

**Political Symbolism and the Ambiguity of Political Community:
An Inherent Dilemma of Politics**

by

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Beyond its immediate practical exigencies, and continuously overshadowing them, political life has inevitable dimensions of both myth and tragedy. These grow out of the nature of political community as such, and the best politics can aspire to in the real world is to work out a strategy for living with them that will draw on their powers of life and growth and limit their power for harm. To form community is an act of transcendence, a reaching beyond purely private and individual interests toward a shared life in a larger world, but our transcendence is never perfect, and the communities we form always remain ambiguous—not only because individual interest subverts them from within, but also because each community tends to reenact in a particularism of its own the egoism of the individuals who find their social identity in it. I would like in this paper to sketch briefly some of the main features of the political myths that work to elicit allegiance to the community and then to discuss the question of how best to deal with the tragic implications our symbolisms of political and spiritual community inevitably carry with them.

Self-interest comes naturally to us. As W. H. Auden put it in his poem “Sept. 1, 1939”:

. . . the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.¹

When people reach beyond their egoism to form communities, they do not leap all at once to the level of universal love. Rather, “bred in the bone,” it accompanies them in the movement of transcendence itself—to immediate family loyalty and then beyond that to partisanship

with a tribe, a party, a nation, or a church. It is the very nature of incarnate life that its every movement must negotiate a balance between self and other and that as the sense of self expands to include the communities it lives in, it must mingle the particularistic and the communal at every point.

The societies we take part in, from the most immediate to the widest reaching, develop symbols of community designed to encourage us to identify ourselves with them—and to uphold and defend them as though our very being and the meaning of life itself were at stake. Each child is taught to think of itself as a member of a family. Each tribe member or citizen has to be taught allegiance to the tribe or state. This teaching takes place on its deepest and most effectively binding level through myths: through stories of founding and calling by the gods, or stories of heroism in combat against hostile forces of nature or those of enemy others. These stories define for us our notions of communal good, and they try to elicit in us a loyalty that will be more powerful than purely individual self-interest.

Such myths have certain basic features that both enable them to be effective and also bring with them some ambiguous consequences. One is the division of the social field into “our group” and “the others.” Another is the division of the world into distinct spheres of quality: the sacred and the profane. These two sets of divisions are not identical, but they work together to bring about social cohesion. “Our” group is always associated with sacred values. The “others” tend to be thought of as living outside the sacred in the chaos of the profane. Myths are intrinsically political because they always have to do with the birth or maintenance of order against the threat of chaos, either from without or from within, and it is unlikely any political community could survive for long without drawing on the symbolism of the sacred to reinforce its claims and encourage its members to struggle against the forces that threaten it.

This symbolism has been analyzed from various angles by a number of modern scholars, of whom some of the most insightful and provocative have been Emil Durkheim, Rudolf

Otto, Mircea Eliade, Northrop Frye, Mary Douglas, René Girard, and Eric Voegelin.

For Durkheim the sacred was a system of ideals that functions to define the order a society seeks to embody and represent. Without some shared ideal values, according to Durkheim, there could be no society as such, but only a collection of disparate individuals, each pursuing separate ends. The symbolism of the sacred is fundamental to society because it serves as the expression of the society's collective ideal and its relation to the order of the cosmos. Its cult and its mythology are essential elements in the activity by which any society, therefore, becomes conscious of itself and forms itself.

Rudolf Otto, considering the sacred phenomenologically rather than in terms of social function, emphasized its experiential structure, especially the sense of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—that is, something beyond comprehension which is simultaneously frightening and attractive and elicits feelings of awe, dependency, and unworthiness. Otto was more concerned with the individual's relation to the holy than he was with politics, but it is easy to see how such feelings as those he describes would lend great force to any political symbolism that could harness their energies for its ends.

Eliade, drawing directly on both Durkheim and Otto, interpreted the structure of religious symbolism as an expression of the “system of the world” prevalent in traditional societies.² At the core of this lies an experience of what he called “hierophany,” a manifestation of the sacred (understood in Otto's sense) that establishes a “center” in time or space, a definite point of reference in contrast with the endless homogeneous flux of “profane” space and time. The sacred center constitutes a point of opening between levels of being, making communication between them and ascent and descent in level possible. As Eliade discusses it, the imaginative universe that this pattern characterizes has three levels: the world of our ordinary experience, a higher level of perfect fullness of being, a fullness of both order and vitality, and a lower level of chaotic energies that tend toward disorder and ultimately toward non-being. In this pattern of thought, the sacred as such is primarily an existential

notion; it is associated with supreme value, but only because it is even more fundamentally associated with ontological plenitude: the sacred is “the real,” and the desire to draw close to the sacred is based on what Eliade refers to as an “unquenchable ontological thirst” (p. 64)—or, as he also puts it, “The sacred is equivalent to a power, and in the last analysis to reality. It is saturated with being, enduringness, efficacy” (p. 12).

Northrop Frye used a similar schema to analyze the way literature in general tends to be organized imaginatively according to the pattern of an ultimately ontological quest. Since the human imagination is fundamentally preoccupied with possible levels of being, myth and fable depict a world of multiple levels corresponding to these, and their drama centers upon the possibilities of ascent or descent in level.³ Frye’s schema differs from Eliade’s only in that Frye thinks the mythological imagination of the West, based as it is on the Bible, involves four levels. These consist of Eliade’s three plus an “earthly paradise” representing what ordinary human life would be if it were lived perfectly rather than as it actually is. That is, Eliade’s level of human life is represented in Frye’s thought in two modes, corresponding to its possibilities of order and disorder, development and decline.

If Frye and Eliade are right, then myth implies a teleology involving something more than a story of mundane success or failure: it offers a map of the structure of human existence and therefore a revelation of what it would mean to be fully human. An important implication of this for politics is that the question of human teleology can never be completely set aside, either by the individual or by society. Whether they recognize it or not, all human beings share a deep concern with the question of how to be, of how they may succeed or fail in an enterprise of existence that has multiple levels: the divine, the demonic, and the divinely or demonically human.

Mythic symbolism is therefore an essential element in the formation of political community not only because it kindles group loyalty but also because of its ability to encompass the full dimensions of human spiritual possibilities and make them conscious. as Eric Voegelin

said in his commentary on the function of myth in Plato's late work:

As long as the movements of the unconscious are allowed to express themselves in myth in free recognition of their nature, the soul of man preserves its openness towards its cosmic ground. The terror of an infinitely overpowering, as well as the assurance of an infinitely embracing, beyond as the matrix of separate, individual existence, endow the soul with its more-than-human dimension; and through the acceptance of the truth of this dimension (that is, through faith) the separateness can in its turn, be recognized and tolerated in its finiteness and limitations. The acceptance of the myth (or on the Christian level, the *cognitio fidei*) is the condition for a realistic understanding of the soul.⁴

Any society that tried to ignore myth or replace it with desacralized science, as the former communist regimes sought to do, would not only lose a powerful instrument of political community but it would also be in danger of cutting off its people from any sense of transcendent spiritual direction and thereby rendering itself subject to all the temptations of political absolutism, since there would no longer be any beyond to limit the state's claims on the individual.

To speak only in this way, however, might imply a more benign sense of political myth than is altogether justified. There can also be a dark side to the mythic evocation of order, as the reference to demonic possibilities suggests. A total denial of the mythic vision of man's relation to the transcendent, would cut us off from the source of order in society, but an uncritical embrace of mythic thinking, on the other hand, can lead us to the demonizing of our neighbors. We have reason to be grateful to such thinkers as Mary Douglas and René Girard for helping to bring this more sinister aspect of the mythic vision into focus. When Douglas wrote *Purity and Danger* (1966) she talked about the religious division between pure and impure, ritually clean and ritually unclean, in terms very like those of Eliade—that is, as a basic step in the enterprise of world-building through imposing system on the untidiness of experience. In *Natural Symbols* (1970), however, while still developing this theme, she also talked about the way groups that feel vulnerable try to strengthen themselves

through self-purification: “Small competitive communities tend to believe themselves in a dangerous universe, threatened by sinister powers operated by fellow human beings. Instead of prayer, fasting and sacrifice to the deity, ritual activity is devoted to witch hunting, witch-cleansing, witch-killing and curing from the effects of witchcraft.”⁵ Anyone reading these words in the summer of 1992 could hardly avoid thinking of the Serbian “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia-Herzegovina as an example. This sort of struggle for strength through purity has a tremendous power of enchantment, and in present world circumstances it could easily spread widely among the fragmenting polities of Eastern Europe and the former USSR.

The most wide-ranging and dramatic application of such a conception of the way groups can seek social cohesion through collective opposition is René Girard’s theory of the scapegoat mechanism. He introduced this notion in his *Violence and the Sacred* (1972); and in numerous subsequent works, most notably *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978) and *The Scapegoat* (1982), he has developed it into a general theory of religion and society. I hope that Girard’s theory is sufficiently well-known not to need extensive summarizing here.⁶ Perhaps it will be sufficient to say that Girard believes people tend naturally to fall into a chaos of envy and emulation that would destroy them all if it were not for the mechanism of collective victimization. This device makes it possible for such a mob to come together in a common cause and thereby develop a sense of community and mutual goodwill. The mechanism gets triggered at a certain point in the general struggle when the rivals, caught up in their unconscious imitation of each other’s desires (which is what causes their rivalry to begin with), find themselves also imitating each other’s hostility to some common victim. This polarizes the spirit of violence that had floated randomly among them and deflects its energy from the emergent community to the “other.” The Nazi movement, probably without any awareness of the underlying mechanism as such, drew on this mechanism to unite the defeated and demoralized German nation in shared hatred of one ethnic group that was easy to single out and stigmatize as a source of all the nation’s ills. In the former Yugoslavia

the same device is currently at work as Serbian commandos hunt out people with different religions or even with names thought to sound non-Serbian.

The power of this scapegoating mechanism has been amply demonstrated in twentieth century history. Demagogues draw on it instinctively for its short range benefits, but factional hatred is a sword with two dangerous edges, and wiser statesmen have always tried to avoid it. (One can see an example in Vaclav Havel's efforts to persuade his fellow countrymen not to play with the black magic of scapegoating by seeking vengeance against the servants of the former political system.) Although it was not an explicit theme of Robert Bellah's essay on "Civil Religion in America,"⁷ an aversion to the scapegoat mechanism seems clearly at work in the tendency he noted in American presidential inaugural addresses to draw on the symbolism of the Old Testament rather than that of the New. The imagery of a covenant with God and an Exodus to a promised land in the new world has had considerable power in American life to elicit a sense of shared calling and responsibility without awakening rivalries. New Testament imagery, on the other hand, has been so closely associated historically with sectarian divisions that it tends to remind the American people of points of difference and antagonism. Their presidents seem to have realized this and therefore avoided it.

Girard's discussion of the way the scapegoat mechanism confers sacrality on its victim is especially important for the sobering effect it can have on those who might otherwise find unambiguously attractive the symbolism of the sacred as discussed by such figures as Otto and Eliade. In Girard's interpretation, the victim is an object of abhorrence insofar as he is perceived by members of the angry mob as the source of all the violence among them. This is why he must be killed. But when he is dead, his death is also seen as the source of the new spirit of peace and brotherhood among them, and the newly born community deifies him and reenacts his death in sacrificial rites in order to try to perpetuate the beneficent effects of his slaying. Girard theorizes that it is this duality of the scapegoat victim that gives rise to the opposing aspects of the sacred as both terrifying and attractive. His critique may be

one-sided, but whether or not (as I for one believe) there is more to the symbolism of the sacred than only a superstructure built over the figure of the scapegoat, Girard brings to light an aspect of its power that should not be ignored. However spiritualized it may become, the symbolism of the sacred continues to carry a charge of polarized violence beneath its surface, and without this it might well lose a good deal of its emotional power. Perhaps it was an intuition of this fact that led Thomas Mann, in his portrait of the Jesuit Leo Naphta in *Der Zauberberg*, to write that “the conception of piety came to be bound up in his mind with that of cruelty, and the idea of the sacred and the spiritual with the sight and smell of spurting blood.”⁸

As Auden warned repeatedly in his later verse, there is a dangerous potential for enchantment in an enthusiasm for the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.⁹ The association of the sacred with perfection and fullness of being, and its further association with “power” as such, as we saw in the quotations from Eliade above, point to elements of utopianism and perhaps even of sado-masochism in its symbolism. To surrender uncritically to their allure would lead to the opposite of the “realistic understanding of the soul” we saw Voegelin calling for and praising myth for fostering.

To speak simultaneously of myth’s power both to disturb and to protect the balance of the soul might seem paradoxical, but the paradox is an inescapable result of the inherent ambiguity of the sacred, of the mythic foundation of community, and of the human spirit itself. This has important implications for political philosophy and the practice of statesmanship. What we must seek is not a resolution of the tension between the two effects—that would itself be just one more utopian project—but rather a strategy for living with the paradox that will enable us to draw on its benefits while avoiding its dangers. In *Things Hidden*, Girard called for a total transcendence of violence through “la surtranscendence de l’amour,” in imitation of the perfect love revealed in Christ.¹⁰ This may be an excellent aspiration, and obligatory for the Christian believer, but in a world of diverse religions it would be not only

unrealistic but maladroit as a political appeal. In some cases it would fall on deaf ears, and in many others it would grate on the ears so as to exacerbate the very passions it seeks to assuage.

A more effective approach, that could harmonize better with the sort of “civil religion” Bellah was talking about, would be to recognize and accept the tragic limitations of the human condition as such and the ambiguity of every movement of the human soul. Girard himself pointed in this direction in *Violence and the Sacred* when he spoke of the difference between the mythic vision and the tragic.¹¹ Myth presents a world of sharply differentiated good and evil forces, of white hats versus black hats. Marduk does battle with the Monster-Goddess Tiamat, and the stakes are cosmos on the one hand and chaos on the other. Myth has an inherent polarizing tendency; whatever their explicit focus may be, mythic cults also encourage identification of one’s own group with good as such and of other groups with evil.

The thrust of tragedy is just the opposite. Tragedy depolarizes violence by showing how all the actors in the drama are tangled in a web no one of them alone has woven. That is why Aristotle’s theory of the tragic flaw of the protagonist misses the point. It was based on the residue of mythic vision in tragic stories. In a purely mythic representation of Oedipus’s crime, he alone would have the flaw that brings violence into the city, and that was the way the story was told before Sophocles made a tragedy of it. In *Oedipus the King* Oedipus may be quick to anger, but so are most of the other principal figures. Laius was as responsible for the fight in which Oedipus killed him as was Oedipus himself, and Tiresias and Creon as well get caught up in the general atmosphere of vituperation. Tragedy presents a world of gray hats, and its major cultural contribution has always been to remind each person in the audience that we all share in the limitations of the human condition and suffer from them together.

This is a characteristic of tragedy that Eric Voegelin also appreciated. In his concern for a realistic understanding of human existence in all its dimensions, Voegelin thought that

the civic cult of tragedy in Athens functioned as a school for the soul, attempting to arouse in the audience a capability for “the decision of a mature, responsible man.”¹²

This, finally, is what all politics can and must strive for. Not only are utopias impossible, but their pull lures us backward into a cult of absolutes and of the polarized violence they mask. What we need, especially today, is not an atavistic mythic struggle between “our” community of real human beings and monstrous “others.” What we need, rather, is something more like the spirit of Athenian tragedy—a willingness to recognize our own limitations as well as those of others and to view them with compassion for all. The real political world is one in which all hats are gray, all humans are flawed, and the best, and most realistic, goal we can all strive for is to heed the commandment Auden spoke of in another poem: “You shall love your crooked neighbor/ With your crooked heart.”¹³

NOTES

1. *Collected Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1945), pp. 58–59.
2. See, for example, Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 37.
3. In Frye’s thought, the terms “myth” and “fable” are closely associated. “A mythological universe,” he says, “is a vision of reality in terms of human concerns and hopes and anxieties: it is not a primitive form of science.” Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), p. 14. Rather, when claims to quasi-scientific or historical accuracy are made with regard to a myth, distinguishing it from a mere “fable,” this is done in order to reinforce its authority for a community: “The difference between the mythical and the fabulous is a difference in authority and social function, not in structure” (Ibid., p. 8).
4. *Order and History, 3: Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), pp. 187–88.

5. Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 137.
6. For a further general description of Girard's thought and that of other Girardians, see my *Philosophers of Consciousness* (1988), chapter 4, and also my forthcoming *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France*, scheduled for publication in January 1993 by University of Washington Press.
7. *Daedalus*, 96, 1 (1967), pp. 1-9.
8. *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H. T. Loew-Porter (New York: Knopf, 1955), p. 441; *Der Zauberberg* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1967), p. 464.
9. See Eugene Webb, *The Dark Dove: The Sacred and Secular in Modern Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), ch. 8, "W. H. Auden: The Ambiguity of the Sacred," pp. 237-63.
10. *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1988), pp. 335-36. The quoted phrase is actually Jean-Michel Oughourlian's in dialogue with Girard and summarizing Girard's point.
11. Chapter two, pp. 39-67.
12. *Order and History, 2: The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 247.
13. "As I Walked Out One Evening," *Collected Poetry*, p. 198.