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## **The Ambiguous Cachet of Victimhood**

### **Elias Canetti's "Religions of Lament" and Abrahamic Monotheism**

"Lamentations are simply the need to constantly irritate the wound." (Dostoevsky 48)

The increase of religiously motivated violence in our contemporary world – especially religiously motivated terrorism – has revived an old charge against all monotheistic religions that are today often accused of causing violent conflicts. In order to evaluate this currently fashionable critique of monotheism this article will discuss Elias Canetti's concept of the "religions of lament" in the framework of René Girard's mimetic theory. By this I will first sharpen our understanding of the difference between pagan religions and Abrahamic monotheism (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). It is the overcoming of human sacrifices and the disclosure of the scapegoat mechanism that marks the end of paganism in this tradition and applies to all three monotheistic religions. Following this thread we discover the emergence of modern individuality and human rights as a result of the monotheistic legacy. This overcoming of the pagan sacred, however, is not without its own dangers. Abrahamic monotheism easily perverts into a form of lament that inspires a vitriolic form of violence unknown to the pagan world. It is therefore not only the root of modern human rights and our contemporary concern for victims but also a possible source for resentment perverting the perspective of the victim. According to Canetti, a lamenting pack changes easily into a war pack. The temptation coming along with lamenting a persecuted victim is that it quickly legitimizes without much doubts violent resistance and even acts of revenge. Our world of today is full of victims turning into perpetrators. It is especially for this reason that the role of the victim has become so attractive and dangerous at the same time. From the perspective of mimetic theory this is the reign of the Antichrist, in which fighting persecution leads to even more cruel acts of violence. A final question therefore has to ask what kind of help we can find in the Abrahamic tradition to overcome this dangerous threat.

## ***The Religions of Lament***

To evaluate the currently fashionable critique of monotheism we will discuss in the following Elias Canetti's concept of the "religions of lament". Referring especially to Christians and Shiite Muslims Canetti called those religions "religions of lament", whose members are siding with a persecuted victim in order to expiate their own guilt as persecutors:

"The face of the earth has been changed by the religions of lament and, in Christianity, they have attained a kind of universal validity. ... The legend around which they form is that of a man or a god who perishes unjustly. It is always the story of a pursuit, a hunt, or a baiting, and there may also be an unjust trial. ... To all those who join it the same thing happens: the hunting or baiting pack expiates its guilt by becoming a lamenting pack. ... It is a sudden change of side with far-reaching consequences. It frees them from the accumulated guilt of killing and from the fear that death will strike at them too. All that they have done to others, another now takes on himself; by attaching themselves to him, faithfully and without reserve, they hope to escape vengeance. Thus it appears that religions of lament will continue to be indispensable to the psychic economy of men for as long as they remain unable to renounce pack killing." (Canetti 168-171)

Canetti refers to two consequences stemming from the legacy of religions of lament. First and more directly, he mentions the tremendous increase of the value of each human individual going along with the spread of Christianity. What he describes in the following passage refers to our modern understanding of an inviolable human dignity stemming from the Abrahamic concern for victims:

"The image of him whose death Christians have lamented for nearly two thousand years has become part of the consciousness of mankind. He is the dying man and the man who ought not to die. With the increasing secularization of the world his divinity has become less important, but he remains as an individual, suffering and dying. The centuries of his divinity have endowed the *man* with a kind of earthly immortality. ... In the midst of all our frenzy of increase, which includes men too, the value of the individual has become not less, but more. The events of our times appear to have proved the opposite, but even they have not really altered man's image of himself. The value that has been put on his soul has helped man to the assurance of

his earthly value. He finds his desire for indestructibility justified. Each feels himself a worthy object of lament; each is stubbornly convinced that he ought not to die." (Canetti 543-544)

A second, much more indirect consequence going along with the religions of lament is, according to Canetti, a certain tendency to legitimate violent and revengeful actions by siding with a persecuted victim. Lament can easily turn into war. Canetti mentions a typical transmutation that stands at the beginning of wars: "A man is killed and the members of his tribe lament him. Then they form into a troop and set out to avenge his death on the enemy; the lamenting pack changes into a war pack." (Canetti 150) The lament for the death can easily inflame war: "The quick-forming lamenting pack operates as a crowd crystal; it, as it were, opens out, everyone who feels the same threat attaching himself to it. Its spirit changes into that of a war pack." (Canetti 162)

Despite the fact that Canetti mentions Shiism as one of the examples of a religion of lament he sees Islam in general as a "religion of war" more directly connected to the war pack not really in need of the lamenting pack as its crowd crystal (Canetti 165-168). In a broader sense, however, this also can be connected to the Abrahamic siding with the victim typical of the religions of lament. The Islamic legitimation of war is rooted in a concept of just war allowing self-defense and the struggle for a just and decent society (cf. Armstrong 164-210; Osman 62-63). Canetti's view of Islam as nothing but a warmongering religion is part of Western Islamophobia and not an accurate evaluation. But it is also true that concepts of just war can easily be perverted justifying violence caused by resentment or sheer lust for conquest. In this regard we can find many historical examples in Islam as well as in Christianity.

There are many examples of vengeful religious lament throughout history. Following Canetti's reference to the Shiites lamenting Husain leads to its recent impact on the Iranian Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini's motivated his people in the eight year long war against Iraq by excessively increasing their lament for Husain (cf. Volkan 134-135; Bonney 246). Also the Christian tradition is not free from this temptation connected to lament. The most striking examples are the Crusades where Christians fought against Jews and Muslims legitimating their violence by emphasizing their solidarity with the crucified Jesus (cf. Bartlett 109). The temptation

of a vengeful religious lament has become a common dimension of contemporary religiously—and also secular—motivated violence, especially of terrorism. Muslim, Jewish and Christian terrorists and even the Aum Shinrikyo group, that carried out a poison gas attack on the Tokyo subways in 1995, legitimate their violent acts as deeds in defense of persecuted victims (cf. Hoffman 95-127; Juergensmeyer 12; Taylor 36). Osama bin Laden is a perfect example of this tendency when he accuses in an interview from 1996, America and Israel of "killing the weak men, women, and children in the Muslim world and elsewhere" (Bin Ladin 40). He sides instead with all the victims and refers to oppressed Muslims in Saudi-Arabia, to persecuted Palestinians, to 600.000 children suffering in Iraq because of the U.N. sanctions, to killed Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina and even to Japanese victims who were killed by atomic bombs used by the United States in World War II.

The temptation of vengeful lament has so much influenced our world that even fascism—including National Socialism—is characterized by a violent exploitation of the claim of being victimized (cf. Paxton; Taylor 30, 36). It is therefore no surprise that George Orwell remarked in his review of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* published in 1940 that the attraction of the German Führer resulted largely from his self-stylization as "Christ crucified", as a "martyr" and as a "victim" (Orwell). Somewhat similarly, the Austrian historian Friedrich Heer used Canetti's concept of the "lamenting pack" to explain the political religion of Adolf Hitler (Heer 570). The Dutch writer Geert Mak drew on Robert Paxton's description of fascism's violent exploitation of its feeling to be victimized to explain radical Islamism and right-wing populism in his book reflecting on the murder of Theo van Gogh by a radical Muslim. According to Mak, the emphasis on victimhood plays a central role for such extremists to justify their violent actions (Mak 81-83, 90). As soon as such people view themselves as victims the aggression against their enemies becomes limitless. Against the background of Canetti's concept of the religions of lament it is furthermore interesting to note that suicide bombers first emerged among Shiite Muslims known for their lament of Husain, the murdered grandson of Mohammed. Only later Sunni terrorists started to imitate them (cf. Allam 139-140). Navid Kermani, a German Muslim writer and Islam scholar, summarizes how lamenting Husain is connected to contemporary wars and acts of terrorism: "During the Iran-Iraq War, the Shiite cult of martyrdom prompted many Iranian soldiers, including children and teenagers, to rush headlong into the Iraqi minefields, with the cry 'Ya Hussein' on

their lips. It also led in 1983 to a member of the Lebanese Hizbollah being willing, for the first time, to carry out a suicide bombing." Kermani, however, is also right to claim that there is no direct connection between lamenting Husain and terrorist acts like 9/11: "The question of why people are prepared to transform themselves into living missiles cannot ... be fully explained by telling the story of Hussein; but September 11 probably also cannot be explained without reference to this story." (Kermani)

Far beyond Islam as such or specific developments in this religion there is a general tendency towards a "cult of the victim" in our world that easily leads to violence (Lasch 67-68). Terrorism is closely connected to a vengeful instrumentalization of victimhood. It is part of what psychiatrist Vamik Volkan called the "egoism of victimization" (Volkan 176). Volkan explains plausibly, how a certain view of one's victimization, the inability to mourn properly and one's own weakness may lead quickly towards terrorism: "The individual who perceives his group as victimized and whose own sense of self is threatened by that perception may be drawn to terrorist activities in the same way that a nation that perceives itself to be victimized may go to war." (Volkan 176-177) What makes our situation today even worse is the fact that counter-terrorism, too—especially Bush's war against terror—has been strongly influenced by the temptation of a vengeful religious lament (cf. Tönnies 46-49).

Is the temptation of a vengeful religious lament connected to monotheism? Despite the fact, that Canetti views Christianity "the most important of all the religions of lament" (Canetti 171) his answer to our question would be negative. According to him, religions of lament can be found in different cultures and different historical periods (mythic and historical). His list of lamented victims illustrates his broad view: Adonis, Tammuz, Attis, Osiris, Husain and finally, of course Jesus Christ, whose crucifixion Canetti calls "the most humane of all passions" (Canetti 169).

Following Canetti it would be rather easy to reject accusations attributing the temptation of vengeful religious lamenting to the monotheistic traditions. Unfortunately, however, Canetti's view is wrong. Already his term "religions of lament" indicates its closeness to the Biblical tradition and one just wonders why he—born to a Jewish family—uses a term alluding so closely to the Psalms of lamentation without ever referring to any Jewish example of lamenting. This strange omission surely has biographical reasons. Canetti realized that many religions narrate acts of collective violence against a single victim. What he did not

understand by following thinkers like Frazer and Freud, who continued an identification of the myths about Osiris, Attis or Adonis with the passion of Jesus beginning during the Roman Empire (cf. Girard 1999a, 10-11), however, are the differences of perspective these religions have narrating acts of violence (cf. Scheffler 1997). Whereas the mythic religions did not take the side of the victim but joined the view of the persecuting mob it is the specific Biblical perspective to express vehemently a concern for the victim. Nietzsche was most likely the first who clearly understood this change of perspective in his famous fragment "Dionysus versus the 'Crucified'" (cf. Girard 2001, 170-181). Following Nietzsche, also Max Weber emphasized the enormous difference between mythic lamenting and expressions of lament in the Jewish tradition. Comparing the Servant of God in Deutero-Isaiah with a mythic dying god like Tammuz Weber discovers a "fundamental change of meaning" (Weber 1967, 374). According to Weber, lamenting "the dying and resurrected vegetation or other deities and heroes" in "all known mythologies" (Weber 1967, 375) must not be identified with the Biblical lament. In the prophetic tradition of the Bible martyrdom is characterized by a unique "ethical turn".

### ***Resentment and the Judaeo-Christian Revelation***

Joining Weber's recognition of the "Biblical 'Difference'" (Girard, 2004, 14-17), however, forces us to deal with the fact that in this tradition we also find the origin of vengeful religious lament. Weber clearly points to this vengeful side of the Biblical tradition by referring to the Psalms: "The religion of the Psalms is full of the need for vengeance... The majority of the Psalms are quite obviously replete with the moralistic legitimation and satisfaction of an open and hardly concealed need for vengeance on the part of a pariah people." (Weber 1971, 111) Weber's insight into the vengeful side of the Biblical tradition must be taken seriously. It would be wrong to evade its challenge. Contrary to pagan myths that obscure the deadly fate of the victims the Bible brings the violence of the persecutors in all its cruelty and ugliness out into the open. If one understands that to reveal hidden persecution means taking right and wrong seriously one understands also why the "Jews cursed more bitterly than the Pagans" (Lewis 30). René Girard very explicitly stresses the vengeful side of the Psalms (cf. Girard 1999b, 388).

Before criticizing the Bible overhasty, however, we have to realize that most of the violence that the Bible brings out into the open is the violence of the mob released against their victims. According to Girard, the Psalms "tell the same basic story as many myths but turned inside out, so to speak. They are like a beautiful fur coat. If you turn the garment inside out, you will perhaps still see traces of blood and you will become aware that, at some point in the past, the garment was part of a living creature that first had to be killed for the beautiful coat to come into being." (Girard 1999b, 391) The vitriolic acts of the victims—contrary to the physical aggression of the mob—consist mostly in nothing but words crying to God for revenge. Not they themselves but God is responsible to revenge their fate. Weber called this "the leaving of revenge to God" (Weber 1967, 260). In this regard the vengeful lament visible in many Psalms still participates to some degree in the sacred violence typical of pagan myths that helps to distance human beings from their own violence. Modern versions of the vengeful lament are due to the rapidly diminishing power of the old sacred much more destructive. Now people take revenge themselves acting as the faithful agents of their God or their ideological program.

Bringing scapegoating to light—taking the side of the victim—was really an ethical turn that changed the face of the world for ever. It was the origin of our modern concern for human dignity and our eagerness to overcome all forms of victimization. Abrahamic monotheism caused this ethical turn. Today it is important to understand that Islam is clearly part of this legacy. Following the Biblical siding with Abel who was killed by his brother Cain, the Qur'an stresses the sacredness of all human life that is typical of Abrahamic monotheism: "Whosoever killeth a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind." (Surah 5:32; Pickthal)

Though the Biblical revelation by taking the side of the victims has contributed very positively to the development of human morality it has also enabled human beings to increase tremendously violence and destruction. The temptation to vengeful religious lament is an important part of this destructive consequences the Biblical revelation indirectly brings with it. Already David Hume remarks in his comparison of theism and idolatry that the "corruption of the best things gives rise to the worst" (Hume 163, 165). This insight that the corruption of the best is the worst—

*corruptio optimi pessima*—is an important key to explain negative consequences of the Biblical legacy (cf. Illich/Cayley).

Recognizing the temptation of resentment as a possible consequence of the Biblical revelation must not, however, lead us to the conclusion of Nietzsche—and partly also of Weber—that the Biblical perspective results in nothing but resentment. Girard clearly rejected such a simplistic thesis. Against Nietzsche he claims, that "resentment is merely an illegitimate heir, certainly not the father of Judaeo-Christian Scripture" (Girard 1987b, 108; 1996, 252; cf. Fraser).

### ***The Abrahamic Tradition of Forgiveness***

Reducing the Bible to resentment would mean to overlook an enormous development that is visible in its religiosity, its image of God and its attitude towards violence. The Biblical revelation is despite its visible leanings towards resentment ultimately resentment overcome. This is not only true of the New Testament but also of the Old Testament. The image of God as we can find it in the vengeful Psalms is not the only image of the Old Testament. Whoever reduces the Biblical monotheism to a vengeful distinction between friends and enemies overlooks the development of the image of God in the Hebrew Bible. Gradually the image of a warrior God was replaced by a God, who no longer relies on military power. A good example how strongly violence is rejected in certain passages of the Hebrew Bible can be found, for instance, in 1 Kings 3:2-15, in which king Solomon asks from God not a long life, wealth and the destruction of his enemies but only "an understanding mind". God praises Solomon's extraordinary plea and rewards him with a wise mind. Also a long living, wealth and honour—for which the king has not asked—God bestows on Solomon. But a wish that the enemies of the king should die is not fulfilled by God. This wish is revealed as a poorly human projection that is not compatible with God's being at all. In the songs of the suffering servant we can find the climax of the rejection of a violent image of God in the Old Testament. Max Weber emphasized the non-violence of the suffering Servant: "The meaning of it all is plainly the glorification of the situation of the pariah people and its tarrying endurance. Thereby the Servant of God and the people whose archetype he is, become the deliverers of the world. ... The specific ethic of meekness and non-resistance revived in the

Sermon on the Mount and the conception of the sacrificial death of the innocent martyred Servant of God helped to give birth to Christology." (Weber 1967, 375-376)

Weber is right that this line in the Old Testament directly leads to Jesus Christ's nonviolence in the New Testament. In the Passion of Jesus the Biblical concern for victims comes to its conclusion. Contrary to all temptations of a vengeful lament the New Testaments solidarity with the victims does not at all legitimate any revenge or retribution. Jesus's heavenly father personifies the love for enemies and the rejection of revenge: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Mat 5:44-45). In accordance with his father Jesus forgave his enemies when he was murdered on the Cross: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luk 23:34) And when he met his disciples again after his resurrection he offered them his peace without blaming them for their weakness and cowardliness (cf. Schwager 1999, 146, 152, 207): "Peace be with you." (Joh 20:19) The true Christian spirit contradicts vengeful lamenting and is beyond all resentment.

Of course also in the other two Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam, we can find important ways overcoming resentment and preventing the vengeful exploitation of victimhood. Derrida speaks about an Abrahamic tradition of forgiveness (Derrida 28, 42). We are today so much in need of forgiveness that we should encourage all religions and world views to develop it as strongly as possible. Marc Gopin, for instance, emphasizes how important it is for a Jewish conflict resolution theory to overcome conceptions of enmity defining the enemy as the incarnation of evil (Gopin 41-42, 78-79). In Exo 23:5 and in Pro 25:21-22 he sees important starting points in the Bible leading to the humanization of the enemy.

Forgiveness is most important to overcome the temptations of vengeful lament. It is not only recommended in the Bible, in Judaism and Christianity, but also in Islam. Just look to its version of the Biblical story of Joseph, one of the few Biblical stories that is also fully narrated in the Qur'an. Surah 12 is completely dedicated to this story. The story of Joseph represents the overcoming of scapegoating and the monotheistic rejection of the divinization of the victim. Furthermore, it is also an important story concerning reconciliation because Joseph ultimately forgives his brothers (Genesis 50:20-21; cf. Williams 1994, 82). This forgiveness is powerfully expressed in the Qur'an: "Have no fear this day! May Allah forgive you, and He is the

Most Merciful of those who show mercy." (Surah 12:92; Pickthal) In accordance with God who is seen as the "All-Merciful" the Muslim believers are called to overcome retaliation and repel evil with good. Mohamed Fathi Osman has listed some verses from the Qur'an that point in this direction: 42:40-43, 16:126, 60:7, 4:34-35 (Osman 58, 69-70). I will quote the first one to show how also Islam emphasizes the need of forgiveness: "A requital for a wrongdoing is equal to it, but whoever forgives and makes peace [with the other], his [her] reward rests with God; He, verily, does not love the transgressors." (42:40) Jawdat Said, a contemporary Muslim scholar, who focuses especially on non-violence in Islam, also emphasizes the importance of forgiveness and refers therefore to Jesus as an important example (Said 127). Like Jesus, we have to understand that evil cannot be healed by evil but only by love and compassion. Said refers to an important passage in the Qur'an that emphasizes this way of healing (Said 126): "The good deed and the evil deed are not alike. Repel the evil deed with one which is better, then lo! he, between whom and thee there was enmity (will become) as though he was a bosom friend." (Surah 41:34; Pickthal) One of the main problems of the Islamic tradition is the fact that Mohammed was not just a prophet but also a political ruler and a military leader (cf. Rodinson). Compared to the Christian tradition, one could probably say that Mohammed was his own Constantine. But even in this difficult realm we can find important hints emphasizing forgiveness and reconciliation. According to a Peace-Hadith, the following words were written on the hilt of Mohammed's sword: "Forgive him who wrongs you; join him who cuts you off; do good to him who does evil to you, and speak the truth although it be against yourself." (Bonney 46)<sup>2</sup>

The temptation of vengeful religious lamenting has accompanied Abrahamic monotheism. It has remained, of course, a permanent temptation throughout Christian history. Many secularized versions of it are also contributing to our contemporary culture of a radical victimology often turning the concern for victims into a even more dangerous weapon (cf. Girard 2001, 178-181; 1996; 208-209, 275; 2004, 18-19; 2005, 188-189; Taylor 29-30, 67-68, 35-37; Waldmann 232-238). According to Girard, today we often "practice a hunt for scapegoats to the second degree, a hunt for hunters of scapegoats" (Girard 2001, 158). This perversion of the concern for victims is the reign of the Antichrist, in which fighting persecution leads to even more cruel acts of violence (cf. Girard 1994, 65; 2001, 181). It is exactly this

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2 <http://www.sufism.org/society/articles/PeaceHadith.htm>.

temptation that makes forgiveness so important in our world of today.

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