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Violent Origins, Origins of Violence

Both the myths just referenced in Chapter 1 are, in some sense, myths of violent origins. They problematise – and, in part, they already answer – the strategic and crucial question: 'Where does violence come from?' 'What are its origins and causes?'

Genesis replies: it's a form of ersatz sacrality, a form of false or idolatrous transcendence; it originates in a violence of spirit born of man's misconceived attempt to imitate and outdo the creator God. It's a form, and, certainly, it's a symptom and a sign, of the constitutional human exile from true harmony with God (the exile or estrangement known in Christian theological tradition as original sin); and it's a pointer to the disasters of murder, and of cultural and cosmic disorder, that immediately, in the book of Genesis, illustrate the meaning of that exile.

The other, postmodern, myth, the one which has still to be written up in book-form, replies: Violence? – that'll be the beast we wake up next to, right there in the lifeboat beside us; it's the tiger in ourselves and other animals and in the cosmic forces of nature around us; it's the beautiful and dangerous beast which, on anybody's account, shares with us our fragile human attempt at salvation – leastways, at survival – adrift, as we all are, on the cosmic ocean of sentient life, in this vast and enigmatic cosmos.

The Life of Pi is, specifically, a post-Darwinian myth: human violence is discovered first of all through its roots in animal violence, which in turn seems to be derived from violence discerned in the primordial forces of cosmic nature. (In the film that is the fire that destroys the floating zoo and the devastating ocean storm, which initiates the

adventure of shipwreck and lifeboat-survival.) We remember those sinkholes we noticed as crucial features of the uprooted miniature island refuge floating somewhere in mid-Pacific. They communicate still with the primordial ocean depths; they are shafts of insight and profundity, reaching down, in daylight, towards mysteries of origin. At least, they have that value as far as the onward-travelling boy is concerned; even if they no longer perform that function for the mass of marooned, secular meerkats, who cluster chattering around the sinkholes, but never jump in.

The time has come for us to jump in and to dive down. I'll try to do some sinkhole exploring, as it were, and to see what we can see of the ocean depths, in the expert company of evolutionary submariner and fundamental anthropologist René Girard. He is the modern theorist who does most, I feel, to answer the aspiration present in both myths to 'mind the gap': the gap of spiritual exile in Genesis; the gap of postmodern uprootedness, of fragmented coherence and fractured wholeness in *The Life of Pi*. Girard, I will suggest, shows us how to get the problem of sacred violence into sharp and strategic focus, thus enabling us to come most profoundly to grips with the tiger.

Two chapters will be needed in establishing this case. First, I'll say something by way of introducing mimetic theory: the theory in which is embedded René Girard's whole approach to violence and the sacred. That will point us towards the interaction of violence and the sacred which we should expect to find at the threshold of our becoming human.

I will come then, in the next chapter, to the 'original scene' Girard envisages: the basic model scenario of 'founding murder' which his theory posits. That will help us see how this Girardian model of origins offers to unlock the still very little understood enigma of hominisation and the beginnings of human culture and civilisation.

Taken together, these moves will open the account of what I have called the foundational complicity between violence and the sacred; and, it will, I hope, equip us to turn around, in all senses, the problem of sacred violence, still extant today.

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Mimetic theory is so called because it refers centrally to the notion of mimesis – the Greek word for imitation. It was Aristotle, very early in human thought, who glimpsed from afar that what distinguishes

humankind from animals is not so much our superior skills and higher faculties; it is, rather, the faculty of imitation we share. He didn't fully grasp the reach or fully develop the potential of that idea. He could not do so, because he had no notion that the human species actually does stand in line of evolutionary descent from animals; and he was prisoner of a limiting idea – to which our own thinking is also mortgaged – namely, that imitation is a relatively second-rate sort of asset: that it is, as we often say, *mere* imitation. (We can see how that idea arises: Aristotle is thinking of mimicry, parody etc., those particular forms of imitation which can indeed appear more derivative and secondary.)

However, look at the very different way Girard himself develops the same notion of imitation. Imagine, he says, a three- or four-year-old child introduced into a room rather like Hamley's toystore, filled with gorgeous toys of all shapes and sizes; within which there is, already installed, another child, who is already playing with an already chosen toy. Which toy, then, in this whole fairy-palace of toys, will the new child desire to play with?

Without thinking, we all know the answer to that question: he will want precisely the toy the other child is already playing with. Why is that? The reason is that he is attuned, immediately and fundamentally, to reading the desire of the other child; so that the first child's preference, to which the second child 'locks on', becomes the highlighted model for his own preference. He wants, most determinedly, what the other child wants; and so he is imitating, not just this latter's externally visible gestures, behaviour (etc.), but also his inward and entirely invisible desire; he's reproducing the other child's estimate of value ('Wow, great toy!') and his intentional goal ('I must have it').

In human beings, there is an amazing and profoundly defining aptitude for immediate group understanding, founded on mimesis. We are built by evolution to represent, empathise with, replicate and reciprocate any and all forms of stimulus, behaviour or attitude; we copy-in-reciprocity (I hold out my hand, you hold out yours) and what we read and decipher first of all is one another's desire. That is what makes us the most social, the most highly collaborative species in nature, which is, more than anything else, the secret of our evolutionary 'success' as a species.

Mimesis creates the very possibility of human reciprocities, of human relationalities of whatever kind. What is the first thing a newborn child does – apart, that is, from the things other animals also do (like suckling, excreting, sleeping, crying etc.)? We all know the answer to

that question too but how many of us have actually stopped to realise how wondrously novel and prodigiously significant it is? The mother *smiles*, her child *smiles back*. Research on the neurobiology of imitation has shown how this reaction is produced: by the firing of what are now called mirror neurons in the frontal cortex. That is the first characteristically human response; and, we may notice, it is something much more immediate and basic than a learned reaction or a rational, calculating one.

It is something akin, perhaps, to group electricity in pre-human animals, to the instinctive mirroring which allows huge shoals of fish, for instance, to flicker and turn, as one, in unison, so as to confuse predators, and which allows the octopus or squid to change colour to match the seabed onto which it subsides; or the lyre bird to mimic any and every bird in the Australian forest. It is this faculty of mimesis that enables the higher primates to evolve the most basic systems of communication, to interiorise learned models of behaviour (such as tool use in crows or in chimps) and to respect certain proto-cultural norms (like dominance patterns). 'You little monkey', we say to our children, when they infuriate or delight us by replicating adult tricks, expressions or manners.

However, we also now know something that bypassed Aristotle: namely, that animals are, in point of fact, not that good at imitation, whereas human imitation is immeasurably more sophisticated and developed, diverse and insistent, and, above all, more freighted with consequence, than is the case in even our nearest pre-human evolutionary relatives.

Animals – that is to say, pre-human animals – do imitate each other, certainly: in learning certain basic skills; in reproducing basic group emotions like hostility or fear; or in basic behaviour like the 'fight or flight' instinct. When they fight their own kind, however, full mimesis – mutually other-imitating reciprocity – barely comes into it; there is no supervolting 'tit-for-tat'. They are contending merely for what they need in order to survive – territory, mates, food etc. This means that animals of the same species fight to the death only very rarely (it does happen, but it's an accident, an exception).

Human imitation is altogether more intimate and complicated. We enter imaginatively into the inner world of other humans. We desire things because we see someone else desiring them. We are, elementarily, interested in their interest. That 'turns us on', as we say, and makes those things desirable to us. What is fashion but novelty made desirable and

imitated? What is advertising except the proposing and manipulation of models of desire? What is a market, except a place of exchange subject to judgements of desirability, which are then copied: 'New York sneezes and London catches cold'. Mimesis all! 'Do you copy that, Red Leader?' Yes, of course he does; we all do when we learn anything at all or communicate anything whatever. We interiorise and replicate inwardly the message or the meaning or the model in the very process of taking it in, making it ours and the human world would fall apart if we didn't (cf. Girard, *TH* 1987: 17).

A large spectrum of the latest research in human neurobiology, in developmental and group psychology is currently confirming, in spectacular ways, the unsuspected range and significance of the phenomenon that largely bypassed Aristotle. Leading French neuropsychiatrist and animal behaviourist, Boris Cyrulnik, in the best and most recent overview currently available of the brand-new and galloping science of imitation studies, writes: 'Western thought is organised around a misconceived centre-point: the individual. . . . It is imitation that organises the biology of our being-together, the affective glue that allows us to receive and respond to Other-pressure, which is what tutors our becomings' (Cyrulnik 2018: 3).

For this leading scientist, imitation is a hugely positive thing: we imitate to bond and to learn and to become, by affiliation and by cultural development, more than we already are. Girard, for his part, recognises perfectly well what he calls 'positive mimesis' but his distinctive contribution in this field is to develop the unsuspected and hugely important darker corollary (or shadow side) of this same phenomenon – 'negative mimesis'. Yes, he perceives, we copy other people's desire. However, that immediately means: two hands reaching out in rivalry for the same object and, very soon, coming into conflict; becoming progressively mimetic in their very rivalry; engaging in retaliatory 'tit-for-tat' (as we call it); and, in that process, mobilising the entire psychic energy and resource of each antagonist; even to the point of sacrificing life itself (witness: the suicide bomber); and, on the way or subsequently, mobilising also, in a mimetic chain reaction, the energies of all our allies and all their allies (witness: the mimetic fascination of the *jihad*). To understand in Girardian terms this latter phenomenon, we simply have to factor in that further multiplier of mimetic effect supplied by the peculiar conditions of internet communication; and no doubt, also, some traditional factors of identity politics, such as the assertiveness and paranoia of displaced and alienated minorities; and, of

course, not forgetting the peculiarly electrifying effect, produced within an Islamic culture-sphere, of the declaration of the Caliphate. (What we are currently observing, as I write this in 2019, is that the recruitment of foreign *jihadis* has declined sharply since that supreme authority, the Caliphate, with its claim to absolute archaic-sacral obedience, has been lost, along with its territorial basis.)

The dynamic of mimetic rivalry is, in other words, built in from the beginning to the mimetic potential of human groups. This is the unobserved factor which any adequate reading of the geo-political context within which IS has arisen and developed will also have to come to grips with. Hence the interest of understanding mimesis thoroughly: the better we analyse the making of that driving force, the better equipped we are to deconstruct and dismantle it.

A further point that will reward careful attention is this: mimetic fascination always locks us into that rivalry, that conflict. Rivalry itself, having become mirror-like and fascinating, can take us over entirely, with a dynamic all of its own, which is obscurely compelling, to the extent, we have said, of leading some to deliberately sacrifice their own lives to the sacred cause. That spectacular symptom of mimetic rivalry alerts us to something more general still, which is that we forget the limited stake for which we had begun to contend and to fight in the first place. What takes over in the end – but it has been implicitly present from the beginning – is always, Girard insists, metaphysical: the pure assertion of our own identity-in-being, rivalling with – and threatened by – some other-identity. That hidden cause and origin is, by definition, sacred (i.e. untouchable, non-negotiable), at least within the first 'natural' framing context, as provided by evolutionary process, with its master-imperative of survival.

Moreover, there is another consequence. In mimetic violence, antagonists who began by wanting merely to assert their own distinctive identity become monstrous doubles of each other; strange twins, as it were, locked together in identical retaliatory acts of verbal, imaginary and then actual physical violence; becoming indistinguishable from each other, as the sacred violence of metaphysical self-assertion takes over each and makes each the 'spitting image' (as we so revealingly say) of the other. (This is the passage from 'appropriative' mimesis to 'agonistic' or 'antagonistic' mimesis.) Already, in Girard's very first work on desire in the European novel, this negative electricity of conflictual 'undifferentiation' (i.e. the progressive loss of difference) sparks and crackles with negative psychic electricity (*DDN* 1961).

That same book presents us with the Girardian 'triangle' of mimetic desire, designed to map out the relationship of the Subject of desire, with its Object and with the mediating/adversary Other. What this structural figure most fundamentally shows is that the relationship described is not inert or stable. As rivalry mobilises all energies, in individual or in collective subjects, the triangle begins to spin wildly, uncontrollably, on its axes in various planes and to morph, as it does so, into various forms of black hole. These are capable of decisively warping social space, just as black holes in the cosmos distort and violently transform physical space.

To this basic structure of negative reciprocity – mutually Other-imitating rivalry – Girard adds, that is to say, an account of its dynamic quality. The conflictual charge of mimetic rivalry in humans will tend to increase exponentially; and it will become contagious externally, catching up and drawing in third parties precisely because it engages, throughout the whole social field, reciprocal mimesis – that great and unseen multiplier or 'turbo' of desire.

In the end, what we are being asked by René Girard to grasp overall is something truly momentous: there is an unsuspected runaway dynamic at work in human affairs. Those black holes of violence – represented by feud, vendetta or crusade – will tend, fatefully, to deepen, proliferate and fuse; thus drawing into conflict and thence into violence all relationalities within a given community. Something of this fundamental dynamic – albeit in a strictly limited (still, for the moment, inhibited, relatively 'civilised' and mainly non-violent) form was evident in the polarisation of the debate in this country over Brexit.

That secret dynamic is worth thinking about both in relation to humanity's violent past and, even now, in relation to our fast globalising world and the more 'apocalyptic' perils of our todays and tomorrows. What, for instance, do we most fear about *jihad*? Surely, that it will generate a logic of generalised conflict, sucking in, on the one hand, those Western societies which have developed out of mediaeval Christendom and, on the other, all members of the worldwide Islamic community: that is the nightmare of 'the clash of civilisations' – and it is not yet yesterday's nightmare. Is it not, precisely, the strategy of IS to provoke just that generalised and apocalyptic paroxysm, to 'bring it on'?

Once we learn to decipher the mimetic nature of desire, once we see the rivalry and conflict it engenders, once we measure its power of contagion and its supercharging drive towards paroxysmal outcomes,

it will be apparent that any human grouping, local or worldwide, is subject, visibly or invisibly, to an extreme peril of violent implosion (from internal conflict) or explosion (from the clash of external antagonisms). From which it also follows (in all deductive rigour) that containing and managing self-generated human violence must be the prime enabling condition and the number one imperative of human social life at all times and in all places. (When MPs and media pundits remind each other, as they so frequently do, that 'ensuring the security of our citizens' or 'defending our nation against attack' constitute the 'prime function of government', they are, obscurely, registering and enacting this fundamental anthropological reality.)

Here is a radically new and disturbing light on what anthropologists are accustomed to calling 'group intelligence' in humans: it represents the obverse face of human superiority in nature, as gifted to us by evolution. Here is the peril that answers human potential – its apocalyptic shadow side. That's why we're worried and, if we know ourselves and our species adequately, that is what we should worry about.

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The exact path that leads Girard from these general, but fundamental, insights and perspectives of mimetic theory to his precise scenario of original founding murder cannot – there is not 'world enough and time' – be examined here.[1] It's a detective trail: a path of hypothesising, modelling and confirmation that passes though the study of Greek tragedy, through the anthropology of primitive religions and of world mythologies. It includes: an intense encounter with English and American anthropologists, Frazer, Malinowski, Radcliffe Brown, Robertson Smith and others; and an even more close-up and personal struggle with those fathers of modern deconstructionism, Freud and Nietzsche, whom Girard sees as having glimpsed – but mis-deciphered and malappropriated – the figure of human origins to which he is increasingly drawn. However, we do not need to retrace that same path minutely in order to gain a vivid, imaginative glimpse of the scenario

1. The best consolidated account of the Girardian hypothesis of origins is to be found in 'Book 1 – Fundamental Anthropology' of *Things Hidden*. The way of discovery leading there is best mirrored in the first eight chapters of *The Scapegoat*; perhaps, indeed, in this sentence of conclusion: 'The foregoing analyses oblige us to conclude that human culture is condemned to a perpetual dissimulation of its own origins in collective violence' (Girard, *S* 1986:100).

of origin which René Girard envisages increasingly in the development of his anthropological thinking. It appears – and Girard himself acknowledges the prescience of this precursor sketch – in the climactic scene of William Golding's novel of 1954*, Lord of the Flies*.

This novel, it will be recalled, is set in the era of an imagined nuclear war. A group of British Anglican choirboys – surely, the most 'innocent' representatives of civilised humanity? – is being evacuated to Australia. On the way, they are – by interception or in the after-shock of a nuclear blast - brought down and crash-land on a Pacific island. They attempt to reconstruct the orderly, liberal and decent way of civilised living they have left behind. However, everything begins to fall apart, as they revert to primitive patterns traced out by the 'hunters' (led by Jack). Piggy, the enlightened rational thinker of the group is killed. Ralph, the responsible democratic leader, is hunted. Simon, the – perhaps Jewish – prophet, discovers that the feared and hated 'Beast', said to inhabit the forest, is no more than the decomposing corpse of a dead pilot, gruesomely suspended from the forest canopy by his parachute – he's been shot down in the larger conflict that rages above and beyond the island.

The climactic scene of sacred violence is set against the background of a fearsome electric storm.

> 'Going to be a storm', said Ralph, 'and you'll have rain like when we dropped here. Who's clever now? Where are your shelters? What are you going to do about that?'
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> The hunters were looking uneasily at the sky, flinching from the stroke of the drops. A wave of restlessness set the boys swaying and moving aimlessly. The flickering light became brighter and the blows of the thunder were only just bearable. The littluns began to run about screaming. . . .
>
> Jack leapt onto the sand. 'Do our dance! Come on! Dance!'
>
> He ran stumbling through the thick sand to the open space of rock beyond the fire.
>
> Between the flashes of lightning the air was dark and terrible; and the boys followed him, clamorously. Roger became the pig, grunting and charging at Jack, who side-stepped. The hunters took their spears, the cooks took spits, and the rest clubs of firewood. A circling movement developed and a chant. While Roger mimed the terror of the pig, the littluns ran and jumped on the outside of the circle. Piggy and Ralph, under the threat of

the sky, found themselves eager to take a place in this demented but partially secure society. They were glad to touch the brown backs of the fence that hemmed in the terror and made it governable.

'Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!'

The movement became regular while the chant lost its first superficial excitement. And began to beat like a steady pulse. Roger ceased to be a pig and became a hunter, so that the centre of the ring yawned emptily. Some of the littluns started a ring on their own; and the complementary circles went round and round as though repetition would achieve safety of itself. There was the throb and stamp of a single organism. The dark sky was shattered by a blue-white scar. An instant later the noise was on them like the blow of a gigantic whip. The chant rose a tone in agony.

'Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!'

Now out of the terror rose another desire, thick urgent blind.

'Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!'

Again, the blue-white scar jagged above them and the sulphurous explosion beat down. The littluns screamed and blundered about, fleeing from the edge of the forest, and one of them broke the ring of the biguns in his terror. . . .

'Him', *'Him!'*

The circle became a horseshoe. A thing was crawling out of the forest. It came darkly, uncertainly. The shrill screaming that rose before the beast was like a pain. The beast stumbled into the horseshoe.

'Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!'

The blue-white scar was constant, the noise unendurable. Simon was crying out something about a dead man on a hill.

'Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood! Do him in!'

The sticks fell and the mouth of the new circle crunched and screamed. The beast was on its knees in the centre, its arms folded over its face. It was crying out against the abominable noise something about a body on a hill. The beast struggled forward, broke the ring, and fell over the steep edge of the rock onto the sand by the water. At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt on to the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws.

> Then the clouds opened and let down the rain like a waterfall. . . . Presently the heap broke up and figures staggered away. Only the beast lay still, a few yards from the sea. Even in the rain, they could see how small a beast it was; and already, its blood was staining the sand.
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> Now a great wind blew the rain sideways. . . . On the mountain top the parachute filled and moved; the figure slid, rose to its feet, spun, swayed down through a vastness of wet air and trod with ungainly feet the tops of the high trees; falling and still falling and the boys rushed screaming into the darkness. The parachute took the figure forward, furrowing the lagoon, and bumped it over the reef and out to sea,
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> Towards midnight the rain ceased and the clouds drifted away, so that the sky was scattered once more with the incredible lamps of stars. . . . Along the shoreward edge of the shallows the advancing clearness was full of strange moonbeam-bodied creatures with fiery eyes. . . . The water rose further and dressed Simon's coarse hair with brightness. . . . Somewhere over the darkened curve of the world the sun and the moon were pulling. . . . Softly, surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, Simon's dead body moved out towards the open sea.

What is Golding suggesting to us? Fundamentally, that violence is an evolutionary legacy and a reversion to primitive patterns programmed into us by our evolutionary past.

We can see this if we look at the behaviour to which the 'hunters' regress. The hunters, yes. By reason of evolutionary provenance, man is a carnivore, hence also a violent predator. Evolutionary biologists tell us meat-eating is, precisely, associated with the growth spurt involved in that emergence which we call hominisation – the larger, more complex human brain required the richest proteins; animal predation, in which homo sapiens shares, assures our survival; more than that, it underlies our higher development and flourishing. Multiply that antecedence of predation with the 'turbo' of mimetic and rivalrous desire, that peculiarly human phenomenon which, with Girard's help, we are just beginning to discover, together with its contagious and incremental dynamics, and one begins to see why humans are 'superviolent' – why we are nature's ultimate tigers.

Now look at the hunting dance. This is a form of mimetic group behaviour with, precisely, a runaway dynamic of crescendo towards

paroxysm. Normally, for our hunter-gatherer ancestors, the hunting dance would mimic the animal tracked: here, the pig actually hunted and killed. The animal, in such tribal rituals, is conjured up, in order to mobilise the hunters' own power over it, in anticipation of the hunt. However, the dance called for in this case (by Jack: the leader of the hunters become 'lord of the dance') is a variant form of that standard ritual. It is performed (by all of his tribe) to ward off everything they fear, not just the hunted animal, but also the darkness, all the whole awesome power of cosmic nature, the baleful will of the heavens over them ('the threat of the sky') and that larger, unnameable dread which they project onto their adversary, 'the Beast'.

We can see Golding's point. This is a form of exorcism and/or propitiation – those are the words we need to understand archaic religion, most especially, where it involves blood sacrifice: exorcism of that awesome dread; propitiation of the cosmic violence of the storm (Golding's text stresses the 'whip' of those lightning flashes, the 'blows' of thunder); propitiating, actually and in fact, the supposed author of those whip blows. Yes, because without knowing it, the terrified boys are projecting into the heavens a 'monstrous double', an adversary Other born out of their own inner violence and torment.

This dance is undertaken, as we see clearly, to process and manage their own obscure collective distress; its effect will be to cook up and distil, by mimetic contagion, their sense of the sacred. They enter into a self-induced frenzy or trance generating the most basic feelings of unanimity and group-power: through music (chanting, rhythm) and movement (circling, stamping). And the ritual becomes, in its climax, a form of runaway violence. Golding then shows us a mob beating or lynching of the adversary who, eerily, materialises out of the darkness and stumbles into their citadel (or circle); the circle that is also compared, tellingly, to a mouth, complete with a 'tearing of teeth and claws'. The boys collectively have become – and, as the crescendo of the dance reaches its sacrificial apex, they actually are – the Beast, i.e. the Other they most fear.

We can see how that dancing circle forms a 'demented but partially secure society'; how the boys are protected by 'the fence that hemmed in the terror and made it governable'. However, highlighted too is the way in which their trance, and its violence, are cognitively and morally blind: in their frenzy, they kill without knowing it – not an animal, or a malign spirit – but a fellow schoolboy who appears where they expect 'the Beast' to appear, out of the forest

darkness ('Him', 'Him'). We have all heard of wish-fulfilment; this is dread-fulfilment. It is nameless, inarticulate, undeciphered – and so self-fulfilling – dread.

What Girardian things should we take from this scene? Human violence is, at bottom, a mimetic phenomenon, a fascinated and fearful mirroring of the Other. It is originally and always, somewhere deep down, sacred violence (despite its apparently 'casual' and merely 'expedient' or 'instrumental' later developments and forms, which we recognise more easily, since that is what our culture expects to find). Yet, still today, human violence is sacralising in at least two important senses. First of all, negatively it demonises its Other but then it is also positively 'self-sacralising' (positively speaking, it divinises itself). Always, it is sacrificial requiring a victim; and, originally and in principle, that sacrifice is bloody.

It is also dynamic and that dynamism, marshalling all psychic resources, is obscurely sexual. It rises to a climax, which must have orgasmic relief in killing, in the spilling of blood. Violence is violation: we speak – how revealingly! – about 'blood lust' and we recognise its presence in the sex orgies and in the child sacrifice which feature in primitive religions, including, in the Bible, the rites practised among the Canaanite tribes surrounding Israel.

We notice, finally, the self-mystification involved in this scene of originary violence; and the irony it generates. Simon has come, precisely, to deliver the hunters from the superstitious dread that haunts them – and they kill him. They themselves exhibit the truth that the transcendent and baleful adversary they fear is, in fact, a 'monstrous double' of themselves, because they themselves 'project' heavenwards their own collective violence. In the language of Luke's gospel: 'They know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). That's a word about human self-misrecognition in general but, most especially, and quite crucially, it concerns human violence, pointing then also to a grievous and harmful self-mystification – and, ultimately, to a human misrecognition of God.

Perhaps we begin to see the pattern of Christian allusions in this passage? Who is killed? Simon, the – Jewish? – prophet; Simon, the deliverer (a Messiah figure, therefore); Simon, the scapegoat victim of a collective lynching: yes, this is a sort of crucifixion, meant to recall 'the dead man on a hill', who is made to pay for that blind frenzy which requires its victim, its blood-sacrifice. Simon is then also, we note, 'recognised' by the cosmos: there is a 'poetic' kind of endorsement, as the universe reclaims its own, its emissary victim, its prophet, its Messiah.

This is, of course, a muted or diminished echo of the Gospel theme of Resurrection. It is muted, diminished or elided for reasons that bear a moment's reflection, since they may well belong as much to ourselves, as to Golding or to his theme. Perhaps Golding does not believe in that element of the Christian story, while yet seeing its extraordinary pertinence. Perhaps he believes that 1950s Britain does not believe it any more? Perhaps he feels that his countrymen should be left nevertheless to chew on that striking and suddenly challenging pertinence.

We may refine further this play of speculative insight. Perhaps the favoured theories of atonement known to Golding in his postwar 1950s, amid what one academic has recently called 'The strange decline of Protestant Britain'[2] (dating back to that very decade), remind him too painfully of a fully natural or archaic religion. Perhaps he wants to show that this island 'tribe' has slipped back, precisely, to a stage of human development before and below the threshold of Christian revelation.

Perhaps, correspondingly, he mutes this theme for the most simple reason of all, which might be that, pre-dating René Girard, Golding never had the occasion to understand simply and clearly how the 'sacrifice of the Cross' is a replay of humanity's 'original scene' – albeit, a replay that changes everything.

At all events, we can say without any speculation, that Golding gives us, acknowledged by Girard, a deeply pertinent sketch of the sacred violence of human origins (if not – not yet – an insight into the strangely productive resolution of that drama to be found in the Gospels).

So now, what, specifically, is Girard's own scenario of founding murder?

2. Inaugural lecture of the Rt Rev Professor Ian Bradley at the University of St Andrews, 1 May 2018. This lecture is currently available and may be consulted on the University website. https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/staff/teaching/teacherstalk/inaugurallectures/2017-2018/. Date of access: 7 December, 2019.