

The Bronze Age: Mimetic Desire, Mimetic Violence and Religious Sacrifice

1. Welcome to this next video lecture on the co-evolution of Religion and Technology, the second on the Bronze Age culture of the fourth through the second millennium BCE. 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? 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 rise of large scale agriculture and human settlement, came growing inequalities of wealth and status. Accordingly, a third kind of imitation became increasingly significant, the imitation of desire: wanting what others want and, too often, already have, both in terms of more things and in terms of higher status.
4. The logic of mimetic desire 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 feelings or 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 a 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. (2) Happy people, popular people, admirable people, in settings that evoke fun and feelings of belonging.

8. This heartfelt, uplifting montage 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 maneuvers they explicitly warn us to never perform ourselves. The ads do not communicate any useful information about the car, rather they associate the car with excitement, prowess, prestige.
9. For example, take Chrysler's famous 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 through a montage of iconic American images to the accompaniment of his strumming 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 as well as winners and losers
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 reputation before others as someone not to mess with. 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 of goods was still largely communal. If you had something a friend or relative wanted, being a good neighbor meant that you would let him have it, or at least use it as long as he needed it. To refuse to share would harm your own reputation as a good friend to have. If anything, people would be looked up to not on the basis of what they had but on how much they could share, even give to their friends and relatives. And so society was still broadly egalitarian and peaceful.
18. In the Aryan Rig Veda we saw the first threat to this largely harmonious way of life in the rise of village raiding personified in the warrior god Indra. Now as possessions wealth and status inequalities between individuals widen, mimetic desire within a community will catalyze raiding within a society as well. Competition will threaten to undermine cooperation, a person's private wealth becomes subject to theft and fraud. Rulers impose taxes on trade and households within their sphere of control.
19. Cities, and their rulers, accumulated unprecedented wealth. The Royal Tomb at Ur in which were found that board game possibly from the Indus Valley discussed in an earlier lecture, also contained stunning jewelry made of gold, silver and lapis lazuli. The invention of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, exacerbated such inequalities and rivalries. For bronze is not only beautiful and shiny but is much stronger, and keeps an

- edge. 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, sexual desire becomes lust. The need to be well equipped becomes a craving for everything, or greed; loss spirals down into despair, while anger intensifies into rage. The desire for a good reputation becomes vanity, and finally, self-confidence and ambition transmutes into pride.
 21. Now 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. But as disparities of technological wealth and social power intensify, humans turn against one another, humans now prey on each other.
 24. As competition spirals into violence, and violence into vengeance, humanity's unprecedented capacity for imitation turns demonic. In another first for our species, intraspecific violence, human on human, becomes endemic both within groups and even more violently between them.
 25. Stronger villages not only raid, but now conquer their weaker neighbors in order to not only seize their wealth, but to occupy their land and rule over or even enslave their inhabitants. Power displaces fertility as the primary ground of status and prosperity. Soon stronger cities will conquer weaker cities to create kingdoms, and ultimately stronger kingdoms will conquer weaker kingdoms to create empires.
 26. The fortunes of Inanna, the Sumerian Great Goddess illustrates this shift of the sacred from fertility to social order. While the ancient goddess of both grain and erotic love, she also becomes Queen of Heaven, and a goddess of war.
 27. In Sumerian mythology each of the cosmic gods are assigned their own city, or better each city has its own patron deity. Thus the early proto-city Eridu became the home of Enki, the primal god of the depths and of wisdom. Uruk, ruled by the legendary first king, Gilgamesh, was home to Anu, the original sky god, and later Inanna, the goddess of fertility and later war. Lagash, another early power center, was hom to Ningursu, god of thunder and war, and finally Babylon was home to Marduk, creator of the cosmos, as we

shall see a little later on.

28. Urban homes are built for them-- not wombs like underground caverns as we found in the Neolithic, but huge, magnificent temples, or ziggurats, rising high up into the heavens. Religious rituals conducted before or within these temples were not only for the fertility of the fields but for the welfare of their city and for victory over its enemies. On the other hand, the destruction of a city's temple, like the city itself laid waste, threatened its god's very existence: "After your city has been destroyed" goes one lament, "how now can you exist?"
29. 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 were not interpreted as the vanquishing of Yahweh their god. Rather prophets preached that the Assyrian and Babylon conquerors were instruments of God's mimetic punishment of his people for their infidelity to him.
30. And so too we find in the psalms, calls for Yahweh to wreak mimetic violence against the enemies of Israel as against all unjust evildoers who afflict his chosen ones. 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. (1) 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.
31. 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 channel our violence by picking out and picking on, a common scapegoat.
32. 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."
33. 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.

34. 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.
35. Or to solve the problem once and for all, we could kill them.
36. 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.
37. Rene Girard argues that such ritual scapegoating lies at the root of all religious sacrifice.
38. 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.
39. 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.
40. That said, however, in the bronze age, 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. Thus in my view Girard identifies not the origin but the later evolution of ritual sacrifice into mimetic scapegoating, where mimetic desire, if left unchecked can indeed threaten revolt and revolution.
41. A comparison of the Neolithic and Aryan creation myths with the Babylonian *Enuma*

Leish provides a stark illustration of this evolving violence. As we have seen earlier, in the maternal cosmotheism of Old Europe, the world hatches from a cosmic egg. The only violence involved is the cracking of the shell into heaven and earth. In the Aryan cosmogony, Ahura Mazda is like a craftsman who builds a cosmic home for humanity from two stone crystal bowls sealed lip to lip to form a hollow sphere. He furnishes the home with the original plant (the soma plant), animal (the bull) and human being (the “mortal one”). He initiates the cycle of life by sacrificing them. But while a killing, its victims have willingly volunteered their lives in the service of propagating new life. For it is from their bodies and their vital sap and lifeblood that new life germinates and a static, empty world is made vital and populous.

42. The *Enuma Elish*, on the other hand begins with chaos. The primordial mother goddess is an angry monster, the terrible Tiamat, a demonization of the boundless, tempestuous sea. Marduk, a personification of warrior might, a Babylonian Indra one might say, battles Tiamat, vanquishes her and fashions the world from her carcass. While ultimately in the service of life and order, Marduk’s sacrifice of Tiamat is an act of redemptive violence. It perfectly fits Girard’s logic of the mimetic scapegoat.
43. Now Marduk was the patron god of Babylon and The *Enuma Elish* was publicly recited annually before his temple on the fourth day of the spring equinox New Year’s Festival, *Atiku*. Thus, the Babylonian New Year ritual celebrates both cosmic order and cosmic fertility.
44. 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. The day after the recitation of the *Enuma Elish*, the king of Babylon is similarly put on trial. Like Kingu, he is stripped of all emblems of royal authority. However rather than being sacrificed, the high priest slaps the king sharply across the face, in rebuke for his sinfulness and to remind him that he is still but a mortal man. Then the high priest, in the person of Marduk, has mercy upon the king and restores to him the emblems of his royal office for another year.
45. Thus while a ritual re-enactment of the return of spring, the festival remains a violent ritual of redemptive violence, resonant of a civilization grown increasingly violent.

Warrior kings will draw upon both palace and temple to scapegoat their own enemies so as to inspire a call to arms to vanquish all threats to the social order, both within and without. In the Bronze Age every ruler will ambition to be a conquering hero, and every conquering hero will present 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 their god’s own sacred vicar, himself. War, not religion, will thus become the ultimate mimetic sacrifice.

46. In subsequent video lectures we shall see how religion further evolves with the spread of literacy beyond court and temple from legitimating and restoring the social order to religious and moral criticism of it on behalf of abstract, universal principles of reason and justice. We shall also see how this revolution in religious thought and practice will also seek to reject the mimetic sacrifice of scapegoats. New religious movements will rather call for a common confession of sin. As all are guilty so all can hope for redemption through a universal turning away from mimetic retribution to mutual forgiveness.

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*