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Feast of the Holy Guardian Angels

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## PREFACE

The first time I heard of the New Age Movement was just before my wedding in August 1987. Directly after the wedding ceremony, one of my dearest friends from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a secular Jewish Methodist, who was also studying transcendental meditation, was planning to hitch-hike to Iowa in order to catch up with some people gathering in anticipation of a tremendous spiritual event. After converging, they planned to head to Guatemala to participate in the “Harmonic Convergence.” According to my friend, after this event, everyone would be able to realize their inherent divinity. My girlfriend never made it to Guatemala but spent the “Convergence” somewhere meditating in the middle of an Iowan corn field, anticipating a tremendous change of universal consciousness.

The Harmonic Convergence reportedly began on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 1987, according to an astrological calculation by the Mayan-Aztec priest-king, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, worshipped as one of four creator gods. He was said to rule over a certain cycle of history, *Quetzalcoatl*. From *Quetzalcoatl*, a new cycle of peace and happiness would issue forth, formally ending a cyclical era of “hell.”<sup>1</sup> In traditional western esotericism, however, the New Age had always been associated with the coming astrological Age of Aquarius. The advent of the Age of Aquarius would supposedly overturn the present astrological Age of Pisces, which was associated with traditional Christianity. As the song written by a 1970’s group called The 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension claimed, a golden age of “harmony and understanding” was “dawning.” Unlike the present Age of Pisces, in the Age of Aquarius, “peace will guide the planets and love will steer the stars.” The “convergence” of these two astrological configurations, the one Greek and the other Mayan, was believed to be a sign that the New Age had finally begun. The “hell” brought on by Christian dominance had reached its nadir and a new dominant religion would emerge.

Shortly after the “Harmonic Convergence,” the new era of “peace and harmony” did not materialize. Thereafter, instead of speaking about the dawning “new age” in anticipatory tones, we sniggered about it under our breath. After the “Harmonic Convergence” disappointment, its trivialization by popular New Age literature, and the obvious commercialism of the movement by many of its prophets, former prominent New Agers and other astrological determinists

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, see: David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990) 43, 59ff. New Age accounts often neglect to openly discuss the fact that maintenance of “cosmic harmony” was deeply indebted to *human sacrifice*.

disassociated themselves from the term, “New Age.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, it became a joke of sorts and former New Agers turned to other forms of esoteric spirituality such as neo-Kabbalism, neo-alchemy, neo-shamanism, Wicca, or they became just plain spiritual seekers, even though their fundamental conception of reality, called “holistic,” remained the same.

Although reared in a devout Protestant home, I myself had gone through a period of religious agnosticism and spiritual searching, before returning to traditional Christianity through the Roman Catholic Church. Like many of my generation, I too considered converting to Buddhism! As a young woman, growing up in the Reagan era of material prosperity, everything seemed “connected.” Armed with “positive mental attitude” (PMA), I felt I could change the world. I too wanted to be “one” with the planet and to live in a world of peace and harmony. How this “unity” could or would be achieved was not much of a concern. Although I had never personally anticipated a “new age,” like many people of my generation, I was influenced by its metaphysical presuppositions. I read *The Celestine Prophecy* in preparation for a vacation to Hawaii. At the time, I was an advertising executive and highly influenced by all the new trends, and “spirituality” was a bestseller. Upon arrival, I planned to swim with the whales and climb Mt. Haleakala, a dormant volcano on the island of Maui and supposedly a center of higher cosmic energy. After following Redfield’s insights and climbing Mt. Haleakala to see the sun rising over the crater, my level of consciousness did not seem higher than before I set out. My spiritual search continued and, ironically, it led me back into the traditional Church. My personal experience somewhat explains why the term “New Age” eventually became *passé* and is an inadequate expression of the burgeoning phenomenon of contemporary spirituality and esotericism. That is why I coined the term, *Contemporary Holistic Esotericism*.

Although I had first-hand experience with so-called New Age and New Agers, at the preliminary stages of my research, writing about it was far from my mind. During the first years of my doctoral research, I intended to write about some ethical aspect of the Eucharist. Since the Roman Catholic Church says that the Eucharist is both a meal and a sacrifice, this led me to look at the Eucharistic sacrifice as a source of Christian ethics, despite the fact that disagreements on the subject helped fuel the religious wars of the Reformation. I felt encouraged to continue this line of thinking when the late John Paul II brought out his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003). In conformity with the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*,<sup>3</sup> he

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<sup>2</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 9.

<sup>3</sup> See LG, 11: “Sacrificium eucharisticum, totices vitae christianae fontem et culmen, participantes, divinam Victimam Deo offerunt atque seipsos cum Ea; ita tum oblatione tum sacra communione, non promiscue sed alii aliter, omnes in liturgica actione partem propriam agunt. Porro corpore Christi in sacra synaxi relecti, unitam Populi Dei, quae hoc augustissimo sacramento apte significatur et mirabiliter efficitur, modo concreto exhibent.”



insisted on the centrality of the Eucharistic sacrifice in the life of the Church, despite its lack of attention in contemporary academic theology. The only problem was, I really didn't understand what was actually meant by Jesus's sacrifice, let alone the intricacies of ancient sacrifice.

From my Masters' studies, I was aware that the French literary critic René Girard saw sacrifice as a founding event that led to the development of religion and culture. I knew that he connected sacrifice, or the violent murder of an innocent victim, to his or her later divinization as a god. At a COV&R (Colloquium on Violence & Religion) conference in Antwerp (2000), for the first time, Jesus's sacrifice on the Cross began to make sense to me. According to Girard, the shocking murder of a victim, in which all members participated, unified primitive communities and allowed them to channel their own intra-communal violence towards external outlets. This was far less threatening to the internal cohesion of the group than the chaos and insecurity that ensued from blood feuds. Guilt around the collective responsibility for the internal crisis, and the subsequent murder of an outsider or a vulnerable member of the community, enabled them to sublimate their violence into more formal religious and cultural expressions. Agreement around the selection of the murder victim helped to establish a cultural unity, but collective guilt motivated the community to deify their victim as a form of restitution for the life they had taken. The mutilated body of the victim became the foundation of their communal unity and their god.

For Girard, although Jesus's sacrifice on the Cross follows a similar structural pattern as most mythological accounts, only the Gospel accounts of Jesus's passion clearly unmask the violent and unjust murder that pagan sacrificial religion and myth attempt to hide and euphemize through the victim's "divinization." More particularly, Jesus's forgiveness of the perpetrators and subsequent resurrection responds to the ancient longing and expectation of the restoration of the life of the victims as well as the perpetrators longing to be restored with them. Jesus's divinity is revealed not as another projection of human consciousnesses, but as God's loving response to human violence and as an offer of forgiveness so that real, new life can begin now and continue in the life to come.

According to Girard, although most nineteenth century intellectuals focused on the *similarities* between primitive myth and the Gospels, only the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche actually saw the *difference* between pagan religion and Christianity, which Girard sees as fundamentally non-violent and non-sacrificial in the primitive or pagan sense. Looking for a way to re-vitalize declining German culture, Nietzsche sided with the inherent violence of pagan religions, calling it Dionysian, and rejected Christian non-violence as weakness and decadence. I initially thought that a dialogue between Girard and Nietzsche would be a way to highlight the differences between Christian and pagan sacrifice. Despite their dependence on him, many

postmodern explanations of Nietzsche seemed to either miss this point. After several months of hitting my head against the proverbial brick wall, I decided to search for possible connections between Nietzsche and the occult. At the time, I found nothing in academic Nietzsche research that could help me;<sup>4</sup> however, after surfing the web, I came up with a document entitled, *The Rainbow Swastika: A Report to the Jewish People about New Age Anti-Semitism*, by an Israeli Jew named Hannah Newman.<sup>5</sup> The main aim of her paper was to show the connections between the philosophy of the New Age Movement and National Socialism, which included the dream of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. In Nietzsche's philosophy, the *Übermensch* is a superior breed of humanity or a "god," which superior human beings create at the expense of a large portion of humanity, the herd. Although I believe that Nietzsche's influence on the New Age Movement is different than Newman suggests, she brought the connection between New Age and occultism to my attention again and raised questions concerning New Age self-divinization.

Taking my cue from Girard, I was curious whether New Age or contemporary esotericism's understanding of divinity included sacrifice and, if so, how this differed from the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus's once for all sacrifice (Heb 10:11-13), which renders all other sacrifices superfluous. From a Girardian perspective, the question whether self-divinization also needs sacrifice or self-sacrifice -- since New Agers and contemporary esotericists are radical monists who realize their own divinity -- seemed like an interesting avenue of research.

After finally finding an interesting question to pursue, I was unfortunately also confronted with my own ignorance. I had already admitted my lack of understanding on the question of sacrifice, ancient religions, but I also knew very little about the historical background of New Age, let alone, magic, esotericism, alchemy as well as how these function within the New Age belief system. If New Agers need sacrifice or self-sacrifice to realize their divinity, then, *how* do they do this? What tools do they use? And, what are the consequences for the individual and society as a whole?

If, according to Hanegraaff's estimation, New Age is now the dominant paradigm, or model of reality in the West,<sup>6</sup> and it is a basically anti-traditional Christian movement,<sup>7</sup> then,

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<sup>4</sup> Since then, I have come across several books which claim that Nietzsche was an occult or esoteric thinker. See for example, in Dutch, André van der Braak, *Hoe men wordt, wat men is: Zelfvervolmaking, zelfoverwinning and zelfvergetelheid bij Nietzsche* (Budel: Damon, 2004) and Abir Taha, *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism: The Cult of the Superman, Unveiling the Nazi Secret Doctrine* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Newman, *The Rainbow Swastika: A Report to the Jewish People about New Age Anti-Semitism*, [www.philologos.org](http://www.philologos.org).

<sup>6</sup> See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "New Age Religion," *Religions in the Modern World*, ed. Linda Woodhead (London: Routledge, 2002) 249-263.

<sup>7</sup> *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 313-324.

traditional Christian theologians have a responsibility and a right to respond to their assertions. This is especially important for Catholic theologians, since the topic is dominated by academics, some of whom have paradoxically anti-Catholic prejudices just below the surface.<sup>8</sup> However, in order to respond to New Age claims or anti-claims, we must first attempt to better understand and even try to sympathize with many spiritual seekers, who are merely searching for God and trying to restore meaning to their lives. We must recognize that in many ways the traditional churches have failed them. This does not mean that traditional Christianity as such has failed but that too often traditional Christians have failed to provide the environment where profound Christian spirituality of the encounter with the Risen Lord is possible. Although many questions remain, I have attempted to understand New Age and its place within the western esoteric tradition, because it is one of the most important religious expressions of my generation, the generation of Postmodernity. If I have in any way made statements that contradict the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, then, this is due to my own ignorance and I bow to the authority of the Church. I hope that my attempt to make a coherent story out of such an incredibly expansive – and often incoherent – field has been adequate and that I have shown that sacrifice or self-sacrifice, whether this be spiritual, psychological or even physical, is essential not only to New Age but also to all occult schemes of self-divinization. Perhaps this work will help stimulate further research in this interesting and challenging field in the service of the Church.

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<sup>8</sup> See little prejudicial asides in, G. Quispel, “Reincarnation and Magic in the Asclepius,” *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition* (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2000) 199, 220-221. On Cusanus, “He became a priest, a bishop, a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church: seldom has a spirit so free and liberal made such a brilliant career in an authoritarian institution.”

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Western Occultism and Esotericism

Since this work concerns the development of western esotericism and occultism, in order to better understand the phenomenon as a whole, I will initially attempt to explain what the terms “esotericism” and “occultism” mean.

#### 1. Occultism

The word “occult” has its root in the Latin *occultus*, which means “concealed”; the verb, *occulere*, “to cover over,” or *obcelare*, “to hide.” Like esoteric knowledge, those who are privy to such information are “privileged,” or the elite possessors of “special knowledge” to which the average person has no access. As the verb *occulere* suggests, efforts are made to hide or conceal this “privileged” knowledge. One of the chief characteristics of occult writers, whether ancient or modern, is to conceal their sources by writing in veiled or coded terms. Riddle is also another popular way that occult writers transmit knowledge. Often occultists claim that their codes and riddles are a protective measure, but more often than not, it is a way to present oneself as *the* source of divine knowledge, a privileged receptacle of a salvific and divinizing form of *gnosis*.

Antoine Faivre, professor at the Sorbonne, says that broadly speaking, “occultism is a dimension of esotericism,” referring mainly to specific “occult” *practices* performed by esotericists, but not all.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, not all esotericists are occultists, but all occultists are esotericists. Occult practices are dependent upon the animistic belief that there are correspondences, or sympathies, that exist between human persons as well as Nature, because the human person is a microcosm of the macrocosm. Faivre states that this amounts to “the homo-analogical principle matching like to like, and this means one of the two can act on the other.” Occult practices operating on these principles are, for example, astrology; alchemy, which is, according to Faivre, magic in the noblest sense; occult medicine, which rests on properties contained in stones or plants and their application at the right moment; magic both white and black, as either theurgy, which invokes angels, or sorcery (witchcraft), which invokes demons.<sup>10</sup>

According to Hanegraaff’s analysis, occultism -- which should be specified here as nineteenth century occultism -- is the “product of a syncretism between *magia* and science, correspondences and causality.” Hanegraaff sees the emergence of occultism as the progressive secularization of western esotericism as from the Renaissance, and the fragmentation of the “occult sciences,” such as *magia*, Kabbalah and alchemy, which are finally eclectically rejoined into New Age.

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<sup>9</sup> Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Access to Western Esotericism*, 34.

## 2. Esotericism

Although esotericism and occultism are sometimes used synonymously, esotericism is more a form of knowledge, thought, or even *gnosis* about the nature of reality, whereas occultism is a “group of practices or a form of action that derives its legitimacy from esotericism” or esoteric knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Typically, the term esotericism is understood in relation to “esoteric,” that is, something that is “intended for or understood by only a chosen few, as an inner group of disciples or initiates (said of ideas, doctrines, literature, etc.),”<sup>12</sup> but also even “beyond the understanding or knowledge of most people,” implying an elite form of knowledge for the privileged. According to Antoine Faivre, in *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition*, “‘Esotericism’ ... currently signifies ‘secret knowledge,’ or ‘secret science,’ which is reserved for an elite and submitted to the discipline of the ‘arcane’. Then, it also designates a type of knowledge or experience referring to a ‘place’ to a spiritual ‘center’ -- known as ‘esoteric’ -- situated in the depths of the Being and, consequently, the means and techniques meant to reach this center.”<sup>13</sup> Hence, esotericism is also a form of *gnosis*, because those who command this secret teaching are privileged on earth as well as in higher spheres, through their knowledge of it.

## B. Methodology

### 1. A Historical and Associative Approach

In this work, I attempt to show how the goal of a significant stream of western esotericism, going back to Presocratic philosophers via Renaissance Hermetism, is the divinization of the self and even the *cosmos*. However, over the course of time, divinization has become understood in an increasingly solipsistic and self-sacrificial, in the sense of self-destructive, way.

Because I am not only attempting to draw out the sacrificial structure of New Age and contemporary esotericism, but am also trying to provide a basis for further reflection and research on the phenomenon -- and within a traditional Christian framework -- as it is situated within the history of western esotericism, I have attempted to order my material -- in as much as this is possible -- within a historical framework. It helps the reader to place ideas, people, places and events within a proper perspective and shows how these are related. To some extent, I prioritize how certain religious and philosophical ideas have evolved over the course of history in order to show how they have naturally developed within the history of western esotericism and are not a product of some new religious “revelation.” In this sense, I loosely follow a method something like the history of religious ideas. For the most part, I base myself on research that has been done

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<sup>11</sup> *Access to Western Esotericism*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> ed. Victoria Neufeldt, “esoteric,” *Webster’s New World Dictionary of American English* (Cleveland & New York: Webster’s New World, 3<sup>rd</sup> College Edition., 1988) 464.

<sup>13</sup> *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition*, xiii.

in recent years (e.g. Hanegraaff, Heelas, amongst others) that argues that New Age is a trend within western esotericism, especially the esoteric Hermetic Tradition. What distinguishes my work from previous work is that I attempt to bring together traditions, personages and thinkers, who contributed to the sacrificial understanding of self-divinization within the western esoteric tradition.

Methodologically, I have also taken inspiration from Susan A. Handelman, “structuralist Midrash approach” in her *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*. Disavowing structuralism, since we are in a post structuralist era, but also the poststructuralist hermeneutics, she claims that her work is a Midrash in the broad sense of the term. She claims that her “structuralist Midrash” is a “search for hidden elements and correspondences, a tropism or ‘wandering of meaning,’ which proceeds as much by analogy and association as by linear logic.”<sup>14</sup> Like Handelman, I too am searching for “hidden elements and correspondences,” which I hope will reveal the sacrificial structures within Contemporary Holistic Esotericism or New Age, even though this work is not structuralist. I am highly sympathetic to her approach, because she proceeds a bit like a Rabbi, looking for connections that open the way to meaning. Although I will in no way take over Handelman’s “structuralist Midrash,” her more Midrashic or “associative approach” suits the goals of this research well. This is because much of what I contend will need to be thrashed out from the subterranean world of esotericism and the occult, which does not always follow a linear logic.

## **2. Occult Logic**

As a strand of western esotericism, New Age or contemporary holistic esotericism has its roots in ancient and Renaissance Hermetism, following from this, in Presocratic philosophy and animism. This explains to some extent the current popularity of Presocratic philosophy and neo-shamanism. As did ancient Hermetism, much of contemporary esotericism, including New Age, conceives of reality as One Divine Mind. In this conception, the human being is a microcosm of the macrocosm; however, the macrocosm is understood as the All or Absolute. Sometimes this conception of reality might be expressed as pantheism or panentheism. A more frightening possibility, which easily follows from the development of occult logic, is “panenanthropism”. I introduce the term in order to discuss the potential ethical problems associated with this self-sacrificial trend in contemporary esotericism. Panenanthropism is a psychological disposition, where the totality of reality is collapsed into the single human ego or self. This psychological state is an extreme expression and reversal of the traditional esoteric belief that the human being

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<sup>14</sup> Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) xv.

is the microcosm of the macrocosm. Today, the traditional microcosm/macrocosm analogy is most often expressed through the “holographic paradigm,” a belief that each fragment of reality is a representation of the whole of reality. When this idea is radicalized by the esoteric panenanthropist, the macrocosm *is* the microcosm. When “panenanthropic holism” is coupled with the temporalization of spiritual alchemy, where the goal is the attainment of the Philosopher’s Stone or divinization, then, there are potential societal dangers, when embodied in persons with political power (e.g. a personality like Adolf Hitler).

In a most monistic systems (i.e. the belief that All is One), be it ancient or contemporary, the realization of one’s “divinity” is necessarily understood as an occult (i.e. hidden or covert) process of destruction and creation. One must destroy the old order in order to create a new or higher synthesis of the same. Often this is understood as the alchemical conjunction of opposites (*coniunctio oppositorum*), the establishment of order out of chaos, the metaphysical return to the origin, or the descent and ascent of the Mystery Religions. After the Reformation, later alchemists, who felt increasingly divorced from traditional Christian spirituality, used alchemy as an alternative religion, accepting a worldview that was similar to ancient monism, which we can understand as a form of hylozoic animism. They began to understand the process of alchemical divinization as a “murder” or “suicide” of the alchemist himself, which was then euphemistically called “sacrifice”. By bringing these esoteric traditions together in a historical associative framework, I hope that the reader will see how they are connected or associated.

### **3. René Girard: Sacrifice as the Origin of Religion, Culture and the Gods**

Because René Girard not only proposes a theory of mimetic desire, or *mimesis*, but also a theory of sacrificial divinization, his theories are always in the background. Although I rarely mention Girard or his theories, they provide the most significant hermeneutical key for interpreting this work and understanding why sacrifice is necessary for divinization. It is for this reason that I present his theories in more detail at this juncture. In 1972, René Girard published his groundbreaking work: *La Violence et le Sacré*,<sup>15</sup> where he proposed his hypothesis on the origins of ritual and myth. For Girard, the most ancient of all religious rituals is sacrifice. It is, according to him, the origin of religion and the gods. Girard’s main task has been to explain how the scapegoat mechanism functioned and continues to function in the development of religion and culture. It is to this aspect of his theory that I now turn; thereafter, I will discuss the function of myth and the difference between myth and the Gospels.

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<sup>15</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977, 1979).

### **a. Mimesis and the Surrogate Victim**

For Girard, the murder of a surrogate victim follows a tremendous social crisis, resulting from mimetic desire. Mimetic desire is the combination of appropriative desire (i.e. the desire to have what the other has or greed) with modeling (i.e. the attempt to “be” or to “be like” a rival). In an earlier work, *Deceit, Desire & the Novel* (1961), he explains the modeling mechanism as it is portrayed in modern literature. Humans create models, who later become their rivals. The desire to possess that which the model has is a desire aimed at the model’s *being*. It is a desire that wishes to absorb the other’s being into one’s own. The perceived object merely mediates this desire.<sup>16</sup> When a model turned rival’s object cannot be obtained by peaceful means, people are often willing to use force to acquire it, but also to protect it with equal intensity. This is the origin of conflict and violence.

According to Girard, in early societies, when violence began to spiral out of control, there were no braking mechanisms to stop it. Uncontrolled violence and revenge killings, or blood feuds, threatened to destroy society. Religion provided a solution, albeit a violent one, to channel potentially annihilatory violence through “rituals of killing and their rationalizations as ‘sacrifice’... [For Girard], violence then, is the manifestation of the Sacred in its dual mode of (1) the terror of uncontrolled killing, and (2) controlled rituals of sacrifice.”<sup>17</sup> Before the religious *Endlösung*, the only solution to murder was murder.”<sup>18</sup> To halt the cycle of violence so that life could continue, a final earth-shattering act of violence was needed, which primitive societies discovered in the “mechanism of the surrogate victim,” or the “Scapegoat Mechanism.”<sup>19</sup> The scapegoat became coequal to the divinity or sacred, forming the foundation of primitive religion and the basis of cultural unity.

At the height of a communal crisis, what Girard calls a “mimetic crisis,” where everyone imitates each other’s desires and violence, a disintegrating community perceives that it needs someone to take responsibility for the accumulation of crimes threatening to destroy it. A victim or scapegoat, in Greek a *pharmakos*, is selected as a sacrificial victim. The selection is based on his *difference* or vulnerability, meaning his inability to retaliate. Often this was a child, cripple, or a stranger.<sup>20</sup> The selection process might be mediated by a *pharmakeus*, in Greek, a

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<sup>16</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire & the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965) 53.

<sup>17</sup> Burton Mack, “Introduction,” *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 6-7.

<sup>18</sup> “Introduction,” *Violent Origins*, 6-7.

<sup>19</sup> “Introduction,” *Violent Origins*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> “Sacrifice as Sacral Violence and Substitution,” *The Girard Reader*, 82.



witchdoctor or sorcerer. As implied by the Greek term, the *pharmakeus* is more conscious of how the scapegoating mechanism functions and was, therefore, able to covertly manipulate it.<sup>21</sup> The scapegoat became a vicarious substitute for the entire community by absorbing their accumulated crimes onto himself. As the victim was selected, the community turned into a lynch mob. The murder, which occurred in the amnesic frenzy of the crowd, served to take the individual members' attention away from their own defects and project them onto the scapegoat. The victim was annihilated into chaotic sameness of the Totality, so that the community avoided or at least postponed it for themselves.

### **b. A Theory of Pagan Divinization**

After the mimetic tension was released onto the substitute, a strange calm was established over the community. A moment before the lynching, the community was literally at each other's throats, but directly after the collective murder, they became as "one". In primitive communities, this new-found peace and unity must have been remarkable. Re-established unity is attributed to the former offender, envisioning him as the divine saviour or benevolent deity.<sup>22</sup> According to Girard, in myth the scapegoat mechanism is depicted in two phases, during which the victim underwent two transformations, or a double transference. The first transference is negative and occurs at the moment when the victim is selected as the source of evil. The second transference is positive and occurs after the murder of the surrogate victim. The new-found unity is attributed to the former offender, envisioning him as the divine saviour or benevolent deity.<sup>23</sup> For Girard, the typical ambivalence of the ancient gods, or the gods' participation in both good and evil, has its origin in the scapegoat mechanism. The divinization of the victim served to "cover up" the communal crime, and *project* the responsibility for the transgression onto "the god," who was, surprisingly, the original sacrificial victim.<sup>24</sup> Collective responsibility for the crisis is denied or conveniently forgotten, and becomes the data of myth and the occult.

Girard shows that the origin of violence is not "organized religion," but "mimetic rivalry." The original murder and subsequent sacrifices, meant to repeat the original beneficial unitive forces, served to temporarily suppress internal jealousies, rivalries, and discord. Sacrifices to the gods restored both harmony and differentiated unity within the group by focusing aggression meant for each other onto the substituted victim.<sup>25</sup> In reality, the victim was *not*

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<sup>21</sup> René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001) 49-61.

Girard's discussion of "The horrible miracle of Apollonius of Tyana" provides insight into the nature of this process.

<sup>22</sup> *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 65, 71.

<sup>23</sup> *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 65.

<sup>24</sup> René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 165.

<sup>25</sup> "Sacrifice as Sacral Violence and Substitution," *The Girard Reader*, 78.

offered up to appease the wrath of some vengeful deity, but was a “substitute for all of the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the community from its own violence.”<sup>26</sup>

### **c. Myth and Ritual**

According to Girard, we should not see myth as separate from the ritual forms that re-enact the original crisis, or creational chaos, and its subsequent resolution by the gods about which myth re-tells. Although this scenario is now widely accepted, at the time that Girard suggested ritual was primary, it was revolutionary. Burton Mack explains that “the history of discourse on religion has consistently preferred myth to ritual as the focus of its primary questions and concerns.”<sup>27</sup> Paradoxically, the prioritizing of myth was probably due to the western cultural influence of the biblical Judeo-Christian tradition. In the nineteenth century, the predominant idea was that religion developed out of myth. This assumption was effectively challenged and reversed through the groundbreaking work of Walter Burkert (1931), classicist and historian of Greek Religion. In *Homo Necans: the Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Religion* (1972),<sup>28</sup> originally published in German, he proposed the opposite. For Burkert, an ethological “Copernican Revolution” occurred when previous ideas on the sacred were challenged, based on ethological evidence that there could be “a primacy of rites over linguistic communications.”<sup>29</sup> Myth is, therefore, an attempt to come to terms with the violent event that led to the foundation of a particular religion and culture. “Quite apart from the fact that mythology is at first the sole explicit form of intellectual activity and the sole mode of coming to terms with reality, the importance of the myths of the gods lies in their connection with the sacred rituals for which they frequently provide a reason, an aetiology, which is often playfully elaborated.”<sup>30</sup>

Myth, then, is a linguistic attempt to come to terms with the community’s responsibility for violence that established their culture. For Burkert like Girard, myth provides an *a posteriori* explanation and rationale for the sacrificial ritual that has its origin in the founding event. In mythical societies, because the responsibility is too much to bear, the perpetrators must “cover it up.” Burkert calls this group’s attempt to justify their violence, through myth, as “the comedy of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>27</sup> “Introduction,” *Violent Origins*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> “Introduction,” *Violent Origins*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 8-9.

innocence.”<sup>31</sup> Burkert says that it is remarkable how similar the actions and experiences are in sacrificial cultures “from Athens to Jerusalem and on to Babylon.”<sup>32</sup>

For both authors, myths attempt to hide the collective responsibility for the terrible deed. This works because the victim is an outsider, or a vulnerable member, whose friends or families are unable to easily retaliate.<sup>33</sup> Although communal *unity* was established, it was gained at the expense of the murder of the innocent victim, who was later made into a “god” or “goddess.” Collective responsibility for the communal crisis is denied or conveniently forgotten through myth. Sacrificial rituals were generated out of the need to reproduce the beneficial *unitive* effect of the original scapegoated victim.<sup>34</sup>

#### **d. The Gospel Difference**

Girard posits that even though the meanings, or interpretations, of myth and the Gospels are radically different, in order to see the point of difference clearly, there needs to be a similar structural relationship between the Gospels/Eucharist and myth/ritual.<sup>35</sup> Girard claims that although the Gospel stories about Jesus appear to have a similar narrative structure to myth, they are not mythical in the proper sense.<sup>36</sup> For Girard, the Passion of Jesus appears mythical “because it reproduces the founding event of all rituals, [and] is connected with every ritual on the entire planet.”<sup>37</sup> The Passion Story “unmasks” what lies behind all myth and ritual: a murder by a lynch mob that is later attributed to the will of the god. According to Girard, the desire to cover the “sacrificial structure” and to make it a “secret,” or a “comedy of innocence” is not only inherent in primitive societies, but in all societies. The non-sacrificial religion of Christianity is about becoming fully conscious of the violence that lies hidden beneath the foundation of all religion, human society and, ultimately, within each individual human heart.<sup>38</sup> Girard believes that this process, although incomplete, already began in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in the writings of the prophets.<sup>39</sup> As religions that emphasize individual responsibility, both Judaism

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Homo Necans*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Homo Necans*, 11. Burkert goes on to explain a Babylonian text that describes the requirements for the sacrifice of a bull. “The complicated preparations include scattering grain, offering breads and libations, and sacrificing a sheep. The bull stood chained on a rush mat until it was time for its mouth to be washed. After this, incantations would be whispered into both its ears, after which it was sprinkled with water, purified with a torch, and surrounded by circle of grain. Following prayer and song, the bull was killed, the heart burned at once, and the skin and left shoulder sinew removed to string the tympanon. After further libations and offerings, the priest would bend down to the severed head and say, ‘This deed was done by all the gods; I did not do it.’”

<sup>33</sup> “Sacrifice as Sacral Violence and Substitution,” *The Girard Reader*, 82.

<sup>34</sup> *Greek Religion*, 8. See also *Homo Necans*, 23ff. According to Burkert, ethnologists have noted that religion and religious ritual are the means “to establish and secure the solidarity of the closed group ... [and have] accompanied the forms of human community since the earliest of times.”

<sup>35</sup> *Things Hidden*, 158ff, 166-170, 191.

<sup>36</sup> *Things Hidden*, 167ff.

<sup>37</sup> *Things Hidden*, 167.

<sup>38</sup> *Things Hidden*, cf. 154-158, especially 157.

<sup>39</sup> *Things Hidden*, 141-158.

and traditional Christianity point beyond the rights and responsibilities of the group toward the individual. As is evidenced by the Joseph Narrative, unlike myth, “the Bible refuses to demonize or deify the victims of violent crowds. The ones really responsible for expulsions are not the victims but their persecutors, the crowds or mobs caught up in mimetic contagion, such as envious brothers and Egyptians who blindly accept false accusations.”<sup>40</sup>

This explains why the Eucharistic sacrifice must be present in every Roman Catholic Mass. Jesus’ death on the Cross and His forgiveness of the perpetrators, as God, is the “founding event” of the Christian non-violent community of forgiveness and reconciliation. Because violence and the “scapegoat mechanism” is so deeply embedded in human behaviour, members of this non-violent community must be regularly reminded of it. The Eucharistic sacrifice confronts each and every believer with his or her own violence and the propensity, so to speak, to murder God in the Name of God. This is especially clear in the Easter liturgy, when the Passion Narrative is read aloud and the congregation shouts: “Crucify him! Crucify him!” It is a liturgical recognition that we too crucify Jesus, not just “they.” By placing a mirror in front of our faces, the Eucharistic sacrifice allows Christians to become aware of this tendency in ourselves. We are exhorted to reject it and seek forgiveness from others and from God.

However, for primitive society, which was basically animistic and similar to New Age “holism,” there was no other solution to restore *order and unity* than the scapegoat mechanism and the subsequent sacrifices that form the basis of ancient religions. The Gospel Narratives of the death and resurrection of Jesus are literally and figuratively a *breakthrough*, out of the monistic structure of ancient pagan society. Girard believes that, for the most part, what must have been experienced as a breakthrough has been forgotten in the West, due to an “excessive respect for ancient Greece,” beginning with the Renaissance. According to Girard, “this undue respect is a function of the anti-Western and especially anti-Christian ideology that prevents the demystification of mythic forms, which we are now really in a position to decipher.”<sup>41</sup> Because today, we largely read more politically correct versions of myth and have forgotten their original violent details, I also attempt to re-introduce the reader to the violence of the mythical worldview.

Girard believes a full understanding of Jesus’ death on the Cross and resurrection from the dead remains, to some extent, hidden and “almost universally misunderstood.” To this day, most people deceive themselves about their own propensity for violence and ability to be trapped by the mimetic mechanism.<sup>42</sup> Christian conversion is not complete, because some have attached themselves to a sacrificial reading of the Gospels, especially through a misreading of the Letter to

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<sup>40</sup> *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 115.

<sup>41</sup> *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 75.

<sup>42</sup> *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 44.

the Hebrews.<sup>43</sup> Due to their similar narrative structure, many Christians throughout history have not perceived how the Gospels unmask the scapegoating mechanism, and how pagan myths stimulate it. The scapegoating mechanism has been softened, but not eliminated. According to Girard, the distinction between “purified” Christianity and religion lies in the fact that most “religion is organized around a more or less *violent disavowal* of human violence. That is what the religion that comes from man amounts to, as opposed to the religion that comes from God (*italics mine*).”<sup>44</sup> In the West, potentially endemic violence and its need for sacrifice has been greatly defused through the influence of Judeo-Christian texts, especially the Gospels. This is because the Gospels unmask the murder underlying mythological transfiguration and its related religious expressions, for example, the Mystery Religions. However, with the decline of the knowledge of the biblical tradition in the West, there is no guarantee that the now latent cultural influence of the Gospels will be able to continue to provide an antidote to violence. By re-familiarizing the readers of this work with the violent content the ancient pagan myths, through historical-associative description, I would like to show how the re-birth of the holistic/animistic paradigm through New Age and Contemporary Esotericism is not the *Endlösung* to violence, but is a sign of its intensification.

#### **4. Historical-associative-description**

In order to avoid mimetic scapegoating myself, I have struggled to find a way to do this, without falling into theological relativism. In order to do this I have chosen the “method” of “historical-associative-description” in order to help the reader to re-enter the brutality of the ancient world, including its re-appropriation in the Renaissance. Girard’s scapegoat theory, which includes his theory of transfiguration, provides an explanation to why so many esoteric writers want to return to the mythical worldview of the ancient Mystery Religions, or use occult tools like magic and alchemy in order to realize themselves “gods.” This method reminds the reader of the violence that lurks below the surface of the mythological worldview, which I believe includes the animistic worldview of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Like the men of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, we are perhaps too enamored with the literary value of myths (which are indeed tremendously valuable) and the Mysteries to criticize their ethical presuppositions that divinization requires sacrifice, or in Girardian terms, that murder is somehow acceptable for some collectively ordained “greater good.” As a religious tradition that maintains a critical position towards ancient myth, this is a presupposition that traditional Christianity ultimately rejects.

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<sup>43</sup> *Things Hidden*, 227-231.

<sup>44</sup> *Things Hidden*, 166.

### C. Explanation of Chapters

In chapter one, I give a brief introductory explanation of the New Age Movement. I have tried to situate New Age within the history of western esotericism, intimating its connections to both ancient and Renaissance Hermetism. I provide a historical background of ancient and Renaissance Hermetism and its understanding of divinization. I explain the re-introduction of Hermetic thought in the Renaissance with the re-discovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and its unquestioning acceptance by certain groups of Renaissance Christianity. I also try to explain the relationship between more magical Hermetic texts like the *Picatrix* and the Latin *Asclepius* and follow Peter Kingsley's arguments that the Hermetic texts served as a covert clearing-house for suppressed alternative philosophies, like those of the Presocratic philosophers. In opposition to Antoine Faivre in *The Eternal Hermes*, that "wherever Hermes passes, religious tolerance prevails,"<sup>45</sup> I propose that the Hermetic Tradition also has a darker side.

In chapter two, I connect the popularization of alchemy to the popularization of the Presocratic philosophers, especially the philosophy of the *iatromantis* (inspired healer) or shaman, Empedocles. Empedocles saw reality as a perpetual combination of forces, that is, erotic love and strife, otherwise understood as magical attraction and repulsion. In the end, as one legend has it, Empedocles sacrificed himself into the "alchemical" forges of Etna as a confirmation of his divinity. Empedocles' life and sacrificial ending became an example for many anti-Christian poets and philosophers, especially for Giordano Bruno.

In chapter three, I discuss the philosophy Giordano Bruno. Through an analysis of *Gli Eroici Furori*, I propose that it is possible that Bruno, by erroneously temporalizing the spiritual process of alchemical *solve et coagula* on himself, willed to be burned at the stake in order to be united with his "love," the god who was himself. I attempt to show how Bruno's influence gained importance as from the Enlightenment and influenced many leaders in the occult establishment.

In chapter four, I attempt to provide a broad understanding of the philosophical and historical background of what Wouter Hanegraaff calls, New Age *sensu lato* or what I call *Contemporary Holistic Esotericism*. In the second half of the chapter, I discuss the "psychologization" of esotericism, especially of alchemy and the shamanic practices of the iatromantic Presocratic philosophers. I compare Jung's ideal of Individuation and the Self and Friedrich Nietzsche's ideal of the *Übermensch* and show how these concepts are substitute terms for "God." I also show how Jung's understanding of the process of Individuation is based on the psychologization of alchemy and shamanism and is a process of self-divinization that requires a sacrifice of the "lower self," or ego, to the "Higher Self" or Self.

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<sup>45</sup> Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes: from Greek God to Alchemical Magus*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1995) 39.

In chapter five, I discuss the four marks of New Age *sensu stricto*, according to Wouter Hanegraaff: 1.) the New Age corresponds to an astrological era; 2.) “The Christ” will return as another incarnation of a greater “energy source” or principle; 3.) there are a group of “Ascended Masters” or “Chiefs” who belong to a “Spiritual Hierarchy”; 4.) the “Spiritual Hierarchy” are preparing a “New World Order,” that will be administered by one world government and religion. I show how these ideas are implicit in ancient and Renaissance Hermetism, especially as it was interpreted by admirers of Bruno. In the second section, I analyze texts from the New Age Mothers, Alice Bailey and Annie Besant in order to show that they too consider sacrifice necessary for the foundation of a new global unity and that suicide, euphemistically understood as self-sacrifice, is necessary for the self-divinization of the individual and the planet.

Finally, I have chosen the title, *The Gods of Destruction and the Creation of the New Age: Self-Sacrifice and Self-Divinization in Holistic Esotericism from Antiquity to Modernity*, because unlike the Father of Jesus Christ, who creates out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, the gods of monism and holism must create and transfigure themselves out of destruction and chaos. In this sense, they reveal themselves as human all too human.

Melanie van Oort – Hall