

Christian Inversion of Jewish Nationalist Monotheism, and Its Romantic, Revolutionary and Narcissist Corruptions

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Abstract

It is important to see Christianity as an internal reform of Judaism that surprisingly came to overtake its parent and attain independent existence. With the attack on all expressions of transcendence during the Enlightenment, this reform flipped into the enemy that, if it could not be expunged, at least should be flattened and institutionalized, along with its antiquated parent, if society is to free itself from unpredictable and scurrilous outbreaks of this nefarious if apparently inveterate tendency and tropism within human nature, to soar instead into the sunny uplands of a neutralized social reality liberated from superstition and a consequently calmer public space. It is therefore disappointing to discover that, when spurs to internal conflict emanating from rival religious world views or mythic traditions have been eliminated, the human psyche is not finally set free from internal turmoil and incitement to external violence, but depressingly discovers itself at the mercy of a heightened internal sensitivity to accusations of irremedial reproach and eternal inadequacy, an awareness of social barriers that appear impossible to cross, of “prizes” that cannot be captured, which replace the earlier confessional denunciations and expulsions. This heightened social sensitivity, highlighted by Rousseau and recently expanded and richly developed by René Girard, suggests that unless disciplined and corrected—that is, *not* “left alone”—the human psyche does not return to “psychic health” and attain “secular bliss”, but rather becomes vulnerable to lower sources of intimidation and inadequacy; it can even become traumatized, psychotic or bestial from awareness of ordinary social differences. Otherwise, such developments as “serial killing”—puzzling and yet distinctive of our era—become difficult to account for. The U.S. has ten times as many homicides a year as Canada, over one hundred times as many as the U.K. Also, the U.S. has more serial killings per year than the next six countries combined.

Keywords

Judaism, Christianity, Monotheism, Secularism, Romanticism, Narcissism, Serial Killing

Beginning with contemporary biblical criticism, I uncover how the Jews, resenting being a “small” nation, “backed into” monotheism for primarily political reasons, as a way to argue that their god was distinct and different from the gods of other nations (who followed the “family of the gods” model or pantheon). This “one god” with whom they had a special relationship was only punishing them through military defeat and exile for dallying with the other’s religion. Thus, in spite of their small size and inglorious military history, they really were superior (Bonn, 2014).

After the Egyptians declined the monotheistic reform of their religion by the pharaoh Akhenaten, by some means the Jews next door managed to pick up the latter, put the same doctrines into the mouth of their national prophet Moses, and imagine that this distinction and unique privilege compensated for their small size, unimpressive natural resources and nonexistent international reputation. Indeed, against all appearances, it lifted them up and constituted them as superior to all other peoples. It gave them a vocation and focus in the direction of political independence and the construction of a Temple where the special relationship or covenant between the one deity and the Jewish people could expand into the legal separation, cultic elaboration, and theological doctrines that constitute the glory of the Jewish nation and their special gift to less fortunate peoples.

Unfortunately, power politics and international relations proved deaf to this theological script. The Jews were condemned to stay a “buffer state” between nations that possessed superior natural resources such as the Nile river or the Tigris-Euphrates complex. The Jews’ awkward, ambiguous visit to Egypt and ignominious departure (despite their compensatory imaginary “victory” at the “Reed” sea) was followed by the loss of the northern kingdom to Assyria and eventually of the southern kingdom to Babylon. Alexander’s victory over the Near East changed everything—and he did not even visit—let alone “conquer”—Jerusalem! Perhaps most embarrassing of all, rather than drawing other nations into their orbit, Jews found themselves more a satellite of the Hellenistic kingdom centered in the “new” capital of Alexandria. The majority of the Jews in Babylonia had not come back, and now even in Jerusalem and Israel generally Jews found themselves speaking Greek! They commissioned a translation of their scriptures into Greek and realized they must now position themselves and make their way in an international, Greek-speaking world where they were not the center but rather an “uppity” protuberance that engaged in pathetic maneu-

verings to contest the supremacy of Hellenistic culture by whispering, for example, that Greek philosophers had derived their wisdom from Moses. Their “supremacy” and social separation was now leading to their ostracization, irrelevance, and detestation by the international community.

The replacement of the Greeks by the Romans only made things worse. The Romans did not feel culturally equal to the Greeks; their skill was administration and discipline. Consequently the Romans did not found independent “Hellenistic kingdoms” around the Mediterranean, but only “outposts” of the single Empire—and they took a dim view of local rebellion. The Romans also felt themselves as an inferior in a “catch-up” competition with Greek culture—the same position the Jews imagined themselves in. The two discovered themselves unpleasantly to be “mirror images” of one another, and they did not like what they saw. They became mortal enemies, both aspiring to the same crown; neither would give in. The Mediterranean stage was set for a tragedy of unprecedented proportions.

Jesus was indifferent to the Jewish-Roman rivalry, but his movement is significant in that it was seen as opening a bridge between Jew and Gentile, cutting off the separation, pretensions and snobbery of the former while opening a portal for Gentiles to share in the privileges and taste the intimacy of those admitted to the special relationship Jews claimed with the single God. Also Jesus spoke Greek, and the Pauline letters and gospels were all written in Greek. Alarmed by the Christian response, the newly-coined rabbis, after the loss of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in the Jewish-Roman war, gradually discouraged Greek translation and removed messianic and apocalyptic (Greek) additions to their scriptures. The “Law” became more prominent in the Gentile identification of the Jew, because after the Roman war the Jews lost land, king, and temple; Law was all they had left of their covenant with God.

Actually, Jesus seems to have seen himself as the founding-prophet of a new (or final) form of Judaism that would be (following his mentor, John the Baptist) extra-temple and collecting or retrieving the “lost sheep of Israel”—especially those excluded from participation in temple-Judaism because of ritual-purity concerns (*i.e.*, tax collectors and other professions). When challenged by pharisees on intricate questions of the Law (a woman is married to seven brothers, all of whom die. Whose wife will she be in the next world?), Jesus showed impatience and exasperation. The heart of religion cannot be concerned with such things. When challenged with how one should behave in a potentially tense situation, again he would typically answer with a parable (the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, etc.), as if to say: “You don’t give a hard and fast rule; such would be juvenile and inappropriate. At the same time, the answer is no mystery. Open your heart, and see where the greatest need is.” In other words, the exigency for responsible ethics is still there, but the authorities have misperceived it. The entire super-story of the Law should be scrutinized, criticized, and largely dismantled; it is a creation of man, not of God. It should be replaced with humility,

simplicity and openness. Look at the story of the wealthy pharisee and the poor man who go into the temple together to pray. Only the prayer of the second, who beats his breast, asking for forgiveness, is heard. So what the Jews take pride in—the only thing remaining after the Roman war, the Law—Jesus suggests is a matter for shame. Again, a door is opened to the Gentiles. Later, when a pagan Roman emperor in some desperation began looking about for a new religion to unify his empire to counter the Zoroastrianism of the Persians, Julian “the Apostate” suggested Judaism and bringing back sacrifices; but Constantine had already chosen Christianity. It is difficult to criticize his choice.

Christianity thus came to place its emphasis on transformation of the individual, rather than on incorporation within a group. The distinction is somewhat artificial, as there is little individual transformation that does not take place, especially when we are young, apart from incorporation into a group, whose *mores* or customs we are encouraged to “put on” or adopt, but Christianity was distinctive in forming communities that did not stem from or were made up exclusively of one *ethnos*. It was thus perceived as a novel experiment in world religions, especially by its “parent”, Judaism. It provided a way of combining freedom from obligatory compliance with local civic cults while also providing escape and protection from a charge of “atheism”, which was regarded as unpatriotic, ungrateful and dangerous.

After their defeat in the Jewish war, the Romans destroyed their temple and excluded Jews from Jerusalem, threatening to wipe them out entirely. Some Jews sought comfort and psychological compensation through the postulate of a special “gnosis” or “knowledge” supplied them by a “savior” behind their creator god, that “lifted them up” and restored a basis for their exceptionalism and superior status. To a now “converted” or Christian Western society the Jews came across as “stiffnecked”, exotic, and defensively haughty. They were tolerated because they performed an essential job that no one else could or would do—money lending—but often were treated as a scapegoat whenever tragedy or disaster struck. The two-beat syncopation of rejection or exclusion, followed by psychological compensation reappeared during the Renaissance in Jewish “Kabbalah” in Mediterranean Europe in which powerful esoteric predictions were hinted, shortly thereafter by Spinoza with his scandalous “atheistic” doctrine of universal determinism, and later by Freud with his shocking prescription of infantile sexuality. In a “closed” world where they often had no rights or were made to move with only what they could carry, the Jews agreed to play the only “role” on offer. They were perpetually available as everybody’s “victim”, but they exacted the psychological compensation of awe and fear as possessing special knowledge or power, which went along with and flattered in a back-handed way their self-estimate. Both sides got what they could live with, if not all they wanted. This continued until the “final solution”, when the roles became exaggerated and the syncopation fell apart.

Greek philosophers studied the connection between personal moral develop-

ment and various types of political constitution. The individual was thought of as having an intellect or reason, which should use the will or “spirit” to guide and discipline his passions. The goal of stability for all states was thought of as being shaped by having “wise” people as rulers; with this requirement fulfilled, it was a matter of historical accident or local conditions whether one had one, several, or universal suffrage (monarchy, aristocracy, or polity). All three were acceptable, but all three could also be corrupted if an improperly formed person seized power (tyranny, oligarchy or democracy). It was practically impossible for anyone to come to moral maturity in the latter states. In the wake of the competition between military generals and the consequent variety of emperors in the late Roman Empire (as well as the variety of leaders in the incoming barbarian tribes as they gradually converted to Christianity), dynasties emerged from noble families to establish monarchy as the most familiar or recognized form of government in the West throughout the Middle Ages, with the king’s authority consecrated by the Church and who reciprocally supported the Church with its cultic and educational institutions. Morality thereby supported politics, and politics reinforced morality.

During the modern period the citizenry has come to lose patience for a variety of reasons with the monarchical form of government. As an experiment, ethnic, social or political “unity” was considered less crucial for the viability of a state; also, monarchy was felt to impede, smother, or oppress the unfolding development of its citizens rather than to advance or protect the latter. The “Romantic” movement held there was a deeper or more important dimension to the individual that could not break to the surface or receive full expression under a monarchical or aristocratic regime. This departure encountered increased irritation in accepting, if only ceremonially, a monarch or aristocrat “over” them. Such negative reaction to their own histories propelled Western states into and through a series of revolutions whereby suffrage was extended to all citizens, rendering “democracy” the inevitable, alone acceptable (or “least objectionable”) form of restraint upon the interests, opinions, and activities of citizens. The challenge was to combine this relaxed license with the order and stability that traditionally had been considered desirable in a state. This change broke the earlier connection between political science and moral development; the state was no longer viewed as the individual “writ large”. His “passions” and enthusiasms were no longer necessarily to be guided and disciplined by a “spirit” operating under the direction of reason. The active “revolutionary” impulse tolerated, and even encouraged, the liberation, expression and indulgence of tendencies beyond earlier practices. Inevitably concern came to be directed to the question whether this innovation or departure from traditional order between the parts of the psyche was compatible with stability in either the state or the individual. Politics became a tense “juggling act”, a precarious and ongoing experiment to discover to what extent and for how long such relaxation could or should be tolerated.

In this last regard, a largely unforeseen experimental transformation took place through the democratic revolution, but it took place “underground”, beneath the surface, and as a consequence took time to show itself. This was the development, behind the apparently successful, well-rounded, well-adjusted and ordinary or conventional individual, of the psychopathic narcissistic personality, a personality who feels deprived or cheated at some deep but invisible level of the “success” or satisfactions from which others have benefited, and consequently feels he has a “right” to compensation or “pay back” for the setbacks and deprivations he experiences. The “democratic” revolution has given him a hidden anger and concealed resentment at the exceptional “success” others have achieved at his expense; this differential result or shortfall in public acclaim, reward or remuneration, rather than inspiring him to work harder for comparable results, kindles a rageful fire at the embarrassing discrepancy. The indirect “coaching” of democracy, that all are in some fundamental sense “equal”, determines him to equalize the situation and obtain what he desires anyway, at all costs—by simply taking it from those who have it, if necessary. The “rights” of others no longer matter to him, he can no longer see himself in the “face” of the other; in fact, he can see no other face but his own. He begins to make an exception of himself—because others have proven themselves no longer able to see him. He feels justified with adopting alternative distractions and forbidden compensations because “society” has not fulfilled its contract with him—to give him adequate response and recognition, equal gratification and appropriate consolation. He is not embarrassed in key situations to covertly put himself first, bulldoze others out of the way, and seize the “prize”. In cases involving secrecy such psychological reasoning can be used to justify forms of release, compensation, revenge and consolation like insult, vandalism or injury—at its limit, even serial killing. “This is something they have done to me, so I am justified in taking my satisfaction where I discover it.” Such behavior is amplified in societies where there is no one dominant group which must be feared or deferred to, so that the individual does not know who to strike out at, or who it is worthwhile to try to join. The individual feels alone. In the USA, the Federal Bureau of Investigation estimates there are between 30 and 50 serial killers operating at any given time. Their victims are chosen randomly and anonymously; they are strangers. “This is an injury I inflict on ‘society’, because it is what I deserve.”¹ (Schlesinger, 2022; Ramsland, 2007; Madigan, 2024)

These casualties to extreme alienation are a consequence the democratic revolution did not anticipate and has not as yet developed the psychological resources to help or heal. They are a “flip-side” of the increased empowerment democracy supplies the individual, but also demonstrate that without concomitant education and therapies fostering psychological maturity, such empowerment by itself is dangerous for both the individual and the state.

¹The scholarly discussion of serial killing is massive and growing. Useful background text is: Scott Bonn, *Why We Love Serial Killers: the Curious Appeal of the World's Savage Murderers*, Skyhorse Press, 2014.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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