

of the sacred. And if you think, as I do, that one of the greatest unsolved mysteries is how people ever came together to form large cooperative societies, then you might take a special interest in the psychology of sacredness. Why do people so readily treat objects (flags, crosses), places (Mecca, a battlefield related to the birth of your nation), people (saints, heroes), and principles (liberty, fraternity, equality) as though they were of infinite value? Whatever its origins, the psychology of sacredness helps bind individuals into moral communities.<sup>42</sup> When someone in a moral community desecrates one of the sacred pillars supporting the community, the reaction is sure to be swift, emotional, collective, and punitive.

To return, finally, to Meiwes and Brandes: They caused no harm to anyone in a direct, material, or utilitarian way.<sup>43</sup> But they desecrated several of the bedrock moral principles of Western society, such as our shared beliefs that human life is supremely valuable, and that the human body is more than just a walking slab of meat. They trampled on these principles not out of necessity, and not in service to a higher goal, but out of carnal desire. If Mill's harm principle prevents us from outlawing their actions, then Mill's harm principle seems inadequate as the basis for a moral community. Whether or not God exists, people feel that some things, actions, and people are noble, pure, and elevated; others are base, polluted, and degraded.

Does the Meiwes case tell us anything about politics? It's too revolting a case to use in research; I'm confident that liberals and conservatives would all condemn Meiwes (although I'm not so sure about libertarians).<sup>44</sup> But if we turn down the disgust a few notches, we see a vast difference between left and right over the use of concepts such as sanctity and purity. American conservatives are more likely to talk about "the sanctity of life" and "the sanctity of marriage." Conservatives—particularly religious conservatives—are more likely to view

the body as a temple, housing a soul within, rather than as a machine to be optimized, or as a playground to be used for fun.

The two images in figure 7.8 show exactly the contrast that Shweder had described in his ethic of divinity. The image on top is from a fifteenth-century painting, *The Allegory of Chastity*.<sup>45</sup> It shows the Virgin Mary raised and protected by an amethyst rock formation. From beneath her flows a stream (symbolizing her purity) guarded by two lions. The painting portrays chastity as a virtue, a treasure to be guarded.



FIGURE 7.8. Two different views of the Sanctity/Degradation Foundation. *The Allegory of Chastity*, by Hans Memling (1475), and a bumper sticker on a car in Charlottesville, Virginia. Another sticker on the car (supporting Democratic Senator Jim Webb) confirmed that the owner leaned left.