



*Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . fix our eyes on Jesus, . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:1, 2, NIV.*

## A Succession of “Falls”

### Digest

David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers: 1998).<sup>1</sup>

*Editorial Note:* The following digest is drawn from David S. Cunningham’s treatise entitled *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*. Dr. Cunningham is Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. Although he assumes an original creation of mankind in the “image of God” and a subsequent “original sin,” Cunningham traces the much larger scope of the catastrophic “Fall.”

### The “Fall” to Violence

“Created as we are in the image of God, human beings bear the stamp of God’s likeness. . . . That we have . . . failed miserably even to approximate this state, testifies to the catastrophic event of the Fall. Theologians have typically located the Fall in Genesis 3, and specifically in the decision of the man and the woman to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But the whole range of pre-Abrahamic stories in Genesis describes human beings as progressively distancing themselves from the image in which they were created; and thus . . . [there have been] a series of “Falls,” in which human beings allow difference to devolve into conflict, strife, and . . . violence. . . .

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“In Genesis 3, having been given a garden . . . , the man and woman partake of the only thing which was forbidden to them; [and] they are exiled from the garden. . . . In Genesis 4, Cain kills his brother, ignoring God’s advice to ‘master sin’; as a result he is cursed (though protected). Again, in Genesis 6, . . . the earth is ‘filled with violence’ (Gen. 6:11, 13). After the flood, the re-establishment of the covenant with Noah is followed by an act of sexual license . . . , which leads to the curse of Canaan (Gen. 9:25). And finally, the decision on the part of human beings to build a city with its tower in the heavens . . . results in the abandonment of their building project, the confusion of their languages, and the scattering of the people over the face of the earth (Gen. 11:1-11).

## Violence and “Otherness”

“ . . . [Thus, t]he Fall consists not only of humanity’s having fallen prey to a trick of language. . . . Its scope is much larger: it concerns our unwillingness to accept the *otherness* of the other; for us, difference tends to become a warrant for violence, rather than a reflection of the peaceable image of God. All five stories describe an attempt to elevate one’s own significance at the cost of the other. . . .

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“These stories narrate the desire to subjugate the other and to elevate the self; they thus contrast markedly with the internal life of God, in which the Other is recognized to be ‘of one being’ with the Self. . . . This desire to violate the other . . . without regard for its integrity and otherness — is characteristic of the ‘fall to violence.’ Indeed, it represents a turning against *ourselves*; the violation of the other is ultimately a violation of self. . . .

“Once human beings have chosen not to live in the peaceable image in which they were created, God apparently chooses to speak to them in terms they can understand — that is, in violent terms. God’s violent activity toward creation is manifest in a wide range of biblical narratives. . . .

“ . . . [Nevertheless,] God is not merely a propagator of violence against the world . . . [He also is the] one who *suffers* the world’s violence. . . .

“The fall to violence tends to be perpetuated, because every act of violence — every attempt to obliterate or consume the otherness of the other — is met by a reassertion of otherness (by the other or by his or her protectors) and by a corresponding attempt to obliterate the original perpetrator of violence. . . . [This pattern] seems consonant with René Girard’s description of violence as rooted in mimetic desire — a desire that is difficult to eliminate. Violent acts engender a desire for retribution; and if this fails, says Girard, ‘violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim.’ Each act of vengeance is seen as a new transgression, and the cycle continues. According to Girard, societies have sometimes sought to *prevent* this cycle by systems of sacrifice. ‘The sacrificial process furnishes an outlet for those violent impulses that cannot be mastered by self-restraint; a partial outlet, to be sure, but always renewable, and one whose efficacy has been attested by an impressive number of reliable witnesses. The sacrificial process prevents the spread of violence by keeping vengeance in check.’

## Violence and Power Structures

“In modern societies, the judicial system provides this outlet for vengeance — not by eliminating it, but by codifying it and demanding that it be carried out anonymously (and dictating that no vengeance be sought, in reaction, upon the system of justice itself). It is generally more effective than systems of sacrifice, but, as Girard notes, ‘it can only exist in conjunction with a firmly established political power. And like all modern technological advances, it is a two-edged sword, which can be used to oppress as well as to liberate.’

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“Whether the deflection of this tendency toward revenge takes place through judicial, political, or religious channels, it must maintain a ‘transcendent’ character, so that the punishment that it distributes does not become a warrant for further violence. Once it loses this transcendent character, ‘there are no longer any terms by which to define the legitimate form of violence and to recognize it among the multitude of illicit forms.’ And such breakdowns are inevitable, according to Girard, since all such attempts to stop the cycle of violence are ultimately human institutions, and their artificiality will eventually be recognized. (‘The only true scapegoats,’ says one of Girard’s collaborators, ‘are those we cannot recognize as such.’) Once this recognition occurs, the mechanisms of restraint are revealed to be fraudulent; they have not actually *put an end* to violence, but have simply carried it out in quieter ways. As this becomes obvious to more and more people, they lose confidence in the ability of the system (the judiciary, the politicians, the priests) and instead find ways of intervening directly for the purpose of revenge — thus reinaugurating the cycle of violence.

## The Crisis of Violence

“ . . . Girard’s *explanation* for the perpetuation of violence . . . [recognizes — ] with an appropriate level of bleakness — the circumstances in which we find ourselves today. Violence does seem endemic to our culture; in the past, it was contained by officially sanctioned acts of violence against which revenge was impossible, but this mechanism no longer inspires much confidence. What, we might well ask, is to prevent the resumption of the war of all against all? The widespread violence that we know today seems very closely related to the disintegration of the mechanisms of its containment. . . .

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“ . . . [In today’s world] the state, rather than God, is now the only entity that seems able to impose (with at least occasional success) a transcendent quality upon the violence it dispenses. This, of course, does not prevent innumerable acts of violence and

revenge from taking place on a daily basis. Here I refer not simply, or even primarily, to the acts of murder, rape, and torture of which our various forms of mass media make us so thoroughly (though highly selectively) aware. I refer also [to] the myriad ways in which we ‘return evil for evil’ – whether in thought, word, or deed – at our jobs, in our communities, and among our families and friends. Can this cycle be broken?”<sup>2,3</sup>

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## Endnotes

1. David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, is available from Barnes & Noble at [www.barnesandnoble.com/w/these-three-are-one-david-s-cunningham/1112763803](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/these-three-are-one-david-s-cunningham/1112763803).
2. David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 243-248. Copyright 1998 by David S. Cunningham.
3. In tracing mankind’s “Fall” into ever-recurring, ever-deepening violence, René Girard employs a symbolic triangle of “subject,” “object” and authoritative “model.” Girard also uses the term “mimetic desire” to refer to the age-long passion of mankind as subject/object (e.g., “Adam”/“Eve”), not only to allegedly imitate God, but to become “as God” and then to eliminate God as the authoritative Other. Thus, God warned Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest they die (Genesis 2:16, 17). So, after eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve determined to exercise God’s own authority and eliminate him as their rival. Thus, Adam and Eve applied the “reciprocal imperative.” If they must die, then God, too, must die. All human violence and all human possession and/or dispossession of others reflect mankind’s unremitting determination to assume divinity and to dispose of God. For further development of this theme, see Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1997), available from Barnes & Noble at [www.barnesandnoble.com/w/violence-unveiled-gil-bailie/1122982821](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/violence-unveiled-gil-bailie/1122982821). See also such references as René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), available from Barnes & Noble at [www.barnesandnoble.com/w/violence-and-the-sacred-ren-girard/1100634567](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/violence-and-the-sacred-ren-girard/1100634567); Eugene Webb, “René Girard and the Symbolism of Religious Sacrifice,” *Anthropoetics* 11, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2005), at [anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1101/webb/](http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1101/webb/); Rebecca Adams and René Girard, “Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard,” *Religion & Literature* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 9-33, available at [www.jstor.org/stable/40059554?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059554?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).