



Imitation and the Transcendent

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Abstract

Imitation stems from the originary term *mimesis*. Imitation can be seen as a desire, something one wishes to appropriate, or it may be seen as a representation of reality. In the work of René Girard (1923–2015), transcendence is seen as stemming from the act of imitation. Imitation creates the condition for sacrifice, and sacrifice becomes a way of holding a society together. Thus, the scapegoat becomes the force that regulates a society. However, the imitation game changes when Christ is killed and becomes an innocent scapegoat in the eyes of the believers. This paves the way for an attitude of imitating the scapegoat's innocence. Imitating Christ by siding with the victim makes the transcendent become a reality. Thus, in this article I ask in what way *mimesis* or imitation is able to make the transcendent relevant.

Keywords

Imitation, Mimesis, Imitation of Christ, René Girard, Transcendence

The Original understanding of Mimesis

The term *mimesis*¹ is known to have been first used in the fifth century BC.² According to Gøran Sørbom, it can be traced back to artistic sources, where it was manifested in magical rituals and dances.³ Sørbom refutes the thesis that the originary understanding of *mimesis* was representation and not imitation.⁴ In the fifth century, *mimesis* referred to external objects, without becoming the object's double.⁵ At the same time, however, in the practice of magic rituals and dances, objects or things were imitated, which meant that there was an attempt to be identical with the object. Both the term *mimesis* and its related words have probably been used in the context of the Dionysian Cult dramas,⁶ which again reveals the close connection between religious rituals and the development of drama in antiquity. One can also say that the originary term corresponds to imitation. According to Sørbom,

1. According to Sørbom, *mimos* is the original word from which the verb *mimeisthai* is derived. The words *mimesis*, *mimema*, *mimetes* and *mimetikos* are in turn derived from *mimeisthai*. All these words are traditionally connected with imitation. *Mimeisthai* denotes the activity of imitating, representing and portraying. Gøran Sørbom, *Mimesis and Art: Studies in the Origin and Early Development of an Aesthetic Vocabulary* (Uppsala: Bonnier, 1966), 12–13.
2. *Ibid.*, 18.
3. *Ibid.*, 13.
4. Sørbom tries to refute or modify Koller's theory that the verb *mimesthai* originally means representation (Darstellung) and expression (Ausdruck), not imitation. (Sørbom, *Mimesis and Art*, 14–17.)
5. Gebauer & Wulf. *Mimesis: culture-art-society*, (California: University of California Press, 1995), 42.
6. Herman Koller, *Die Mimesis in der Antike. Nachahmung, Darstellung, Ausdruck*, Dissertationes Bernenses Ser.1, Fasc.5. Bern (1954): 119.

all words related to mimesis are traditionally connected to imitation.⁷ From the originary concept, one can, according to Gerhard Else, derive three main meanings of the word:⁸

1. To mimic. The direct mimicry of men and animals through appearance, action, song and dance.
2. To imitate. A more general imitation, which is not expressed through direct mimicry.
3. To represent. To represent a picture of a person through material form, for example, a statue, a picture and so on.

In their book *Mimesis: culture, art, society*, Gebauer and Wulf mention expression, imitation and representation as characterizing the originary concept of mimesis. Gebauer and Wulf's definition contains only a minor deviation from Else's in that the word 'expression' is used instead of 'mimicry'. Otherwise they seem to agree as to the basic concepts of 'originary' mimesis.

Contemporary Understanding of Mimesis

When comparing the originary understanding of mimesis with the contemporary understanding, we see that most modern concepts of mimesis are linked to the originary concepts such as imitation, expression, representation, and mimic. However, even if all these concepts are included in today's understanding of the word *mimesis*, mimesis today is, more importantly, linked to *desire*. Today's concept of imitation is especially linked to desires and drives, giving mimesis a darker and crueller meaning. In addition, rivalry, another basic concept in modern mimesis, was hardly part of the originary understanding of mimesis.⁹

According to Auerbach, the main forms of representational art in the Western tradition are the Greek and biblical representations. Auerbach focuses on how great writers interpret and represent reality. For Auerbach, mimesis is a representation of history, style and reality.¹⁰ In representational mimesis, especially as interpreted by structuralists and deconstructionists, representation does not necessarily refer to any reality other than the text itself.¹¹ Representational mimesis can function just as well as intertextual representation or something without reference or sign.¹²

7. Sørbom, *Mimesis and Art*, 12–13.

8. Gerald F. Else, *Imitation in the Fifth Century*, *Classical Philology* vol. LIII, 2, 1958, 79.

9. The first notion of mimetic rivalry, however, is found in Plato's *Dialogues*.

10. See Gebauer & Wulf, *Mimesis*, 10.

11. Structuralism, especially, is sceptical about locating the text's referentiality in some concrete reality. One could regard the last forty years as a deconstruction of the sign in which the reference to reality in literature is limited to the text itself. Mimesis as representation, however, was basically, at least up until the 1960s, mostly an attempt to locate the representation of reality. And the further one goes back in history, reality and representation become more or less one and the same. Historical criticism has been an important factor in relativizing the most straightforward relationship between representation and reality. All the same, in most religious thought, until today, there has been a clear notion that religious texts ultimately refer to a religious reality. From Kierkegaard onwards the element of representing truth indirectly has grown stronger, along with cautiousness towards thinking that truth is something that can be immediately reached. This tradition, though, goes back to the cautiousness of negative theology towards statements on ultimate reality, a tradition which, in textual scepticism, was further elaborated in nominalism. This scepticism relating to text and reality, linking nominalism to structuralism, shows structuralism as the ultimate scepticism in its dismissal of textual representation of reality.

12. Past rivalries in finding the most significant references to reality seem to have turned into a new kind of rivalry: how to be the most sceptical in reference to reality. The task is now to locate different forms of representation without claiming to refer to 'reality.'

According to Gebauer and Wulf, Auerbach neglects completely the mimetic power principle in history.¹³ This is precisely the problem with limiting mimesis to representation alone: mimesis would then have no drive, and history would not be influenced by mimetic desire. In a work such as Auerbach's, the acquisitive and rivalistic elements of mimesis are reduced to representations of reality. They are not seen in relation to any governing power principle. Auerbach shows mimesis through the representation of reality. He does not analyse or define mimesis. Nor does he locate the desirous and disruptive side of mimesis. On the other hand, in his analysis of the New Testament, he comes very close to an understanding of something mimetically potent. Auerbach contrasts the non-realistic descriptions in the literature of Greco-Roman antiquity to the literature of the New Testament by claiming that the former has a static image of the world devoid of everyday life,¹⁴ while the texts in the *New Testament* do not operate with static, non-mobile concepts.¹⁵ Auerbach does not, however, attempt to locate the force which generates dynamic descriptions in the biblical texts. If Auerbach had gone one step further in his brilliant but tame analyses, he might possibly have located the key to these textual differences. He comes so extremely close in some places to discovering mimetic desire as the underlying principle of representation that his work (first published in 1946) has brought us one step nearer to uncovering mimesis as approbation.

Mimesis and Deconstruction: Derrida and the Deconstruction of Mimesis

Another set of thinkers who have located mimesis primarily as representation are the deconstructionists. When compared to Auerbach's understanding of mimesis, however, Derrida and other deconstructionists have been more eager to analyse and interpret mimesis as a concept and phenomenon. (Auerbach never analyses the concept mimesis.) Mimesis is clearly seen as a central concept in the process of deconstruction. According to deconstructionist theory, mimesis dissolves existing orders and hierarchies.¹⁶ Mimesis can be seen as a tool in breaking down logocentric thinking. The floating nature of mimesis dissolves established structures engendered by binary classifications. Derrida's own concepts such as *pharmakon*, *supplement*, *hymen*, *between* and *trace* are only capable of having their oscillating character because of their mimetic character.¹⁷

Derrida, like so many other modern thinkers, criticizes Plato's idea-world. These thinkers are critical of the belief in an inner wisdom, or inner revelation, which may be attained from outside the act of imitating. René Girard has criticized Plato's dismissal of mimesis as falsified copying and the lack of considering mimetic acquisition. Derrida, on the other hand, interprets Plato's mimesis from a slightly different angle, questioning the inner truth, the *aletheia* of essential forms, which are free of mimesis. The privilege of the spoken word, as both origin and self-preserved truth, needs to be deconstructed, while mimesis actually prevents the unproblematic reference to the ideal, the essence.¹⁸

13. Gebauer & Wulf, *Mimesis*, 10.

14. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 1974), 33.

15. Auerbach claims that the New Testament texts refer to ordinary people and describe people from all layers of society, which was unthinkable in the Greek and Roman literary tradition. (See Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 44.)

16. Gebauer & Wulf, *Mimesis*, 305.

17. *Ibid.*

18. See Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U.P., 1987), 54.

In the second part of *Dissemination*, entitled 'The Double Session', Derrida uses Mallarmé's prose text *Mimique* to demonstrate the free, floating and non-copyistic nature of mimesis (even when there is initially a concrete copying of a plot). Mallarmé's *Mimique* is a story taken (imitated) from a story by Fernand Beisier, about a husband who kills his unfaithful wife by tickling her to death. According to Derrida, some literary critics regard Mallarmé's version as a rather uncomplicated mimetic copying of the 'original'. Derrida claims that Mallarmé's retelling of the story is so different, so far from the 'original', that there can hardly be any imitation in a copying sense, as Mallarmé's version lacks any clear reference to Beisier's story.

Derrida wishes to deconstruct both the notion of the original story and the copy version. Every imitation is a *supplement*, something distinct from that which is imitated. Like Deleuze, Derrida sees the repetitive elements in writing not as producing likeness, but as producing something different. Derrida actually goes further in 'The Double Session'. Mimesis is located as something unique in itself; mimesis with no before or after, no repetition, no imitation, no reality, no right or wrong similarity, no truth outside the mimetic. Mimesis is something in itself with no reference outside itself, and should not be reduced to anything else.¹⁹ The result of this desire for the uniqueness of mimesis is that it becomes indefinable. Mimesis is unique in the sense that it is autonomous, even if it is anything but uncontaminated. There is, therefore, no attempt in Derrida's work to define mimesis.²⁰

Attempts to Efface the Trace of the Victim

The question surrounding the authenticity of mimesis can also be seen in relation to the victim. According to René Girard, Western thought has tried to efface *the trace* of the founding violence. Derrida has, according to Girard, substituted the trace for being, in the Heideggerian sense.²¹ Derrida's use of trace, as far as I can see, does not eliminate scapegoating even if expulsion is modified by the emphasis on the symbolic scapegoating of writing. Gebauer and Wulf, when discussing Derrida's understanding of (mimetic) scapegoating in writing, claim that for Derrida the *pharmakeus* (which also designates the scapegoat) by being killed and expelled from the city, offers the means by which social crises are overcome.²² In Athens human scapegoats were regularly identified and ritually sacrificed as a practical measure to preserve civil order. The *pharmakos* (which Derrida describes in *Plato's Pharmacy*) is, both in its etymology²³ and historical reality, the scapegoat of the city.²⁴ He is the victim in the desire to create a heterogeneous society.

The character of the *pharmakos* has been compared to the scapegoat. The evil and the outside, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out) of the city (...).²⁵

19. Gebauer & Wulf, *Mimesis*, 301–302.

20. There is, however, more of an attempt to broaden the mimetic field when dealing with mimesis as a process. In 'Economimesis', for example, Derrida clearly broadens the scope of mimesis by connecting mimesis to production and politics. (Derrida, 'Economimesis,' in Derrida et al., *Mimesis des articulations* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1964), 55–93.

21. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 65.

22. Gebauer & Wulf, *Mimesis*, 299.

23. See footnote 59, where Derrida demonstrates all the different meanings of the word *pharmakon/pharmakos*. Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy,' in *Dissemination* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981), 132.

24. Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy,' 128–134.

25. Derrida, *Dissemination*, 130

Derrida thus goes on to explain that the scapegoats' genitals were cut off in order to chase the evil out of their bodies. They were then killed in order to purify the city.²⁶ Derrida, in exactly the same way as Girard, sees these sacrificial acts as purifying and restoring the city. In his analysis of Greek scapegoating, Derrida mentions that Socrates, whom Plato explicitly designates as a *pharmakos*, was also made a scapegoat. And the imitative side of writing materializes in the fact that Plato began writing after the death of Socrates, imitating and representing his thoughts. Plato's writing is motivated by the scapegoating of Socrates, revealing how culture arises in a purposeful attempt to atone for violence. In this respect writing is a consequence of violence, becoming a *trace* back to the sacred violence.

Imitation as a Path to Transcendence

As we now have a certain historical understanding of imitation and mimesis, I would like to move on in order to understand the transcendent from a mimetic or imitative point of view. The later development of representational mimesis must, according to mimetic theory, be marked by a religious representation, Christ's representation of God, the non-violent and non-sacrificing logos. This representation of the logos, the true ontology, also means the uncovering of sacrificial violence, the antithetic representation of God (what religion has represented as a sacrificial god), which is nothing else but human violence.

The word of Christ is at work in this whole long process toward humanity and representation. Representation is still distorted, as it still distorts or disguises the violence stemming from original mimesis.²⁷

Girard's point seems to be that Christ reveals the content of human violence, not only by revealing the violence done against him as such, but by revealing a violent structure, both historically and in his contemporary milieu, and, finally, by representing a non-violent God. Showing Christ as the representation of a non-violent deity is a quite common motif, even if its most radical and non-sacrificial consequences are seldom thought through. Girard has tried, in his writings, to purge all violent elements associated with God and transfer them onto humanity. He has also put greater and greater emphasis on Christ's role in revealing historical violence by showing the symmetry between Christ's destiny and the destiny of the prophets.²⁸ Christ is seen as representing, in a revelatory manner, human violence; violence enacted due to mimetic rivalry, leading to sacrificial constructions, in order to prevent the truth concerning human violence coming to light.

For Girard, Christ is the key representational figure because he represents a non-violent and loving God. In this respect, representation is of great value, but in order to really understand the representational power of the Christian message, Girard advocates the imitation of Christ, an active mimesis in order for human beings to be transformed by love.²⁹ In this respect Christ's representation of the Father, which cannot be seen as non-mimetic, should be activated by imitation. Thus, the representation of the Gospels requires some sort of imitation on human beings' behalf.

26. Ibid., 132–133.

27. René Girard, *The Girard Reader* (ed. James Williams; NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996).

28. See Girard, *Things Hidden*, 158–179 and René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 25–26, 85–86.

29. Girard, *Things*, 430–431; Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 13–14.

Lacoue-Labarthe claims that Girard does not see Christ's destiny as mimetic or sacrificial.³⁰ In my view, however, nearly everything normative in Girardian theory amounts to an imitation of Christ. Admittedly, Girard did not directly emphasize the *imitatio Christi* motif strongly in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, although it is clearly present in this work (see pp. 206 and 430). It is most clearly elaborated, though, in Part One of *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*.³¹ Christ's destiny, according to Girard, is clearly mimetic as the crucifixion is seen as the result of mimetic conflict in Jewish society.

The Imitation of Christ

Imitating Christ, meaning mimesis based on Christ, is mostly discussed in the context of Christian norms. In the case of Thomas à Kempis, imitating Christ would mean transforming one's personality into the likeness of Christ. This would, in my view, realize pacifist norms and ideals. The imitation of Christ, from a mimetic point of view, appears relevant anywhere where violence is in the process of being moderated. Over the last two thousand years there has been much emphasis within Western culture on the ideal of imitating Christ (outwardly at least), however violent and sacrificial a form a society has taken. And despite the fact that some of the most abominable sacrifices have become part of Christian culture, sometimes even enacted because of what was considered to be imitating Christ, the norm of being Christ-like remains present. Christian ideals, even in the most violent periods of Western history, were common and loudly preached, even if the pacifist and non-sacrificial ideals seem to have been enacted only by the few. The *imitatio Christi* motif seems to have survived in some kind of overriding fashion throughout the ages of Christian culture despite, at times, being cushioned in an idealistic and otherworldly manner.

The *imitatio Christi* motif was and is one of the most central religious motifs in Christendom, despite the fact that there has been very little pronounced knowledge of the imitative nature of human beings. One might say, in a somewhat heterodox Freudian manner, that one of the most basic drives in European civilization has been the desire to be like Jesus, either consciously or unconsciously. One only has to think back to one's own norms at school, where practically every song and every ethical ideal had some affinity with the ideal of Christ. And for every generation, if one goes back in history, Christian ethics were presented, forcefully and authoritatively, as the ultimate true worldview.

Jesus' Imitation

In mimetic theory, mimesis is based not only on the understanding that every human is imitative and that we imitate each other. Nor is religious mimesis restricted to humans imitating God or Christ. Mimetic theory also emphasizes, from a theological point of view, Christ's imitation of his Father. Jesus' imitation of God is basically seen as an imitation in love. There is no rivalry and no acquisition involved in the way the Son imitates the Father. Hence, Christ's imitation is radically different from the imitation among men, which tends to be rivalistic and easily ends in violence. In *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, Girard emphasizes that Christ also imitates. He is not putting a stop to imitation by directing it towards

30. Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: mimesis, philosophy, politics*, (Cambr. Mass.: Harvard U.P, 1989), 110–111.

31. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 13–15.

himself; he invites humans to imitate his own imitation.³² Jesus, according to Girard, does not claim to desire from himself.³³ He does not obey his own desire. His goal is to become the perfect image of God.³⁴ Jesus advocates mimetic desire (*imitate me, imitate my Father*).³⁵ In this respect, Christ is the mediator towards God. Because of this imitation, Christ inherits the same loving and non-violent nature as God. Thus, Christ is seen to be God.

Theologically, the Trinity can be interpreted as a relationship based on total interdependence devoid of rivalry and acquisition. The openness between the hypostases that make up the Godhead and the non-rivalistic manner in which the Trinity is seen to function, stand in marked contrast to the hidden and rivalistic manner in which people imitate each other. Because imitation among humans traps people into different forms of rivalry,³⁶ Girard focuses emphatically on the imitation of Christ. His version of the imitation of Christ may be labelled what Kwon calls a *relational interpretation*.³⁷

Girard's Version of *Imitatio Christi*

One's way of interpreting the imitation of Christ will vary according to how one understands the life of Jesus. Therefore, the importance of the *imitatio* motif depends on what one considers to be the main themes in Christianity. Paul's emphasis on the justification of the ungodly through faith, for example, is decisive for his image of Christ as the saviour of all mankind. Imitation of Christ is therefore the Christian's continuation of salvation. The central theme in the New Testament, according to mimetic theory, is Jesus' revelation of violence through his dissolving the scapegoat mechanism. This theme is therefore decisive for the *imitatio Christi* motif. From *Deceit, Desire & the Novel* onwards, there has been a certain emphasis in Girard's work on the *imitatio Christi* motif. One could even say that Girard's religious thinking starts with the *imitatio Christi* motif and is later developed into a non-sacrificial theology. In mimetic theory, the imitation of Christ is a direct consequence of Christology as it combines a general anthropological drive with religious imitation.

Girard's notion of a divine model devoid of violent desires was already established in his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. In this work the road to freedom from metaphysical desire lay in choosing the divine model.³⁸ Girard claims that there is a fundamental qualitative difference between the human and the divine model. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* can actually be read as a conversion story where the pains of metaphysical desire force a change in imitative models. However, the focus on the laws and structures of desire is much greater than on the liberation from these same desires. Despite this, as early as his first book Girard advocates a conversion that entails imitating Christ, but the work does not discuss the content of such an imitation at any great length. In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* there is, considering the scope and emphasis on Christ in this work, little direct emphasis on the imitation of Christ. It is basically in the last two pages that Girard directly introduces the theme of imitating Christ. Up to that point, Girard's Christological reflec-

32. Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 13.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 63. (An interview with Girard.)

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

37. See Soon-Gu Kwon, *Christ as Example. The Imitatio Christi Motive in Biblical and Christian Ethics*, (Dissertation) Uppsala: Uppsala Studies in Social Ethics 21 (1998): Chapter 9, 194–210.

38. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1965), 58.

tions have dealt mostly with interpreting the Gospels in a non-sacrificial manner. However, the whole discussion leads to the conclusion that imitating Christ is the only way out of a violent existence. In the section called 'The Divinity of Christ', Girard claims that Christ is the only agent capable of helping us escape from the violent structures and freeing us from their dominion.³⁹ Girard connects here the themes of *non-violence* and *non-sacrifice* with the imitation of Christ.⁴⁰ Non-violence can be seen as the consequence of turning away from mimetic desire.⁴¹ Thus, imitation of Christ means mimesis without obstacles and violent opposition between doubles.⁴²

Through the imitation of Christ humans can possibly avoid the danger of turning the model into a fascinating rival. Christ does not possess any form of acquisitive desire, rivalry or mimetic interference.⁴³ Thus, imitating Jesus is seen as a natural consequence of conversion. Neither in the Gospels nor in the other texts of the New Testament is there any professed prohibition against imitation. They recommend, Girard writes, the imitation of Christ.

The Gospels and the New Testament (...) 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 the way children imitate – of being transformed into a fascinating rival.⁴⁴

However, in *Things Hidden*, there seems to be a certain reluctance towards accepting the effects of mimetic phenomena as such, a reluctance which, as a whole, is not present in his later works.⁴⁵ Part of the lack of clarity concerning mimetic desire consists in Girard's different uses of the same concepts. One passage in *Things Hidden* especially seems to blur his main view on mimesis. After recommending the imitation of Christ, Girard says that 'following Christ means giving up mimetic desire'.⁴⁶ If following Christ means giving up mimesis or imitation, Girard is contradicting the mimetic theory that implies that the most basic aspect of human beings is imitation. The theme here, however, seems confined to giving up rivalistic imitation, the kind of imitation that is acquisitive and governed by desire. It seems to me that Girard means giving up *metaphysical desire*, an expression he uses when someone with whom one is in rivalry, governs desire.

Imitating Christ's Role as a Scapegoat

Jesus as a scapegoat may be seen a consequence of his imitation of God. The scapegoat, however, is not something necessarily imitable. The imitable would be the attitude of non-

39. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 219.

40. Ibid., 400, 427.

41. Ibid., 400, 431.

42. Ibid., 430.

43. Ibid.

44. Girard. *Things Hidden*, 430

45. The problem, as it relates to imitation, is that in *Things Hidden* Girard professes, at times, a rather negative attitude towards mimetic desire. He mostly operates within a dualistic understanding of mimesis according to which imitating Christ is good while all other kinds of imitation is seen as destructive. In this decisive work there is an element of renouncing the whole business of mundane imitation. However, after writing *Things Hidden*, Girard has come to take a much more positive approach to imitation as a whole. This dualism between the imitation of Christ and mimetic desire in general was later criticized by Girard because it contained too negative an approach to mimesis. (See 'An interview with Girard' in *The Girard Reader*, 63.)

46. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 431.

retribution and forgiveness. In this sense, one has to distinguish between violent forms of imitation, which lead to scapegoating, and the non-violent imitation of Christ. Christ represents a new model, a new Adam who has deconstructed violence through an act of love. According to mimetic theory, Christ is a mimetic model devoid of violence and therefore capable of mediating God's love. Christ is therefore the main model for good mimesis. Christ's imitation of his Father reflects a new and radical kind of love. This imitation is conceptualized in the ideal of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is an attitude where the values and distinctions of the ordinary world are overturned.⁴⁷ The mimetic rivalries concerning power, prestige and possessions are contrasted to God's values. This means that the Kingdom of God, which is not a location or place,⁴⁸ is marked by inclusion. Criteria such as clan, family, economy, gender and age are dissolved as being in any way decisive.⁴⁹

Passion and Scapegoating

Girard's introduction of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures in *Things Hidden* seems, in relation to victimizing, to be motivated nevertheless by a general starting point. The Passion drama becomes more than a general scapegoating scene because it changes humanity's approach towards the victim. Although Girard's introduction of the Passion may seem motivated by the more general theme of scapegoating, my investigation has led me to conclude that Girard's work is based on an *a priori* or indicated Christology. I suspect that Girard's work, viewed *in toto*, corresponds to Dieter Henrich's thesis that no way leads to God which does not begin with God himself.⁵⁰ This actually makes mimetic theory look more like a theology, and it is from such a theological point of view one may consider the role of Jesus.

Imitation and Non-Violence

If one were to take the concept of imitating Jesus further into a more ethical context, Girard, especially in *Things Hidden*, emphasizes non-violence as an effect of imitating Christ. Christ is a non-violent model; he is not only non-violent, but also attempts to reveal the violence down through the ages.⁵¹ For Girard, imitation of Christ means that violence is revealed as such and is not given any legitimation. By imitating Christ, human beings can see that violence is violence and contains nothing divine or transcendent. Imitating Christ means giving up physical and psychological violence, not because one will be totally liberated from violence, but because the model is totally free of it. I do not, however, interpret Girard's ideal of imitating Christ as meaning total pacifism. This would mean that one had the luxury of behaving as though the world were no longer sacrificial.⁵²

47. Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, XX.

48. Jacob Jervell, *Historiens Jesus* (Oslo: Land og Kirke/Gyldendal, 1978). See especially footnote number 22 & 132.

49. The people excluded in Jesus' attempt to realize the Kingdom of God were those who found themselves too superior or too orthodox to be a part of such a group. Thus the exclusion consists in self-exclusion.

50. Dieter Henrich, *Der ontologische Gottesbeweis. Sein Problem und seine Geschichte in der Neuzeit*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967).

51. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 158–161.

52. In a lecture delivered at Oxford in November 1997, Girard claimed that he had great respect for pacifists but went on to say that pacifism can prove to be too easy a way out of the problem, hinting at the problem with pacifism when a force like Hitler comes to power. (See 'René Girard Responds to Questions.' Double Tape, New Malden Surrey: W. Hewett/Inigo Enterprises, 1998.) In a conversation I had with Girard at a Colloquium at Stanford in October 2001 (some weeks after September 11), Girard said that sometimes turning the other cheek could actually provoke violence. These more personal remarks in conversations and lectures are clearly less pacifistic than what one receives from reading his work. On the other hand, Girard never recommends total pacifism in his work. Despite this

Violence and Doubles

Imitating Christ in mimetic theory is primarily an individual and psychological act of breaking away from the violence of doubles.⁵³ People tend to live under the illusion that they can become less violent by differing from others.⁵⁴ According to mimetic theory, doubles give rise to conflict, but the desire to be different is no solution to the problem. The solution is the harder one: the humility of admitting one's sameness, even towards the loathed double. This self-understanding is the first step towards non-violence as admitting one's likeness helps not to provoke opposition towards the other.

To break the spiral of violence is to imitate Christ in the way advised in the Sermon on the Mount. By giving the other what he demands, or even more than he demands, the spiral of violence may be broken.⁵⁵ This understanding seems, however, to be limited to individual ethics.

The Childlike Content of Imitating Jesus

When speaking of imitating Christ, Girard uses terms such as innocence, childlike, non-rivalistic and non-violent – often together.⁵⁶ All these terms are regarded as antithetic to conflictual desire. An innocent and childlike manner of imitation could mean that one is not trying to acquire anything other than what one is imitating. Innocence is the act of imitating without hidden motives, an imitation based on Christ's qualities, which again is based on Christ's imitation of God. The childlike imitation of Christ is, however, a somewhat problematic concept. What does it mean?

Childlike imitation could mean imitating without understanding or foreseeing the consequences. Childlike also refers to innocence, which is clearly something recommendable. According to Girard, children are mimetically open, meaning that they can imitate whatever they like without knowing if it is good or bad.⁵⁷ This can hardly be what Girard implies by the concept of childlike imitation of Christ. Nor can childlike, in Girard's thinking, mean imitation devoid of acquisition. The example he gives about the fight over toys contradicts such naïvety.⁵⁸ Childlike imitation of Christ is therefore a problematic and unclear concept for describing the quality of imitating Christ. The most positive way in which I can conceive of childlike imitation (besides innocence) is the child's unquestionable trust towards the imitative model.

Mediating God

A number of theological implications arise from Girard's theory on divine imitation. One is the orthodox view of Christ as being divine from birth. If it is Christ's perfect imitation of

lack of any politically motivated pacifism, Girard, as regards the Gospels, has to be one of the Christian thinkers, alongside Tolstoy, who stresses the dimension of non-violence most emphatically in relation to Christ's message. This pacifism, however, is not based on any idealistic view of humans as such. On the contrary, the mimetic principle reveals human beings as rivalistic and, potentially, violent.

53. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 400, 430.

54. *Ibid.*, 400

55. Girard, *Quand ces choses commenceront...*, Entretiens avec Michel Treguer, Paris: Arlèa, 1994, 76. See also Per Bjørnar Grande. 'Vold og konflikt – en løsning?' Kirke og Kultur 3 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2002).

56. See Girard, *Things Hidden*, 427. See also 'Satan', 197 and 'The Question of Anti-Semitism in the Gospels', 215, both articles in Girard, *The Girard Reader*.

57. See Girard, *Things Hidden*, 290.

58. 'Place a certain number of identical toys in a room with the same number of children; there is every chance that the toys will not be distributed without quarrels.' (Girard. *Things Hidden*, 9.)

God that makes him divine, can he then be considered divine from the beginning? Will the act of imitation turn him into both the mediator and the representation of God? A rather crucial question, from a theological perspective, is whether Girard interprets Christ as being the Son of God through imitation. If imitating God makes Christ divine, which is clearly a prospect in mimetic theory, Girard's Christology, according to a three-stage Christology (pre-existence, existence, post-existence),⁵⁹ focuses mostly on the existent and post-existent Christ, as imitation must be seen to be an effect of Christ's life. Another question is: if Christ imitates God, is he not considered to be something beneath God? If it is through imitation that Christ becomes God, there could be reasons for conceiving of him as a mediator, something between human and God. On the other hand, if Christ's imitation of God represents the same as God, he could be interpreted as God in the orthodox sense. In fact, it all depends on how one understands imitation. If imitation is not something lower than what one imitates, there is no reason to regard Christ's imitation of God as something lesser. If, on the other hand, one regards mimesis as Plato regarded mimesis, as something lesser and falser than the original, religious imitation would have to be dismissed as a falsified imitation.⁶⁰ However, the difference between Christ and humanity, from a mimetic perspective, must be seen as a difference in degree rather than in kind.⁶¹

Imitating Christ's Non-Sacrificial Attitude

From the perspective of violence in society, Christ can be seen as an arbitrary victim. From the perspective of revealing the victim's innocence, however, he is the least arbitrary of all victims.⁶² According to Cesáreo Bandera, Christ must, from a sacrificial point of view, be expelled, as he reveals the violent injustice inherent in the scapegoat mechanism.

All the other victims could have been spared. Each of them could have been replaced by something else, leaving the system intact and fully operational, that is, as incapable as ever of facing up to the unspeakable truth. The only victim the sacrificial system cannot spare without immediately running the risk of self-destruction, is the one who reveals, exposes, the truth.⁶³

This passage marvellously illuminates the effects of Christ's death. Christ's revelation of human violence is a revelation of the sacrificial system. Although Christ, as presented in the Gospels, does not perpetually criticize sacrifice and violence, the Gospels' main theme can nonetheless be regarded as non-sacrificial in that Christ's death and non-violent response reveal a religion built on non-sacrifice. Scubla's claim that non-violence and non-sacrifice are seldom mentioned by Jesus⁶⁴ is not unreasonable when considering Jesus' teaching

59. Leander E. Keck, 'Christology of the New Testament: What, then, is New Testament Christology?' in Powell/Bauer. *Who do you say that I am? Essays on Christology* (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 187.

60. I do not aim to detect any Neo-Arian tendencies in mimetic theory because all theories emphasizing anthropology will start with the human sides of Christ. Few theological reflections and systems that start from anthropological models are able, as far as I can see, to reveal the symmetry between God and Christ in such a rational manner as mimetic theory, as well as show the qualitative difference between Christ and humans.

61. See John Macquarrie, *Christology Revisited* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 59.

62. According to Gebauer and Wulf, in principle each and every person could be chosen to be a scapegoat, but the selection of one person (or group of persons) is justified in retrospect by a multitude of factual, imaginary, or attributed particularities: the evil eye, physical deformities, peculiar habits, their status as an outsider (foreigner). (Gebauer & Wulf, *Mimesis*, 258.)

63. Cesáreo Bandera, *The Sacred Game* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania U.P., 1994), 25.

64. Lucien Scubla. 'The Christianity of René Girard and the Nature of Religion' in *Violence and Truth* (ed. P. Dumouchel; London: The Athlone Press, 1988).

(although his claim is modified by a number of examples where these themes are highly acute). Jesus' attitude of non-violence and non-sacrifice is, however, most apparent from the perspective of the Passion. Seeing Jesus essentially from the perspective of the Passion, from the victim's point of view, reveals an understanding of history as determined by victimizing.⁶⁵ In such a context the meaning of history cannot be understood solely as empiricism or crude facticity.⁶⁶ Thus, victimizing becomes the hermeneutical basis in relation to which one can locate historical development and meaning. Non-sacrifice, however, is perpetuated by mimesis, by imitating the non-violent attitude of Christ. In this respect the Gospels' good news, the new religion, cannot be realized without the act of imitating Christ. Thus, religion may be practised either by imitating sacrifice or by imitating the one who ended sacrifice.

The stages of mimesis have the following chronology: mimetic desire – conflict – scapegoating – violence – peace. Mimesis is the centre around which all the other concepts cluster. Desire and scapegoating are brought about by mimesis and end in violence. Violence is the product of conflictual mimesis, and most cultural prohibitions are established in order to control and reduce violence. This, according to mimetic theory, is the primary function of (primitive) religion, which may be defined as an attempt to regulate a society by means of the victimage mechanism. Religion, like all ancient cultural forms, uses violence, but in order to restore peace.⁶⁷ The violence in victimizing is a means of keeping a society together after an eruption of violence. The surrogate victim is the key to this violent process.⁶⁸

Thus, the imitation of Christ is each individual's response to the process of dissolving violence. In this respect, imitating Christ is the individual's continuation of Christ's work. While the Passion was clearly a sacrificial phenomenon, imitating Christ can be seen as the ethical implication of the Passion. This also means that imitating Christ is the practical step forward, derived from a reflection on Christ. In this sense, imitation is a response to Christology and, at the same time, ethically speaking, perhaps the most important part of Christology.

Concluding on Mimesis and the Transcendent

In violent rituals, the experience of relief and peace which arises after a sacrificial murder will make people think that the victim has some sort of inherent power. One can practically hear someone in the crowd expressing: 'before there was conflict and tension all around, but now we experience peace. The victim must be a God!' This is what marks the birth of religion and transcendence. The essential transcendence in religion is the sudden shift from sacrifice to veneration. Because the victim creates peace, it turns him or her into something divine. The sacrificial scene marks a transcendent event. By creating peace and stability, the scapegoat also becomes the force which regulates a society. Therefore, religion may be seen as the regulatory mechanism in society. The divinity of Christ, however, follows the same preliminary processes as in a sacrificial scene, but, by proclaiming non-violence and the victims' innocence, seems to change the core value in sacrifice not by claiming the sacrificial rite as transcendent, but, on the contrary, seeking the transcendent in the victim's innocence.

65. See Tony Bartlett, 'The Work of James Williams' in COV&R, Number 21 (September 2002): 7.

66. Bartlett, 'The Work of James Williams', 7.

67. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, (5th Ed.) (Maryland Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 132–34.

68. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 63.