhetorically out-narrate Nietzsche are the moments when his response is weakest—in that it is least truthful to its own premises, and the moments when von Balthasar displays solidarity with Nietzsche in contesting with him are those when his response is strongest. In both of these cases God's own passionate engagement—which expresses itself in both liberality and severity, and through the mediation of that which seems other to God—forms the measure.

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