

Monotheism and idolatry: Preface to a conversation

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Introduction

Some privileges are fairly useless. For instance, the privilege of the foreigner's insight. As a professional foreigner, I have this in spades, for I've lived in several countries other than my country of birth, and indeed live in one such at the moment. These countries have done me the honour of allowing me to spend time in them, and even more, to interact with highly educated and cultured members of their respective societies, to listen to how they talk about what is going on in their midst, to watch how they participate in events and processes. Yet without my actually being a long term participant myself in these events or in any decision-making concerning them. In other words, I get treated to a great deal of locally-generated insight without taking any responsibility for how that insight is achieved.

In addition to this, as I spend time in a place, like most long-stay foreigners, I detect, more or less verbally, a variety of incoherences, areas where the self-presentation and self-image of the inhabitants is out of sync with the reality which I perceive around me. I look at them with an eye formed elsewhere, ears which pick up dissonance where they seem to detect harmony. I'm not here referring to the sort of critical insights thrown up by the usual discussions between the different actors, political parties, the media and so forth in any of our countries – but rather the sort of insight which detects weirdnesses, uglinesses as well as things unconsciously admirable, discrepancies so embedded in all the local parties to critical discussion that they do not themselves seem to have any awareness of them, let alone could they reach perception of them, short of some complete collapse of their way of interacting, of being together.

However, this critical insight of mine, even supposing that it has any inherent interest or worth, is quite useless in the countries in question, since even when I can articulate it at all (and I have tried) the response from locals tends to be, reasonably enough, to interpret it from within the resources made available to them by the reigning critical discourse in their own society. They either treat me politely by including me in that discourse, or to let me know, usually by body language, that I don't know what I'm talking about – what I'm saying just doesn't jive with any form of self-understanding that is available to them. So, my insight is either so true that it can't be understood, or it is not so much false as simply meaningless. Hence my starting point: that of the uselessness of the privilege of the foreigner's insight.

There is of course one country, one society, concerning which I have much sensitivity, but not much critical insight, and that is of course the country and society of my birth and upbringing. I am as blind here, in this country in which we are meeting, as any of my interlocutors in the countries in which I have lived. Even more so, perhaps, since in addition to my awareness of my country having been strongly formed up until the last time I lived here stably, which was, in my case, around 1979, I have also come back several times to live here for periods, and have grown dismayed at how little I am part of anything, have sympathy for it, or understand what makes it tick. I have become, as professional foreigners tend to become, someone slightly parodically fixed in a way of being of my nation from a couple of generations ago. Resting on a self-image that projects me coming from a place with many Miss Marples, and very few murders, a country in which the *Daily Mail*, edited just round the corner from where we are meeting, is a newspaper rather than the whitewashed portal of a heart of darkness.

Just so, I imagine that some of you, who are here as visitors, whether short term or long term, will have critical insights into this country. Should you attempt to share them with me, I will either politely bend over backwards to show I appreciate them within the terms of reference my belonging makes available to me, or my body will give away an impatience which lets you know the meaninglessness to me of your insight. And you will quite rightly appreciate that I haven't really got your point.

I apologise for having started with this long preamble, but it seemed to me an appropriate way into a discussion about monotheism and idolatry. I wanted to illustrate two points: just how difficult really useful self-criticism is, and just how difficult and delicate a matter is the communication of genuine critical insight from another source outside ourselves. And yet there is no helpful discussion of idolatry that isn't founded in these matters.

1.

We are meeting together quite specifically as Muslims, Jews and Christians, members of three monotheistic groups, to discuss whether the thought of René Girard can be of help to us. Our hosts have asked me to address the issue of monotheism and idolatry. So I thought it appropriate to begin by looking for a helpful way to face up to the difficulty of talking about the matter at all. I take it for granted that there is no such thing as a neutral place from which any of us can step outside our belonging to talk about idolatry. The term “idol” is always going to be either an accusatory term, as when we talk about other people's idols, or a self-critical term, as when we attempt to examine our own. In the first, accusatory case, pointing out to other people their idols is mostly useless, unless backed up by *force majeure*, for either they do not understand what you are talking about, or they understand you very clearly as someone who is utterly hostile to them and things that they hold very dear, and so reject what you have to say. But then, in the second, self-critical case, compared to what our accusers can see in us, our self-criticism is unlikely to get very far. For by definition, we see what we see thanks to our belonging, and it is very difficult to see what forms and structures that belonging from within it, except in moments of great crisis, when belonging threatens to dissolve.

There is of course one way in which a discussion of the sort that is proposed to us here, among people of quite different ways of belonging, can seem to yield some light, and that is when we find each others' company so pleasant that we find a certain number of points in common concerning how to talk about idols, and then look away from ourselves, as it were, toward the “benighted” among our respective groups who don't understand things in the same way. Then we can congratulate

ourselves on our comity, shared understanding, and capacity for dialogue. We will, in fact, have created a new in-group at the expense of others whose idolatry is only too clear to us. While, of course, I very much hope that we do find each others' company pleasant, I am inclined to think that such a unity, at the expense of a shared accusation of others, would be, in itself, a seriously idolatrous construction.

Instead then, of a search for common ground which supposes idolatry-free participants, I am searching for a way in which idolators might be at least one of the parties to a discussion. And I say one of the parties, since I have no right to assume that those of another belonging than my own might regard themselves as idolators, even as a thought experiment. I cannot assume a shared complicity, when it is both the value and the very possibility of coming to awareness of complicity that is in question.

The only way, that I have been able to glimpse, that might get around this problem is when at least one of the parties to a discussion is at least partly aware of their own idolatry, and is aware of this not only as an intellectual matter, something in search of a merely definitional correction. Rather the awareness is in them as a *pain* associated with a sense of responsibility for the consequences for others and for themselves of their idolatry. Such a party might be in a place where they feel strong enough to be able to recognise that their capacity for self-criticism is vastly inadequate to the task at hand, massively superficial given the depths of the problem. *Such a party might then reach out to a friend and ask for help.*

There are at least two positions from which I might reach out to a friend to ask for help. One is if I am floundering so badly that I reach out to grab anything that the friend will offer, in which case I probably won't be in any position to discern whether the advice offered is actually helpful to me, or whether it won't be an alien emergency patch on what keeps me going, rather than something organically constructive. The other is if I am asking from a position of at least enough strength that I have some self-critical faculties running, am to some extent aware of how those faculties work, and am aware that they are inadequate. However I also trust that those faculties are not so inadequate that I won't be able even to detect the helpfulness to me of what is being offered. In other words, I trust that I will be able to distinguish between, on the one hand, the sort

of devastating critique which might be offered to me which can only come as a putting down, a declaration that I can only really be rescued if I agree to become someone else; and on the other, an insight which while it does not flatter me, is at least sympathetic enough to what I think I'm about that I can begin to undergo the arduous process of integrating it into my self-understanding.

If I am in this second position, then perhaps my reaching out to a friend for help can begin by my attempting to set out for them what I think are the tools of self-critical discernment that are available to me. Then my friend can, if they want, discern elements of those tools with which they can work in communicating to me something of what they see, and in fact communicate it in such a way as I can hear.

A word about the friend. Anyone who makes themselves vulnerable in the face of another, runs the risk of having laid themselves open either to indifference or to attack. Because whether the friend really is one or not cannot be determined in advance. *Their friendliness will be shown in the quality of their honouring of that vulnerability.*

2.

I apologise for the length of time it has taken to get to this point, but it seems to me that, in a discussion of this sort, process, being relational, is everything and content is secondary; and in a meeting which is centred around the possibility of the helpfulness of René Girard's thought for shared life between us, that it is appropriate to sketch out first some hint of the relational structure of our being able to talk about monotheism and idolatry at all.

So I'd like to make an attempt, as a Catholic theologian, to ask for help in coming to a better sense of my own involvement (and to the extent that we are tarred with the same brush, that of my sisters and brothers in that faith), in idolatry. There is an initial problem with my request, in that *only my friend can determine whether or not I am in fact sufficiently pained by the reality of my own idolatry for it to be worth talking to me.* I might be pretending to be pained as a sort of *captatio benevolentiae* so as to find a subtle way to tell my friend what I think of them, a sort of interreligious passive-aggressive move to enable me better to devastate

them on the rebound, with some supposed insight into them. If my friend is at all suspicious that this is in fact what is going on, then of course they are wise to keep away. I haven't really reached a place of genuine pain where my asking for help is at all sincere. I am just being manipulative.

The difficulty is compounded by the reverse possibility: if my pain is genuine, might it not be so deep that I'm inclined to jettison the whole of my belonging and take on, or try to take on, a new belonging offered to me by someone else, maybe even by my friend? In which case my friend may be inclined to offer not a critique of my idolatry that is compatible with and organic to my belonging, but their own belonging instead. That would be another way of making this conversation impossible. So indeed, the place of conversation is a very delicate one: one where I am genuinely pained enough to be sincere in my seeking of help, and so where the help might deepen my appreciation of my idolatry in ways that are comprehensible to me, and yet where I am not so distraught that I risk devastation.

Well, clearly enough, it is not I who can discern whether my pain is sincere, or whether I am too devastated. Only my friend can do that, and the degree of either my pain or my devastation will only become apparent during the course of our interaction. And I won't control the interaction, since in the degree of my sincerity and of my ability to trust, I will in fact be allowing myself to be held in my friend's regard and will be receiving myself back from them, somewhat anew, through that regard, and they from mine. *The interaction will control us both.* That is both the danger, and the potential reward, of friendship.

3.

I offer then, as evidence of some degree of penitential pain, the fact of taking René Girard's thought seriously. It is the most striking offer that I know of the possibility of self-criticism made in a way that is at least consonant with a traditional Christian sense of what it is to be human, and where that adventure is going. Whether Girard's insight even begins to be useful to anyone from outside that belonging, I cannot tell. I won't attempt to sketch out Girard's ideas here, for we have among us at this meeting at least two people, Michael Kirwan and Wolfgang Palaver, who

have enriched us with complete book-length introductions¹. What I will try to do instead is to offer some initial hints of how Girard's insight has taught me concerning idolatry.

In the first place, if we accept that human culture was brought into being, that we first discovered ourselves as humans, through the workings of the random victim mechanism, then idolatry is very much involved in the "méconnaissance", the miscognition of what is going on, that has enabled us to survive our own violence. Our security, our peace, undoubted goods, depend on a trust in the goodness of something that is not really good, but is in fact the fruit of our self-deception. If that is the case, and if we are in some way able to move beyond that self-deception, if we have in fact received any insight from Heaven, from outside ourselves, which shows us what we are doing, then it is clear that idolatry is not something cosmetic, applied like the wrong sort of make-up, to a basically non-idolatrous human condition. It is something close to being co-terminous with our condition.

What is more, our idolatry is particularly associated with that which we call good. It is too easy to regard idolatry as a bad thing, and thus associate it with forms of behaviour which we call bad. The most upsetting of the insights which Girard has given us is that: given that *violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred* what *others* may call idols, *we* call gods. It is in the things that we hold *dear*, and regard as a source of goodness, of identity, of strength, of unity, of wealth and of belonging, that we are especially likely to invest the force of our idolatry. More than ever as I have tried to live a Christian life do I find myself wondering whether anyone can show us how to cope with *the dangerousness of our goodness*. Anyone who can help me apply this insight to my life, and the life of my Church in such a way that I, or we, can hear it and learn from it, is my friend.

One of the criteria which have emerged as Girard's thought developed, and which I have found useful is the distinction between the sacred and the holy. In much discourse, the two are used in ways which are sometimes synonymous, sometimes overlapping. But I have found in Girard's thought a way of making sense of both words which is rigorous

¹ Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, London: DLT 2004; and Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, East Lansing: Michigan University Press 2013.

and allows of no overlap except in as far as the latter subverts the former from within. The sacred, whether we are referring to something in an archaic culture, or a contemporary culture, whether it is apparently religious or not, is something which is structured sacrificially: it tends to present itself as a form of power and goodness which demands attitudes of subservience and respect, and in the face of which some peoples and things are regarded as potential contaminants to be excluded. The holy can only be detected by penitent idolators in our relief at being set free from being run by the sacred. If Girard is right, then God has nothing at all to do with sacrality, and any reading off from sacrality to God is a dangerously idolatrous delusion. The Holiness of God is only available to us as a still small voice amidst the noisy rubble of the sacred.

So, once we have sensed this, then what could conceivably be the right way to worship God? To engage in the appropriate form of *latria*? Anyone who can help me apply this to my life and the life of my Church in such a way that I, or we, can hear it and learn from it, is my friend.

From this distinction between the sacred and the holy I deduce a fairly simple description of an idol: *an idol is that which demands sacrifice*. It always presents itself to us under the appearance of the good, the necessary, the just. And it always diminishes our humanity, displacing it in favour of something that *is not*, that neither sees, nor hears nor feels. God, by contrast, not only does not demand sacrifice, but comes towards us idolators as one who seeks to make us human by setting us free from the illusions of sacrificially-achieved goodness.

Where I have found Girard's insight particularly helpful is that Girard's understanding of desire as essentially mimetic and always starting outside ourselves means that there is always a continuity between any personal idolatry and the idolatry of the group in which I live. So, for instance, our dominant neo-liberal economic system, on the one hand, and anorexia, adolescent psychosis, or other forms of apparently individual pathology are ways, different in degree not kind, in which human bodies are run by the same socialized patterns of desire.

Thus, when Pope Francis talked, early in his pontificate, about the idolatry of money, and referred to the "globalization of indifference", I

do not know if he had read Paul Dumouchel², or Andre Orléan³, who have brought Girard's thought to bear in this area. But if he has, then he means something much more than that rich countries and rich people in poor countries are increasingly indifferent to the plight of the poor elsewhere. For those authors suggest that our modern economic pattern of desire has allowed us to have been weaned from "hot" forms of solidarity with each other, forms which very easily spill into enacting vengeance; our weaning from them thus enables an ever freer flow of competitive imitation. But this has as an automatic, unintended, but absolutely regular consequence a systemic blindness to those too weak to thrive. Our idol teaches us to sacrifice to it with a good conscience, producing blindness and indifference on the way. Indifference is a modern victimary construct. Anyone who can help me apply this insight to my life and to the life of my Church in such a way that I, or we, can hear from it and learn from it, is my friend.

4.

Finally, and not as any sort of conclusion, but merely because time is too short, one of the ways that Girard helps me is in having offered us what I might call a narrative anthropology. The distinction which Girard makes between, on the one hand, narratives which are told from the perspective of the persecutor, the survivors, and thus which tend to cover up what has really been going on; and, on the other hand, narratives which are told from the perspective of the victim, a much rarer phenomenon, since the latter is all too often dead. I find this very challenging, since there is no re-telling of stories, whether my own story, or my reading of, for instance, sacred narratives, which is not run by one or other of these perspectives.

Just to give a small and apparently unrelated example: there is a parable in St Luke's Gospel in which we are told of two men praying in the Temple. One, a highly religiously observant man, standing at the front, congratulates himself on his religious observance, and compares himself favourably with a tax-collector, who is skulking at the back. This latter,

² *The Ambivalence of Scarcity*, forthcoming from MSU Press in 2014.

³ *The Empire of Value*, forthcoming from MIT Press in 2014.

not daring to look up, is praying “God have mercy on me, a sinner”. We are told that the latter left the house of prayer justified before God, while the former did not. Now it is perfectly possible to read this as though the problem with the highly observant person was that he was impenitent, while the tax-collector was penitent. It becomes comfortable therefore to tell this story in such a way that we can hold onto our idols. So we know that religious people, in order to be good, must always include a confessional element in their prayer, while the tax-collector, genuinely a bad man, is still a bad man, but at least has the saving grace of knowing this. This can I tell a pious-sounding story in order to ensure that nothing really changes. However, if Girard is right, as is my bet, then this story becomes much more shocking, rocking my idolatry to its core. For it is what passes as good in our midst that is revealed to have nothing at all to do with God, there is no analogy available from it, while the shame and desperation of a genuinely despicable man is close to friendship with God. For the tax-collector was not a modest and unfairly-hated modern employee of a state bureaucratic system: he was a collaborator with a hostile, punitive, and rapacious foreign regime, someone who had chosen to flourish at the expense of his fellow countrymen. An enemy.

What on earth can it mean as part of our exposure to our own idolatry that such a person can be but a broken heart away from friendship with God, while the normal forms of what we consider good are a pointless application of cosmetics, a fake face before God? Anyone who can help keep alive the sense of the reality of the distance between the two as it applies to my life and to the life of my Church in such a way that I, or we, can hear from it and learn from it, is my friend.

And of course, as a Christian, I can tell the story of how Caiaphas and Pilate handed over Jesus to execution so that it becomes a form of divinisation by sacrifice. In this account the principal religious authority unwittingly yielded High Priestly authority to Jesus, and the principal imperial authority unwittingly handed over Royal authority to Jesus, who now reigns as Prophet, Priest and King, from his throne, the Cross. This then authorizes his followers to exercise combined royal and priestly power over all nations. Which of course, is to turn Jesus into a god, and is a form of paganism based around an idol which demands sacrifice.

Or I can learn to tell the story in such a way that, once again shockingly, the only icon of God available to me is one which shows up the completely fake basis of all religious authority, depending ultimately on a sacrificial lie; and simultaneously, the completely fake basis of all civil authority, depending ultimately on a murderous convenience. Here the only non-idolatrous perception of God we are offered is as a seditious blasphemer on his way to a shameful death.

But this by definition means that my idolatry is not a simple matter of misinformation – the wrong god, or the wrong number of gods – something capable of simple educational correction. It is something much more serious. I am not merely mistaken about who God is, I am actually *averse* to who God is, as any human is averse towards a seditious blasphemer of whatever I hold sacred, on that person's way to a shameful death. Which means that my being set free from idolatry means beginning to detect a form of love, mercy, and power that is actively breaking through my ingrained hostility to it. The problem is not principally one of cognitive inadequacy faced with incomparable hugeness, but of a pattern of desire unaware of its own hostility. Anyone who helps me better to understand God whose loving communication with me is a certain breaking through my own structural hostility to God, whose befriending of me starts with me as his enemy, and anyone who helps my Church live out this discovery of a completely unknown love which traverses our hostility, is my friend.

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