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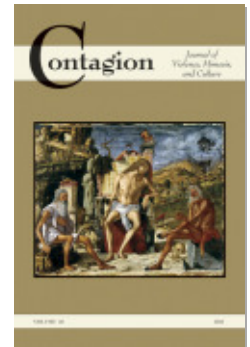
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Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture, Volume 7, Spring 2000, pp. 18-35 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/ctn.2000.0002



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# ABORTION AS A SACRAMENT: MIMETIC DESIRE AND SACRIFICE IN SEXUAL POLITICS

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"If men got pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament."

That familiar taunt is mostly aimed at Roman Catholics to humiliate them for their purportedly religious and anti-rational opposition to abortion. It is conventional to sniff that the "religious assumptions" on which disapproval of abortion is "typically based" are "highly questionable" (Chambers 1). But the cultural theories of René Girard suggest that it is because men don't get pregnant that abortion already is a sacrament. The key elements of sacrificial religion, as Girard defines it, are the presence of intolerable tension that must lead to social disruption; the choice of a victim who cannot strike back to absorb the community's violence; and the concealment of the function of the sacrifice, which employs actual violence for the purpose of stabilizing institutional violence. Abortion in America is upheld not as medical or even political policy, but as, in fact, a religious sacrifice.

Girard's definition of religion requires neither a moral code nor a divinity nor a metaphysical grounding. The cult of Dionysus, to name only one example, evidently endorsed nothing we would recognize as a general code of morality; Buddhism, a far more august example, does not focus on a divinity; animism proposes no universal metaphysics. As to sacraments,

Thomas Aquinas, following St. Augustine, did not scruple to call non-Christian sacrifices sacraments of their religions, "Whether true or false."<sup>1</sup>

Scapegoating defines religious sacrifice. It protects the sacrificing community and promotes its unity—so long as all believe that the scapegoat must suffer. Often the victim is called an enemy to some established order; sacrifice is always conservative, even if it upholds an inherently unstable system. Because powerlessness, not real disruptive power, is the criterion for becoming a scapegoat, sacrifice requires a strong shared illusion. Classical religions provide unopposable gods to choose the tragically necessary victims, allowing strong ambivalence to surround the sacrifice itself. If this is not present, the death or banishment takes on a different character—more political than religious, though Girard notes a fundamental unity between those two methods of controlling mimetic violence.

Mimetic violence originates in illusion surrounding a rivalry. Often there is an object involved, such as territory or wealth or political rank, but the object, which seems important, is actually irrelevant. The rivalry can continue, seeking new objects, whatever concrete acquisitions either party makes or loses. General, aimless rivalry dominates a social world of fragile, undefined selves in which anyone can be a model for imitation, and therefore anyone can be a threat to one's sense of self. What an imitator actually seeks is to have whatever is desirable; most desirable of all, perhaps, is the ability to know what is desirable, a mysterious quality that is constantly attributed to others; Girard calls this quality "being." From the nursery we are each other's disciples, wanting each other's toys not because of their inherent virtue so much as because someone else has seen some virtue in them. As human desire has no real single object, it has no closure; envy and revenge threaten others in a widening net of destruction.

In the classic scenario, the model whose "being" has become matter for imitation finds himself in competition for the object, and attacks the rival, who returns in kind. A disciple who can rally aspire to the model's status can become a dangerous, even a deadly rival; in imagination, and sometimes in reality, they turn each other into monsters. Yet as the desire has no single object, neither has the rage: the violence can be easily transferred to another object than one's rival. Sometimes those who are uneasy about their status in relation to one another can cement a powerful unity by focusing blame on some common target: a scapegoat. The Orwellian scenario is in fact the normal scenario: individuals caught in the maelstrom of social instability

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<sup>1</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, 3a.61.1 31.

seek to avoid victimization by diverting the violence into blame and destruction directed, first of all, against someone else—and, if possible, against someone who cannot strike back: a sacrifice.

Not all sacrificial religious structures actually involve blood sacrifice. The deflection of social violence so that it does not escalate into retaliation can take many shapes; imprisonment, slavery, seizure of property, enforced poverty—indeed, all forms of social injustice. Caste systems of all kinds institutionalize violence in a singularly stable way. The reason such systems work is that they create a barrier to the escalation of mimetic desire. One way to avoid the destructive competition is to make it really impossible for imitators to compete with their models, without lessening their desire for the *being* possessed by the models. Girard described the mechanism on a small scale in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, wherein a rival, having failed to be like his idol in possessing an object, seeks instead to turn the model's contempt into a possession to be seized; one can at least share the tastes of one's model, which include a distaste for oneself. The desire for one's own subjugation becomes itself a valuable status marker; the prohibition on competition is internalized, so that while mimetic desire exists, it strengthens rather than destabilizes the system of subjugation. As America learned when the Civil Rights movement questioned its racial caste system, and the "black is beautiful" movement convinced African-Americans that no one should seek to *be* whiter and thus feel superior to darker people, the possibility of real competition transformed self-hatred into resentment and social unrest.

This mechanism of self-hatred, the foundation of the institutionalized violence of caste, has long been known to feminists under the rubric of "internalized oppression." Mary Wollstonecraft describes it in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; John Stuart Mill, in *The Subjection of Women*, made it the basis for his argument that the true desires and character of women are unknown, for a hope-less power gap allows her no identity save that granted by the male possessors of power and all that seems desirable. Women blame their bodies, not the men in power, for their abasement. Unable to be like a man in status, a woman can be like her idol in desiring him to have high status, and indeed even in despising those who rank below him. She thus becomes an eternal disciple, desiring her own permanent subjugation.<sup>2</sup> Such a woman defines her very self in terms of upholding

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<sup>2</sup>This term was one of several proposed to describe this peculiarly twisted psychology at a meeting of the Colloquium on Religion and Violence at Stanford on November 24, 1998; René Girard preferred "eternal disciple" because he liked the allusion to *The Eternal Hus-*

male privilege; the Curse of Eve describes such self-imposed oppression: "Your desire shall be for your man and he shall lord it over you" (Genesis 3:16). Western societies do not take this subjugation to the extreme of *suttee*, the suicide of widows, the Hindu practice which takes very seriously the idea that a woman is emptied of meaning by her husband's death. Nevertheless, American women's shelters are all too familiar with women who will endure any sort of abuse in order to be connected to a male person—a dirty little secret in the high culture of our supposedly egalitarian society which has not escaped the keener eyes of writers of popular music and literature.

An overwhelmingly dependent self-definition makes the social plight of a woman whose man leaves—or threatens to—seem somehow more terrible than concrete risks to her own health or welfare. In America, which is supposed to be a place where such things do not happen, and where women enjoy the same sexual privileges as men, Emory University recently conducted a study among young sexually active teenage girls in order to discover what sexual information they most urgently wanted. And so ingrained was their habit of defining their own needs as the needs of a male person that 85% wanted to know "How to say no without hurting the other's feelings." As Frederica Mathewes-Green remarked wryly, "The meaning of politeness has shifted in one generation from 'nice girls don't' to 'nice girls have to'" (Mathewes-Green). Feminist theorists like Germaine Greer and Andrea Dworkin are not speaking mere nonsense when they deplore all heterosexual activity as "rape culture;" but the coercion they detect has to do with an atavistic social fear (Fox-Genovese 148). There is safety in cooperating with the master caste.

In America today, a woman's sexual life and her parenthood are emphatically nobody's business but her own, weighting any pregnancy, even within marriage, with great peril. Feminist theorist Elizabeth Fox-Genovese is not the only one who has argued that the "right to privacy" in sexual matters "virtually secures" the oppression of pregnant women who have no legal means of coercing cooperation from the father (Rudy 103); they abort, they say, because of lack of male support (Sadchev 161). When all the risks fall upon the woman, sex indeed is violence. And a woman cannot move from one sexual relationship to another easily; aside from the health risks, much more severe for women than men, a woman who lacks a defining male through having had too many sexual relationships is in an even lower social

position than the woman who has never attracted enough attention to get a lover.

Traditional cultures surround sex with ceremony and taboo, as a peril tantamount to bloodguilt, and not without reason. Like anger, lust can strike anywhere and subvert authority structures. It creates false equalities and deadly rivalries, breaks kinship bonds and produces children with no place in the social structure. Born to insecurity, such children can become a dangerous and disruptive class. If sexual mores are even loosened so far as to permit easy divorce, the bonds which tie adults to children are also more easily broken; women fall into poverty, and children lose vital emotional connections. Indeed, even financial connections; for American children, as a rule, poverty follows divorce.<sup>3</sup> No welfare system can counteract familial breakdown. The founding myth of Helen of Troy demonstrates with academic clarity that "Make love not war" is a naive slogan. One of my Generation X students observed that the lovemaking of her generation's parents is tantamount to war against their children.

The process of instability leading to sacrificial crisis, which Girard describes in many works, can be seen clearly in the development of American abortion culture. Rational equality for women in a judicially organized state was proceeding cautiously until customary sexual sanctions broke down—most importantly, the onus against divorce. Parenthood virtually imposes on a divorced woman both financial insecurity and undesirability as a mate. As the incidence of divorce rose sharply, American women lost the protections offered by male obligation to marriage partners. Faced with a crushing burden of structural violence, poverty and strangling lack of opportunity—women justly demanded more employment and educational equality, very rapidly.

Equality is the precondition for rivalry, and equality was in fact defined mimetically: women would be free if they were just like men. But a worker cannot help having a body, and insofar as sexuality is part of a worker's life, equal treatment is inequality. But sex and parenthood do not, and cannot, mean the same thing to a woman as to a man. Feminist sociologist Kathy Rudy observes that the "traditional norm—the subject everyone is equal to—is the unencumbered (non-childbearing) male...and reinforces the stereotypes that lead to sexism" (Rudy 142). Yet a woman is not likely to seek to change the social structure whose deprecation of her physical

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<sup>3</sup>At the moment, most American marriages end in divorce and only 20% of divorced fathers pay child support. See Clymer.

characteristics she has no doubt internalized. If she is a mother, further complications ensue; unconventionality is hard on one's children.

The "norm" of the non-childbearing male is not the product of angry feminist rhetoric; it is a juridical fact. American law long designated pregnancy as equivalent to "disengagement" from the sphere of public life, especially in the area of employment (Williams 335). The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that employee health care plans could exclude pregnancy while honoring claims for disorders of male sexual organs because pregnancy was not a condition of a worker, but a "sui generis" condition. Until the federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, women could not seek remedy for pregnancy-related loss of income, seniority or employment, because the Supreme Court upheld a California court's ruling that pregnancy discrimination is not sex discrimination (Williams 337). Even now, the legal logic governing rulings on women's reproductive lives militates against considering pregnancy in terms of equality under law, and instead treats it as a matter of "privacy;" the functioning of the womb is irrelevant to public policy and protection. (Williams 343).

And despite the Pregnancy Discrimination Act—in those relatively rare instances where it is enforced—women are disadvantaged by motherhood in the working world. Objective physical consequences of pregnancy can and do limit pregnant women's work lives, for the sake of their own safety and that of their offspring. Male workers in good health simply have a physical advantage in this area, as tall people have a physical advantage in professional basketball. Moreover, it is well-documented that mothers are handicapped in professional careers by persistent disapproval of any behavior that is not "nice" and submissive on their part, even in managerial positions where authority must be wielded (Corse 39). A woman faced with economic and social oppression connected to the normal functioning of her body has two obvious choices: she can reject the definitions of her entire political world and try to set up some sort of rebellion—or she can conclude that the enemy is within; is indeed her own pregnant body and the fetus growing there. If she accepts the definition of the pregnancy as her enemy, she can join forces with the structures that are in place, and deflect the crippling economic consequences of her femaleness, although at the cost of her own blood. The boss can retaliate; the fetus cannot.

Abortion kills something called a "mass of cells," or "aborted fetal matter" (Rudy xi) but with human ancestry that joins it closely to the community for which it acts as surrogate. Our political community has established structures that have defined personal success and structures that defend sexual expression as too sacred to be restrained; it must be "private,"

beyond the reach of law. If both these structures are to remain in place, women must choose between failure and the willingness to sacrifice maternity to the violence inherent in the structures. Considered in these terms, abortion in America precisely fits the structure of religious sacrifice, where the best victims are the most defenseless. Like a classic sacrificial victim, the fetus is both blamed for the disorder surrounding its conception and acknowledged as innocent, sometimes at the same time. Here an abortion worker displays sacrificial ambivalence, as if not "we" but other forces made abortion happen:

I see more of murder the further along they get....I believe that, yes, it is a potential life or being, person, but at the same time it is not independent of the mother and it's not able to live by itself. Until we can reach that point...it's really the mother that has the decision over the life.(Reardon 254)

Archaeologists like Lawrence E. Stager discuss the burning of perinatal infants in Moloch-sacrifices to Tanit at Carthage in terms of the economic functions that we tend to assign to abortion, without denying that the act was religious: "In this way the elite could control their numbers in a rather systematic way while still receiving the blessing of the gods." Nor does advancing civilization discard sacrifice; Stager denies that "the 'barbaric' practice of human sacrifice was gradually replaced by the more 'civilized' practice of animal substitution," for "it is precisely in the third and fourth centuries B.C., when Carthage had attained the heights of urbanity, that child sacrifice flourished as never before" (Stager 9). Animal substitution for child sacrifice was more common earlier, according to radiocarbon dating; it was later, when Carthage was most prosperous and thriving, that child sacrifice became more common.

Sacrifice provides blessings as elusive as the object of mimetic desire. The "quality-of-life" argument for abortion, which opponents of abortion can dismiss as nihilistic, or at best utilitarian, sometimes takes on a frankly religious cast:

There can be nothing more destructive to a child's spirit than being unwanted, and there are few things more disruptive to a



woman's spirit than being forced into motherhood without love or need.<sup>4</sup>

Here spirits are invoked purely as a cloak for physical violence—a usage almost invisible as religion to Western culture. Christianity speaks of the Spirit as offering freedom from compulsion from pain or fear or cupidity. It was pagan gods, such as Dionysus, that compelled people to join unanimously in sacrificial practice, without regard to the beliefs in their heart; witness Tiresias in *The Bacchae*. Sacrifice that had nothing to do with one's interior desire for God's justice was reprehended by the Hebrew prophets, and Christianity wholeheartedly adopted their attitude. The assertion that well-doing under compulsion is destructive to the spirit was nonsense to the Greeks. It draws its power from Christian theodicy, which concerns itself with the idea that love must be free in order to have full human dignity. Note that concern with the state of the heart as the measure of human dignity is not, in Christian theodicy, a concern with emotions *per se*. Emotional compulsion is viewed in traditional Christian thinking in much the same light as more external compulsions (which ultimately have their effect through emotions) since emotions, besides being unstable, have the ultimately frustrating effect of narrowing a person's concerns to herself or himself. The Christian tradition of psychological interiority has been completely inverted to require that an action be considered to have true human dignity only when accompanied by tender feelings. Through the Middle Ages, the common consent of the Christian philosophical tradition treated love as the rational ability to attend to some good other than one's own. Such love is free because it is not limited to the good, even the psychological good, of a single creature but has a potentially infinite field of play; mere desire, unchecked, is limited and irrational, confined to the isolated human self (Wolter 179). That is how even a vow of obedience could be an act of freedom, if it were chosen for its rational goodness rather than for the sake of getting some comfort out of one's inferiority.

But Americans, oriented towards the satisfaction and development of the self, do not admire obedience, preferring a vision of noble struggle for expression of the genuine self, untrammelled by others' demands. America is the land where everyone is free to compete, so we say, for the highest office in the land; everyone, indeed, rivals everyone else, and it is deep shame to

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<sup>4</sup>Committee on Psychiatry and Law of the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, *The Right to Abortion*, 1969 (quoted in Woods 84).

admit oneself to be less than original. Now such originary desire would free anyone who had it from being a mimetic disciple—but it is not possible. We know this in the most practical way, since the engine of our commerce, the advertising industry, runs entirely upon mimetic insecurity. Yet Americans affirm—go poll any group of college freshmen, as I have done for years—that freedom consists of following the deepest and most sincere desires of one's heart solely for the development of oneself. Therefore, in order for a person to have a stable sense of self, the desires oriented to self must be seen as firm and unyielding. And indeed, when the abortion rights movement speaks of "unwanted children," the rhetoric treats "unwanted" as a permanent state of a child's being rather than a reflection of its mother's immediate personal concern. Invested with the illusion of manifesting originary desire, this self-oriented freedom escapes rational judgment, for one's deepest desires are hidden in the heart. Many defenders of legal abortion who admit to no desire to use it themselves justify their position on the grounds that people must be required to do only the things that accord with their deep desires. That people's deep desires are fundamentally infected with mimesis would be anathema to such an ethic.

However, such support of "choice" is for the theoreticians of the movement. Most mothers who actually abort do so because they feel they have no free choice. They are under a terrible compulsion, and the compulsion is not physical. Paul Swope's brilliant article in *First Things* described how, although aborting women may know that it is irrational to think so, motherhood seems "equivalent to a 'death of self'....a complete loss of control over their present and future selves. It shatters their sense of who they are and will become....the choice of abortion becomes one of self-preservation" (Swope 32). Almost 90% of women who abort do so because they seek the approval of someone else—"to please or protect someone else"—because they feel that in order to have a self they must comply with some other human being's desire (Mathewes-Green). All of the pro-choice women in Swope's cited study believed that abortion was killing, but "that is a price a woman in that situation is willing to pay in her desperate struggle for what she believes to be her very survival" (Swope 33). Abortion appeases mysterious forces that threaten a woman not physically but spiritually, with the extinction of her *being*. If she just accepts a few minutes with a knife or a suction machine, no worse fate can pursue her.

American law, however, purports to be rational and equal in defending its citizens' lives. Therefore political supporters of abortion must contend that the fetus is not "really" alive—making medical nonsense of the

surgery—or not human, another medical impossibility.<sup>5</sup> Rare and recent abortion rhetoric calls the unborn an evil "invader" and deplores the "awesome power of a fetus to draw what-ever nourishment it needs from the pregnant woman; so much for weak and helpless" (Ritter 9). More often, the victim is fictionalized into part of the woman's body, though no product of human conception can be identical with its parent.

To make anti-abortion groups and abortionists monstrous doubles (as Girard calls them) vying for power with equal crimes on either head, defenders of abortion match language about the "right to life" with language about "the right to abortion;" anti-abortion language about the murder of the unborn is countered by slogans about saving a baby at the cost of the mother's life. The deception is blatant; if a pregnant woman dies, no child she is carrying can survive; but there is rhetorical advantage in misusing the two old, respectable senses of "life"—"heartbeat and brain function" and "a social and economic place in the world" (Lewis)—as if they were equivalent. Disgusted with the dishonesty, Naomi Wolf critiques her allies in support of abortion: "Clinging to a rhetoric about abortion in which there is no life and no death, we entangle our beliefs in a series of self-delusions, fibs and evasions" (Wolf 26). She continues, "Images of violent fetal death...are not polemical in themselves; they are biological facts. We know this" (29). Wolf finally, confusedly pleads for a religious paradigm wherein the "sin" of abortion must not be forbidden because it can be forgiven (34). More straightforwardly, some abortion workers pity the fetus that must die for the greater good—sometimes, paradoxically, for its own good, in an ambivalent "sweet brutality" (Tisdale 66). One mused: "I mean, they are killing something that would develop into maturity, but under the circumstances that's necessary, and probably better for the baby" (Reardon 254).

Girard recognizes that in sacrifices made for political reasons, those who are "not naive" about the victim's innocence must deny the reality of the killing or risk awakening the mechanisms of vengeance. Indeed, proponents of abortion are aware of the danger of vengeance if their concealment fails. They routinely identify murder and political vengeance as the real agenda of people who name the fetus a human person with full rights (Cohen; see also Nash). Abortionists have in fact been killed by those who would defend the unborn as persons. Not all anti-abortion groups reject those murders, despite

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<sup>5</sup>Molar pregnancies aside; there abnormal cell production destroys fetal development before its threat to the mother's life becomes detectable.

Christian prohibitions of revenge. Our legal culture's definition of personhood intervenes: personhood is the right to be avenged. Legal persons, such as banks and universities, can sue for damages in a court of law, and are defended by the police and the courts from acts of aggression. Exclusions of human individuals from the ranks of those who may be avenged are not unusual; in America, they once applied to slaves. They always apply to victims suitable for sacrifice. As Girard comments, "The 'translation' of this violent process into terms of expulsion, evacuation and surgical operations is made in the most diverse cultures" (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 288).

If the political illusion of the victim's insignificance breaks down, so does the law. Abortion becomes private violence which may be avenged and start an uncontrollable cycle of violence.<sup>6</sup> In *Abortion without Apology*, Nina Baehr states it frankly: "Abortion activists have a rich history of taking the law—and their lives—into their own hands. When the law doesn't respect women, women don't respect the law" (quoted in Rudy 66). This is the rhetoric of self-destructive mob violence, as in the Los Angeles Riots of 1992; if the law has failed in its duty to protect, we must take our own revenge. But revenge is not taken directly against one's powerful opponents; Black Angelenos did not storm police headquarters (though there was scattered and surreptitious violence against police) and women do not attack the men who abandon and oppress them. The violence is transferred from the oppressor to some surrogate victim; it takes on a sacrificial cast.

Courts have been used to establish a "right" to abortion as a decision "between the woman and her doctor," but abortion has a legal status unlike that of any other medical procedure. Patients must give informed consent for surgery—but by 1987, judgment had been made that abortionists had a "constitutional right" to withhold information about possible complications even if directly questioned by the patient. Even now, not all states have informed consent laws that cover abortion. No other elective surgery dispenses with any waiting period after the initial examination. Ten years ago, doctors in some locations could pay kickbacks for abortion referrals, a practice which, if exploited in favor of any other surgery, would endanger one's medical license (Reardon 234). Amidst proof that they are unsafe, overused and unnecessary for their ostensible medical purpose, gruesome abortions in which a woman is put through all the rigors of a breech birth

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<sup>6</sup>Its vengefulness has drawn "girls' gangs" in Dorchester, Massachusetts, to require two abortions as proof of sufficiently antisocial "toughness" for membership. See Fox-Genovese 25.

and then the child's brain is sucked from the skull, are defended desperately. No other debate has illustrated so clearly that the real questions underlying abortion have nothing to do with women's health. Prohibition of sex-selection abortion, which has begun to skew demographics in America, and created sex ratios tilting wildly toward the male elsewhere—in fact, any regulation of even the most egregiously evil kinds of abortion—might make for a crack in the ceremonial unity necessary for sacrifice. No voice is to be upraised to call the unborn child's death a murder; exclusion zones for protesters keep dissenting voices and images out of an aborting woman's sight and hearing. Until February, 1997 eight-foot "bubbles" of protection surrounded abortion clinics' patients and employees; their very persons were sacred (Greenhouse 1). This is surgery after the pattern of ancient sacrifice (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 100-101).

The federal Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Bill seems crafted to reveal the essentially sacrificial and religious nature of the extraordinary legal defenses accorded to abortion. The law penalizes any person who "intimidates or interferes with" anyone who is or has been "obtaining or providing" what it coyly calls "reproductive health services" (although the word "abortion" does surface before the end of the document) and it explicitly discourages religious activities near abortion clinics. A startling clause follows, penalizing whoever intentionally damages or destroys the property of a facility, or attempts to do so, because such facility provides reproductive health services, or intentionally damages or destroys the property of a place of worship.<sup>7</sup>

The phraseology equating abortion clinics with places of worship is consistent throughout the law. It is not an accident. Attempting desperately to save the appearance of equal protection for opponents and proponents of abortion, the attempt to equate the sacred spaces of Christianity and the cult of abortion eerily resembles the fiction of unanimity gained by forced participation in Dionysiac processions.<sup>8</sup> American politics, like all politics, is only sacrificial religion in a different idiom; both require faith, or at any rate collusion, with the powers that be. If a population ceases to believe that a polis really protects against violence, the system ceases to operate; therefore everyone must somehow be brought to express belief in the wise

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<sup>7</sup>Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Law 18 U.S.C. Sec. 248 (a) 3. q in full in Staver.

<sup>8</sup>The books of Macchabees, among the Apocrypha, describe such coercion of the Jewish population under Greek rule.

protectiveness of the state. If not, anarchy and violence—what Girard calls the "mimetic crisis"—are likely to ensue.

The fundamentally religious premise of the abortion laws explains such aberrations as the fact that children risk life and limb in abortions, and conceal the surgery from their guardians who must otherwise know every detail of their health record. The surgery is routinely performed without any attempts to examine the woman's full health record or consult with her primary care provider. Abortion laws protect no one's health, no confidential trust between the patient and the doctor; in abortions, the two often do not know one another's names. The laws protect only sexual privacy, the sacred space accorded to the divine act of desire, which must not be violated at any cost. Sexual privacy vastly increased male freedom to abandon pregnant women (Fox-Genovese 26); laws reinforce this by excluding fathers from abortion decisions. Recent bestsellers have begun to explore the cost of this sacralized sexuality in social and emotional dislocation among women (See Shallitt); but the mere physical costs are so obvious and severe that they could scarcely be endured but for the illusion that male bodies provide the measure of worthiness. The old feminist protest against the dictum that "biology is destiny" has been infected with the prejudice that women's real, originary desires, their true destiny, requires them to ignore or suppress their bodies' ability to conceive, and the connection of their bodies to those of their children. The assertion that women's sexuality can be just like men's, however sincerely proclaimed, is deeply mimetic and biologically oppressive. Such an unstable belief system requires sacrifice for its maintenance. If pregnancy is death to self, and sexual intercourse is required for self-fulfillment—both culturally conditioned notions—abortion seems to provide the only escape from the terrors of living in a woman's body. The breakdown of that sacrificial system threatens a woman with the emptiness that drives Hindu widows to *suttee*.

Girard points out that sacrifice, aimed not at the prevention but the diversion of rage, cannot produce long-term stability; a judicial system is far more effective for halting mimetic violence (*Violence and the Sacred* 20-21). Abortion enables rather than ends the economic and social oppression of women, and correlates with skyrocketing statistics on child abuse.<sup>9</sup> (Indeed, as the abortion rate has fallen recently, so has the child abuse

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<sup>9</sup>See Reardon (225). See also evidence for the alienation process which makes this possible, and the evidence that previous abortion is an important indicator for likelihood of future child abuse in Boss (218).

rate.<sup>10</sup>) Intolerable social risks create expanding disorder. And despite declining rates of abuse and neglect in general, sexual child molestation and child murder are both on the rise; men molest, and women kill (Fox-Genovese 164). Legal pressure to recognize less and less permanent sexual relationships as worthy of the special protections of "privacy" has given rise to a culture in the grip of sexual violence that only in abortion recognizes the terrible as well as beneficial face of Venus. As every woman competes with other women for men and with men for privilege, in both rivalries, her disadvantage is tied to childbearing—in fact, to having a woman's body.

Since abortion seems to offer escape from the costs of having a female body, legal challenges to abortion provoke aggressive condemnation as a "backlash" and a "war against women." Naomi Wolf acknowledges that the system of abortion does nothing to change the fact that women must purchase male privilege at the price of their bodies and their children. She favors abortion because it provides, as she frankly puts it, "a desperately-needed exit from near-total male control of our reproductive lives...an unambiguous chain of power and powerlessness in which men control women, and women, in order to survive, must have unquestioned control over fetuses" (Wolf 35). These assumptions about a chain of power that Wolf describes are foundational to the rhetoric that accuses the anti-abortion movement of hating women and constricting them to the home. It signals fear that women rather than children are to be sacrificed. Underneath it is a half-recognized terror of women absorbing alone the violence unleashed by the disruptions which followed the collapse of real, if ritually rigid, social protections for childbearing women.

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<sup>10</sup>Abortion has been slowly decreasing since 1988, according to a report from the Surgeon General's Office of Population Affairs, accessed at <http://www.hhs.gov/progord/opa/pregtmed.html>. See also "Changing Trends in Abortions," *Monthly Vital Statistics*, October 1997, vol. 31, no. 8 accessed at <http://www.health.state.mo.us/MonthlyVitalStatistics/Zc97.html>. See *Journal of the American Medical Association Women's Health Information Center Newslines*, on "Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dec. 4, 1998 vol 47, no. 47 accessed at <http://www.ama-assn.org/special/womh/newslines/special/mm4747.htm>, which reports a slight "uptick" in abortion numbers in 1996 only. The United States Department of Health and Human Services reports that child abuse began its slow decline in 1993, five years after the abortion rate began to decline. Teachers are required to report cases of abuse; reportage naturally follows school entry ages. See the HHS Administration for Children and Families, HHS News, "HHS Reports New Child Abuse and Neglect Statistics," accessed at <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/news/abuse.htm>.

The anti-abortion movement rarely considers such matters; it has indeed little to offer to the woman who finds herself in a sacrificial position, because the *pro-life understanding of the abortion dilemma* is so emphatically legal. Certainly concern with illusion written into law is legitimate; falsehood at its root is a real danger to our whole legal system. However, among women seeking abortion, juridical language and thought are inadequate. One cannot use the language of reason and constitutional law to convince defenders of abortion, who already know that abortion is killing and that to kill the innocent is indefensible under a system of justice. Their defense is that of necessity: they face a threat beyond the powers of the law's defense—the threat posed by the sacred, the private, the required license of sexual desire. Though the risks run by women in the American sexual environment are objective and quantifiable on the physical level, rational responses, such as offering free healthcare, child support and adoption services—desperately as all these are needed—will never suffice to remedy the crisis of the pregnant woman. Because this is a symbolic more than a physical crisis, as Swope has proven, women would rather abort than give their children up for adoption. Rational, physical aid will not mollify the irrational, mimetic terror that tells a woman that if she is not allowed to treat the fetus as a sacrifice, she will lose her very life. A woman's "life" in this context means her "being" in the mimetic sense.

The rational definition of freedom offered in Christian theodicy supports the notion that to be unable to equate the needs of others with one's own defines irrationality (Wolter 102-103); it is to be in the grip of evil. Christians are commanded to approach the sacrificial crisis with this sort of rationality and freedom—the freedom that enables a person to defend the victim even if it means sharing the victim's fate.<sup>11</sup> Rationality in a sexual context acknowledges the dangers to which one can expose another by one's actions, and either voluntarily accepts the full physical and psychological consequences, or refrains from imposing them. The first of those decisions is, in Christian terms, marriage; the second, virginity. Both provide real escape from the sacrificial system. If the male in a sexual relationship understands his sexual activity as volunteering for the role of the sacrificial victim,<sup>12</sup> he takes on, as much as possible, the uncontrollable danger and restriction to which he exposes the woman.

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<sup>11</sup>Girard, *The Scapegoat* (200); all of ch. 15 serves the argument.

<sup>12</sup>The fifth chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, often used in marriage ceremonies, makes this point.



But on the other side of the battle line in the culture wars, abortion is no less a religious issue. Abortion directs violence toward an entity which has human ancestry, but is denied the right to vengeance, which defines a person in the community. The real nature of the violence and the victim are concealed, in defiance of rationality, for the violence works in a powerfully conservative way to preserve the current social structure while satisfying mimetic cravings. The structural violence of a society which values the achievements of male bodies and denigrates those of female bodies remains in place, but women are allowed the chance to escape the violence by shedding their own blood and that of their offspring. The women remain eternal disciples, despising their own bodies as the source of their social constriction and seeking always to deflect the death of *being* that seems to be their lot. The fears assuaged by abortion are atavistic and at the root of human culture; the language of rights and social contracts does not touch them. Cooperation in abortion is cooperation in a sacrificial system, with all the deceit, oppression and futility that that entails.

Does such a recognition free us from mimetic desire? No; our desires and envies remain. But to recognize the devices that conceal our own dependency from us is to do much towards enabling us to choose our masters wisely. Indeed, we may be able to emulate one another in the freedom that is willing to endure suffering to proclaim truth and justice. To provide an escape from the endless cycle of sacrificial violence—of sacrificial abortion in particular—we must recognize the ways in which reproduction is a burden for women and address the truly deep terrors of sexuality with self-restraining love, love which agrees to suffer the consequences of evil it has not caused. Such love constitutes the only rational way to live.

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