

Idolization Mourning and Catastrophe: Transfiguring Religious Fundamentalism*

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ABSTRACT *Religious fundamentalism organizes around a core set of attitudes and dispositions: exile, shame, condemnation, grandiose self-loathing, passivity, moral literalism, idolization, persecution, revenge, and violent messianic transcendence in which an abject self fuses with a vengeful spirit. This paper examines some of the sources that fuel the constellation of this set of positions – which also includes ‘clash of civilizations’ ideologies – in one individual whose way of being is exemplary of the confusion between violence and salvation. The concept of idolization is developed as it is the grounding attitude through which the religious fundamentalist turn of mind inflates. Fundamentalist dispositions undergo modification when the personality begins to soften through the capacity to mourn cumulative losses, violations, and traumatic abandonments. The capacity to mourn disentangles fusion with violent states of self-other linkage. A space then opens through which symbolic representations of tenderness and care enrich the self and take on more constant internal presence than does fascination with cultic ideologies. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: catastrophe, clash of civilizations, evil, exile, icon, idolization, mourning, religious fundamentalism, revenge, spirit, transcendence, violence

‘In revenge there is life.’

(Announcement at the Kabul Sports Arena during an amputation and execution by the Taliban)

‘A man who is deeply wounded in his heart by provocation and abuse shows thereby that deep in himself he harbours the old serpent.’

(St Symeon the New Theologian)

I want, Tom said, to chop off my hand. Glaring through a stare on fire, filled with loathing and fear, Tom sat across from me, wooden, stiff, brittle, breath suspended, poise gone, pause absent. He was an array of tense knots, sharp with edge, holding in his body the rigid

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intensity of one whose mind has fractured into slivers of desperation, shards of despair, fragments of hate. Tom spoke in violent angular ejaculations, urgent insistent proclamations, and self-infatuating visions of destruction, quoting, so he thought, an illuminated amalgam (though in fact a rather incoherent one) of the Cure of Ares about a priest who spent 'one thousand years in purgatory', St Augustine who also 'spoke' to him and whom he adores, Revelations, which, he said, 'judges me', and a voice who told Tom that his name is 'Paul', which he understood to be St Paul, who demands of Tom with the force of a commandant 'to sit still' as Tom wrestles, in the same moment, with an inner emissary of metaphysical violence, a Manichean dark force, whom Tom calls his 'guardian angel'.

Tom's 'guardian angel' who speaks to him through a hijacked conscience and as an externalized voice in an oppressive surround is the spiritual counterpart of a desolate and sharp inner parent to whom Tom has been consigned. This atrophied yet grotesquely omnipotent internal presence signifies in its persecutory care the principle of a primal disaster whose personified countenance delights over Tom's entrapped immersion in worlds of pain that cannot be borne and that repeat themselves endlessly with a leveling monotony. Life for Tom is slippage between moments of catastrophe lived against an inexpressible background of shatter whose force keeps on destroying, vectoring through his hope and leaving in his mangled mind traces of terror raw as the moment of their conception. Disaster references, according to Maurice Blanchot (1986), the eclipse of one's polar star. Tom is the son of disaster, blind to any intimation of beneficent guiding light, caught in the agony of an innocence sacrificed before birth to a monstrous and punishing god who delights in his effacement. 'I have', Tom said, been 'cast out ... a piece of garbage, not human, not even afterbirth.' In the reflection of his own gaze, Tom sees only evil, murder, and possession. The good is darkened, held hostage in the prison of frozen loss. Any suggestion that he might be other or more than the puppet emissary of a sadistic foreign power is experienced as a mockery that only releases wrath, revenge, and pernicious mistrust.

Catastrophe obliterates personhood, slices through the personality, shaping in repetitious serial obsession the disfigurement of susceptibility into fiery coldness. Catastrophe that suspends thought and paralyzes heart poisons all self-other perception, all hesitant and soft gestures of relating. Tom trusts only his 'guardian angel', messenger of further catastrophes to come; he believes in its logic, simple and self-consistent, void of any opening ambiguity or nuance, absent of mystery. The object of emotional electrocutions that sear and burn through his being requires only one response – attack against himself intended to at once quell and fulfill the culpability that infects him. Jean Luc Marion (2002, 2) describes the logic of destructive serial mimesis whose contagion inhabits Tom: 'The logic of evil thus puts forth its first necessity by arousing in me, who is suffering, the desire for another evil: to destroy the cause of evil that is destroying me, to return to the evil its hurt, and to attack the attack.' Tom's attack spreads outwards toward all those who are strange to him, foreign and disturbing attractors of his own hated desire and his own strangeness, and inward toward that in him that is in the first place susceptible to mimetic alignment with debasement. Tom appeals to the judge with no heart the case for his own ruthless innocence and in doing so turns even his innocence into another accusation. Life, for Tom, is corrupt, invaded by a foundational lie present to him, in his own discernment, within the logic of evil, from birth. This foundational lie nurtured in forsaken destitution encrypts passion in the tomb of vengeful justice. Tom bonds with justice in order to perpetuate iniquity against

himself and through invective against anonymous others whom he justifiably wants to suffer just punishment. The bond with justice functions as a strong force to hold together a fractured self under siege by pull into the abyss of non-being.

Listening to Tom, seeing his exile and captivity, feeling his damage and disgust, sensing the explosions that course through his body and that bind his spirit, I nevertheless felt in contact with another more subtle self, with some sense of him as fragile and sweet, some young boy curious and open before he was befuddled with shock upon shock, some child quietly alert in communion with the good before the onslaught of seductions and the numbing resort to addiction after addiction, some infant who with original face could still see with wonder and awe the light of love that, however subsequently fleeting, swaddled him deeply in an embrace without end. I was interested and in a way troubled by this double perception of Thomas the twin as I too could feel the deep split, the internal rivalry that warred in his heart and that pulled him to want to kill the corruption of innocence, to chop off the offending part – the ghosted double – that poisons the whole. This perception of his other self in communion with an anointing presence never left me and so in contact with it I could bear and be with the hateful invectives that swirled around Tom and spread toward me in order to also ensnare me in the symmetrical logic of damage and reactivity whose end point wish was to turn me into another hateful twin. Before me was a man who lived on a cold ledge, in a desert landscape, a cave dweller, hiding and looking out askance at predators, poised to strike.

Deep in the back of the cave, kept under guard, was another archeology of self, states of love and capacity that had been obliterated from memory and from experiencing, fed only on a dark illumination beyond sight, burning as an unconsumed spark in the recesses of an otherwise terrorized and numb self whose mind spewed forth ranting litanies of ideological hungers for purification and punishing perfection. This double helix of self polarized around an internal rivalry magnified without limit before the expectation of release, threatened more by the solicitations of the good than by a self-continuous equilibrium of self torment and persecution. Those for whom care has fallen into an atrophied destitution of indifference and for whom sustained human warmth is present only as a tantalizing ideal cannot bear to sense or to feel or to receive for to do so would awaken a world of loss in relation to which paranoia and madness are a relief.

Missed moments and broken potentials punctuated decisive epochs in Tom's formation. Exiled from trust, Tom could not take in what another might offer. Simple witness and an ear of presence that could listen without judgment was a near intolerable dose of relating. The other's ear had to be damaged, distorted, suffering from a hidden affliction that with time will reveal its true duplicity, its commerce with the accusatory lie. No benign boundary distinguished Tom from the abyss of non-being. Tom early froze into a collation of pain and impulsivity. The registration of feeling and of thought requires a beneficent gap, a space in between that holds internal states demarcated from a possessing void. When gap is less a signifier and self fuses with a persecutory amalgam echoing an emotionally 'dead' mother and haunted absent father, and the tormenting inner voice 'speaks' with threats of damnation and torture, which Tom described as the 'thorns' of hell.

Apocalyptic visions are woven into the fabric of Tom's life, and blend and meld with his own substance. They shape and form him into an expendable object, an offering on an altar before a primitive god present as the contracting starting point from which life issues forth

as atrophy and forsakenness, given over to a fractured yet fused mother-father dyad who cycled between dark moods, brooding invectives, punitive explosions and short springtimes of attention, rendering Tom into an object of sacrifice without expiation or escape. The sacrifice and the one sacrificed are joined, awaiting release from another to whom Tom appeals with longing to arrive unbidden, like a potent logos, with the voice of the Son carried on the breath of the spirit that transforms non-being into an icon of presence (Rhode, 2003).

Tom – fused with a dead psychic twin – is a frozen idol mirroring a vacant witness that renders him void of self and so merged with the abyss. He is a cipher that is the double of a malicious conscience to whom he voluptuously submits yet one from whom he also seeks release into a blessing preserved for those born of the God of life, a birth that he, in his view, was never granted. Every day for six months Tom has been trying to chop off his hand, his offending part, the sign and measure of his poisoned weakness and damaged vulnerability, emblem of his core corruption. Tom is obsessed with death, with dying, and with torture. Death, for Tom, is an eroticized torment that inhabits him while the God of love is the one from whom he longs to receive releasing acceptance but who, in Tom's certain and resistant belief fueled by malignant doubt, has cast him out, interminably. Tom hates himself, he hates his sexuality; he hates his life, he hates the 'filth' he sees and feels all around him, that invades him, that extrudes out of him, that fascinates, allures, and controls him. Tom transfers these amalgams of hate and immanent destruction onto those who he sees as enemies of self-cohesion and threats to national security, in which nation through the logic of equivalence is also a measure of self. Tom is driven in the name of purity and of disgust and through visions of the 'clash of civilizations' toward a redeeming death.

Difference and otherness wounds Tom as others are inhabitants of a country to which he is eternally refused admittance. Tom cannot sense that others feel or think or want except as debased examples of threat and disgust or as mocking doubles that only further intensify his shame over being a reject from life, a genetic monster consigned to the tomb of exile. Tom is the radical Other of excluded desire, the one who cannot be and so, in his view, is cast out of the kingdom of the 'saved'. A ghost of the non-existent, Tom spends day after monotonous day consumed as the enslaved victim of hate and as one of hate's violent representatives litigating life. With knives of various shapes and edges and sometimes with a hand ax he has tried to do the will of his 'guardian angel', the one who rules every thought and who fills the matrix of thought's origination with threat and demand. 'Do it now', he hears the voice say, 'or it will be worse for you later.' A good supplicant who also wants only to be a good boy, Tom tries to obey, each day he tries, but fails – fails at living, fails at dying, fails at being.

Violence begins with a hole in the heart that is less portal than conduit into paralytic absence. Mourning, in contrast, is a blessing as it is an ontological transformer of absence into loss and so harkens linkage to desire. That which Tom yet had capacity for was the ability to mourn. He could not mourn his brokenness, his squandered resources, his dispersals of self, his unthinkable emanations of damage, his multiple early losses, his abandonment. Tom lives as the ghost of a dead baby, of a baby self never held secure with consistency and care and attention. Sometimes this lack in being forms through imperceptible slights that spread into hemorrhages of shame. Sometimes this absence recruits lack,

twists and deforms around itself, grows seeds of the negative and seeks salvation of damaged self ideals through perverse plenitudes and the sacrificial transcendence sought in the infliction of damage. The inability to mourn seeks encasement in the spread of mimetic contagion. Contraction of self inside a crypt that incubates violence and that functions as the hard shell against grieving susceptibility idolizes sacrificial symmetry and transforms a rival into an unconscious idol. The genesis of the idol is located in the Book of Wisdom as a response to the inability to mourn. A father's son dies. In unbearable grief the father sculpts a duplicate image of the lost child and this image is reshaped into a venerated object, a substitution that seeks static totality in the place of mystery and ineffable freedom. Idols are bastions against breakdown and breakthrough. Spirit is entombed in the container of stimulation.

The gaze is frozen on the surface of spectacle held in the mimetic circuitry of its cynical doubling, caught in the obstructing grip of a dense object (Emery, 1992, 2006), an internal presence that blanks out thought and hijacks the heart's opening. Worlds shaped through the insistent and imperious impulses of idolized desire are counterparts to the kenotic opening through charity that grants to the other (both the interior counterpart and the one before me) their heritage of simple and unassuming glory. Absent the poetic voice of love Tom hears only envious angels of persecution who sound within and around him as mocking sensations, seducing him into ejaculatory death. Mournful idolizations haunt the self, misshaping non-linear realities into a causal chain of escalating events of destructions and retaliations, into a web of suspect totalities that constrain mind into an agent of the literal.

'I am', Tom says, 'consumed by evil. I am two beings and all I want is the love of God.'

'You should have', Tom says now with increasing agitation, 'kept reminding me of the spark. You didn't do enough.'

To which I say, 'The spark of love, of God, of the loved twin, the chosen Son... maybe it is held here... when you are not here, there is not enough and you are not; when you survive to return, the spark awakens as when two or more are gathered.'

Dense objects moralize alterity and in doing so turn the other in me into an abject exile, a poisonous contaminant. Threat coagulates into obliterations of thought and experiencing. Self in the shadow of dense object orchestration condenses into a contracted point saturated with shame and reactivity. Dense objects foreclose formative potential and organize chaos whose multiplier effect disseminates credible delusional versions of its own fantasy of purity-contamination cycles. Dense objects function as strange attractors, proliferating throughout the relational field mimetic idols in order to diffuse condensations of pain. Pain that shrouds existence with agonies of non-being turns the self inhospitable to mystery and thus defined by containing idolarities, which substitute totality for opening reception. Spirit fuses with specter and shapes mourning turned violent into ecstatic spreads of contagion and scandal. The spiritual is denuded of humility and inflamed with apocalyptic arousals. Receptivity and sensitivity are exploited and fuse with the wish to expiate the defaced ghost of a lost ideal. Mourning through the idol (Emery, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2008) facilitates the spread of cultic ideologies. In the shadow of the idol, mind evacuates thought and thickens under a permeable loss of face into mythic perceptions that inspire scapegoat hungers.

In mourning through the idol, that which manifests as streamings of the ineffable is suspended as self oscillates between intimated plenitudes from which it feels exiled and fascinated resignation under the force of possession. The space of witnessing is trumped by keeping vigil over irruptive transgressions against the law. 'I am', Tom said, 'caught between the Devil and the beauty of God and of Mary that I long for.' In the shadow of the idol, Tom is a pawn in the fort-da game of curse and blessing. Damage to the core exceeds the binding capacity of word and of presence. Hunger for the ineffable derails toward a fundamentalism that concretizes texts into smug and intolerant certitudes. The 'Christ' who is appealed to in this fundamentalist turn and who is more specter than spirit bestows on the damaged self restoration through persecuting violent displacements. Christianity, in contrast, begins with the empty tomb (Certeau, 1986).

Idols of mourning and dense object fundamentalism manage catastrophe by returning the body to the crypt. This anti-poetical turn results in fixations on violence, first described by the sixth century monk John Climacus in the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*: 'Violence and unending pain are the lot of those whose aim is to ascend to Heaven with the body' (1982, 74). The non-disappearing body, the body maintained as an adhesion against the limiting function of mourning seeks reflection in violent doubles. Encasement in the tomb fuels mimetic crises. Counterpoint to this refusal of mystery is exemplified in one of the most poignant works of art by Giotto, the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1305), whose focal point is the gaze of the grieving mother embracing with pure receptivity her sacrificed son whose reflection in turn becomes an icon of the Father, transparent light of divine presence (Jaspers, 2004). The gaze speaks of a breaking open in lamentation to radical acceptance as it prefigures releasement, a fiat that returns the signifying body to the abyss of mystery.

Mourning through the idol, in contrast, refuses transfiguration through susceptibility to the numinosity of the icon. Dense object mind states assert hegemony over the fragility of intimacy as transcendent attachment is collapsed into possession by destitute degradations transmitted, in Tom's case, through a fragmented mother, a father haunted by an inter-generational lineage of corruption and collaboration with crime shrouded in personas of piety, and a subsequent history of cumulatively traumatic transgressive violations. Intolerable pain, a tapestry of the subjective interwoven with the inter-generational and trans-historical, projects outward as collective scandal. The strong force that recruits good enough 'enemies' from within the theatre of global politics supplants, under the drive toward idolizing mimesis, the weak force of intimate susceptibility and generative hospitality. Revenge becomes the measure of life in the unmediated shadow of cumulative lost objects of primary love. Returning the body to the tomb mirrors failure to open to the fragility of being.

Presence builds credibility through capacity to process evacuations of damage. With this the armor of broken autonomy ever so gradually gives over to moments of reliance and trust. This also is the path from blindness toward affective insight. Emergence from blindness is strewn with long periods of turbulent regressions against a background witnessing reception to deranging pain. Blessing begins with paroxysms of tears. In *Memoirs of the Blind* (1991) Jacques Derrida writes, '...apocalyptic blindness... it implores: first of all in order to know from where these tears stream down... from where and from whom this mourning... this essence of the eye, this eye water.' Tears serve Tom as an ablution. Through softening streams Tom is anointed and layer upon layer of exile gradually disentangle. Doubt, his twin, does not disappear but halting acceptance of sensitivity grows. The

poisoned psychic double cautiously opens under witness to good baby states. Persecutory fears function less as a containing tomb; moments of releasement and gratitude break through. Tears bless Tom, open his eyes, coordinate his gaze with introjective attention to background support as he awakens beyond persecutory fields to what is present. Prayer dislocated from politicized obsession further facilitates generative mourning and grows into a grounding supplement, a container inside of which Tom further transfigures from haunted demand into a self-giving through which he feels given to. Prayer becomes for Tom a signifying linkage to symbolic realization. Through prayer space opens. One who prays enters into a gap that is also a threshold through which devotion becomes a form of dreaming. At the juncture of history, imagination, myth, and revelation. Mary is an icon of an abiding and accepting mother in the economy of Tom's inner life. Eucharist – an incorporated still point – becomes for Tom a benign nutriment, a feeding through the Son who returns under the agency of invocation from nowhere to become the mystery of forgiving presence.

The gaze of the mother of consoling fiat builds for Tom into a transmitting reflection of sustaining and embracing acceptance. I, for my part, offer metabolizing witness, prosthetic development, and, above all, receptive if at times forceful presence not blinded to Tom's good psychic counterpart. That which I first saw in Tom that he did not see comes to him with less assaultive desperation through networks of reciprocity as we in turn hold, as it must be for Tom, the solicited gaze of spiritual witnesses. 'I am beginning', Tom said, 'to sense the spark.' Abandonment as destitute lack becomes release into receptive transfiguration filtering through layers of damage and psychic poverty. Tom begins to tolerate the plenum of the unknown and the enigma of what cannot be known as a kind of grace. Development of the imaginal supplants preservative fantasy with a growing sense of the *imitatio Christi*. Violent mourning eases through the sustained kenosis of tears and a space hospitable to the mystery of transfigured life expands outward in gestures of care toward others. Mourning becomes more of an icon than an idol, living in this way the truth that Jean-Luc Marion (2004) described in his reflection on the icon: 'the icon is the kenosis of the image.' Mourning through the icon transfigures the sacrificial rivalry that otherwise fuels the fundamentalist turn of mind. Being seen by the primal gaze reformulates the frantic and violent reactivity to the dread of being nothing. Discontinuity becomes less persecution and more invitation. Self given in the prayer of surrender accepts its simplicity, seeks neither piety or the law or salvation but finds itself returned to itself as it finds within the transfiguring word that whispers in the depths of one's heart what it always was from the beginning.

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