

# ○ THE VIOLENCE OF IDOLATRY

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This essay foregrounds both representations of monotheism in the Bible – God as infinitely charitable, infinitely giving, with blessings for all and God as exclusivist, possessive and intolerant. However, it is the latter construct that enables us to use God as an authorizing instrument for our violence. I argue that when possession (of us by God and of God by us) underwrites the narrative construction of our identity, violence seems to be inevitable.

In Osama Bin Laden's view, 'the world is split into two camps: the camp of believers and the camp of infidels'. His rhetoric of violence is filled with God: 'God attacked America at its heart and filled the American people with fear'. Rather than being the language of a deranged person, it is an invocation of an all too familiar monotheistic God of vengeance, a God who destroys his enemies and rejoices at their defeat, the God invoked at the Crusades to destroy Muslims, during the conquest of the New World to destroy Natives, during the Spanish Inquisition to expel the Jews, during ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, during the invasion of Iraq – and the list of religiously authorized violence goes on. How does this happen? What gives rise to such perversity? In theory, monotheism should be heir to the philosophical problem of the One and the Many. Parmenides, Plato and Plotinus should be its companions. But in practice, monotheism was born and reared in a very different soil – the climate of group identity. The monotheistic God was first the God of a people; hence, from the start, there was a particularism built into monotheism, despite its reach toward universalism. There may be only one God but he is not God for everyone: he is the God of a group. In its beginnings, belonging to the group was the focus of monotheism's energy. This belonging is a fraught: its condition is possession, and as I will show, that understanding of identity as belonging, as possession, is the wellspring of religious violence.<sup>1</sup>

The holy scriptures have not only inspired charity and hope, they have also been deployed as a weapon to degrade peoples who have been classified as infidels, pagans, and idolaters. For when a people forges its identity negatively, against some 'other', too easily, 'Us as distinguished from Them' turns into 'Us versus Them', – in religious parlance, believers vs. infidels. This means that in their very process of defining and defending the borders of their religious identity, people often defy their religious ethics. I am not the first to say this and I won't be the last. Jeremiah stood on the steps of the Temple of Jerusalem when worshippers streamed past him, to warn them that their abuses of their fellow men denied them the divine favor they sought through ritual (Jer. 7:5-7). Erasmus was impatient that monks worried too much about the color of their habits and not enough about feeding the poor. Matthew Arnold defined religion as heightened ethical sensibility, so genocide in the name of God makes no sense. So before we extol the exodus as a magnificent myth of liberation in contrast to many other foundational myths of conquests, we should also ask, 'What about the Canaanites? the conquered Canaanites?'

We can discern two poles of representation of monotheism in the Bible. One endorses generosity: God is depicted as infinitely charitable, infinitely giving, with blessings for all. In Exodus, the story of manna offers the image of a God who rains food from the heavens, enough for everyone. The notion that some would want to hoard, to take more than they needed, is addressed in a remarkable narrative that schools the Israelites in an equitable distribution of their resource:

‘That’, said Moses to them, ‘is the bread Yahweh gives you to eat. This is Yahweh’s command: Everyone must gather enough of it for his needs’. When they measured in an omer of what they had gathered, the man who had gathered more had not too much, the man who had gathered less had not too little. Each found he had gathered what he needed (Ex. 16:15-18).

But the Israelites’ failure to accept this divinely ordained distribution of resources – each according to his needs – engenders greed. When they hoard their food, it rots and indicts them:

Moses said to them, ‘No one must keep any of it for tomorrow’. But some would not listen and kept part of it for the following day, and it bred maggots and smelt foul; and Moses was angry with them (Ex. 16:19-20).

Despite all evidence to the contrary – despite their starving in the wilderness – the Israelites are asked to trust in a God who will provide and they are asked to base their ethics on such a belief in divine generosity so that they will not hoard.

This vision of generosity and bounty recurs in the New Testament where Jesus miraculously multiplies the loaves and fishes to feed everyone. But even these stunning visions of generosity can be twisted into the meaning when the Bible is invoked to legitimize hatred of the other, as it so often is. In an op ed about the Albanian refugees fleeing to Italy, a spokesman for the Italian right wrote:

We can offer them a plate of pasta but not open the cafeterias. Even Jesus who multiplied bread and fishes did not open trattorias. He transformed water into wine, but, it seems to me, only once, and even then, for a wedding. Albania, like Bosnia, is not our problem, but the problem of Europe.

At the other end of the spectrum, monotheism is depicted as endorsing exclusion and intolerance. Here, divine favor and blessings are rendered as scarce so they must be competed for, inspiring deadly rivalries like the first fratricide, the story of Cain and Abel. While centuries of Christian theology have focused on the ‘original sin’, I turned my attention to the next narrative in Genesis, the story of Cain and Abel, for here, the first brothers commit the first murder, and so long as we continue to murder our brothers, we are the heirs of Cain. Interestingly, the story depicts God as *implicated* in the problem of deadly rivalry rather than *solving* it. The story depicts both brothers offering a sacrifice to God, Abel from the flock and Cain from the soil, but God inexplicably ‘looks with favor’ upon Abel and his offering but does not ‘look with favor’ upon Cain and his. Devastated, Cain murders Abel in a jealous rage. As a thought experiment, we could wonder what would have happened if the story had described God accepting both of their sacrifices, thereby promoting cooperation between the sower and the shepherd instead of violent competition. This deeply troubling depiction of divinity is not unique to that story, for God is depicted as playing favorites repeatedly, with someone receiving his blessings at someone else’s expense – some are blessed and some are cursed. As a drunken Cassio puts it in *Othello*, ‘God’s above all, and there be souls that must be saved and there be souls must not be saved’. In the story of Jacob and Esau, after Jacob steals his elder brother’s blessing, the unsuspecting Esau

approaches his father to ask for his blessing – only to learn that his younger brother has already been blessed, so there is no blessing left for him:

When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, 'Bless me – me too, my father!' But he said, 'Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing ... Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?' Isaac answered Esau, 'I have made him lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So what can I possibly do for you, my son?'

And then Esau asks a profound question, one that resonates throughout the history of religious strife: 'Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!' Then Esau wept aloud.

This ancestral myth of Jacob/Israel and Esau/Edom, with its terrible answer to Esau's pointed question, points to an interminable future of violence between peoples. There will be no blessed future for the Edomites, the enemies of ancient Israel (Gen. 27:30-37). Scarcity impels this pain: What if the authors had imagined the Edomites and Israelites enjoying equally blessed futures? What if there had been two blessings? Would the cultural legacy of the Bible have been a less violent one? Would it have been more difficult to use the Bible as a weapon to degrade those who have strayed from the one jealous God? Surely, we would still have had the Crusades, the Inquisition, the genocides of modernity motivated by religious identity, but would the perpetrators have had to look elsewhere in their cultural legacy, other than representations of the will of God as recorded in his authorized text, to authorize their hate-crimes?

I believe that the role of biblical narratives in our understandings of collective identity, in the ways in which we imagine peoples, can hardly be overestimated. Encoding Western culture's central myth of collective identity, the Bible grounds it in belonging. In the narrative, a transcendent deity breaks into history with the demand that the people he constitutes obey the laws he institutes and first and foremost among those laws is the requirement that they pledge allegiance to him and to him alone: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me', as the familiar commandment puts it. In this story, a people who will be the ancient Israelites are forged by their worship of one deity and what makes others the 'other' – Egyptian, Moabite, Ammonite, Canaanite, Perizzite, Hittite, or Hurrian – is their worship of other gods. When ancient Israel is forged negatively as a collective identity – against the other – that is also figured as against other deities, and so when Israel is threatened, it is not by the power of other peoples or other nations, but by the power and wrath of her own God because she has wavered in her exclusive loyalty to him. Inclinations toward polytheism are repeatedly figured as sexual infidelity: 'I am a jealous God, you will have none but me'; and Israel is castigated for 'whoring after' other gods, thereby imperiling her 'purity': 'so shameless was her whoring that at last she polluted the country'. Jeremiah's kinky confusion of idolatry and adultery condemns Israel for 'committing adultery with lumps of stone and pieces of wood' (Jer. 3:9).

These preoccupations with divine and sexual fidelity are part of an understanding of collective identity as a people set apart, with boundaries that could be mapped, ownership that could be titled; they are to be the exclusive possession of the deity – and none other – and they are to have exclusive allegiance to him, and to none other. Not only does God possess the people, but the

people possess the land and men possess women. This possession is the dark side of monotheism. Delimiting identity as a possession is fraught with violence, both in history and in Biblical narratives – which could also, by the way, be plausibly read more as a warning than a recommendation of such a doctrine of possession.

In the biblical discourse, the ownership of land and women is deeply homologous (Locke understood Adam's authority over the land as the same as his authority over Eve);<sup>2</sup> both land and women are conquerable territory, both have borders that must be kept intact – with a host of purity laws expressing anxiety about bodily emissions and countless warnings about the foreigner's potential to make the land impure – and both, like any valuable property, must be defended against theft. But the violence that continually erupts around this ownership belies its hazards: exclusive rights to the people prove impossible, and their multiple allegiances are the grounds for exile and extinction. Ezekiel 16 offers an extended allegory of Israel as a whore, bringing into sharp relief the violence of possession and the nexus of adultery, defiled land, and idolatry. It tells the story of a child being born and growing up wild in the field, and when she matures into puberty, of her being owned, sexually and materially, by Yahweh:

And I passed by you and I looked on you and behold, your time was the time of love. And I spread my skirt over you and I covered your nakedness. And I swore to you and I entered into a covenant with you and you became Mine.

She is now washed, anointed, dressed, wrapped, covered, and adorned with silks, fine linen, gold and silver. But then young Israel commits adultery with the nations: with Egypt, Assyria, Canaan, Chaldea, with, not incidentally, all of Israel's enemies:

At every head of the highway you have built your high place and have made your beauty despised, and have parted your feet to all who passed by, and have multiplied your fornications. You have whored with the sons of Egypt ... You have whored with the sons of Assyria without being satisfied. You have multiplied your fornication in the land of Canaan.

The emphasis on property is underscored by her punishment: it describes her being stripped of her wealth, of her luxurious garments, before being brutally stoned and stabbed to death:

Because your lewdness was poured out and your nakedness was bared ... I will uncover your nakedness to them, and they will see all your nakedness. They shall also strip you of your clothes and shall take your beautiful things and leave you naked and bare ... and they shall stone you with stones and cut you with their swords.

The word for uncover, *gala*, also means, 'go into exile'. No longer covered, the adulteress is no longer owned from one point of view, no longer protected from another. Israel has become a whore in exile. The violence of possession is not just a metaphor. As Serbs took over the territory inhabited by Muslims, murdering men, they systematically raped women, holding them in captivity during their pregnancy in order to claim not only land but progeny. It is difficult to call attention to how impossible the notion of possession is, that we cannot really own anything. Not only can objects of possession be taken away by others, they can defy being owned on their

own accord – they can break, wither and die, making persistent efforts to appropriate land, dwellings, women and portable property futile. Territorial claims turn out to be squatter’s rights, marriage contracts cannot command love, even divine ownership of humankind fails. It seems we not only kill in order to own, but also we kill because we cannot own. In the biblical narrative, this violence erupts with the revelation of the covenant itself: when Moses comes down from the mountain with the tablets in his hand that create the people as the people possessed by the one God who must obey him, he discovers them worshipping another:

‘Whoever is for the Lord, come to me’, he said, and all the Levites rallied to Him. ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says, “Gird on your sword, every man of you, and quarter the camp from gate to gate killing one his brother, another his friend, another his neighbor”’. The sons of Levi carried out the command of Moses and about three thousand people perished that day (Ex. 32: 26-28).

And the violent rhetoric permeates the Bible, with Hosea imagining God tearing the Israelites apart:

I will be a lion to them a leopard lurking by the way  
Like a bear robbed of her cubs I will pounce on them  
and tear the flesh around their hearts  
the dogs shall eat their flesh and the wild beasts tear them to pieces (Hosea 13:4-8).

What is the alternative? The challenge is to imagine land, people, women, not as objects of possession, as objects at all, but as expressions of infinite giving, and the religions of the book offer resources for this too. In Jean-Luc Marion’s distinction between the idol and the icon, ‘The idol presents itself to man’s gaze in order that representation, and hence knowledge, *can seize hold of it*’ (Marion 1991, 10). For many thinkers, biblical through Reformation through contemporary, ‘the invisible made visible’ is the very definition of idolatry, claiming not only access to the divine but also manipulation over it. But opening onto plenitude, the icon defies possession for it defies limits.

It is because of the real and palpable scarcities in the world that we are in danger of responding with competition and violence, and therefore that mode of apprehension must be put into question, to enable us to share goods and to circulate them rather than hoard them like the Israelites hoarded manna. The possession of objects must be contrasted with the love that knows no possession,<sup>3</sup> a love presupposing an endless supply – even before the reality of dearth. The Israelites were asked to believe in plenty precisely when they had nothing to eat but manna, and the loaves and fishes multiplied precisely when there were not enough. These miracles are not a testimony that real dearth will disappear if we have enough faith; rather, they are a recommendation for generosity, to imitate divine generosity.

If, from an idolatrous perspective, monotheism depicts multiple loves as adulterating, (as pollution, a base admixture), constituting faithlessness against God, an idolatry that pollutes the purity of the land and the people themselves, issuing in violence and exile, from another perspective monotheism offers a vision of love that is not reducible to possession, and that is not burdened by rules of obedience to one, that is not exclusive and abhorrent of the other. This love is not

driven to violations of exclusivity that spawns violence. For monotheism also has a proliferating dimension in blessings to be fruitful and multiply, embracing pluralism, loving others as thyself, taking responsibility for the widow, orphan and poor – a generous love that contrasts to the exclusivism of ‘obey me or lose all’. Kant puts the question of instrumentality at the center of his ethics, but even more than ethics, however, instrumentality is finally a question about love. Instrumentality may infect ethics, but it destroys love. Love begins precisely where instrumentality ends. You can do good and still be instrumental: you may want to secure the safety of apparent for your own well-being. But you cannot love and be instrumental. Or possess. Possession is the absolute antithesis of love.

Infidelity is not the opposite of fides, of faith, for faith does not speak the language of possession, threatening with the demand of obedience. Faith, like Hosea’s *hesed* or love, is unrequired, unrequited and unconditional. ‘With love, it is about neither object nor appropriation, it is about, on the contrary, the other as such, irreducibly distinct and autonomous’ (Marion 2002, 75). Love has no interest in possessing the other, whether epistemologically, ideologically, or materially, but in embracing the other in full life instead of decreeing her objectification or death for possession. Love does not speak the language of subjection, exile, terror, and murder.

Where there are prophecies, they will fail: where there are tongues, they will cease; where there is knowledge, it will vanish away. Love never fails (I Cor 13:8). These sentiments are also biblical. Pauline, to be precise, but I am not able to go down a road of Christian triumphalism, of love over law ... For the Hebrew Bible offers a vision of monotheism that is alien to idolatry, defined against, not the idols of other peoples, but the idol of possession. This is the monotheism of plenitude, of infinite giving, of love, that is described from the creation through the prophets. Idolatry, then, is not only about the worship of images, of mistaking an image of god or a vehicle for the true god, nor is it only about the worship of false gods. It encompasses wider meanings than the idolatry of ‘replacement’ wherein worship of the wrong object is substituted for worship of the right one. It also includes the radical understanding voiced succinctly by Wittgenstein: ‘All that philosophy can do is to destroy idols. And that means not making any new ones—say out of the “absence of idols.”’<sup>4</sup> It is especially those who are sensitive to the limits of language, like Pseudo-Dionysius or Maimonides, like Marion or Levinas, who are also sensitive to erecting new idols. They too would distinguish between the object of worship—if it is false or misleading, leading to a false life, one devoted to the wrong pursuit, an unworthy cause—and the manner of worship, one that approaches the wrong in a troubling way. As Halbertal and Margalit (1992) remind us, the Hebrew term for idolatry—*avodah zarah* literally means ‘strange worship’ and that strangeness registers in two senses: as the worship of a strange thing, but also as a strange way of worshipping.

I have focused on a very strange way of worshipping: possessing, and noted the violent cost of that idolatry. When we imagine that we possess God, we can use him as an authorizing instrument for our violence. Such a God can authorize, for us, the slaughter of our enemies. But depicting God as intolerant of the traditions of other people, as slaughtering our enemies, strikes me as a deeply impoverished version of divinity, one that speaks more about human intolerance and violence than about God. When we imagine that God possesses us, we can explain the terrors of history as his righteous wrath for our infidelity, and the possession and resulting violence trickle down. If I have been suspicious about the adequacy of narratives about God, it is not only because

such narratives tend to be projections of human life, human desire, human possession, and human violence but also because of the idolatry of any such description. To speak of representation as idolatry is not new: it is several thousand years old. But to speak of the idol, not as a visual representation, a statue, a painting, but a verbal one, a narrative, seems to still be somewhat controversial. And yet it is our narrative idolatries that hold us in their grip.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I am using monotheism in the broad sense to mean allegiance to one principle, rather than in the strictly ontological sense of the existence of many or one God. Scholarly consensus is that ancient Israel was henotheistic, that is, acknowledging the existence of many gods but allegiance to one. Certainly, polytheism, when it develops an exclusive allegiance, is also fraught with violence. See my fuller discussion of the problem of inclusion and exclusion in Schwartz 1997: 1–13.
- <sup>2</sup> See Locke (1960, section 48, 210).
- <sup>3</sup> The mystical Christian tradition embraces this love without possession. See especially Bernard of Clairvaux.
- <sup>4</sup> From Wittgenstein's, *The Big Typescript*, Manuscript 213 and 413.

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Cite this article as: Schwartz, Regina. 2008. 'The Violence of Idolatry' *The Bible and Critical Theory* 4 (1): pp. 2.1–2.7. DOI: 10.2104/bc080002.