

'TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL' AND TREE OF THE CRUCIFIED MESSIAH: SYMBOLS OF ORIGINAL UNTRUTH AND ITS HEALING

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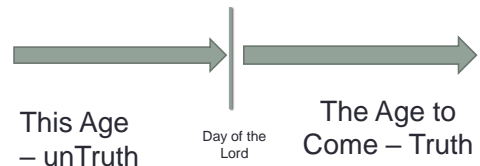
Introduction

- From the point of view of the doctrine of Original Sin, especially from the perspective of Mimetic Theory, the era of 'after Truth' began at hominization – humankind has perpetually lived in an era of untruth
- The symbol of untruth is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil
- Jesus the Messiah came to launch the era of Truth – "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" – but the old era of untruth has not yet come to an end
- The symbol of the healing humanity's untruth is the Tree of the Crucified Messiah

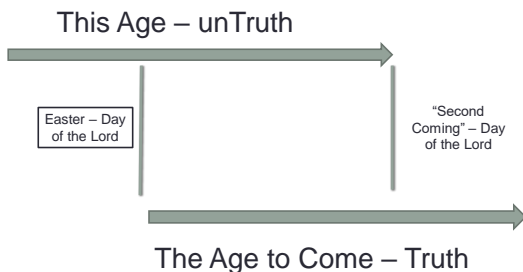
N. T. Wright: *How God Became King*, 44

- "God so loved the world," reads the famous text in the King James Version of John 3:16, "that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have *everlasting life*." There we are, think average Christian readers. This is the biblical promise of a timeless heavenly bliss.
- But it isn't. In the many places where the phrase *zoe aionios* appears in the gospels, and in Paul's letters for that matter, it refers to one aspect of an ancient Jewish belief about how time was divided up. In this viewpoint, there were two "aions" (we sometimes use the word "eon" in that sense): the "Present age," *ha-olam hazeh* in Hebrew, and the "age to come," *ha-olam ha-ba*. The "age to come," many ancient Jews believed, would arrive one day to bring God's justice, peace, and healing to the world as it groaned and toiled within the "present age."
- But there is no sense that this "age to come" is "eternal" in the sense of being outside space, time, and matter. Far from it. The ancient Jews were creational monotheists. For them, God's great future purpose was not to rescue people out of the world, but to rescue the world itself, people included, from its present state of corruption and decay.

Two Ages – Jewish Version



Two Ages – Christian Version



Introduction

- We live in the overlapping of eras with the possibility of healing our untruth and living into Truth
- Our contemporary naming of 'after' Truth is relative to the Truth that humanity has never fully lived into – there has never been an era of complete Truth for which we are now 'after'
- So the question becomes: What are the criteria for distinguishing between relative truth and untruth? When are we living into Truth and when are we reversing course to seemingly a time of 'after' Truth?
- Proposal: our two primary Tree symbols will guide us into criteria
- Finally: are there disciplines to follow into the Way of Truth? Where does scientific method fit? Contemplative Spirituality?

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- Primary resource: **Jean-Michel Oughourlian's** *The Genesis of Desire*, especially pages 66-70
- "Desire and rivalry are coextensive; these two dimensions are opposed, but indissociable. Both good and evil are contained in the same manner in the fruit that feeds, through their difference, the one who eats it. The difference between good and evil is at root that which constitutes and establishes desire: what is good is what I desire. What is bad is what my rival desires! Moral judgment follows along *afterward* to dress up the mimetic mechanism. It is this that makes that tree the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." (66)

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- Allegorically speaking, the eating of the forbidden fruit has provoked the simultaneous birth (*co-naissance*) of good and evil. . . . God knows that that difference is fallacious, deceptive, venomous, and not created by Him. He sees what man has not seen since the beginning of the world: that the division between good and evil is the product of a diabolical enterprise, the result of the serpent's action. (67)
- Henceforth human beings will remain perpetually deaf to the counsel of God that warned them not to swallow false differences, not to eat the fruit from that tree, which once eaten, creates a mendacious difference with "diabolical" effects: the difference of good and evil — something that has not been created by God. . . . (69)

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- **James Warren's** book *Compassion or Apocalypse?* provides a clear summary of Oughourlian's reading of Genesis 2-3, in chapter 2, "Mimesis in Genesis 2 and 3"
- Especially: "Mimetic rivalry does indeed generate 'knowledge of good and evil' — meaning a knowledge constituted by violent oppositions. In Genesis 1, God pronounced what he had made 'Good' — but this is not the same good as that generated by mimetic rivalry, which is a 'good' that always stands antagonistically over against some 'evil.' In Genesis 1 God never pronounces anything evil. All is Good, all is perfect unity. What rivalry calls good, on the other hand, always stands in direct opposition to evil. This good and evil arise together as a distinctly human perception born of the machinations of mimetic desire." (47)

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- This tree, therefore, is truly the tree of the knowledge . . . of good and evil, which are separated only by a difference that is both mythic and venomous, the result of a mimetic process from beginning to end. The "forbidden fruit" is only a symbol, and it is mimetic rivalry, which is itself the source of all the oppositional differences in the world, that causes one to eat it. (67)
- From this point on, false differences invade the field of reality, and reality is everywhere replaced by illusion. The world into which mimetic rivalry will plunge the man and woman is a world peopled with rivals who are equally models, and models who are equally rivals. (67)

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- If mounting mimesis produces the sacred as a form of false transcendence ("you will be like gods"), only a true understanding of the mechanisms of desire will make it possible for the man and woman to grow in respect for each other. (73)
- "the fundamental role of false understanding in psychology and psychopathology" (80)
 - Jesus on the cross: "they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)
 - the Girardian notion of *méconnaissance* (*mis*-knowing, interpreting falsely)
 - Quote from Girard: "We have said that the ability of the victimage mechanism to produce the sacred depends entirely on the extent to which the mechanism is misinterpreted." (*Things Hidden*, 33)

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- **Warren** continued: "Human history thus becomes the kaleidoscopic reflection of a thousand variations of this kind of 'knowledge of good and evil,' with human activity characterized by wars and interpersonal hostilities based upon each side's claimed possession of the 'good,' along with a labeling of the other side as evil. Utopian schemes, dictatorships, and even democracies will distinguish their own brands of good and evil, and seek to create the good society by eliminating evil-doers who threaten to pervert the structure. All over the planet human beings will gather themselves into associations large and small, defined by their perception of 'good' and characterized by attempts, both crass and subtle, to exclude the evil other. All of this will be experienced as what we call 'morality,' which is a function of the fall into rivalrous desire." (47)

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- **Andrew Marr**, *Moving and Resting in God's Desire*, p. 67:
- God said that if humanity ate of the fruit of the tree of good and evil, they would die. The serpent told Eve they would not die. At first, the serpent seemed to be right. The fruit did not explode in the stomachs of those who ate it and kill them on the spot. They were still alive after their little meal on the sly. But in the longer run, it was God and not the serpent who was proved right. When our eyes are open to good and evil, we see evil where we didn't see it before. Once our eyes open to good and evil, suddenly some people (ourselves, of course) are seen as good, as clean, and *other* people are seen as evil or unclean. It just so happens that the next tribe is unclean, and it just so happens that some people in our own social group are unclean. So it is that eating the fruit does indeed cause death.

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- **James Alison's** *The Joy of Being Wrong*, especially the section, "The Culmination of the Discovery of Sin," 131ff.
- Alison recounts **Girard's** *The Scapegoat*, ch. 6, "Ases, Curetes, and Titans": Girard's reading of mythology enables us to see something of the development of an ethical conscience, of a perception of good and evil, and the way this is related to an original murder." (*JBW*, 133)
- There is a movement of hiding the collective violence while distributing good and evil among the gods:
 - Scandanavian: Baldr is the perfectly good god who is murder by his blind brother Hoehr, due to manipulations by Loki.
 - Greek: Kronos is the monster god eating his children, but Zeus is saved by the Curetes

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- **Alison** (132-33): What we have then is a comparative study showing the way in which the violence that originally was shared by many (even if those "many" were gods or demi-gods) is gradually displaced onto the few, or even onto one figure alone (Chronos, or Loki), while the real responsibility for the violence is shirked. **Girard's** suggestion is that in the development there is: "a certain sharing of *good* and *evil*: moral dualism appears as *collective* violence is eliminated" (*The Scapegoat*, 72).
- "That is to say, that the motor force behind the representation of good and evil that emerges is the same accusatory mechanism that produced the original murder. The perspective is always the same, a collective exculpation at the expense of a victim, and consequently a vision of good and evil that is blind to its own origin." (133)

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- **Raymund Schwager's** *Banished from Eden*, p. 20:
- "The consequences of sin show therefore with even greater clarity that God did not want to withhold something good from humans when he forbade them to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17); his intention was rather to spare them the experience of evil." (Footnote to **Robert Hamerton-Kelly's** *Sacred Violence*, pp. 92-97)
- Hamerton-Kelly's is the book that first got me hooked on René Girard and Mimetic Theory back in 1992 – it was good to go back there

Symbol of Untruth – Hamerton-Kelly's Reading

- Only after the serpent had persuaded her by this deception to imitate God's acquisitive desire for the fruit did it become desirable to her; she learned rivalry from mimesis's misrepresentation of the divine desire as envious. The moment of mimetic acquisitiveness has been reached and the train of events leading to the Sacred set in motion. Thus desire transforms God from creator, to whom one should be related in gratitude, into rival, to whom one is related by envy, and it does so by manipulating the prohibition (Rom 7:11). This is the act of sin as envy (*phthonos*). (93)

Symbol of Untruth – Hamerton-Kelly's Reading

- Twisting God's good intention: "In fact, there is no envy in the divine, and the prohibition is not an expression of the divine desire for the object but of the divine desire to prevent humanity from acquisitive mimesis and the ensuing course of violence. The prohibition does not symbolize human lack but human completeness and sufficiency in trusting dependence on the divine solicitude. Had human desire remained in the proper relation of dependency on the creator, the cycle of mimetic rivalry arising out of the false sense of lack would never have started and desire would have been free to desire the other in and for itself, and not as a means to make good its lack." (93-94)

Symbol of Untruth – Hamerton-Kelly's Reading

- The second stage of sin: Concupiscence as a sense of lack
- Third stage: turning it into sacred violence, with God even as a scapegoat (94-95)
- Summary: "This is the background of Paul's statement that sin used the Law to deceive and kill Adam (Rom 7:11). According to the story they gained the knowledge of good and evil. According to our theory this "knowledge of good and evil" is acquisitive and conflictual mimesis with the divine. Before the transgression they knew only good — namely, that the creator is beneficent and generous, and free of envy. After the transgression they had imputed both evil and good to the creator in making God a rival. Thus faith as trust in the divine goodwill was at an end. Now the Law produced not faith but anxiety and rivalry with God and one another." (96-97)

Symbol of Untruth – Hamerton-Kelly's Reading

- Hamerton-Kelly's summary cont.: "The sin of Adam and Eve was, therefore, the corruption of human desire to mimetic rivalry by using the prohibition to misprize the divine proscription on acquisitiveness as an expression of divine envy. This had the effect of turning God into an idol of sacred violence. The corruption of the relationship between the divine and the human corrupted the relationships between human beings. Mimetic desire broke out in the forms of envy, concupiscence, and sacred violence. This is the argument of the first three chapters of Romans." (97)

Symbol of Untruth – Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

- The Tree of the Knowledge of Sin and Evil symbolizes the original fall of humankind into untruth:
 - The misrecognition of the otherness of one's own desire that leads into envy and rivalry and then mimetic violence
 - The misrecognition of collective violence that saves us (temporarily) from mimetic violence as a moral dualism on which cultures of sacred violence are constructed
- In short every culture is framed in a dualism of Us vs. Them structured by narratives of good vs. evil – the good guys vs. the bad guys
- Today's untruth falls into proliferating siloed communities where the authoritative voice of framing good vs. evil is given unquestioned authority for the 'truth'

Symbol of Truth: Tree of the Crucified Messiah

- The Theological Anthropology of **Alison's** *Joy of Being Wrong* and Schwager's *Banished from Eden* are elaborations of how the life, death, and resurrection of the Jesus the Messiah – the drama of salvation – represent the healing of our original human untruth
- A few highlights (from PJN's perspective):
 - The cross provides the circumscribing meaning to the salvation narrative by presenting God in Jesus the Messiah as submitting to the human untruth of good vs. evil dualism – Jesus lets himself be accused, tried, and executed as one deemed to be evil, completely outside the culture's definitions of good.
 - The resurrection is God's vindication of breaking through our dualist structuring of culture

Symbol of Truth: Tree of the Crucified Messiah

- The Symbol of the Cross/Resurrection circumscribes Jesus' life and ministry as being about the same breaking through barriers of dualistic cultural structuring, an unlearning of the knowledge of good and evil
 - The parable of Satan casting out Satan (Mark 3)
 - Mark's presentation of Jesus' healing as 'teaching with authority' – as challenging the dualistic cultural systems of healing in order to heal human practices of healing
 - John's story of Jesus healing the man born blind (John 9)
 - Teaching of forgiveness in place of judgment and vengeance
 - The Sermon on the Mount, especially a love that includes enemies
 - Jesus' identifying with the marginalized (e.g., Matt. 25)
- Paul's summarizing the grace of the cross: "that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two (Eph. 2:15)

Symbol of Truth: Tree of the Crucified Messiah

- **Schwager**, *Banished from Eden*, in a section "Freedom and Preset Nature," p. 124:
- "The preset, human and extra-human nature, is the product of an earlier history and earlier bifurcations, and present decisions will become what is preset for coming generations. At the same time this insight makes it evident that freedom cannot be completely understood either from the standpoint of the isolated subject nor from that of the I-Thou relation, but must be seen in the context of human society and history in their entirety."

Symbol of Truth: Tree of the Crucified Messiah

- PJN's interpretation of Schwager's quote: human untruth began with communities of scapegoating practices in history that structure our cultures into the untruth of good and evil; untruth is gradually healed by communities of Cross-shaped practice:
 - Alison's "Ecclesial Overcoming" (ch. 6 of *JBW*)
 - Wisdom traditions: "mindfulness"; ancient, multi-religious practices of contemplative spirituality; modern practices of healing
 - Scientific method?
 - Bonhoeffer's modern revival of discipleship communities based on the Sermon on the Mount
 - Gandhi's pioneering of nonviolence in mass movements
 - Politics that defuse friend-foe and seek solidarity with the marginalized (Palaver and Schwager on Schmitt; Zahnd on Matt. 25)

Symbol of Truth: Tree of the Crucified Messiah

- Wisdom traditions:
 - Oughourlian's Conclusion in *The Mimetic Brain*
 - Richard Rohr's work (I have a pdf handout of highlights)
 - Andrew Marr's *Moving and Resting in God* (and his workshop at this conference; and Stephanie VanSlyke's?)
 - Brian Robinette's essay in the recent *Contagion*: "Contemplative Practice and Therapy of Mimetic Desire"
 - Brian McLaren's book *Naked Spirituality* (esp. ch. 22)
- Theology & Peace basic practice

Symbol of Truth: Tree of the Crucified Messiah

- Scientific method?
- Characterizing a pillar of scientific method as a bracketing of dualistic judgments of good and evil in favor of investigating simply 'What Is'
- Girard's classic sound bite on science in ch. 15 of *The Scapegoat*, p. 204-5: "The invention of science is not the reason that there are no longer witch-hunts, but the fact that there are no longer witch-hunts is the reason that science has been invented. The scientific spirit, like the spirit of enterprise in an economy, is a by-product of the profound action of the Gospel text."

Symbol of Truth: Tree of the Crucified Messiah

- On the pivotal role of practicing nonviolence:
 - Schwager, *Banished from Eden*, pp. 108-10, contrasting it to the violent heroic sacrifice of one's life in conventional culture: "Non-violence in the face of mortal danger and practised in loving intervention for one's enemies brings an utterly new dimension of human existence into play. Its radical challenge makes it clear that this freedom is not simply an attribute of human being by which one can choose from the range of possibilities preset by nature. Non-violence presupposes a more radical freedom. Through this freedom we can be summoned beyond our natural limits so that we may enter again into our own past history of freedom or non-freedom and thus into our entire earthly existence." (108-09)

Last Word

- Is also the literal last word in **Brian Zahnd's** book *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*:
- In the conclusion of his "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon, Jonathan Edwards says, "The axe is in an extraordinary manner laid at the root of the trees, that every tree that brings not forth good fruit, may be hewn down, and cast into the fire." And I say, "Amen." I thank God that the theological tree that produced the bitter fruit of belief in an angry, violent, retributive God has at last been hewn down and cast into the fire. In my life the poisonous tree of angry-God theology is now gone. In its place grows the tree of life, a tree whose leaves bring healing (Rev. 22:2). It's a tree that looks like it once may have been an ugly cross, but it is now beautiful and verdant, producing the fruit of eternal life. Planted by the Father himself, this tree is an everlasting reminder that I am a forgiven sinner now being healed in the hands of a loving God.
- The ultimate authority of truth: wrathful gods vs. a God of love

Discussion Questions

- If humanity originates in untruth, and Jesus inaugurated the era of truth 2000 years ago, then why does this time feel different – an era of 'after' Truth?
 - Does it have to do with the cycling back and forth with making progress in truth and then stepping backwards again? Each new time feeling more pronounced than the previous one?
 - Does the explosion of social media make us more aware of the radical silo-ing into proliferating groups of good-guys and bad-guys?
- Or is there something substantially different or new? What?
- What pivotal role does authority (power; *exousia*) in truth?
- Does the key to Truth involve wrathful gods vs. the God of love?