Original Sin, Grace, and Positive Mimesis

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INTRODUCTION

In the last four decades, René Girard has preeminently dealt with the questions of violence and antagonistic mimesis. Currently his mimetic theory is attracting more and more public attention in Europe, where his recent publications have been very positively reviewed in important German newspapers and where he has received major awards, such as admission to membership of the Académie Française and the Leopold Lucas Prize of the Protestant theological faculty in Tübingen, which he received in May 2006. The explanatory power of mimetic theory with regard to conflicts and violence is held in high regard.

However, mimetic theory also faces criticism. One of the most frequent objections to mimetic theory is that Girard ontologizes violence and that the problem of conflicts and violence is given too much significance within the theory. Even though the suspicion of ontologizing violence can and must certainly be rejected—Wolfgang Palaver has done this convincingly in his introduction to mimetic theory[1]—especially in the early writings some passages can be found that might nurture such a suspicion. Rebecca Adams[2]

points to one such passage that is susceptible to misunderstanding at the end of *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World:*

> The Gospels and the New Testament do not preach a morality of spontane-
> ous action. They do not claim that humans must get rid of imitation; they
> recommend imitating the sole model who never runs the danger—if we
> really imitate in the way that children imitate—of being transformed into
> a fascinating rival. . . . On one side are the prisoners of violent imitation,
> which always leads to a dead end, and on the other are the adherents of
> non-violent imitation, who will meet with no obstacle. As we have seen,
> the victims of mimetic desire knock at all the doors that are firmly closed
> and search only where nothing is to be found. . . . Following Christ means
> giving up mimetic desire.[3]

Especially in his earlier books, Girard's tendency to address primarily the neg-
ative, that is, the conflictual and violent dimensions of mimesis and mimetic
desire (these two terms are basically used synonymously), can be observed.
On the other hand, in recent years Girard has time and again pointed out
that only mimetic desire, and not violence, plays a primordial role within his
theory and that mimetic desire is intrinsically good (even where it seems to be
bad because it leads to conflictual mimesis), because it is connected with the
radical opening of the human person.[4] In spite of this repeated emphasis on
the fundamental goodness of mimetic desire, Girard's more recent writings
continue to speak more about acquisitive and conflictual mimetic structures
than about positive and peaceful mimesis. More than ten years ago, Raymund
Schwager argued that this emphasis on the conflictive and violent dimension
of human life can only be properly understood against the background of the
theological doctrine of original sin.[5]

However, among those who adopt mimetic theory, the notion of posi-
tive, loving, creative, and nonviolent mimesis is becoming more and more
widespread.[6] But what are the significant differences between positive and
negative mimesis? How can positive mimesis be characterized? What renders
it possible, and how does it differ from negative, antagonistic mimesis?

I want to enter the field marked by these questions in three big steps.
In the process I will relate terms of mimetic theory to theological concepts,
because I am convinced that these theological concepts—while benefiting
from mimetic theory—might in turn also help in clarifying certain aspects
of the theory. In the first step, I will link mimetic desire, which Girard char-
acterizes as intrinsically good, with creational grace, with the creation of the

human person opened toward the divine. The second step illuminates negative, antagonistic mimesis from the perspective of the theological concept of original sin. And in the third step, I want to show that positive mimesis is not made feasible by mere human efforts, but owes itself to God's gracious self-giving.

THE OPENNESS OF THE HUMAN PERSON TO THE DIVINE AND THE INTRINSIC GOODNESS OF MIMETIC DESIRE— MIMETIC DESIRE AND CREATIONAL GRACE

At the beginning of the Old Testament we find the following words:

> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. . . . And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.[7]

The Christian tradition has always believed that these lines from the first creation account show that God created human beings in their relatedness to each other and to God and that this creation was very good. Against the background of a Trinitarian understanding of the divine, which also comprehends the relations between the divine persons, the relatedness and radical openness of the human person proves to be one of the essential aspects of a person's likeness to God. We can say that it is part of creational grace. As God's image and likeness, the human person is always striving beyond him/herself—to God as his/her model/prefiguration. Therefore human beings are restless,[8] never completely satisfied with themselves, imperfect, aware of their frailty, and always searching for something that could bestow perfection upon them and satisfy the yearning deep within their hearts. In the theological tradition, this fundamental yearning and openness of the human person toward transcendence was called "desiderium naturale in visionem beatificam" by St. Thomas Aquinas; the Second Vatican Council called it "profundior et universalior appetitio" in its pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS, 9); and Karl Rahner referred to it as the "übernatürliches Existential"—the supernatural existential.[9]

Thus, the human person is open to transcendence, *capax Dei*. However, the ultimate end of the human yearning—the divine—normally is not directly accessible to the human person, but is accessible only through the mediation of his/her fellow human beings, who also have been created in God's image and likeness.

What I just have been describing on the theological level, mimetic theory describes on the merely anthropological level as the primordial and intrinsically good mimetic desire that constitutes the human being. Since it aims at transcendence, this fundamental mimetic desire is thematically undetermined. On the anthropological level, Girard introduces it in his book *Violence and the Sacred* in the following way:

> Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being,* something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being.[10]

This fundamental desire, which unthematically aims at being or—theologically speaking—at transcendence, is immediately interlinked with the mimetic nature of the human person.[11] It is mimetic desire that constitutes humanity—Girard emphasized this again in his lecture on the occasion of the bestowal of the Lucas Prize.[12] It is mimetic desire that distinguishes the human person from animals, which are determined by their instincts. It is mimetic desire that makes a person receptive to her/his fellow human beings as well as to the divine:

> If our desires were not mimetic, they would be forever fixed on predetermined objects; they would be a particular form of instinct. Human beings could no more change their desire than cows their appetite for grass. Without mimetic desire there would be neither freedom nor humanity. Mimetic desire is intrinsically good. . . . If desire were not mimetic, we would not be open to what is human or what is divine.[13]

The last sentence of the above quotation from *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* where Girard associates mimetic desire with openness to the divine, especially underlines the legitimacy of the interpretation presented. Therefore, at the end of this first step, we may conclude that the anthropological statements on the intrinsically good mimetic desire, which opens us to what is human and to what is divine, finally converge with the theological notion of creational grace, of the human person created in God's likeness and the capacity of the human person for the transcendent. Moreover, from a theological perspective it becomes even more evident why this mimetic desire has to be called "intrinsically good": because it refers us to our creator, the absolutely good giver of life.

However, the question arises, why—given the intrinsic goodness of mimetic desire—do we so quickly descend to those conflictive forms of mimesis that receive much attention within mimetic theory? Girard addresses the ambivalent nature of mimesis:

> It [mimetic desire] is responsible for the best and the worst in us, for what lowers us below the animal level as well as what elevates us above it. Our unending discords are the ransom of our freedom.[14]

How can we explain the fact that an intrinsically good mimetic desire can lead us to our true calling as well as into the abysses of rivalry and violence? What decides whether mimetic desire ends up in negative or in positive mimesis?

CONFLICTUAL MIMESIS AS THE "SCIENTIFIC VERSION OF THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN"[15]

Can we find an answer to these questions in a distinction that Girard presents to us in the book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel,* the distinction between external and internal mediation? External mediation doesn't lead to violent rivalries, because the distance (not the physical but the mental distance) between the mediator and the imitator is big enough for them not to become rivals. In contrast, internal mediation easily leads to violent competition between mediator and imitator, because their spheres of possibilities are overlapping.

The distance between model and imitator is a contingent reality. For example, it can easily diminish when social norms or structures change. Therefore the difference between external and internal mediation is a difference only of degree, not of quality. But is that enough to explain why mimesis sometimes leads to resentment and violence while sometimes it doesn't?

In the same book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel,* we get another hint when Girard alludes to the notion of a "deviated transcendency."[16] We can elect our model and thereby we are faced with a fundamental choice: "Choice always involves choosing a model, and true freedom lies in the basic choice between a human or a divine model."[17] If we imitate a human instead of a divine model, transcendency is diverted from the other world into our world, from "au-delà to the en-deçà,"[18] as Girard puts it. The human model soon turns out to be a rival, and violent conflicts are almost inevitable. Passages in *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* point in a similar direction. Here, God and Satan are described

as "the two supreme models, 'arch models.'" On the one hand there are those "models who never become obstacles and rivals for their disciples because they desire nothing in a greedy and competitive way and [on the other hand there are the] models whose greed for whatever they desire has immediate repercussions on their imitators, transforming them right away into diabolic obstacles."[19]

In order to further elaborate on the question of why good mimetic desire becomes negative mimesis, let us now turn for the second time to Christian theology and ask how it can contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of negative mimesis. Theologically the question of why evil exists even though God's creation was originally good is answered by referring to human freedom and the doctrine of original sin. Recently the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk called the concept of conflictual mimesis the "scientific version of the doctrine of original sin."[20] Symbolically the scene of origin is described by the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve in paradise. This story tells us about the serpent, which is traditionally identified as a satanic figure and which Schwager interprets as a symbol for conflictive mimesis.[21] This serpent fallaciously distorts God's words and thus presents God as a rival to the human beings. The serpent insinuates that God withholds something from humankind so that they may not be like God. By means of this distortion, God suddenly doesn't seem to be the gracious giver of all life anymore. Rather, God appears as a rival to human beings, wanting to guard "his" position against "his" rivals. Deviated transcendency has its seeds in exactly this confrontation of God and humanity. Consequently, the human attitude of grateful receiving gives way to acquisitive and rivalrous desire. By distorting the experience of the divine, the serpent prompts the human beings to imitate God in an antagonistic way. This rivalrous imitation of God means that human beings try to be like God, but not in accordance with their creation and vocation, not by gratefully receiving their being in the image and likeness of God, but by trying to be like God out of their own effort, without God and against God.

Without further analyzing the story or elaborating on the symbolism of the serpent, the tree, and so forth, we may conclude that the garden story shows how a counterfeit image of God goes along with rivalrous mimesis. What follows in the biblical narrative is the tendency to put the blame on someone else (Adam accuses Eve, and Eve accuses the serpent), as well as conflicts and finally the violent death of human beings (Cain and Abel). The dramatic escalation of violence addressed in the book of Genesis points out how this perverted religious experience is likely to be intensified in the course of time.

On the basis of the insights of mimetic theory, Raymund Schwager and James Alison have tried to show how the original perversion and distortion of the experience of the divine could have happened historically. Both theologians have drawn up a scenario for this original perversion. Schwager imagines that the anthropoids, who had just attained the capacity for self-transcendence, culpably remained behind their newly bestowed possibilities, that is, that they failed to use them adequately. Alison says that in a situation of mimetic conflict, the anthropoids, who weren't controlled by instincts anymore, didn't tread the path of yielding to each other but the path of violence.

The same motif of fallacious distortion and perverse imitation of God that we have encountered in the narration of the Fall can also be found in the New Testament. Schwager argues that in the scene of the temptation of Jesus,

> we have precisely the same occurrence of temptation before us as in the garden story. First of all the Tempter imitates God's words in the same counterfeit way and then he himself presents a perverse image of God to be directly imitated. In one case the creator God is presented as a rival, in the other he himself as the god of this world.[22]

Thus imagining God as humans' rival turns out to be the primordial satanic temptation, which radically disturbs the relations between humans and God, and consequently also the relations among humans themselves. And since God normally is not accessible to human beings directly and immediately, one easily falls for a deceptive notion. Schwager writes: "The step from the imitation of God to imitation of an idol can come to pass almost imperceptibly."[23] In this way, the basis is provided for the kind of conflictual and rivalrous mimesis that is the focus of attention of mimetic analysis. Once you are caught up in the maelstrom of antagonistic mimesis, the only way out consists in creative renouncement, in being prepared to yield everything to your rival.[24] But how is that possible? How can humanity break free from the maelstrom of conflictive mimesis?

GRACE AND POSITIVE MIMESIS

Let us for the last time turn to the theological level. We have seen how the perverse imitation of God is closely connected to the violent history of antagonistic mimesis. But alongside this history and closely interwoven with it, there is another history: the history of grace, which time and again renders possible

moments of positive and loving mimesis. This history also starts—like the history of negative mimesis and even before that history—at the very beginning of creation. The theological concept of creation has shown that the capacity of human beings for transcendence is already a bestowed gift—creational grace. And since every human being is an image of God—even if the likeness is distorted by sin—it is also true that the mutual imitation of human beings doesn't necessarily lead to perdition. In this context, the relevance of law, especially the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, also has to be taken into account: The Old Testament Law provides a framework within which positive mimesis can be realized. Moreover, there have always been people who have represented this image and likeness of God in an especially lucid way: Such figures included the prophets of the Old Testament and particularly the Servant of the Lord. In its purest and most unaltered way (at least for Christians), this image and likeness of God appears in Jesus Christ. He is—as the Second Vatican Council professes—the *homo perfectus,* the perfect man, who is at the same time the undisguised image of God.

Like Adam in the garden story, Jesus is also led into temptation; the Tempter also wants him to adopt a counterfeit image of God. But Jesus "does not in any way let himself be drawn into the deceptive world of the enemy."[25] His significance can—as Nikolaus Wandinger shows—be found in breaking through the vicious circle of counterfeit imitation and the distorted image of God.[26] This breaking through happens on several levels and affects the *distorted image of God* as well as the *quality of imitation.* On the level of his *preaching,* Jesus communicates the undisguised image of God: God is the loving and merciful Father, whose unconditional forgiveness is offered to everybody and who wants to give us everything—even Godself—as a present. However, the drama of Jesus's life and death reveals that under the precondition of original sin, under the precondition of the ensnarement of humanity in antagonistic mimesis, the mere message of the merciful Father is not enough to correct the distorted image of God. Rather, people drag Jesus into their own, perverted notions of God; they consequently accuse him of blasphemy and finally kill him. In this situation of intensifying conflict, a correction of the image of God is only made possible by Jesus's own way of acting. Confronted with human violence, Jesus renounces counterviolence and finally even gives his own life for his opponents. After all of this, the risen Christ returns to guilty humankind with words of peace and forgiveness. Thus he allows for a new experience of God: an experience of a God who reacts to human failure and sin not with revenge but with loving forgiveness.

How can Jesus act like that? Is it mere ascetic self-decoration? Jesus says about himself that he imitates his heavenly Father. Yet he doesn't imitate him in a rivalrous way, but in a positive, nonviolent way. How is such a positive mimesis possible?

Jesus's imitation of the Father doesn't end in the blind alley of rivalry, because—as Girard says—it is not based on a greedy and egoistic form of desire.[27] Rather, Jesus's way of imitation is in itself an unmerited gift. Christian theology locates the fundamental reason for this fact in Trinitarian theology, in the passionate relations of the divine Persons with each other. In "Extra Media Nulla Salus? Attempt at a Theological Synthesis," Jozef Niewiadomski pointed out that Jesus "became independent of mimetic projections" because his "relation to his God had become the innermost core of his own self-experience and of his own person."[28] The concrete man Jesus of Nazareth is stamped by his passion for the communicating God, a passion that arises from participation. Thus Jesus's image of the Father is not that of a rivalrous God who wants to withhold something from God's creatures, but that of a loving Father who wants to give Godself as a present. Moreover, Jesus is not an autonomous subject imitating the Father by virtue of his own efforts; he is imitating the Father by virtue of the Holy Spirit that has been given to him. According to the New Testament, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in baptism. Thereby Jesus is designated as the beloved son of God and the bearer of the divine Spirit. This experience in baptism might play an essential role in making positive mimesis become possible. By virtue of the Spirit bestowed on him by the Father, Jesus imitates the Father in a consummate way. Thus, Schwager argues that during his life and death, Jesus perfectly represents his heavenly Father.

By means of his life and death and the sending of the divine Spirit after his ascension, Jesus, the *homo perfectus,* the undistorted image of God, makes possible a new, undisguised experience of God and consequently also new interhuman relationships, relationships that don't follow the structure of antagonistic mimesis. This new form of relationships—I want to call it positive mimesis—becomes possible because of the new image or rather the *new experience of God,* which Jesus communicates by means of his own life and behavior.

God isn't the rival of humanity; God respects human freedom and wants salvation for all human beings. On the other side, there is also the need for a new *quality of imitation,* a quality that does not lead into mimetic conflicts, because it arises not from an attitude of scarcity but from the experience of gratuitous forgiveness and from newly bestowed possibilities for life. This

form of positive mimesis, given by this new experience of God and the new quality of imitation, doesn't aim at taking the place of the model and finally of God. *Positive mimesis doesn't aim at replacement but at gratuitous participation— ultimately participation in the divine life.*

The experience of having gratuitously received something forms the foundation of positive mimesis. It is cultivated wherever human beings experience themselves as having received a gratuitous gift and consequently are willing to pass on what they have received, freely and without calculation.

In an outstanding and explicit way, this happens in the Eucharist. The Greek term *Eucharist* refers to the given benefaction as well as the thanking answer to it. And the verb *eucharistein* means to behave as presentee. Thus, celebrating the Eucharist means cultivating the experience of living out of bestowed abundance. This experience is the source of positive mimesis, and also the source of a community where positive mimesis is realized: the church. Inasmuch as the church lives from the Eucharist, it is the community of those who follow Christ and realize positive mimesis. But since the church isn't only the community of those celebrating the Eucharist but also a community acting within the ambivalent context of human institutions, positive mimesis is realized there only in a very fragile and fragmentary way. The theological term *ecclesia mixta* addresses this brokenness and incompleteness.

CONCLUSIONS

Let me summarize the understanding of mimetic desire, of negative and positive mimesis, that I have just tried to develop:

- Mimetic desire, meaning the openness of the human person to what is human and to what is divine, has its theological counterpart in the capacity for transcendence that is given to the human person as creational grace. Thus, it is intrinsically good. However, since God is not directly accessible to humans, mimetic desire can easily be perverted.
- Negative mimesis can theologically be understood in the context of a humankind affected by original sin. As acquisitive mimesis, it aims at taking the place of the model—ultimately at taking the place of God. Thus, rivalry and violence are quasi-predetermined.
- The question of how positive mimesis can emerge in a world distorted by violent imitation can hardly be answered without entering the theological fields of soteriology and grace. Positive mimesis is based upon God's

prevenient grace. Thus, to explain positive mimesis we need to have recourse to theological categories.

Perhaps at this point we have finally reached the deeper reason why Girard hasn't been writing much about positive mimesis until now. As far as possible, he tries to argue on the levels of anthropology and sociology. And in order to get to positive mimesis one has to go beyond these levels, as a quotation from *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* indicates: "To break the power of [violent] mimetic unanimity, we must postulate a power superior to violent contagion. If we have learned one thing in this study, it is that none exists on earth."[29]

NOTES

1. See Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girards mimetische Theorie: Im Kontext kulturtheoretischer und gesellschaftspolitischer Fragen,* Beiträge zur mimetischen Theorie 6 (Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 2003), 283–84.

2. See Rebecca Adams, "Loving Mimesis and Girard's 'Scapegoat of the Text': A Creative Reassessment of Mimetic Desire," in *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking,* ed. W. Swartely (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000), 281.

3. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 430–31.

4. See Adams, "Loving Mimesis and Girard's 'Scapegoat of the Text,'" 281–82.

5. See Raymund Schwager, "Rückblick auf das Symposium," in *Dramatische Erlösungslehre: Ein Symposium,* Innsbrucker theologische Studien 38, ed. J. Niewiadomski and W. Palaver (Innsbruck, Austria: Tyrolia, 1992), 357; also Palaver, *René Girards mimetische Theorie,* 284.

6. See, for example, Adams, "Loving Mimesis and Girard's 'Scapegoat of the Text.'"

7. Gen. 1:27, 31, quoted from the Revised Standard Version.

8. In this context, the famous passage from St. Augustine's *Confessions* (Confessions 1.1), in which Saint Augustine states, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you," has to be mentioned.

9. See, for example, Karl Rahner, "Existential, übernatürliches," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche,* 2nd ed, vol. 3, ed. J. Höfer and K. Rahner (Freiburg, Germany: Herder, 1959), 1301.

10. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred,* trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 146.

11. In this context, the question could be raised as to whether the unthematical desire directed toward transcendence constitutes the origin of mimesis or whether—inversely—the mimetic nature of desire lies at the origin of its direction toward transcendence. In order

to correctly answer this question, a detailed and thorough study would be necessary, and this cannot be provided within the scope of the present article. However, for our present purpose, it is enough to point out the close interlinkage between the desire directed toward transcendence and the mimetic nature of desire.

12. The complete text of his lecture is published in René Girard, *Wissenschaft und christlicher Glaube* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

13. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 15–16.

14. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* 6.

15. Peter Sloterdijk, "Erwachen im Reich der Eifersucht: Notiz zu René Girards anthropologischer Sendung," epilogue to René Girard, *Ich sah den Satan vom Himmel fallen wie einen Blitz: Eine kritische Apologie des Christentums* (Munich, Germany: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2002), 250. Quotation translated by Petra Steinmair-Pösel. In German, Sloterdijk calls it a "wissenschaftliche Fassung der Erbsündenlehre."

16. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 61.

17. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* 58.

18. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* 59.

19. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* 40.

20. Sloterdijk, "Erwachen im Reich der Eifersucht: Notiz zu René Girards anthropologischer Sendung," 250.

21. See Raymund Schwager, *Erbsünde und Heilsdrama: Im Kontext von Evolution, Gentechnologie und Apokalypse,* Beiträge zur mimetischen Theorie 5 (Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 1997), 174. See also, Schwager, *Banished from Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation*, trans. James G. Williams (Herefordshire: Gracewing Publishing/Inigo, 2005) 153.

22. Schwager, *Erbsünde und Heilsdrama,* 41. Quotation translated by Petra Steinmair-Pösel. See also Schwager, *Banished from Eden*, 28.

23. Schwager, *Erbsünde und Heilsdrama,* 60. See also Schwager, *Banished from Eden*, 43.

24. See Palaver, *René Girards mimetische Theorie,* 280.

25. Schwager, *Erbsünde und Heilsdrama,* 41. See also Schwager, *Banished from Eden*, 28.

26. See Nikolaus Wandinger, *Die Sündenlehre als Schlüssel zum Menschen: Impulse K. Rahners und R. Schwagers zu einer Heuristik theologischer Anthropologie,* Beiträge zur mimetischen Theorie 16 (Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 2003), 310.

27. See Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* 13–14.

28. Józef Niewiadomski, "Extra Media Nulla Salus? Attempt at a Theological Synthesis," in *Passions in Economy, Politics, and the Media: In Discussion with Christian Theology,* Beiträge zur mimetischen Theorie 17, ed. W. Palaver and P. Steinmair-Pösel (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2005), 495.

29. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* 189.