

Agrarian religion: Mimetic Desire, Mimetic Violence, Mimetic Sacrifice

1. If religion is about binding us together by reconnecting us with what we hold sacred, with what gives our lives transcendent meaning and purpose, how is it that religion can also inspire such outrage and violence towards “them,” outsiders and others on the margins of our society? If religion is about what we hold sacred, how can it sometimes be so demonic?
2. In an earlier video I had argued that one of the roots of religion lies in imitation. Imitation is the most primal and fundamental form of human communication. In the earlier video I introduced two forms of mimetic communication—the imitation of behavior enabling learning and the imitation of feelings enabling bonding, empathy and compassion.
3. However with the emergence of large scale agriculture and human settlement, came growing inequalities of wealth and status. Accordingly a third kind of imitation becomes increasingly decisive, the imitation of others’ desires: wanting what they want and, too often, already have, both in terms of more things and in terms of higher status.
4. The logic of mimetic desire then is to imitate the desires of others. Asceticism, common to virtually all religious traditions is based on the conviction that most of our desires are mimetic-- not original to us, but rather imitations of the desires of others. When we see another desire something, we feel it is desirable and we begin to desire it too.
5. Mimetic desire is particularly strong when what we see desired is desired by people we desire to be like in the first place. (1) Since we want to be like them, we want what they want.
6. For example, how distract a baby who is crying or who is getting into trouble? One effective way is to begin to play with something. (1) Soon our behavior will draw the baby’s attention, and they will want to play with it too, (2) distracting them from their original upset or upsetting behavior.
7. Such mimetic desire grounds the logic of contemporary advertising. Advertising works neither by literate logic or even oral rhetoric. Advertising is not about informing us about the product so that we can rationally make a decision whether or not to buy it. Sometimes we do not even know what is being advertised until the end of the ad. (1) Rather we are shown people we would like to be like. Happy people, popular people, admirable people,

in settings that evoke fun and feelings of belonging.

8. This heartfelt, uplifting montage is creates desirable associations with the product being marketed to us. (1) For example, think of beer commercials. They do not inform us about the qualities of the brand of beer they promote, rather they show us happy popular people at a bar, the beer itself being the life of the party. (2) Or car commercials. Often enough they portray a car performing manoeuvres they explicitly warn us to never perform ourselves. They do not communicate any useful information about the car, rather they associate the car with excitement, prowess, prestige.
9. For example, take Chrysler's 2014 Superbowl ad, pitched by Bob Dylan. What does Dylan know about automobile performance? Who knows? And who cares? Bob Dylan is a American legend in his own time. After an iconic shot of him at an outdoor concert, the ad runs a montage of iconic American images to the accompaniment of his strumming a folk guitar instrumental:
10. They are evocative images of cowboys on horseback, (1) high school cheerleaders, (2) a diner offering "home style cooking," (3) a nighttime baseball game, (4) a solitary red barn and silo, (5) a Route 66 road sign, (6) portraits of a laughing Marilyn Monroe (7) and a cool James Dean, (8) a war poster of Rosy the Riveter, (9) a Detroit car engine assembly line, (10) freeways splayed atop and around one another. Dylan offers no information about the cars he is pitching. In fact we do not even know what brand of car he is selling until the very end. Rather in a voice over, Dylan speaks of qualities and virtues that evoke American nostalgia, American grit, American pride. Only then does he deliver his pitch:
11. "So let Germany brew your beer. (1) Let Switzerland make your watch. (2) Let Asia assemble your phone. (3) We will build your car. (4) The Chrysler brand appears only then, in the ad's closing seconds, over the hood of a dark blue car in the shadows.
12. The ad is less an argument than a reverie. It communicates primarily, not information but feelings, a sense of competence and character, pride and belonging. It works visually rather than linguistically, viscerally rather than logically.
13. The great social benefit of mimetic desire is that it indeed strengthens our communal bonds. In wanting the same things, just as in emulating the same role models, we come to share a common purpose; we come to form a common cultural identity. We become us,

as distinct from them. We transcend what sets us apart from each other, and we reconnect with what defines us *as* us.

14. However all of us wanting the same things also has a downside—it creates competition.
15. Often enough two babies cannot both play with the same toy; they must fight one another for it. (1) And so mimetic desire inevitably leads to mimetic violence.
16. And of course we imitate that violence too. You hurt me, I am going to want to hurt you back. An eye for an eye. (1) In fact I may well want to hurt you worse, to teach you and anyone looking on a lesson, to defend my own reputation before others and even my own self-respect. Thus, just as imitation enables behavior to spread through learning, and feelings to become contagious, so imitation fuels desire and escalates violence.
17. Neolithic villages had already begun to accumulate grain, herds, pottery and a growing array of tools for harvesting and weaving, as well as a more diverse armory of weapons for the hunt. However this accumulation was still largely communal and so society still broadly egalitarian and peaceful.
18. In Avestan and Vedic oral traditions we saw the rise of raiding and other forms of violence between villages. But as possessions become private in larger, more complex agrarian societies, and wealth and status inequalities widen, mimetic desire within a community would now catalyze competition as much as cooperation, and slide from competition to outright violence.
19. Luxury items also begin to accumulate. The Royal Tomb of Ur contains stunning jewelry made of gold, silver and lapis lazuli. The invention of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, further exacerbated such inequalities and rivalries. Bronze provides considerable strength and durability, critical for both sword and plowshare. Bronze will literally weaponize mimetic competition and violence.
20. It is telling that the seven deadly sins of ancient Christianity are all natural dispositions exacerbated to destructive extremes by mimetic desire and mimetic violence: Hunger becomes gluttony, sexuality becomes lust. The need to be well equipped becomes a craving for everything, or greed; disappointment spirals down into despair while anger intensifies into rage. The desire for a good reputation becomes vanity, and finally, self-confidence transmutes into ambition and pride.

21. Through the invention of stone tools and the domestication of fire, humans had transformed themselves from prey to predator.
22. Through the Neolithic domestication of plants and animals, they had transformed their lifestyle from one of subsistence to relative abundance.
23. Now as disparities of technological wealth and social power intensify, humans turn against one another, human beings become their own most fearsome foe.
24. Competition spirals into violence, violence into vengeance and humanity's unprecedented capacity for imitation turns demonic. In another first for our species, intraspecific violence, human on human becomes endemic both amongst individuals within a given community and even more graphically yet between communities in organized warfare.
25. The fortunes of the gods mirrored the fortunes of their followers. In Sumeria, each city has a patron deity, for whom a towering temple, a ziggurat, is built. The magnificence of the temple honors the patron divinity of the city, but it also enhances the glory and renown of its ruler.
26. On the other hand the destruction of an enemy's temple, like the city laid waste, threatens their god's very existence: "After your city has been destroyed" goes one lament, "how now can you exist?"
27. For example, it was crucial to the perseverance of Israel and Judah as a people that when the Assyrians and the Babylonians destroyed their shrines and temples, their cities and palaces, and led their people off into exile, that these events did not represent the vanquishing of Yahweh their god. Rather prophets preached that Assyrian and Babylon were instruments of God's mimetic punishment of his people for their unfaithfulness to him.
28. And so too we find in the psalms, calls for Yahweh to wreak mimetic violence against the enemies of Israel as well as against those evildoers who afflict the righteous.
29. In this respect the laments found in Sumerian religious literature is striking. For here lament and supplication is for relief and redemption but not for vengeance or retribution. Like Job, one may protest one's innocence, and that one's afflictions are undeserved, but one appeals for mercy not vengeance. There is no call to dash the heads of the babies of one's enemies against the rocks.
30. But that is the universal and perpetual temptation. To imitate violence with violence and to restore order by channeling the escalating spiral of violence onto a safe target. That is

we can pick out and all pick on, a common scapegoat.

31. And who would make an effective scapegoat? Who are safe targets for communal aggression? Someone who cannot fight back, (1) whether because they are weak, or because they lack resources or because they have no allies to fight beside them, or for them (2) because they are “them” strangers, not one of us.
32. Among our ancestral hunter gatherer bands, these would be the “runts” of our community: (1) the weak, the lame, the slow, the sick. Or again, the stranger, one who does not belong with us, one who has perhaps wandered into our camp, lost and abandoned by his own.
33. If we could just cleanse or purify our group of such troublemakers, such undesirables, such “deplorables,” order and prosperity could be restored. But how purge? (1) We could shame them. Or shun them. More radically, we could shoo them away, banish them to fend for themselves, alone in the wild, at the mercy of predators.
34. Or to solve the problem once and for all, we could kill them.
35. Of course, even sacrificing the scapegoat will not prove to be a permanent solution. After all, the scapegoat is not the real source of our problems. Thus after the relief of order restored and cooperation renewed, competition will only rise up once more, calling for yet another scapegoat to be sacrificed for the good order of society. (1) Thus communal scapegoating repeats, the shaming, shunning, shooing and ultimately killing of the scapegoat becomes a regular ritual, a religious ritual that rebinds us together as a community by reconnecting us to what we all hold sacred—our own society, its laws and its prosperity, personified in our deities to whom we relate in reverential but also personal, intimate terms.
36. Rene Girard argues that such ritual scapegoating lies at the root of all religious sacrifice.
37. But we have seen how religious sacrifice is not always an act of religious violence; it is as often an act of religious praise or thanksgiving, even a religious communion with the divine.
38. In the grand Paleolithic sacrifices at Gobekli Tepe its is not the violence but the feasting that bonds bands together, that both motivates and rewards the common work in a purpose transcending that of any one of them. It is not an orgy of mimetic violence but of mimetic celebration and ecstatic intoxication through which people are drawn out of their

ordinary profane lives and into an experience of a transcendent sacred.

39. That said, however, in agrarian society, religious sacrifice will also serve to channel the rising mimetic violence endemic in such societies into safe outlets thereby restoring the sacred order of society that such mimetic violence threatens. Girard identifies not the origin but a further affordance of ritual sacrifice in agrarian societies, where mimetic desire, if left unchecked can indeed threaten revolt and revolution.
40. A comparison of the creation myth we saw in Neolithic Indo-Aryan religion with the Babylonian *Enumma Leish* provides a stark illustration of this rise in violence. As we have already seen, in the former, Ahura Mazda, after building and furnishing a cosmic home, introduces the dynamic cycle of life and death by sacrificing his original iconic plant (the soma plant), animal (the bull) and human being (the “mortal one”). It is from their bodies and blood/sap that new life germinates and the empty world is provisioned with food and offspring. This original sacrifice is violent in that it introduces death into creation, but it is in the service of filling and provisioning the cosmos, with the recognition that the living feed off the dead. In fact the three willingly submit to their own sacrifice, for only through their death can their offspring arise. The Upanishads will later declare that all life is food. Even humans are food, in that they supply food for the gods through their sacrifices and ultimately age and die themselves to make way for their offspring.
41. On the other hand in the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk, a personification of warrior violence, a Babylonian Indra, builds a home for humanity from the corpse of the vanquished primordial mother turned monster, a scapegoated Tiamat, the demonization of the chaotic, boundless sea. While still in the service of life, Marduk’s sacrifice is the fruit of violence. It better fits Girard’s logic of mimetic scapegoating than Ahura Mazda’s sacrifice of the self-sacrificial ancestral plant, bull and man. For in the *Enuma Elish* order is the fruit of violence, the vanquishing of chaos.
42. On the other hand *Enuma Elish* also re-enacts the annual cycle of nature. It was ritually recited annually on the fourth day of the spring equinox New Year’s Festival, *Atiku*. In this way, while the narrative embodies mimetic violence and sacrifice, the ritual as a whole does also play the role of the Indo-Aryan creation story in which the cycle of life, death and renewed live is retold and celebrated.

43. The Babylonian New Year's festival also renews the authority of the monarch, god's viceroy for the cosmos. After killing Tiamat, Marduk puts her husband Kingu on trial, scapegoats him for Tiamat's destructive rampage and executes him. In the twelve day long New Year's festival, after three days of ritual confession of society's sin by the high priest, and a fourth day when the Enuma Elish is publically read out to the people, on the fifth day, the king is similarly put on trial and stripped of the emblems of his authority. However rather than being sacrificed, the high priest slaps him sharply across the face, in recognition of his sinfulness and to remind him that he is still but a mortal man. The high priest then in the person of Marduk restores to the King the emblems of his royal office for another year. There then follows a second three day period of carnival, or social dissolution in which the social order is symbolically dissolved, ritually expressed by the imprisoning of Marduk in his temple. Gods from Babylon's principle allies assemble to battle the rebel divinities and liberate Marduk. Order is then restored in a ceremony in which the statues of Marduk's allied divinities are processed through the city to the royal temple where the defeated rebel gods submit to a liberated Marduk. In this way the renewal of the monarchy is a re-enactment of Marduk's renewal of order over chaos.
44. Thus while a ritual re-enactment of the return of spring, the festival remains a violent ritual of redemptive violence, resonant of an increasingly violent, agrarian society. Warrior kings will draw upon both palace and temple to scapegoat their own enemies so as to inspire a call to arms to vanquish the forces of evil and cleanse their lands by themselves assuming rule over their former enemy's territory, wealth, and even their subjects in the form of slaves, human property, the ultimate act of violence. In agrarian bronze age society every ruler ambitions to be a conquering hero, and every conquering hero presents himself to his subjects as their savior, promising that the sacrifices endured in battling the demonic evildoers will be redeemed by a new social order, this time one that is truly sacred—a just, holy and prosperous home for all to be governed by god's own sacred representative, himself. War, not religion, is the ultimate mimetic sacrifice.
45. In subsequent video lectures we shall see how religion further evolves with the spread of literacy beyond court and temple to move from legitimating and restoring social order to begin criticism of it.
46. This will catalyze what has been called an "axial revolution" in thought, religious thought

especially, in which literacy matures beyond simply preserving oral wisdom and legitimating a society's hierarchy, literally, its sacred rule, to criticize the social order in the name of universal norms and truths beyond ethnicity and locality.

47. We shall also see how axial reforms in religion will seek to transcend the purity model of mimetic scapegoating by a common confession of sin and defilement and calling for forgiveness over mimetic retribution.

Suggested readings for further exploration

Burkert, Walter *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*; University of California, 1983

Girard, René, *Violence and the Sacred*:

Kramer, Samuel *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character*; University of Chicago, 1963

Lears, Jonathan, *Fantasies of Abundance*