

Hamerton-Kelly on Violence and Mimesis: A Critical Appreciation

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(This paper is adapted from chapter 5 of the most recent draft of the book in progress, “Girardians: The Colloquium on Violence and Religion 1990-2010” [provisional title].)

In writing the history of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion I have revisited many events and personal connections (as well as learning much that was new to me about René Girard and the work of friends in COV&R). In this review of the past one of the most important persons and mimetic theorists is Robert Hamerton-Kelly. We first met 25 years ago. It was in April of that very year, 1985, that I had first encountered the work of Girard. Then sometime during the summer or fall of 1985 I was invited to attend the Jesus Seminar meeting at St. Meinrad Seminary in St. Meinrad, Indiana. My participation in the Jesus Seminar for two years was a terrible experience in many respects, but in one very basic respect it was one of the best things that ever happened to me, for there I met Bob Kelly, who facilitated my first meeting with Girard as well as the presence of Girard at the meetings of another seminar that came about, the Bible, Narrative, and American Culture Seminar (BINAC). It was out of BINAC that COV&R was formed, a story to be told in the history.

Hamerton-Kelly has been a formidable presence in COV&R and has stated his position on a number of issues quite forcefully. In recent

years, beginning with his paper on Heraclitus and other interventions at the Riverside conference in 2008, he has criticized some COV&R colleagues for their preoccupation with positive mimesis and he has lamented that the general neglect of the centrality of violence in the mimetic theory is unfortunate and benighted. His statements have had the effect of “fighting words” for many in COV&R. For myself, I have found that his position is well reasoned and must be taken into account, whether or not I can accept it completely.

It is true that Hamerton-Kelly is pessimistic regarding the course of history in which the economy is the primary motor of social relationships and politics . Indeed, it appears that he has been influenced not only by Girard, but also by Dupuy and Dumouchel. He has also turned more and more to the theology of John Calvin, the great Protestant reformer who is well known for his doctrine of the predestination of the elect. In Hamerton-Kelly’s Methodist heritage there are two primary theological strains in its beginnings. One was that of John Wesley, the founder, who was an Anglican priest. He, his brother Charles Wesley (the great hymn writer), and most of their followers were inclined to the thought of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). Arminius was a Dutch pastor and at one time a student of Theodore Beza (1519-1605), who was Calvin’s successor in Geneva. However, Arminius rejected Beza’s teaching that God predestined some for salvation and some for damnation.

Although the Arminianism of the Wesleys predominated in the future development of Methodism, the theological perspective of George

Whitefield (1714-1770) was a significant influence in Methodist origins. He held to the kind of “moderate Calvinism” of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church. He believed that God was the sole agent in conversion and salvation. In actual practice, however, this was not an obstacle to him in preaching, for he always exhorted and invited his audiences to accept the good news that Christ graciously reaches out to lost souls. He was probably the most popular preacher in the 18th century, drawing thousands of people wherever he traveled in America. He was the single most influential preacher responsible for the revival movement in 1740 called the Great Awakening .

Hamerton-Kelly’s model within the Methodist tradition is Whitefield. In terms of the actual course history has taken, he agrees with Dupuy that the economy is the bearer of the sacrificial mechanism that is the main manifestation of the human predicament. From a theological standpoint, human being is “fallen,” and it has no recourse of its own volition. Therefore, as the participants in the Riverside conference became well aware--and this was also quite clear at the 2009 conference in London--he announced that violence, i.e., the link of mimesis and violence, should be the primary object and focus of our work, and that many of us had become unwisely attached to emphasizing a positive, loving mimesis. He did not name names, but as I have highlighted in this history, quite a few colleagues, in their respective ways, have focused on the positive possibilities of mimetic desire in social and religious life, including Rebecca Adams, Martha Reineke, Pablo Bandera, Ann Astell, and of course the Innsbruck school (Raymund Schwager, Wolfgang Palaver, Joseph Niewiadomski, Nikolaus

Wandinger, Petra Steinmair-Pösel, among the Innsbruck theologians most well known to us).

So Hamerton-Kelly has thrown down the gauntlet, as it were. Whether or not we agree with him, his exhortation on violence is something we must think through carefully and understand before we accept or reject it. The point of departure would be his paper at Riverside, “Heraclitus Hierophant: A Mimetic Reading of Two Fragments,” but he has spoken on this also in various contexts.¹

Concerning mimesis, Hamerton-Kelly begins with the fundamental Girardian concept that mimetic desire itself is the human mode of being in the world. Desire, which is mimetically structured and directed, is our “nature,” i.e., it is what is not created by human effort or achievement and it is essential to the basic characteristics and faculties of human being. This mode of being tends toward violence in the sense that violence is inevitable in human life because desire is a force that works through unconscious imitation of other humans who become models and rivals. A model is always potentially a rival, a rival is always potentially a model. They easily slide back and forth into each other, almost like the 0-1 polarity that is fundamental to cybernetic technology. The very biology of the human brain---the neural network in particular—is a combination of feedback loops and mirror neurons,

¹ The description of his position that I present here owes much to the hours of conversation with Hamerton-Kelly in Palo Alto on September 30, 2009. I would like to thank him, Lindy Fishburne, and Imitatio for supporting my travel there to have extended conversations with René Girard and him over a period of four days.

which place our existence always in polarities of tension and inevitable conflict between self and other.²

Pre-Socratic philosophers, particularly Heraclitus in the 5th century B.C., recognized the dynamic, polar combat of opposites. War (*polemos*), declares Heraclitus, is the father or source of all things and all human relations. Heraclitus' maxim, which is repeated in various forms and applications in the extant fragments, was evidently influenced by the wars between the Greeks and the Persians as well as Persian dualistic thought, along with the reflections of earlier philosophers. He held, in other words, that violence is the generative principle of both nature and the world of man.

Now how does this discovery of violence as generative principle square with Christian theology? Does it deny the Christian doctrine of original sin or is it a modern form of Gnosticism? That is, does it posit an evil creator or creation and a special spiritual knowledge that is gained only through a particular interpretation of the revelation centered in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus? Hamerton-Kelly's answer to both questions is no. The cross of Christ is the historical event of the divine disclosure of the scapegoat mechanism, which is the operation in human life of the elimination of a victim through whom the contending beings

² On mind, brain, and social networks Hamerton-Kelly's thinking has been reinforced and extended through his reading of Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), and Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am A Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007). These ways of understanding mind and human being as biosocial are pertinent to his concept of the Holy Spirit as the Mind of God.

gain relief from the mimetic rivalry that threatens to destroy them. The event of Jesus Christ is the entrance of God into this world of violence: God the Son suffers the violence, the misery, the hell (“he descended into hell”) that God’s creatures suffer. In a process which may have taken place over thousands, even millions of years, the human species attained to human being, in the form that we know humankind, in which victims slain by hominid groups became the focal point of all sorts of differentiation and the threshold of hominization. That means certainly that language and culture have their origin in the victim.

But what about the Jewish and Christian affirmation of a creation that is good? God, according to Genesis 1, created the world, including Adam, First Man, and everything in it was very good. Hamerton-Kelly holds that the way to understand this affirmation of God’s creation, which in some form is necessary to Christian faith, is to view it as mythic or symbolic; it does not describe a “history” or process of events succeeding one another in time. Creation of the world as very good should be understood as an eschatological reality in the mind of God, as it were. That is, creation is good in the “end,” as it is meant to be. Understood in that way as the apocalypse, the *apokalupsis* or unveiling of the transcendent reality of the world, creation is unveiled in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the Second Adam, the Alpha and Omega, in his victory over Satan, the Accuser who is the god of this world. This revelation of creation is indeed proleptic, yet to be fully revealed, but it is vouchsafed to us through a great chain of witnesses in and through whom the Holy Spirit moves. This Spirit is the present dynamic reality of that Mind of God. The Divine Mind is the gracious

Spirit that gives us our minds and the possibility of love and peace, beginning with the defense of victims, as a prolepsis of the true apocalypse, the restoration of all things.

The primary task of the mission of witness to the gospel is to proclaim and teach the freedom of the children of God, who though sinners may be freed paradoxically as servants. For when they bind themselves to the service of the Savior-Creator God they are most free. They come to know, then, the truth of Paul's testimony, that the whole creation is groaning in travail until now, awaiting the glorious revelation of the sons of God (Romans 8:18-23).

Therefore, in short, Hamerton-Kelly stresses that the generative principle of the world is violence, but the *telos*, the *eschaton*, the end toward which it moves is the *Logos*, the gathering together in salvific unity and a community of the acknowledgment of guilt and repentance, of joy and hope in divine forgiveness. A community, in short, of those formerly lost to the dead ends of division and violence. So then, is violence in the primordial sense good? Only insofar as it is directed toward its end, the (re)creation of the world that is its eschatological reality in the Mind of God. Two biblical texts come to mind as characterizations of Hamerton-Kelly's perspective. One is where Joseph reassures his brothers, who feared he would have them executed because they had sold him into slavery: "Even though you meant evil against me, God meant it for good, so that now many people might live." (Genesis 50:20). The other is the Apostle Paul's exhortation to the

Philippians: “Have this mind among you that was in Christ Jesus.....”
(Philippians 2:5).

The issues involved in Hamerton-Kelly’s anthropology and theology bear serious import. The question of good and bad mimesis is one of the “founding” topics for the mimetic theory.³ It is essential, in other words, for members of COV&R to discern what they think can be held and what must remain very questionable, within a context of free thought and discussion, as they take the Colloquium into the future. Here are a few of my thoughts as a contribution to that. They are given under the rubrics of the following questions. (1) Is Hamerton-Kelly’s theological perspective a kind of Gnosticism? (2) Does his position come perilously close to the satanic theodicy about which Jean-Pierre Dupuy warns us? (3) Can human beings act as agents to affect and change the course of conflict and violence? (4) Has Christianity actually influenced the direction of Western culture, not only toward apocalyptic disaster but also toward transformation for the betterment of personal and social life?

On the question as to whether he has slipped into a kind of Gnosticism, Hamerton-Kelly’s position that the world is generated and governed by *polemos*, war, battle—generally considered, by violence—does not mean that there is nothing good in all the aspects of human life. He does not denigrate physicality and matter as such, as the ancient

³ Cesáreo Bandera says, “It is not just one topic among many. In my view, it was at the beginning—and apparently still is today—one of the two fundamental (founding) topics. The other one being the historical function and the Christian meaning of sacrifice....” (From an e-mail message of December 3, 2009.)

Gnostics did, and he points to gatherings of the church as communities of hope to the extent that they attend to Scripture and the Eucharist. There will be more below about life in the world, when we turn to the third and fourth questions.

But what about the good creation as an eschatological reality in the mind of God? If the creation is not actually good from the beginning, and if some other power—violence as “father” or source of all things—has brought about everything we call “world,” isn’t that a version of the Gnostic myth of the world created by an evil god? Orthodox thought in the Christian tradition, Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox, has in general held that prior to the present sinful course of human history there was an actual primordial situation, however transitory, in which human existence before God was good and undistorted by deceit and violence. Supporting this position there is a kind of principle permeating theological reflection stemming from the Bible, and in particular from the Incarnation, which favors the concreteness of the signs, blessings, and judgment of God in space, time, matter, and human history.

Raymund Schwager grappled with this as he investigated and sought to conceptualize the relation of “original sin” and evolutionary theory. This is especially clear in chapter 3 of *Banished from Eden*, in the discussion of “The Historical-Symbolic Primordial Scene of Sin.”⁴ There he first compares and contrasts five instances of the Old Testament version of primordial sin in Genesis 2-3 with Gospel accounts of Jesus. From a

⁴ Raymund Schwager, *Banished from Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation*, tr. James Williams (Gracewing and Inigo: Leominster and New Malden, 2006), 88-97.

Christian perspective one must begin with Jesus in the New Testament Gospels. Schwager seems to imply that in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection the primordial predicament of man is recapitulated and transformed into a new mode of being. Then Schwager presents a "thought experiment," offering three variants of the primordial scene in which the new consciousness of freedom and transcendent reality emerging with hominization becomes perverted in experiences revolving around sexual union, common feeding, and hunting or war between rival groups.

Schwager's pioneering work in this area thus seeks to be faithful to the traditional Christian creed of a good creation and a fall into sin while communicating this in a manner intelligible to modern canons of knowledge.⁵ He calls these reflections "historical-symbolic," by which he means they are not historical in a strict sense, although they represent the reality of actual human experience. He calls them possible reconstructions of primal human decisions that "were not made by means of rational considerations, but between the feeling of a call and a shrinking back from it."⁶ He says further that "the reconstructed primordial scene should not be understood as a historicizing representation."⁷

⁵ Which logically implies that modern culture is not totally depraved and violent, or we could communicate nothing of a transcendent reality. Moreover, there is the factor of Christianity's own positive deposit in the culture of modernity.

⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁷ Ibid., 97.

So Schwager's theology of original sin turns out to be not too different from what Hamerton-Kelly proposes, particularly if the latter would accept that what happens *in the human mind and emotions* as the self stands between the experience of the transcendent and other selves is a series of real events. If human awareness and feeling (though not rational contemplation) can receive and turn away from what the Mind or Spirit of God imparts, which will come clearer to human understanding through a long process of dawning revelation, then the two positions can easily be reconciled. The goodness of creation and the knowledge of the freedom and love of the children of God are not absent from human experience and awareness, but in the early stages of hominization—and ever thereafter-- it is like a glimmering candle that is easily blown out in most individuals and communities.

The second question is whether Hamerton-Kelly's position is perilously close to the danger of the theodicy of which Jean-Pierre Dupuy has spoken: This is a theodicy that, in justifying the putative ways of God to man, actually camouflages and justifies evil. If we consider the book of Job, the biblical classic on theodicy, Job's Friends held to a kind of theodicy, a theodicy of retributive justice. Job, they insisted, must have committed some grave transgression for God to bring such misfortunes upon him. But even worse than the theodicy of the Friends is the theodicy of the prologue to the book of Job, where the Lord permits the Satan to afflict Job and his family with suffering and death simply as a test of Job's loyalty to the Lord. From the perspective of the prologue the test of Job is *anthropodicy*, a justification of God's human creatures as represented by Job. Whether God is the efficient

cause of evil or the final cause in a grand plan, isn't this to ascribe to God the worst kind of ends justifying the means? As it turns out in Job, the theophany of God in the whirlwind (Job 38-41), at least, does not seem to be concerned with justifying God. For there the Divine Voice moves beyond the usual questions of theodicy (and anthropodicy) to challenge Job to moral action in light of the ultimately mysterious reality of both God and world.

I have quoted a verse from one of the most important paradigmatic accounts of the emergence of divine revelation, Genesis 50:20, where Joseph tells his brothers, "Even though you meant evil against me, God meant it for good." This would seem to support the theodicy of the sacrificial detour in Dupuy's sense. However, we should note that the Bible does not narrate the ancestors and prophets as puppets in the course of a divinely manipulated history but *interpreters* in crucial moments. The verb usually translated "to mean" or "to intend," *hashav*, has a broad range of connotations, including "count, impute, reckon." For example, "Abram believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness (*wayahshevha lo tsedaqah*)" (Genesis 15:6). So, Joseph probably does not mean, "God caused these evil events, and you have simply had your role in a story with a good ending." Joseph, like his ancestors Abraham and Jacob, has been an interpreter all along. He interpreted his dreams as meaning that his parents and brothers would bow down to him. Where are we told that his

interpretation gives the meaning that God has predetermined?⁸ What we find both in Genesis 45 and Genesis 50 where he assures his brothers of God's gracious providence is that God has taken their evil intentions and "counted" or "reckoned" them as something that would be transformed into a blessing for Israel and others in the world.

Thus the biblical concept of revelation that begins to emerge in ancient Israel's historical experience is that God's providence includes human freedom. Evil does not originate with God, but with man in his perversion of freedom against the backdrop of transcendence.⁹

Therefore, from the position just sketched, the violence of human beings must be clearly distinguished from the reality of God if one is to stay within the stream of biblical faith--even though violence appears to be inevitable in human existence. A theological or philosophical position

⁸ He later correctly predicts the fate of fellow prisoners and the years of plenty and famine in Egypt. He says in both instances that dream interpretations come from God (Genesis 40:8; 41:16), but it is interesting that no such assurance is stated in Genesis 37. On the creative interpretation of events by protagonists in the biblical narratives, note Abraham's interpretation in Genesis 22 that allows him to substitute a ram for Isaac, as explicated by Sandor Goodhart in "Reading the Ram: Abraham, Isaac, and the Text of Sacrifice," *BCOV&R* 5 (October 1993), 8-9 (abstract of paper). See also Jacob in Genesis 32:23-31: He wrestles at night with a *man*, who tells him that he has "struggled with *God and man* and has prevailed, but Jacob names that place Peniel (Face of God), saying, "I have seen *God* face to face, yet my life has been spared." Jacob *understands* this mysterious antagonist as communicating something to him ("you have wrestled with God and human beings, and you have prevailed") and he *interprets* the experience ("I have seen the face of God, yet my life has been spared."). Immediately thereafter when he encounters his brother Esau, of whom he was mortally afraid, he says to Esau, "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God."

⁹ See Schwager's unraveling of emerging revelation in which violence does not originate with God but with the desires and deeds of human beings. *Must There Be Scapegoats*, 53-71.

that justifies violence as part of the divine plan, or necessary to the course of history, stands in opposition to a Jewish or Christian understanding of human existence. Even if Heidegger was right in explicating the logos of Heraclitus as the generative source of the world, which is the archaic sacred in its various guises, can the believer accept that it completely and utterly dominates the world as we know it in the historical existence of human beings? The Logos of Heidegger is not the Christian Logos, as Girard has emphasized over and over again.

In a conversation on September 29, 2009, I read to Girard the paragraph from my discussion of the Antwerp conference on his engagement with Heidegger's thought in chapter four of the history of COV&R. Its main point is that Heidegger rightly distinguishes the logos of Heraclitus and the logos of the Gospel of John, but Girard cannot accept Heidegger's attempt to validate the identification of violence (*polemos*) as the ultimate logos of the world because he understands the world as the creation of the God who is love, not violence. He commented that I had gone "a little too far" in that statement. He was concerned that I had played down his position on the mimetic reciprocity of human beings, which inevitably results in violence. He went on to say that Heidegger was right about the way in which the world of culture and politics operates. The Christian Logos, however, is completely different from the logos of mimetic violence.

He did not completely express it in that conversation, but I think his reservation about my statement is pointedly expressed in chapter two of *Battling to the End*. There, in his conversation with Benoit

Chantre about Clausewitz and Hegel, he confesses that that in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* he was wrong in thinking that he could stand above the fray of history and describe an “essential Christianity,” presumably stemming from Christ and the original Christian revelation, that existed over against a sacrificial “historical Christianity.” That distinction was at the basis of his criticism of the Epistle to the Hebrews. He goes on to say that archaic sacrifice and Christian sacrifice are “all sacrifice. We are immersed in mimetism and have to find a way around the pitfalls of our desire, which is always desire for what the other possesses...We are forced to remain at the heart of history and to act at the heart of violence because we are always gaining a better understanding of its mechanisms. Will we ever be able to elude them? I doubt it.”¹⁰ However, his own understanding, as expressed in numerous statements, indicates the possibility of love to which the mimetic structure of our existence is open. He must, short of complete inconsistency in his thought, conceive at least of a provisional and incomplete “outmaneuvering” of mimeticism and the mechanisms of violence, as many of his statements attest. However, in the last decade or so he has reflected on the work of Carl von Clausewitz and has focused more and more on apocalypse and the extremes to which humans can go in escalating rivalry, conflict, and violence. His perspective is actually consistent with a form of traditional Christian eschatology, which holds that salvation and the overcoming of evil has

¹⁰ *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoit Chantre*, tr. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 35.

occurred already in principle, but the coming of the reign of God and the consummation of all things is yet to occur.¹¹

In relation to Girard's understanding that we are all entangled in mimetism, from a New Testament perspective it should be noted that the prologue to the Gospel of John reads as though the Logos of the Christian tradition is not restricted to the possession of Christian communities. It is the life that "was the light of the human race" (John 1:4). It is "the true light enlightening everyone coming into the world" (John 1:9). Some translators prefer to render the Greek as "the true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world," but it makes no difference with regard to my point. John is saying that every person bears the light of the Divine Logos, even if darkened by sin. Now of course the Johannine witness to the Logos is quite different from the anthropological analysis of the human condition that Girard accomplishes in the mimetic theory. Nonetheless, his venture, the wager that the mimetic theory entails, is that the truth of biblical revelation is

¹¹ A study that puts Girard's thought in an even more pessimistic light, and that offers a kind of support to Hamerton-Kelly's position from the standpoint of Girard's thinking, is a brilliant review essay by Stephen Gardner, "René Girard's Apocalyptic Critique of Historical Reason: Limiting Politics to Make Room for Faith" (tentative title), which will be published in *Society: Journal of the Social Sciences*. I received a copy of the draft too late to integrate it into this paper before it is posted on the conference website, but I will include a discussion of it in the history. Gardner states that for Girard modernity is precisely an internal rivalry of the archaic and the modern. He points out that Girard sees Islam as fundamentally a reassertion of archaic religiosity, so it cannot be considered "Abrahamic." Gardner also notes that although Girard speaks of a "good mimesis," there seems to be no evidence that he acknowledges a good "mimetic desire." On the polarity of the archaic and the modern in modern Western culture, cf. the related article of Cesáreo Bandera, "Separating the Human from the Divine," *Contagion* 1 (1994), 73-90.

ultimately of a piece with universal truth, including scientific truth. This is supported by the great Johannine legacy that witnesses to the light of the Divine Word that is a possibility for every human being from creation itself.

This question of theodicy overlaps the third question, that of human initiative in all the realms of history and social life. Do we have the ability to take the initiative to act against unjust persecution and violence?¹² Even if theologians cannot completely unravel the problem of human agency in relation to God, still the question is whether human beings can change anything in the sphere of historical existence. Are we real actors or players, not completely scripted but possessing a gift that we call “freedom of the will,” however limited it may be? This would certainly hold for Judaism. As Rabbi Akiba said, “All is foreseen, but freedom of choice is given.”¹³ As for Christianity, Girard once told me, “The fact that there is a new type of individual in Christianity is the most important thing in the world. The Christian person is new and would have been viewed by traditional cultures as subversive.”¹⁴ This new type of person would certainly experience a dimension of freedom and an impulse to take initiative in the events of her life, even if the Christian

¹² In response to my description of Hamerton-Kelly’s understanding of mimesis, Cesáreo Bandera wrote to me in an e-mail message of December 3, 2009: “I find this description of mimetic desire a little too automatic, too ‘physiological,’ so to speak. [It] is also involved in the development of self-awareness...Human freedom must still work through the mimetic entanglements. It cannot avoid them, nor do they automatically eliminate [this freedom].”

¹³ Mishnah Aboth (Sayings of the Fathers), 3:16.

¹⁴ From the interview, “The Anthropology of the Cross,” in *The Girard Reader*, 279.

life proceeds within the context of tension between freedom and predestination.

To my mind the model of this new person is engraved in Paul's declaration, "I have been crucified with Christ.; I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). I have translated his statement as literally as possible.¹⁵ This means that the I, the ego-subject that formerly drove his existence, is no longer the true subject, the ultimate agent of his life. However, this does not mean that the former human subject is completely dead and does not exist at all. For he goes on to say, "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20). Paul is saying that the Christ who possesses him does not do away with his fleshly—natural, human, historical—existence. Paul the man is one who acts, an agent, whose ultimate identity is eschatological. In other words, the Christian is both "I, (yet) no longer I," a being of two ages, this age and the age to come; he is entirely human, but at the same time belongs to God through Christ. The full freedom of the children of God is yet to be revealed according to Paul; yet in Christ there is in the present age a certain freedom for love and service. He continually exhorts those in the various churches to realize their proper freedom. For example, he exhorts the Galatians not to use their freedom as an opportunity to fulfill sinful desires, but as the power through love to serve one another. His gospel logic is simple: If you are [really] led by the Spirit, then walk by the Spirit. (See Galatians 5:13-18.) So the Christian person lives in the

¹⁵ The Greek is *Christo sunestauromai; zo de ouketi ego, ze de en emoi Christos.*

tension of indicative and imperative: You have been redeemed, so live your redemption. There is a sphere of positive mimesis.

Hamerton-Kelly would make this rejoinder to that last sentence: “Of course there is a sphere of positive mimesis, it is a reality in the context of *imitatio Christi* of which Paul speaks in his letters. But that is an eschatological reality within the church, which itself is the eschatological assembly, the Body of Christ.”¹⁶ If we compare Hamerton-Kelly’s understanding with Girard’s, it looks as though there is a slight but significant difference between them. In *Evolution and Conversion* Girard says to Benoit Chantre, “I reject your formulation [that human beings cannot resist forms of violence]. Desire is always mimetic, but some human beings resist desire and being carried away by mimetic violence.”¹⁷ He goes on to say that when Jesus speaks of the inevitability of scandal (Matthew 18:7-8), he was referring to communities, many people living in proximity and interacting. To the question as to whether our only freedom lies in imitating Jesus, he responds, “Or to imitate someone like Jesus.”¹⁸ He cites Paul, who tells the Corinthians, “I urge you to imitate me” (1 Corinthians 4:16). Paul imitates Jesus, who imitates God the Father. The saints are links in this chain of “good imitation.”¹⁹ It is not clear, however, whether Girard

¹⁶ His brief statement during the panel discussion of Girard’s *Achever Clausewitz* in Riverside is available in an audio-video selection at www.imitatio.org/mimetic-theory-audio-selections/-selections-from-covr-conference-2008-html.

¹⁷ *Evolution and Conversion*, 222.

¹⁸ Loc. cit.

¹⁹ Loc. cit.

would affirm the possibility that “someone like Jesus” could exist outside of this Christian chain of non-rivalrous imitation. However that may be, I think that that many of us know, or know of, persons who seem to be “like Jesus” or saintly in their own right, even though they do not avow Christian faith or who even belong to other traditions. I would hold, in any case, that even from a firmly orthodox Christian position one should not deny what one cannot know (whether there are those outside the Jesus tradition who practice a salvific imitation of God). As one of my wise theological professors once said to his class, “In things of the spirit we are generally right in what we affirm and wrong in what we deny.”

So on the question of positive mimesis, Girard appears to stand between Hamerton-Kelly’s position and that of those who wish to focus on it as at the center of our engagement with the mimetic theory. However, the position he articulates in *Battling to the End* seems to be much more pessimistic about the effect of positive mimesis in the world of violence and retribution. To discuss that brilliant and complex book here would overstep the limits of this paper, but it will be taken up in the history of COV&R.

The question of human freedom and positive mimesis leads into the fourth and final question. Has Christianity actually influenced the direction of Western culture, not only toward apocalyptic disaster but also toward transformation for the betterment of personal and social life? When I name Christianity here I have in mind the total tradition that carries with it basic aspects of its Jewish origins, in spite of the

frequent anti-Semitism of Christian institutions and attitudes, which forms a subject in its own right. Are there people who give of themselves on behalf of others even apart from any connection with the Christian message or Christian churches? Is Girard right that the biblical faith in general and the Christian gospel in particular bear a new knowledge that affects human life wherever they have been taught, proclaimed, or acted upon? Has Christian knowledge—that is, the wisdom revealed in the Crucified and Risen One—truly entered human awareness and brought about significant developments, e.g., concern for the poor and the unjustly persecuted, the need for hospitals open to all, and the end of witch trials and the beginning of science? And does Girard still stand by the pronouncement that he made at the end of *The Scapegoat*?

“In future, all violence will reveal what Christ’s Passion revealed, the foolish genesis of bloodstained idols and the false gods of religion, politics, and ideologies. The murderers remain convinced of the worthiness of their sacrifices. They, too, know not what they do and we must forgive them. The time has come for us to forgive one another. If we wait any longer there will not be time enough.”²⁰

This is a visionary pronouncement, one anticipating a possible great turning point in history, if not the eschaton itself and the realization of the kingdom of God. Meanwhile, are there not people who love one another and practice forgiveness of others in secular settings? To be

²⁰ *The Scapegoat*, 212.

sure, these are individuals, families, groups, and communities here and there who do not and cannot turn the historical tide of the violence borne by the mimetic forces of economy, politics, and war. Nonetheless, given the mimetic theory, which is that grand thing of which we have hold, or rather which has hold of us, is it not a mistake to restrict love or positive mimesis to the sphere of the overt, explicit imitation of Christ?

In short, I view what I have set forth here as a tribute to what René Girard has conceived and brought to the light of day in the mimetic theory and to Robert Hamerton-Kelly's acuity, clarity, and forthrightness about the link of mimesis and violence, which performs a great service for us. But it does so only if we do not reject it outright or accept it without question. (And I think few members and friends of COV&R would do the latter.) We should rather commit ourselves to a full, honest discussion of it, even a strenuous debate if necessary.

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