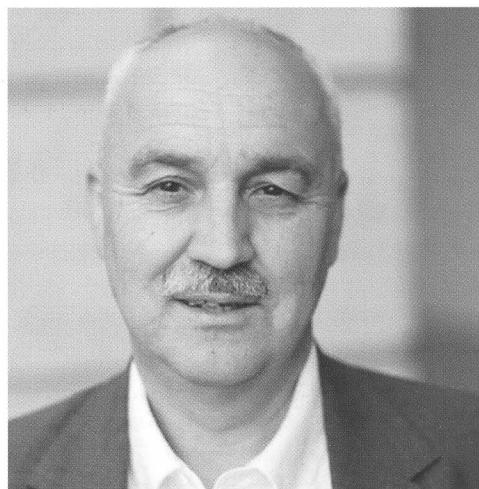




# THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY ACROSS TRADITIONS

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## The Sacred and the Holy



Research depends on a clear focus as well as on serendipity leading to new and unexpected insights. Both these preconditions helped me to work on René Girard's distinction between the sacred and the holy with its special take on violence and religion. The Research Workshop on Religion & Violence at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton during the fall of 2018 provided me with a clear focus for my work. We started with working definitions of religion and violence. I insisted from the start that we should reflect on human violence first, turning to religion in a second step. I still think that this the right way to proceed because it forces us to reflect on human potentials for violence without shifting too quickly all the blame on religion. Scapegoating religion diminishes our understanding of human violence. We should not forget what the Austrian writer Robert Musil stated after World War I: "Human nature is as capable of cannibalism as it is of the *Critique of Pure Reason*." Similarly, the primatologist Richard Wrangham concluded recently that human beings "can be the nastiest of species and also the nicest." Girard's claim that mimetic rivalries are a main cause of human violence remains valid. Jonathan Sacks endorsed it recently in his book *Not in God's Name* highlighting the murderous force of "sibling rivalry."

Putting violence first, however, does not mean to whitewash religion. A profound understanding of religion needs to find out in what way religions can enhance the outburst of violence and in what way religions are able to tame it. Serendipity provided me with new insights about religion. Discussing my work at CTI at a conference

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on religious violence at Georgetown University, a fellow participant referred me to Benjamin Schewel's overview of important theories of religion in his book *Seven Ways of Looking at Religion*. This book offered me two helpful insights for my own work. First, Schewel insists that in recent decades scholars of religion avoided substantial judgements to overcome past claims of Christian superiority. Purely descriptive theories of religion, however, no longer allow us to distinguish "Mother Teresa's religion from Osama bin Laden's." By following Girard's distinction between the sacred and the holy, I try to strengthen a substantial understanding of religion. In order not to fall back towards unjustified claims of Christian superiority, however, I also follow Schewel's connection with John Hick's pluralistic theology of religions according to which we can discover a common core in all axial religions consisting in the transformation of "self-centeredness into Reality- or Other-centeredness." The mystic dimension that characterizes Girard's understanding of the holy allows me to claim that it belongs to this axial transformation.

Conversations with associate director Joshua Mauldin, with my colleague Ed Noort, and with Marcia Pally, who visited me twice at CTI, led me to investigate more closely the relationship between Girard's mimetic theory and recent research on religion and human evolution (especially Robert Bellah's book *Religion in Human Evolution*). Bellah's distinction between tribal, archaic, and axial religions forced me first to rethink the terminology that Girard and his followers have used. Girard preferred the term "archaic" for early stages of human evolution that are characterized by the "sacred" rooted in the scapegoat mechanism that helped to overcome violent crises inside early human groups. Following Bellah, I decided to use the term "pre-Axial" for the period that Girard called archaic. Bellah's work challenges Girard's hypothesis about the emergence of the pre-Axial sacred from a scapegoat mechanism. Bellah did not engage with Girard's theory in depth but remarks on one occasion that "a possible relation between religion and terror goes way back, though perhaps not, contrary to Rene Girard ...all the way back." This criticism becomes clearer where Bellah remarks that the collective violence that Girard understood as scapegoating and as a foundational murder belongs to the later stage of "archaic religion," which is according to Bellah monarchical and centered around one person. For this reason, Bellah claims in opposition to Girard "that the first killing among culturally organized humans was not the killing of a scapegoat, but the killing of an upstart who genuinely threatened to revive the despotism of the old primate alpha male." Bellah downplays violence significantly if we compare most parts of his book with Girard's mimetic theory. A more careful look, however, recognizes that Bellah may have come closer to Girard than he himself had thought. With Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* he emphasized play as the main root of rituals. He, however, did not overlook

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that with play also "aggression and violence" evolved, "with the particularly nasty result that humans and our nearest primate relative, the chimpanzees, deliberately kill other members of their own species." Bellah did not shy away from mentioning "cannibalism" showing up in the fossil record and "in-group aggression" as part of human evolution. Most strikingly, Bellah refers by following the work of primatologist Christopher Boehm to the fact that egalitarian hunter-gatherers relied heavily on violence:

"Boehm insists that human egalitarianism does not come easily, that it is not the absence of the disposition to dominate; rather, it requires hard, sometimes aggressive, work to keep potential upstarts from dominating the rest. ... Potential upstarts are first ridiculed, then shunned, and, if they persist, killed."

What Bellah remarked more in passing plays a central role in Richard Wrangham's most recent book, *The Goodness Paradox*, which also relies partly on Boehm. Wrangham distinguishes between reactive aggression responding immediately to a threat that is much more common among wild animals and proactive aggression that is an instrumental and "cold" use of violence requiring planning and collaboration. The second type of violence is much more common among human beings. According to Wrangham, human

evolution has resulted in humanity's self-domestication moving more and more away from reactive violence. Proactive violence has played a key role in this domestication. Wrangham mentions an "execution hypothesis" explaining a selection against violent men:

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

Wrangham links the execution hypothesis with the human universal of capital punishment. His evidence strengthens Girard's scapegoat theory. Whereas Wrangham does not recognize a significant role for religion, Girard's understanding of the violent sacred helps to explain how the execution hypothesis may relate to pre-Axial forms of religion. The title of Wrangham's chapter introducing the execution hypothesis is "The Tyrant Problem." Girard's interpretation of the *Book of Job* in *The Victim of His People* offers a biblical counterexample to the execution hypothesis. Girard described the collective persecution of Job as following the sacred pattern of collective violence against "tyrants." Job's trust in a God that sides with victims is an experience of the holy clearly distinguished from the violent sacred. ¶

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