

## **Contagion in the Pentecostal/Charismatic Movements: A Good Mimesis?**

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### **I. REVIVAL FIRE**

The moment the crowd has waited for has come! For two hours 150 men, women, and children have waited for the evening's climax. Earlier, during the first hour, the assembly had enthusiastically sung along with and danced to the music of the host worship band while waving bright-colored flags, jumping and clapping to the fast starter tunes, later slowly swaying or prostrating themselves during the slow intimate songs. The guest evangelist had next climbed the platform to give the evening message, starting first with light banter that loosened the people up to likeableness toward him. Like an airplane pilot in new territory circling for a landing strip, his preaching rambled until it found the pulse of the people. As such, the message was anecdotal, one story after another, salted and peppered with scripture verses, and vigorously presented by pacing the aisles and gesticulating with body and face.

All this was preliminary. Minds, bodies, and emotions take preparation and time to put off the cares and trials of the day, to cast off self-consciousness and timidity, to open up in trustfulness and expectancy to the ministering leadership, that is, to be kindled to receptivity to The Holy Spirit. As the time ripened, the evangelist transitioned his message that announced that time for personal ministry was soon to commence. Like a whiff of wind fanning across a field of wheat, the crowd began to stir... as a swarm tensing to storm the stage.

The host minister quickly stands up to appeal to the throng for patience and order. "Everyone will have an opportunity for ministry. Please line up in a column down the center aisle, and ushers will direct you to a place to stand when space opens up. Please folks, God is moving, so let's be patient with one another."

Some in the crowd, feverish for ministry, scarcely hear these words. The ushers work fast, forcefully to maintain space in the first row stretching from right to left along a yellow line taped to the carpet. Other ushers clear out the first five rows of padded chairs, quickly stacking them along the corners of the far walls. The few people still sitting move further back. Purses, sweaters, and Bibles left on the chairs are put on remaining seats. The evangelist begins to work the line, at first rapidly, laying his hands on the heads of the people. Soon people are falling down, “slain” in The Spirit. A few go down hard, thrashing. Chairs should not be in the way. Hard as they try, the ushers cannot keep the people on the ministering row, “the line,” spaced apart. The ushers now become “catchers.” As folks fall down under the sway of The Spirit, the beefy catchers try to keep them from falling on top of one another by positioning them as they go down.

The catchers are sober, vigilant to their task, eyes on the evangelist as he moves up and down the line laying on hands. The catchers are not caught up in the crowd contagion...yet. They will receive their ministry after the others are done, and may anticipate choice morsels of verbal prophetic impartation as they are ministered to.

Not everyone is standing. Some sit in chairs near the back waiting their turn, meanwhile watching the show in front. The evangelist is now standing in front of a quiet, delicate, middle-aged woman. He lays hands on her forehead gently, prays, then proffers a word of knowledge that her anxiety concerning her family is known by God who has a triumph for her soon to come. Only those close by can hear, but all those watching can see the lady nod her head in assent, begin a shimmer in her torso then convulse violently to collapse in a heap. This time the catchers standing right behind her missed.

But most in the line are caught to be laid more or less gently on the floor. Two or three catchers line up behind the big fellows, the 250-pounders who could seemingly crush with a hard fall their neighbors packed close by on the floor. The floor is strewn with prone bodies as parallel as the ushers can manage. Female ushers scurry about draping a linen cloth over each slain female. These ushers rush faster when a sister with a short skirt or a teen with a bare midriff goes down. The congregants are dressed along a spectrum from

coat and tie to shorts and sandals. However, each female, even those well covered in their own dress, receive a cloth linen, a sign of the church's respect for modesty.

To an uninformed visitor, the dignity of those on the floor might be questioned. Most rest quietly, peacefully, even prayerfully, "soaking" its called, like luxuriating in a warm bubble bath. Several twist and squirm on the floor. One or two have fallen in a cocked body position, an arm sticking straight up in the air, held motionless perhaps for twenty minutes, an amazing length of time if one was sober.

Sobriety. Inebriation. In the new wine of The Holy Spirit some become visibly drunk. "Plastered, snockered, roaring drunk," the evangelist chortles. Someone begins to giggle, then cackle. Another person side-by snickers, then belly laughs, then turns over on his stomach roaring in laughter, tears streaming down his face. An obese woman begins a hee-haw horse laughter, bicycling her legs as she lies on her back. The cloth linen covering her dress flies off to overexpose her legs, while a nervous lady usher flits about to no avail to drape the modesty linen. Holy laughter it's called, and the contagion sweeps through several people in the close vicinity. One of them stumbles up to his feet, takes two staggering steps, falls in a heap. His blood alcohol level would be 0.00% but he behaves like it is 0.25%.

Meanwhile nearby a woman quietly is lying prone, seemingly asleep. She has a tumor, is fearful of death. Next to her two sisters (in The Lord) are praying over her, hugging her, wiping her brow. The raucous laughter a few feet away seems out of place. A bit later, the woman arouses, and then she too gets caught up in the laughter contagion. She laughs so hard tears come to her eyes. Some say laughter is the best medicine. Tonight was the first time she has laughed in months.

I know this church. Indeed I know it very well. You see, I am a member of this church. Tonight as with many nights I have participated in the service. Earlier in the evening I played bass guitar in the worship band. During the hands-on ministering I'd been one of the catchers.

I pause for a moment to reflect on the contagion that is now beginning to ebb. I look around at the people, most of them now up on their feet, some engaged in friendly chatter in a corner, others still praying, others still looking moonstruck. Peace. Contentment. Unity. The contagion has peaked in a catharsis of cleansing and inner healing. The people are strengthened, unity is bolstered, and zeal for God is quickened. I am happy for them.

With the evening winding down some of the catchers and ushers line up to be ministered to. Their bodies too begin to sway under the moving of the Wind, and some of them are slain. I myself do not go up for the laying on of hands. It won't work for me anymore.

## **II. Whither Fanaticism or Good Mimesis?**

The Charismatic/Pentecostal/Third Wave movements are numerically the most popular Christian expression sweeping the face of the Earth at the present time. Adherents are distinct from other Christian groupings by their practice in a literal interpretation of the gifts of The Holy Spirit as listed in 1 Corinthians 12, including speaking in tongues, inspirational verbal prophesying, and seeking of miracles. Gatherings often are emotionally charged, participatory, and involve considerable physical expression. While most of the groups within these movements hold to the basic orthodox tenets of traditional Christian faith, generally speaking the more intellectual pursuit of careful theology is not a strong suit.

The history of Christianity is full of movements, many of which like a shooting star flare up quickly only to flame out into obscurity. The Charismatic/Pentecostal/Third Wave movements (Renewalists)<sup>1</sup> are yet to be taken seriously by many in the more traditional established churches some of who view “holy rollers” as an embarrassment to the public perception of Christianity. The clearly established fact is that this present movement phenomenon, yet scarcely one hundred years old, is undergoing rapid expansion in many

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<sup>1</sup> Renewalist as in the Holy Spirit Renewal movement is an overarching term for Charismatic/Pentecostal/Third Wave.

Third World countries along with significant growth in Europe and North America. Meanwhile, the established traditional churches are facing decline in many quarters.<sup>2</sup>

Classic Pentecostalism derives from a Wesleyan holiness revival movement beginning in 1901, and includes numerous denominations such as the 57 million member Assemblies of God and the 780,000 member Yoido Full Gospel megachurch in South Korea. The Charismatic movement began during the 1960s within and influencing existing established churches, including Catholic, Orthodox, and most Protestant denominations. While many charismatic Christians continue within their traditional churches, others, sometimes termed neo-Charismatics, have formed their own congregations and alliances or Third Wave. Renewalist Christians worldwide number about 500 million, or one in four Christians, thus second only to Roman Catholicism numerically.<sup>3</sup> About 2/3 are in Asia, South America, and sub-Sahara Africa. Movement growth rates globally are in the 10% range. According to the Barna Group, in the United States one in four Protestant churches is charismatic, four in ten nondenominational churches are charismatic, and 22% of Catholics fit within the definitional framework of charismatic. 16% of USA white Protestant congregations are Pentecostal, compared to 65% of the Protestant churches dominated by African-Americans.<sup>4</sup> As should be expected, practices, expressions, and intensities within the Renewalist spectrum vary widely.<sup>5</sup>

The central question, one that Jesus presumably might ask this movement, is this: “Are lives being changed toward Kingdom of God values? Are good fruits being borne? Are adherents growing in love, remaining steadfast, maturing in the faith? Is there unity among the believers?”

In light of the emotionally charged nature of many of the gatherings that characterize this overarching movement, a question begs forth from the Girardian mimetic model, namely,

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the Presbyterian churches in Korea and other Asian countries that are growing most rapidly are charismatic.

<sup>3</sup> The 120 million Charismatics within the Roman Catholic Church do not identify themselves separately.

<sup>4</sup> “Is American Christianity Turning Charismatic?” Barna Group. January 7, 2008.

<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/18-congregations/52-is-american-christianity-turning-charismatic>

<sup>5</sup> The scene at my church I describe earlier might be considered hyper-charismatic, and would not reflect all Pentecostal/Charismatic groups (indeed, some would be highly critical of its “excess”).

“Does the crowd contagion in these meetings influence the participants for good? That is, can this be a good contagion, or more broadly, a good mimesis that results in social harmony without scapegoating violence?”

Augustine’s classic line from his *Confessions* on the innate hunger for God that “the heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee” succinctly defines “good mimesis.” Rene Girard writes “mimetic desire is also the desire for God.”<sup>6</sup>

“[Christ] offers not the slightest hold to any form of rivalry or mimetic interference. There is no acquisitive desire in him. As a consequence, any will that is really turned toward Jesus will not meet with the slightest of obstacles. His yoke is easy and his burden is light. With him, we run no risk of getting caught up in the evil opposition between doubles.

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 in the way that children imitate—of being transformed into a fascinating rival.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>i</sup>Gil Bailie emphasizes that the distinctiveness of Jesus was his God-centeredness. “The temptation to emulate another’s desire—the devil’s—was unable to lure him away from his desire to imitate the God of powerless love in rapport with Whom he lived and moved and had his incomparable Being.”<sup>8</sup>

The Gospel illuminates the moral dilemma posed by Paul, who grieves that “though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not: the good thing I want to do, I never do; the evil thing which I do not want—that is what I do” (Romans 7:18,19). Paul follows by describing his salvation as a rescue by Jesus who gives forth a new law of the Spirit to walk no longer in self-condemnation but in a spirit of adoption as children of God (Romans 7:24; 8:14-17). The heart mimetically imprisoned by the world spirit cannot free

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<sup>6</sup> “Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with Rene Girard” (*Religion and Literature* 25 no. 2 (1993), pp. 9-33 as quoted in *The Girard Reader*, James E. Williams, ed., (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Rene Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 430.

<sup>8</sup> Gil Bailie. *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1995), p. 207. Cf. Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-12.

itself even as it acknowledges its imprisonment; only the fully God-centered One can pull the heart to its rest in God.

Jonathan Bonk illustrates Paul's dilemma and deliverance powerfully using two parallel Greek myths whose heroes, Odysseus and Jason, encounter the seductive yet deadly Sirens.

Odysseus, having heard of the deadly but irresistibly appealing call of the Sirens, was determined to experience the pull without succumbing to its effects. Accordingly, he had himself bound to the mast of his ship, and the ears of his oarsmen plugged with beeswax, after issuing firm instructions that he was not under any circumstances to be released until the ship had sailed well past the island inhabited by the Sirens. As the boat approached the island, Odysseus began to hear the song of the Sirens, gradually, inexorably, succumbing to its spell until at last he writhed and struggled in his bonds, begging his crew to let him heed the deadly song, and cursing them for ignoring his frenzied appeals. As the boat drew past the island, and the voices of the Sirens faded into silence, Odysseus was able to assert self-control once again, and reflected on his desire to rush to what must have been certain death. His method of resistance illustrates the way of bonds and restrictions. It is not pleasant, but it can be effective in saving us from our own desires.

Jason and his Argonauts faced a similar peril, as—approaching the island whose shores were lined with the bleaching bones of thousands of sailors who had been unable to resist the appeal of the Sirens—they began to lose the will to resist the Siren's deadly pull. Fortunately, as the story goes, Princess Medea had the presence of mind to urge Orpheus (Greek god of music) to counter the Siren's song with the music of the gods. This he did so effectively, accompanying himself on his lyre, that the music of heaven drowned out the sound of the Sirens, thus neutralizing its mesmerizing effects, and saving the lives of all on board.<sup>9</sup>

The Sirens represent the irresistible seductive pull of the worldly mimetic contagion to which multitudes meet shipwreck and death. Without the valence of religion and derivative culture to counter the gravitational pull of frenzied mimetism, people in deteriorating cultures hurl toward barbarism. This is now the plight of Western culture.

Odysseus chaining himself to the ship's mast represents religio-cultural systems of law and morals whose prohibitions mimetically inflame and quench desire's work in never

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan J. Bonk. *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 131-132.

ending cycle, or as Paul laments, “In my inmost self I dearly love God’s law, but I see that acting on my body there is a different law which battles against the law in my mind.”

Chaining themselves to the ship mast of religion and culture with its rituals and prohibitions, devotees and their religious societies hope to avoid shipwreck and calamity in times of crisis.<sup>10</sup>

Jason and the Argonauts have their sails set for shipwreck on the shores of the Sirens. Nothing within their own strength of will and mind will prevent their impending calamity. From outside another music calls to them, sweeter and more compelling. The Siren song is drowned out, and the Argonauts avoid destruction. In an analogous way The Holy Spirit sings forth the music of Christ through the mouths and hands of his witnesses into the hearts of people and nations. Those that hear the music and dance to its tune resist the Siren call, are not shipwrecked, indeed sail to calm harbors and pleasant pastures (Matthew 7:24-27; Psalm 23:4).

The primary function of Christian worship is to enter into the music and dance of The Spirit, to have all eyes, individually and corporately, fixed upon the Christ who was crucified and is arisen, and ultimately to receive the embrace and kiss of God as beloved sons and daughters.<sup>11</sup> Whether the ecstatic style of charismatics or the incense and candles of high liturgical expressions, Christian worship serves to draw mimetic hearts from others to The Other.

A great temptation for church people is that in doing good deeds for others such as helping the poor, visiting the sick, advocating for social justice, and in living upright moral lives,

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<sup>10</sup> The word “religion” etymologically stems from the Latin *religare*, where *ligare* means “to tie or bind” (think of ligament) and *re* means “again.”

<sup>11</sup> “The commonest word for worship, (*proskue*), occurring 66 times in the New Testament (the other six words are used only once each), means ‘I come towards to kiss.’ This is the language of intimacy and love.” David Watson. *Called and Committed: World-Changing Discipleship*. (Wheaton, IL: David Shaw Publishers, 1982), p. 73.

they lose sight of the source and center of love. They fail to tap into the well of Life, the Living God.<sup>12</sup>

“What is the greatest commandment of God,” asked a Pharisee to Jesus, who replied to him:

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with your entire mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39)

Commenting on this passage, Gil Bailie notes:

The Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel did not say that the greatest commandment was to *believe* in God and love humanity. He did not say that we should be nice to one another because that’s the way God would like us to behave. He said the first and most essential thing is to *love* God with a paramount love.<sup>13</sup>

Bailie further notes that the modern illusion of human progress is predicated on the notion that the first commandment can be dispensed with in favor of a stand-alone second commandment to love and serve humanity. The transcendent One who has come into the world to turn our desires away from one another to the Father of Love, is deemed irrelevant and outmoded. With the turned page still fresh-stained from the bloodiest century in history, the grim reaper accelerates his pace in a world ricocheting in its self-enclosed walls of mimetic passion.

When assembled believers enter into worship with all their hearts, souls, and minds, a tangible presence of God’s Spirit permeates their midst. To say this is not hyperbole or spiritual rhetoric. Humans are released from their prisons of mimetic passions toward one another to the mimetic passion for God. This God lances the boils of the worshippers’ interpersonal rivalries, envies, and resentments through a penetrating love that sweeps the people in its contagion. In such worship there is unity and peace.

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<sup>12</sup> A hypothesis explored at the end of this paper is that mimetically low-charged churches tend to focus on good deeds to others. Lacking God-focus, their mimetism remains stuck on other people resulting in either spiritual impotency and resultant membership decline or else *resentiment* and *skandalon*.

<sup>13</sup> Bailie. *Violence Unveiled*. p. 272.

### III. Are Chains Broken?

A question arises at this point: Are the phenomena associated with ecstatic worship services of supernatural origin, as claimed by the practitioners, or are these phenomena purely psychological responses manipulated unconsciously through stagecraft? To probe this question, the interindividual psychology of Jean-Michel Oughourlian, a sometime collaborator with Rene Girard, will be brought to bear upon Charismatic/Pentecostalist ecstasy and life. The interindividual psychological model is that a person is constituted by his or her mimetic interactions with others.<sup>14</sup> Oughourlian's seminal work, *The Puppet of Desire*, along with his co-authorship with Guy Lefort and Rene Girard on *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, lends helpful insight into religious practice.

Deep in the heart of Charismatic theology is "The Baptism of The Holy Spirit" (Holy Ghost baptism to some of the more fundamentalist Pentecostalists), in which The Holy Spirit possesses the believer, typically imparting the gift of an unintelligible speech that is termed tongues (glossolalia). By being possessed by The Holy Spirit, the believer can henceforth maintain more surety in faith, wield more spiritual power to do God's work, and gain more victory in day-to-day living through the vicissitudes of life. Thus one of the tasks of a charismatic church is to prepare believers to yield themselves unreservedly to Spirit baptism and to maintain Spirit possession.

Preparation typically involves several closely intertwined components. Usual preliminaries involve long selections of repetitious music, often with heavy rhythm, verses limited to a few easily sung phrases, and accompanied by dance and body movement, a stark contrast with the more complex yet emotionally even-keeled music of more

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Michel Oughourlian. *The Puppet of Desire*. (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 1991), "It is mimesis, and that alone, that makes one human, that constitutes the self, and that makes possible one's entry into the sphere of language. This means that from the very start psychological actuality is to be found between individuals." p. 15. "It can be seen that every social holon (individual, family, clan, tribe, nation) is at once a coherent whole in relation to its constituent parts and part of a larger social entity." p. 17.

traditional congregations.<sup>15</sup> Music worship leaders use the power of their music and the expression of their voices and bodily gestures to induce the congregation into the desired level of suggestibility and receptivity. As the congregation “enters in” to this worship, a mimetic acquisitive affect takes hold, a contagion that compounds itself to modify the consciousness of the people.<sup>16</sup> During this preparation, the featured minister for the session has to meter his (or her) own participation, so that he can be lifted into the current of the flow in order to minister with effective magnetism yet not be utterly overwhelmed to the point of not being able to function.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Oughourlian notes he has found occult manuals to be the most direct in recognizing the importance of the enchanter in working himself up to a heightened state through the interindividual mimetic process such that he can have magnetic mimetic power to impose over others, to have “catchable” desire.<sup>18</sup> This parallels closely to that of charismatic preachers who combine their fascinating and heightened state of ecstasy with the prestige of their position. Differentiated from the rest of the congregants by the reputation of their special powers (anointing) to operate in the gifts of The Spirit, these ministers command the unhidden awe of the people. The people, believing in the special power of the minister, yield themselves unreservedly to the minister’s power.<sup>19</sup> Often guest ministers have more influence than the home pastor, probably due to the greater differentiation made possible by distance and novelty. Thus the preliminaries of worship and the magnetic *charisma* of the minister open the congregants to possession. But who is doing the possessing, God The Holy Spirit, or just a flesh and bones human?

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<sup>15</sup> One pastor of a more traditional congregation told me that although his congregation enjoyed contemporary praise music that he would not permit more than three repetitions of a particular song because it might induce a hypnotic trance effect upon the people. Such mantras, as he termed it, might open people up to unwholesome influences. On the other hand, the suggestibility this pastor seeks to thwart other congregations eagerly seek.

<sup>16</sup> See *Things Hidden*, p. 318, and *Puppet of Desire*, pp. 114-115 for the effect of music in fanning mimetic contagion.

<sup>17</sup> A Spirit-drunk preacher tends to be incoherent, meandering in his/her message, and has to somewhat sober up before being effective. The analogy with alcohol consumption is valid. On the other hand, a preacher who is not warmed up will not have the magnetism to sway the crowd.

<sup>18</sup> *Puppet of Desire*, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Speaking of sorcerers, Oughourlian says that “...the influence that the sorcerer can have over the members of his tribe does not come, let us be clear, from the simple manipulation of their representations. It comes from the *belief* they feel in the sorcerer’s power, a belief founded directly on the social power of imitation and on its importance in the life of each person. *Puppet of Desire*, p. 34.

On a recent evening at my rural charismatic church, a guest minister was working the congregation. The hour was getting late, well over three hours into the service, in part because it had taken some time for the minister to sober up from his own intoxication stemming from the music worship time. But in the last hour his cadence and surety had quickened. The minister was an older man, heavily built with a full-faced beard. He wore a motorcyclist's skullcap, and looked the caricature of the Harley-Davidson outlaw biker, drug pusher, and pimp he had been before his conversion many years before. Denzil was fully differentiated from the congregation in his background and style, yet had established rapport through his warm personality and conversational skill. The congregation was fascinated, mimetically susceptible to suggestion. Denzil now called out to invite people who had low self-esteem to raise their hands. This is the story of one of these, Sheila, a woman in her thirties, married with two children, pretty but significantly overweight, very active in the church, one often known to fall slain in the Spirit with strong convulsions, a person one might construe to have high mimetic suggestibility.<sup>20</sup>

Denzil: You say you have low self-esteem. What is it about yourself that you don't like about yourself?

Sheila: How I look. I'm fat. I don't like being fat. My thighs are big.

Denzil: ( tells a joke about sacrificial animal offerings in Leviticus 3:16 where the punch line is this). All the fat is the Lord's.

Sheila: (laughs nervously) Well, then God can have all my fat.

Denzil: (now serious) I want you to repeat after me, Sheila. "I am a treasure in a field." Sheila, don't turn away, look at me! Say, "I am a treasure in a field."

Sheila: (Stammers, cannot talk. Denzil repeats the soft command). I...I...am...a...ttr.  
(She stops. Denzil coaxes her, a soft command, asks her to look at him). I..I am...a

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<sup>20</sup> I witnessed this episode, however I have changed the persons' names.

tttreasure in a field. (She has spoken quietly, nervously, the words finally gushing after the word treasure).

Denzil: Yes, indeed you are a treasure! Now say, “I am a pearl of great price.” Look at me, Sheila. Say, “I am a pearl of great price.”

Sheila: (Stammers, again needs coaxing after several false starts to say) I am a pearl of great price.

Denzil: All right, Sheila, repeat this. “I am beautiful.” (Sheila begins to shiver, tremble. She looks down, her face grimaces, she is in torment, speechless). Sheila, look at me. Look at me. Say, “I am beautiful.” (Denzil commands, cajoles, coaxes, as Sheila makes a few false starts then stops, quavering, stammering, shaking her head no). I am beautiful, say it, Sheila! This is scripture. God says you are beautiful, now get in line with scripture. Say, “I am beautiful.”

Sheila: (finally) I...I...am bbbbeaaautiful.

Denzil: Good. Say it again.

Sheila: I..I..am bbbeautiful. (Denzil keeps having her say it again. Each time it is difficult for her but she gets it out a little bit easier and louder every time).

Denzil: (To some women nearby). Ladies, keep working with Sheila, have her keep saying “I am a treasure, I am a pearl of great price, I am beautiful.” She needs to get this reality down into her spirit, to believe this truth. (The women gather around Sheila and they work with her, while Denzil goes to another person to minister to.)

The following morning, a Sunday, time is given for people to share testimonies of God's work in their lives. Sheila comes up to the front, takes a microphone, looks the assembled people in their eyes, and calmly tells her story, one that few knew. Since she had been six years old in kindergarten, she had begun to hate herself, to loathe her appearance and feel inferior in intellect and personality. Over the years she had developed an eating disorder, bulimia, in which she would gorge on donuts and other sweets then force herself to vomit. She had been to two different psychiatrists without significant improvement. "Last night, she said, "God worked a miracle in my life. I now see myself as precious in the eyes of God. I can now say to myself, I am a treasure in a field, I am a pearl of great price, I am beautiful. I could never have said that before." Sheila has spoken all of this in a clear, firm, confident voice while looking the congregation in the eye. Her demeanor is one of inner peace. The contrast from the previous night to this morning is remarkable, a true transformation. The congregation would say Sheila was delivered from demonic oppression (their theology would deny the term "possession").<sup>21</sup>

It would be hard pressed to attribute Sheila's transformation to hypnosis. She did not undergo the classical hypnotic stages in which consciousness dissolves into catalepsy and non-resistant imitation. Rather, the deliverance fits a pattern of possession, in which the Deity represented through the personality of the minister overwhelmed her resistance to effect transformation in her personality. The mimetic contagion, then, was through the minister as a vector to raise her faith in God to a level of receptivity to break through the prison walls of her entrenched attitude to a new personality.

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<sup>21</sup> Typically, Charismatics/Pentecostals practice exorcism, however theological interpretations vary as to when someone might be possessed by a demon or oppressed by a demon.

#### IV. Manifestations of the Spirit?

Many of the newer charismatic churches identify themselves by their “flow,” in which a particular gifting and anointing of The Holy Spirit is working within certain loosely associated congregations. Usually a leader is recognized as the apostle of a particular flow along with certain pastors, prophets, teachers, and music worship leaders who function within the charisma of that flow. Crossover identification and support with other closely related flows is common. On the other hand, wariness exists between the more highly charged charismatic churches and traditional churches, a wariness that may not be so much theological difference as intuitive avoidance of mimetic contagion.<sup>22</sup> The degree and form of the gifts and manifestations of The Holy Spirit vary according to the flow. Let us examine several of these from the flow that is my congregation

(1) Most of my congregation has experienced speaking in “tongues.”<sup>23</sup> Usually the practice is either in private prayer or quietly under the breath. A visitor might attend several weeks of Sundays and not know the congregation universally speaks in tongues. A public utterance in tongues is not encouraged unless an interpretation can be made in English. However, when congregants knot up in close huddles to lay hands on the sick or for other intercessory prayer, tongues can often be heard in the background as people’s silent vocalizations break forth. Hearing others speak in tongues often ignites others to pray in tongues, indicating a mimetic contagion at hand. When a person comes forward to have hands laid on to receive the gift of tongues for the first time, typically others around that person begin speaking in tongues themselves, which induces a mimetic influence on that person.

My own initial experience many years ago was one of receptivity and release into possession by The Holy Spirit (and the representative minister). I was conscious of

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<sup>22</sup> The charismatic churches might say they do not want The Spirit quenched (1 Thess.5: 19), while the traditional churches express concern about proper order (1 Cor. 14:40). The atmosphere people create influences a congregation. Leadership seeks to control that atmosphere.

<sup>23</sup> Glossolalia is a technical term for tongues. Speech is uttered that sounds unintelligible, although some attest they can interpret through the spiritual gift of interpretation of tongues.

inarticulate sounds rolling out of my mouth, and could have ceased or reverted back to conscious speech. However, the tongues were cathartic. Thus a heightened state of suggestibility along with open confidence with the minister is prerequisite to speaking in tongues. However, it should be noted that some people have burst out in tongues spontaneously without knowledge that such a phenomenon even exists. Acclaimed evangelical Bible scholar Craig Keener recalls his conversion as a teen. Keener was raised in a non-churched family and was atheistic until some fundamental Baptists shared the gospel with him on the way home from high school. That night at home he experienced a profound conversion, and two days later appeared in a church where he met with a pastor to pray. Keener says that an overwhelming presence of God came upon him such that words could not properly form. He prayed aloud in tongues for hours interspersed with periods of raucous joyful laughter. Keener writes,

Having never read the Bible before that day or been exposed to speaking in tongues, I did not know “tongues” existed, nor did I hold preconceptions about what tongues should involve. God simply granted me the gift as an act of grace to a completely unchurched convert who desperately needed an overwhelming experience of his presence.<sup>24</sup>

Why tongues? Oughourlian posits that language is not what unites individuals but rather what distinguishes them. The conscious rather than the unconscious structures language.<sup>25</sup> A major shift in the locus of interdividual personality, such as during possession by another entity, could result in a failure of known language. This new language, tongues, would be evidence of the possession, or in theological language, evidence of the baptism of The Holy Spirit.

(2) Holy Laughter is somewhat related to tongues in that the vocal utterances are inarticulate and spontaneous. Once one person begins to break out into laughter, others nearby are highly likely to be likewise affected, especially if they are experienced in such laughter. Holy laughter can range from titters to belly heaving, tears flying, rolling-on-the-

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<sup>24</sup> Craig Keener. *Gift and Give: The Holy Spirit for Today*. (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 175-176.

<sup>25</sup> *Puppet of Desire*. p. 125. “The victim of a crisis in interdividual relations [may be deprived] of language.”

floor heehaws. To those accustomed to staid, dignified church services, holy laughter seems scandalous. Even congregants in churches who accept holy laughter can be disconcerted when a person is being prayed healing for a serious illness when over in another corner a contagion of laughter breaks forth.

Easter laughter is a tradition dating back at least to the fourth century during the time of Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa when to celebrate the resurrection Christians would gather together to tell jokes, such as the devil being fooled by the empty tomb. One could hypothesize that the tradition was a cultural memory of a time when early Christians burst out in spontaneous laughter. Irrespective, laughter for our congregation is deeply cathartically healing, even though it appears scandalous to the uninitiated.

(3) A person is slain in The Spirit when he or she falls in a trance to the floor. Typically people are invited to come forth to have hands laid on them with prayer. At other times someone may be called forth by name or face. Then again, certain persons are so receptive that they spontaneously fall down during a time when the ambience of a place is heightened and charged. Timing and setting seem to be important. This phenomenon is often the climax of a long meeting after extensive worship singing and dance and then a long message by the featured speaker. At times the crowd presses forward with such intensity that ushers need to be assertive to control spacing in what is known as the receiving line. The minister works up and down the receiving line “imparting” the laying on of hands, prophesying, praying, often with one or more assistants who might record his or her words or who might linger to pray with someone after the minister passes through. Ushers stand behind persons who are being prayed for to catch them if they fall. Catching has some controversy, since some believe that a person being slain in The Spirit will not be injured. Others hold that when people know there is someone to catch them that they are less inhibited to receive the impartation. The main concern, however, is with safety. If necessary, chairs are moved out of the way. The ushers catch people as they fall so that they do not hit the floor hard and do not land on someone else already on the floor. I have never known of anyone injured.

People of all ages are slain, from children to frail elderly folks. The slaying varies from person to person. Some begin to tremble, go into convulsions, sway, while others seem calm. Those who seem to quickly come into the sway of the ministering, who swiftly and deeply exhibit physical symptoms, are given the appellation ETR (easy to receive).<sup>26</sup>

When the evangelist approaches a person, he or she makes bodily contact, typically with a hand or hands on the recipient's head, but sometimes on the stomach or back (a female assistant will be available to place her hands on the torso of a female). An experienced evangelist will have the intuition to discern the level of excitability and suggestibility of recipients.<sup>27</sup> With an ETR, the evangelist might himself be calm and reserved in order to get through a prayer or "word of knowledge" (prophecy). With the given word completed to the ETR, the evangelist simply needs to accelerate and intensify his own level, and the ETR will quickly go down slain. The evangelist might include sudden unexpected gestures such as accelerated tempo and increased level in voice, or blowing onto the recipient's face, or hand thrusts into the chest or forehead or stomach. On the other hand, with other persons the evangelist might intensify himself to spark mimetic contagion into the recipient. If the recipient seems to respond, the evangelist will continue until the recipient falls or otherwise stands yet seems possessed by The Spirit as manifested by physical symptoms such as trembling. If a person does not seem to be progressing toward being slain, the minister will adjust himself to a quieter mode that seems to decompress the unfulfilled mimetic tension, and leave the person to quietly stand in a prayerful mode. Often times more experienced recipients who have not become mimetically charged take what is known as a "courtesy fall," which means that they consciously and intentionally fall without being overcome by The Spirit. A courtesy fall is good manners, does give the recipient bodily participation in the prayer, and greatly enhances the crowd contagion. Their catharsis is relatively weak compared to those who are mimetically charged.

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<sup>26</sup> Oughourlian notes that the more one experiences possession, the more apt he or she is to yield to possession. *Puppet of Desire*. p. 127.

<sup>27</sup> Oughourlian writes, "Heterosuggestion may be defined as that process in which one subject tries to induce another to imitate him, in which he seeks to impose himself on the other as a model, to exert influence on him. Active suggestion is therefore the mechanism by which a self-holon seeks to bend to his own profit the mimetic relation and the laws of attraction of universal mimesis. *Puppet of Desire*. p. 198.

When I was first slain in The Spirit, I along with several others were being prayed for in a small gathering of the local congregation. The atmosphere was calm although supercharged by the intensity of prayer. When the minister's wife laid her hands on my forehead I felt myself beginning to fall backward. I was relaxed, secure in God's peace, trusting of those around me, and thus released myself to the fall as if releasing myself to sleep. In hind reflection, I believe my own consciousness was given a rest. Drawing upon the work of Gilbert Rouget, Oughourlian notes that,

“Possession seizure” often does not just indicate that the divinity has suddenly taken possession of the individual, but signifies above all that the *individual has been ‘killed’ by the divinity*. Put another way, this ‘taking’ or seizure, which may be a random possession occurring outside the context of ritual or may mark the beginning of a ritualized possession trance, represents in both cases *the dissolution of the self of desire*. It signifies not the incarnation of the new identity, which will not actually take shape until the following stage, that of actual possession, but *the evacuation or eclipse of the ordinary identity*.<sup>28</sup> (italics mine)

People slain in The Spirit are at rest. They are in a state of possession, a state of trance in which the mind is alert and awakened but uninvolved with the surrounding events or one's own personal problems. Sprawled on their back or side, some lying still, others twitching or convulsing, perhaps one or two with an arm sticking up in the air in a locked position, the possessed lie in their trances soaking in the presence and personality of The Divinity. Some lay on the floor for a few minutes, then slowly rise onto their feet, while others might lie for an hour or more. Invariably the slain will report an experience of deep peace and inner healing, of being loved and accepted, of assurance, of unity, a lifting of anxiety, tension, and inner turmoil. The self is being reconstituted in the personality of The Divine. People leave the meeting rested and healed in their inner being, and with unity toward their fellow human beings.

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<sup>28</sup> *Puppet of Desire*. 107. Oughourlian's use of the term “possession seizure” to describe being killed by the divinity comes from Gilbert Rouget. *La Religion et la magie songhay*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), p. 74.

Oughourlian speaks of possession (adorcism) as a phenomenon common to varying religions and their cultures. His study aptly describes slaying in The Spirit as an occurrence of possession.

The outcome of all of this, the source or goal of all the vectors, is *catharsis*. When the ceremony or festivity is over, the social body is filled with a feeling of unity and reassurance, of rediscovered cohesion. The ritual has been fulfilled. The recreated disorder has been pleasantly brought to an end by the renewal of order. The god has become manifest: following the loss of difference, a new identity becomes incarnate....Catharsis is expulsion, commemoration, and the recollection and representation of the founding expulsion; it is a collective soothing that restores peace and difference.<sup>29</sup>

(4) Divine Healing is an integral part of almost every service. Sometimes people are indeed healed of physical illnesses ranging from arthritis to COPD to cancer (all of which I have witnessed). The ministry of healing takes many forms and involves varying levels of intensity dependent upon how severe is the ailment or whether the person being prayed for is physically present. Prayer chains are used primarily by a circle of women who regularly contact one another to pray for a variety of matters including healing. Fasting is practiced by some as a discipline accompanying prayer, although fasting is usually kept secret. For more severe illnesses a group of people will surround the sick person with tactile and verbal expressions of support and prayer. These “huggles”<sup>30</sup> may have 10 to 15 persons laying hands on the sick person’s head, torso, arms and feet, or if the crowd is dense, then those on the outer ring touching someone closer in. Time spent in a larger “huggle” might be 15 minutes, with a smaller group of persons staying with the ill person for even an hour or more. Frequently tongues are integrated into the spoken prayer. Sometimes the person prayed for is slain in The Spirit to lie prone, soaking in the healing. The minister exhorts the sick person to believe in God’s desire for him or her to be healed, and to line his or her faith up with the word of God (Bible passages that speak of divine healing). Others in the huggle are likewise exhorted to exercise their own faith to believe. Sometimes a sick person is asked if there is unconfessed sin in his or her life, and if so, to immediately repent of it to release healing. “Do you have bitterness toward someone? Unforgiveness

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<sup>29</sup> *Puppet of Desire*. p. 126.

<sup>30</sup> Huggle is an amalgamation of huddle (as in football huddle) and hug (as in bodily embrace).

toward someone else? Then forgive that person as an act of your personal will.” “Have you been involved in any occult activity in the past? Then renounce it.” “Could there be a generational curse on your family, the sins of your ancestors passed down into your lineage? Then rebuke it.” If a person being prayed for is not part of the congregation and is not present, a child’s doll may be anointed with oil, prayed over, and then given to someone to take it to the sick person.

A few years ago Phyllis was at her wits end. She was tired of struggling with long bouts of coughing along with the strangling feeling of getting insufficient air. Her physician and many specialists had diagnosed her with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), a progressive, incurable, ultimately fatal disease. Her father and brother had both died from the disease. One evening she set out to visit her sister-in-law, Darlene, who happened to also be her minister’s wife. Just as she arrived at the house, she had another of her frequent coughing episodes, and stayed in the parked car for some time. When she came into the house, Darlene recognized Phyllis was in anguish and immediately began praying for her healing. Several others who happened to be visiting also began to pray. Phyllis went down, slain in The Spirit. Phyllis began to lose consciousness of the people around her, and being tired of her chronic debilitation, expressed in thought a desire to die. However, an intensely bright yet warm light entered her consciousness, with a man in its midst. Phyllis felt great peace. After about 15 minutes Phyllis came around and got up. Believing she had seen Jesus, she became excited. Her hands glistened as if sprinkled with gold dust. Seeing this and having heard of miracles in which people had received gold fillings, she rushed to a mirror to see her own amalgamated fillings a dull gold. Most amazing, she could breathe. That night, complaining of a burning sensation on her back, her husband discovered there a bright red band like sunburn. Now, several years later, Phyllis has no trouble breathing. She has a clean bill of health from her physician. She is exuberant with joy and has experienced a tremendous upsurge in faith.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike Phyllis, not everyone is healed.<sup>32</sup> The congregation has younger members in wheelchairs afflicted from birth with crippling disabilities. Every member struggles to keep his or her faith built up to pray for the hard cases, for miracles that will not only relieve suffering, but convince skeptics about the power of Jesus’ name to heal. And many are healed. Two decades ago the congregation took a doctrinaire view of “name it and claim it” which tended to put guilt on those who did not receive healing. This view is now

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<sup>31</sup> I know Phyllis well. The story of her healing is often repeated to bolster faith.

<sup>32</sup> Phyllis’s husband died a few years later in his early 60’s from melanoma cancer.

tempered, and those who do not experience immediate healing are given much tenderness and empathy.

Is there a purely psychological phenomenon occurring during these healings, or are these cures attributed solely to an act of the Sovereign God? Or does God work through human agency? Is faith healing an expulsion of illness, an expulsion of a demon, or to put it in more Girardian terms, a resolution of mimetic conflict? In Phyllis' case it is far-stretched to establish a psychosomatic linkage with clinically diagnosed COPD. On the other hand, science has conclusively demonstrated the causality of mental psychological health with physical health. The status of the immune system, for example, includes not only genetics but matters of diet, exercise, anxiety, stress, outlook on life, and bodily care, all of which can be directly or indirectly impacted by one's interindividual psychological make-up.<sup>33</sup> Oughourlian posits that the history of psychology and its antecedents has been in "Western culture, from its very beginning, adopting the policy of denying the fact of mimesis and the interindividual relation."<sup>34</sup>

Why is culture so intent on protecting the secret of the mimetic relation? Because mimetic desire is a force that dissolves differences, and because in doing so it erodes the established structures of society where indifferentiation is a potential source of blind violence and destruction. Religion, and more broadly culture, seeks by every means to establish differences and consolidate hierarchies, notably by *prohibitions and taboos*, which bear on arbitrary objects but serve to institutionalize the difference between the permitted and the proscribed, the beneficent and the maleficent; by *rituals*, which prescribe sacrificial procedures and through the temporary abolishing of prohibitions, establish the difference between the time of the rite and ordinary time, between the exceptional and the quotidian, the sacred and the profane; by *myths*, which in addition to masking the mechanism of victimization, grounding the cultural system, and explaining the origins of the world they legitimate, serve to demarcate the boundary between a human realm of immanence and a divine realm of transcendence, between violence and the sacred.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Interindividual in the sense of Oughourlian, that personality is formed through mimetic interplay with other persons.

<sup>34</sup> *Puppet of Desire*. p. 147.

<sup>35</sup> *Puppet of Desire*. p. 149.

Oughourlian emphatically refutes the existence of Freudian unconscious as a mythical dodge to evade the real source of conflict that is interindividual mimesis.<sup>36</sup> Psychological health and those physical ailments that are derived from and correlated with psychological health are contingent upon properly addressing mimetic conflict. To a large extent, prohibitions, rituals, and covering myths of culture and religion have managed mimetic conflict, but these stabilizing forces are now being undermined and demythologized by the preeminence of the scientific worldview that has yet to integrate into populations the sway of its own covering myths. As the world staggers in unresolved undifferentiation, without the age-old mechanisms of scapegoating and ritual to safely bleed off society-destroying violence, an upsurge in neuroses and psychoses can be expected.<sup>37</sup>

Faith healing reconstitutes the sacred. Known mimetic conflict is acknowledged through confession of sin and rivalry, the scapegoat demon and/or illness is repudiated and expelled, and a new interindividual personality is formed through the possession of the Divine through the mimetic influence of the intermediary ministrations of the faith-healers. In exceptional crises, such as that with Phyllis, the subject appears to go through a death to former desire (“I was tired of being sick, I wanted to die”); a time of *tabula rasa* where the subject is a blank slate erased of all mimetic desire; and the appearance of a new object that excites new mimetic desire (in this case, the Divine) and reconstitutes a new interindividual personality. This suggests hypnosis. Oughourlian writes of three phases of hypnosis: (1) *Hypnotic sleep* is a state of physical inertness and immobilization yet the mind is alert, peaceful, attentive; (2) *Catalepsy* is a middle state in which the person’s will is immobilized, nonresistant, *tabula rasa*, in a state of complete suggestibility and position to be reconstituted; (3) *Somnambulism* is the final state in which the a new mimetic influence begins to take hold to reconstitute a new interindividual personality.<sup>38</sup>

The interindividual psychology based upon the Girardian mimetic model seems to offer a fruitful line of inquiry into the correspondence of faith and healing. The temptation should be resisted to categorize all faith-based healing as solely psychologically induced

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<sup>36</sup> *Puppet of Desire*. p. 152.

<sup>37</sup> *Things Hidden*. pp. 284; 288.

<sup>38</sup> *Puppet of Desire*. pp. 206-217.

phenomena. If The Spirit of God breaks through human walls of positivistic scientism to heal someone supernaturally, that can only be welcomed as a sign of hope, for the greatest need in our narcissistically smug yet frantically desperate nihilistic world is for The Other to break through our veil of pretense and heal us. We need models to imitate that will not be rivals who destroy us. According to the Gospel, that model is Jesus. It should be no wonder, then, that the gospel narratives are full of works of healing miracles performed by Jesus, and that the narratives of the early church are full of stories of healings.

### **The Evidence of Good Mimesis: Lasting Good Fruit**

“By their fruits you shall know them” (Matthew 7:20). “Either a tree is good and its fruit is good, or a tree is corrupt and its fruit is corrupt. A tree is known by its fruit” (Matthew 12:33). In these passages and others Jesus teaches that a person and his or her personality is an integral whole. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul contrasts the works of the flesh — adultery, lasciviousness, sorcery, idolatry, hatred, jealousy, strife, envy, etc. with the fruit of The Spirit— love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control (Galatians 5:13-26). The mimetic model would have much to confirm in Paul’s description contrasting good fruits and carnal fruits. This passage begins with an exhortation to love one another with service (v. 13) and a concomitant warning that those who bite and devour others will themselves be consumed by others (v. 15). Jesus says that he is the vine, and that only those who abide in him bring forth abundant fruit, while those who do not abide in him do not bear fruit and are branches that are cut off to be burned (*kaiō* unquenchable mimetic conflagration?) Jesus concludes his teaching on the vine with an exhortation that to abide in him is to keep his commandment to love one another as he as God’s regent has loved others (John 15:1-14).

I cannot pretend to give an impartial assessment of fruits of the people in my congregation. I am too intertwined myself in the mimetic interplay with them to be objective, as if true objectivity of other persons ever is possible under any condition anyway. My impression is that the interpersonal relationships both within the congregation and those of its members going outward into the larger world is correlated to the degree to which they can keep their

mimetic focus on Christ. At times members become fractious with one another, with petty squabbling and accusation and personal scandal. However, episodic opportunities come along that are so cathartic that they sweep off the accumulated debris of mimetic irritations to replace with The Spirit's harmony. By and large, the people are supportive of one another and reach outward to the larger community as well. Backbiting, quarreling, and envying seem at least on the surface rare. Members enjoy being together and are open and demonstrable about their tender feelings toward one another. At times members feel the sting of community criticism for their strange "holy roller" practices, and react defensively and angrily. While many if not most of the members have dysfunctional and failed life histories, such as drug and alcohol abuse, divorce, or financial ruin, they have now built consistent, temperate, responsible lifestyles and stable relationships. Most of the children, especially as they move into their teens, are caught into the contagion of the congregation, and they too become solid, responsible, and temperate.

A common criticism of Charismatics is their simplistic thinking in matters of theology, politics, science, and their openness to manipulation by charlatans. This criticism is justified. The analytical mind seems to block the yielding to emotional contagions that sweep clean mimetic passions.<sup>39</sup> Magnetic TV preachers and traveling evangelists who can stir up mimetic fascination wield extraordinary influence. Unscrupulous preachers "fleecing the sheep" of their finances occurs because people caught into mass mimetic contagion lose critical thinking ability.<sup>40</sup> Charismatics are accustomed to being induced into mimetic receptivity; charlatans are adept at building and manipulating mimetic suggestibility to their advantage. One gift of The Holy Spirit that seems underdeveloped in Charismatics is that of discerning spirits.<sup>41</sup> The few political issues that concern

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<sup>39</sup> Noted British evangelical churchman John Stott insightfully states the anti-intellectualism in an interview with *Christianity Today* (January 8, 1996). Speaking of the "Toronto Blessing," [noted for raucous holy laughter] Stott notes that "it is a self-consciously anti-intellectual movement. I listened on tape to the first person who brought the Toronto Blessing to Britain. This person said: 'Don't analyze, don't ask questions. Simply receive.' I think that is both foolish and dangerous. We must never forget that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth."

<sup>40</sup> In 2007 United States Senator Chuck Grassley (Iowa) rather unsuccessfully tried to investigate the finances of six well-known multi-million dollar "prosperity gospel" ministries. Subsequently, one of these ministries did later join the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability. In Giardian theory, external mediators (models) attract admiration rather than resentment, thus a "star's" lavish lifestyle is admired.

<sup>41</sup> I Corinthians 12:10.

Charismatics primarily relate to highly-charged mimetic sexual morality and tend to be oblivious to other concerns such as the poor, war, the environment, and economic justice that have low mimetic capacitance.<sup>42</sup>

In my own congregation, political issues are seldom discussed in congregational settings, although most of the members predictably line up with right wing politics when probed. Rather uniquely, the congregation does not file for church tax exemption, preferring to maintain full autonomy of speech and action if political advocacy is deemed expedient. Unlike many churches in the nation, the U.S. flag is not displayed. At times flags of many nations will be displayed as a visual exhortation to missionary work and intercession. Missionary work is generously supported and encouraged. Indeed, the thrust of the congregation is to evangelize the region as well as impact the world. Miracles and healings are all desired as evidence to sway non-believers and to bolster the faith of the congregants. Inducing a highly-charged mimetic catharsis seems to be an unstated technique to this end.

The majority of the congregation is lower income working people with high school educations, with a smattering of college-educated folks. Education and income difference do not seem to be noticed. The male pastor has a high school education, his wife (now co-pastor) is college educated.<sup>43</sup> Few would know I have an accredited Master's degree in Theology. I doubt anyone knows or cares about these differences. Social camaraderie or church office is not predicated upon class or status. The congregation is exceptionally generous with their time and money, yet is never pressured to give. Although congregational giving is not trumpeted, the congregation of about 100 adults and children of working class folks not only tithes for regular church collection but regularly collects

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<sup>42</sup> Collating mimetic suggestibility among Renewalists to their political views is an important topic that would be well to pursue for further study. That mimetically hyper-charged Renewalists are vulnerable to the mimetic potency of sexuality might explain their preoccupation with sexual politics over less mimetically-charged issues such as the poor or environmental concerns.

<sup>43</sup> One Sunday the Evangelist Denzil (mentioned earlier) awarded our pastor with five degrees, successively a bachelor's degree, two master's degrees, and three Ph.D level degrees, the lower degrees backdated, all from the same diploma mill. The gullible congregation accepted this as a layer of prestige for the pastor. I quietly discussed this later with the pastor, who thankfully rarely mentions publicly the phony degrees. On a related note, unaccredited but operational Bible schools proliferate within the Renewal spectrum.

free will offerings of \$500 to \$1000 or more to visiting missionaries, for sending out teens for short term missions, and for relief to folks inside and outside the church experiencing hardship. The church runs a food pantry for low income people in their congregation and for the community, distributing free food every month. Several missionaries receive monthly support. Furthermore, some folks give privately to people in need, and support Para-church ministries. People are supportive of one another with visitation, assistance with a helping hand, and consistent prayer and emotional support. Volunteerism is strong, with folks involved with various church ministries as well as involvement in community organizations. Some parents home school their children while others use the public schools. The church gives considerable space for individuals to forge their own destinies as long as the direction seems to have integrity in following Christ.

### **A Personal Coda**

After having analyzed and to some extent demystified the mimetic mechanism that describes some of the distinctive activity of my congregation, a reader might well ask me, “Why do you stay with this people? Having unveiled the mystique, how can you spiritually profit from their association?” And indeed, one of the key conclusions of the mimetic model is that the unveiling of religious mystery renders it impotent.<sup>44</sup> So does the mimetic contagion of the congregation have a sway over me? After all, in this present study I have tried to describe the mimetic mechanism that holds together its most powerful rituals. Although my response cannot be fully objective, I think it fair to say that I am no longer able to fully yield myself into the mimetic contagion. Perhaps to my impoverishment! My mind shifts into analytic gear when holy laughter breaks out, and although I am apt to smile from contagion, I do not yield to its spirit. It’s been some years since I have been slain in The Spirit. I can release myself into tongues, into energetic worship expression, into festal shouts, but this is at least in part a conscious decision, and its cathartic effect seems less than that of other members. My sons and wife, perhaps

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<sup>44</sup> See for example in *Things Hidden*, p. 136. “The completion of contemporary criticism coupled with the finally complete deconstruction of all religious and cultural mystification necessarily corresponds to an ever greater privation of sacrificial resources.”

modeling after me, seem less caught up in contagion than most of the others of the congregation. So why do I stay? Is this hypocrisy?

Jesus teaches that where two or three are gathered in his name, he dwells among them.<sup>45</sup> All humans, every one of us, are mimetic. Dangerously so, since eyes that desire after one another create rivalries as well as psychological pain—I speak from personal experience.<sup>46</sup> So when my congregation has their eyes fixed upon Christ, and I am at least to some degree drawn into their contagion, my eyes too are fixed upon Christ as my model. I am safe. Whole. Healed. And at peace with others.<sup>47</sup>

This is not to say that this could all become undone. Our relationship may be precarious. Certainly I have no interest “educating” the congregation to the mystery of their contagion. Indeed, I would vigorously resist anyone who would hastily spoil their faith expressions.<sup>48</sup> The progressive unveiling of the mimetic mechanism since the advent of Christianity has been tumultuous and fraught with deadly overshoot.<sup>49</sup> In a world in which mimetic restraint has been unleashed,<sup>50</sup> it is needful for mimetic passions to be channeled aright. The health of a church, it seems to me, is in its ability to focus persons’ mimetic desires off of one another and onto God. Ritual and prohibitions are useful to this pointing to God. Jesus himself instituted the Eucharist. The liturgies of the high churches, the candles, the incense, the beautiful music of organ and choir, these are but mimesis-channeling variations on the festal shouts, tongues, ecstatic dance, and holy laughter of charismatic churches. Each expression as well as myriads of others serves to elicit a mimetic contagion that pulls eyes off of rivalries with others onto the eyes of Christ who loves all

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew 18:20. This verse lies in the middle of a passage on handling conflict and forgiveness.

<sup>46</sup> As a young adult in another church I took the minister as my model, which eventually led to compounding rivalry, resentment and schism. Too late, I discovered Rene Girard’s mimetic theory.

<sup>47</sup> I am aware of my need for a setting where I can readily transfer my mimetic predisposition toward God. Currently my need is not fully met within my present congregation however other alternatives have been less successful.

<sup>48</sup> Girard is adamant about the destabilizing implosion that follows when the mimetic/scapegoating principle is too hastily unveiled.

<sup>49</sup> *Things Hidden*, p. 136. Speaking of desacrilization due to the scientific revolution, Girard says, “The whole of humanity is already confronted with an ineluctable dilemma: human beings must become reconciled without the aid of sacrificial intermediaries or resign themselves to the imminent extinction of humanity.”

<sup>50</sup> I think here of Revelation 20:7, 8. “And when the thousand years are ended, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall go forth to deceive the nations...to gather them together to battle.”

and scandalizes none. Oftentimes such ritualistic expressions lose their potency, with the result that congregations become dry and fade away or else resort to scapegoating in order to reconstitute their unity.<sup>51</sup>

So has all I have written simply been an attempt to explain the human social behaviors of Charismatics from a psychological standpoint? Is belief in God simply a displacement for purely human behaviors?

Or is there room for the mystery of The Transcendent? Yes, for those with eyes of faith, there indeed is The God who is not only moving through human agency within the laws of physics and biology, but who as well is transcending those laws in mystery.

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words of wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.  
(1 Corinthians 2:1-5)<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *The Puppet of Desire*, p. 245. Complete healing and ultimate wisdom will be found in the renouncing of all *rivals* and *obstacles* in order to keep only *models*. In *Things Hidden*, p. 430, Girard writes, “The Gospels and the New Testament do not preach a morality of spontaneous 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: *He who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked* (1 John 2:6).

<sup>52</sup> In this scripture passage, Paul refutes any claim of a personal “mimetically-compelling” charisma that induces people into his leadership sway. Later in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:1), Paul says basically that one should only imitate him as he imitates Christ. Mature godly leaders recognize the mimetic attraction they have over people and will seek to safely transfer those people’s mimetic desires to God. This is the distinguishing mark of leadership integrity.

### Questions For Further Inquiry

That the rapidly expanding Pentecostal/Charismatic/Third Wave movements have garnered over a quarter of Christians within 110 years is still not taken seriously within much of the intellectual establishment. Yet these movements are significantly transforming cultures with global political and economic implications. In his research on the upsurge of evangelicalism in Latin and South America (much of it Pentecostal and Charismatic in nature even within Catholicism), sociologist David Martin finds a positive influence. People touched with a deep personal experience of God are transformed: They develop literacy skills to read the Bible; they stay faithful to their spouses; they stop abusive drinking patterns; they improve work skills and reliability. Society lifts up.<sup>53</sup>

In light of Rene Girard's mimetic theory, the mimetically highly-charged movements in the Charismatic/Pentecostal/Third Wave spectrum raise hypothetical questions for further exploration. Some of these questions follow:

1. Most established mainline Protestant denominations in the USA are experiencing a serious decline in numbers of congregations, adherents, and clergy.<sup>54</sup> Church services tend to be more staid and non-emotional in tone, the sermons more intellectual, and the ministry less hands-on. Such churches simply do not generate sufficient mimetic countercharge to outcompete the world's mimetic winds. Members do not experience sufficient mimetic draw to God and accompanying cathartic release from worldly mimetic tensions to feel peace and satisfaction. This problem is especially acute in Hispanic and African-American people groups and with the younger generation who likely are experiencing mimetic crises related to their own contemporary situation.

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<sup>53</sup> David Martin. *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993.)

<sup>54</sup> In the USA since the 1950s, numbers of mainline congregations are down 10%, membership is down 25%, and clergy average age has increased from 48 to 55 in the past decade. Barna Group, 2009. <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/17-leadership/323-report-examines-the-state-of-mainline-protestant-churches/>

The mimetic power of music is well-established. The pulsating throb of drums and bass, the screaming dissonance of guitars, the vocal gyrations of singers, loud amplification, along with energetic dancers and clapping participatory audience, serves at charismatic meetings to heighten mimetic suggestibility. Furthermore, this is the pop medium of today's mimetically-supercharged culture that is the competition. Traditional churches are more subdued in their music styles. Most adults gravitate to the music style they enjoyed during their twenties when their own mimetic passions were especially keen.

Sports teams use mimetic power expansively. Pretty, sexy, energetic cheerleaders and robust marching bands stir a crowd into shouting, arm-waving mimetic fevered pitch. This mimetically transfers energy to the players for more vigorous output, especially if they are playing before their home fans. Charismatic/Pentecostals like to point out to their detractors who criticize their "Holy Ghost" exuberance that such same critics seem to have no compunction against cheering and dancing wildly at sporting events.

Super festivals and stadium filling concerts are an extraordinary phenomenon not generally known outside the evangelical and charismatic subcultures. The annual CreationFest in Pennsylvania draws 80,000 for several days of camping, concerts, and preaching. Many other large festivals dot the U.S. during the summer. Drawing mostly youth groups, the festivals serve as culture-overcoming mimetic juice for the youngsters who get caught up in the contagion of their peers. A typical evening event illustrates mimetic technique. Loud, energetic music gets the kids dancing, shouting, singing, and wearing themselves out physically. The event preacher then comes up to confront a mimetically-charged audience. Messages are typically anecdotal, elicit guilt (sexual sins and partying are common themes), and conclude with the offer for expiation through Christ. While slow, emotionally expressive music plays, and encouraged by their Christian friends, scores of teenagers come forth to make a decision to accept or recommit to Christ.

Liturgical services are experiencing a renaissance among some of the younger generation. Carefully choosing the setting, establishing a prayerful mood, and actively involving participants seems to have the capability to direct mimetic impulses to God. For example,

through dimming the lights, focusing upon an icon, calming the meeting room, and chanting the God-centered liturgy.<sup>55</sup>

2. Evangelical and Charismatic televangelists dominate the airwaves. Today's highly-competitive media market is mimetically hyper-charged. Viewers gravitate toward showmen who can work up the crowd. Politically, right wing radio hosts are using an "evangelistic" style to build and sway their audiences. Scapegoating through black-and-white differentiation is a key component for success. Dualisms between good and evil are highlighted through emotional appeal, while careful argumentation may be lacking.

3. Non-charismatic evangelical churches also use mimetic techniques in their programs. For example, Billy Graham crusades filled large auditoriums and stadiums, used stirring music to build crowd contagion, and preached powerful sermons. Graham's swooped mane of hair, piercing eyes, and confident, compelling demeanor bespoke magnetic charisma. The call to "make a decision for Christ" involved lines of ushers coming forward, which in turn pulled large numbers into coming forward. The Graham crusades made efforts to involve local churches in follow-up with new converts, recognizing that otherwise dropout was almost certain. That is, the mimetic power to draw people forward for Christ was insufficient to carry through very long without mimetic reinforcement.

4. Church splits are an ongoing tragedy. The proliferation of denominations in Protestantism, along with myriads of independent congregations, attests in part to disunity. Furthermore, clergy are leaving their ministries in droves.<sup>56</sup> While doctrinal issues are typically the given rationale for such splits, closer examination is likely to find mimetic rivalries that have foamed over. Doctrinal differentiation seems less likely than mimetic undifferentiation as a root cause of schism.

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<sup>55</sup> Many years ago I personally participated in a small candlelight gathering with youth at a traditional church. In that dimly-lit, prayerful setting, the youth transferred their mimetism to God, setting off following youth meetings that pulled in many others. With hearts fixed upon God, the expressions of harmony, unity, and love between them were awesome to behold.

<sup>56</sup> Rowland Croucher estimates the numbers of ex-pastors roughly equal that of serving clergy throughout the Western world. Rowland Croucher, "Ex-Pastors: What Happens When Clergy Leave Parish Ministry?" Unpublished manuscript. Melbourne: Monash University.

An effective head church leader may need to have considerable personal charisma to galvanize and hold his or her congregation, especially in light of the competitive market of many congregations all vying for “customers.” Neighboring churches are eyed warily for signs of “sheepstealing.”<sup>57</sup> Scapegoating potential “sheepstealers” is a tempting way to hold a flock but can lead to mistrust and disunity. Clergy must walk a fine line between mimetically exciting parishioners to follow his or her lead, while avoiding the pitfalls of inducing competitive mimetic rivalry or abandonment.<sup>58</sup> Male clergy might need to recognize that they have a spiritual hold on the females in their congregations, which can lead to potential rivalries with often less spiritually adept husbands... a possible contributing reason why fewer men attend church. Finally, many clergy are lonely, intuitively knowing they must maintain differentiation from their congregants in order to hold mimetic authority and stave off rivalry, yet in so doing they avoid close friendships. Many clergy relocate every several years to new locations, perhaps due to mimetic fatigue.

Understanding Rene Girard’s mimetic/scapegoat theory may be the most valuable “undiscovered” tool to address the blight of church division!

5. The Pentecostal/Charismatic/Third Wave movements are criticized for narrow theology and concomitant narrow political and social views. My hypothesis is that much of the conservative churches’ mistrust of science and education is a protective shield around the mimetic sacral mystique whose unmasking would create a debacle.<sup>59</sup> For example, a literal

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<sup>57</sup> Church growth by conversion is an arduous, long, usually slow process, while growth through transference (from one congregation to another more appealing one) can be rather quick and easy. See William Chadwick. *Stealing Sheep: The Church’s Hidden Problems*. Downer’s Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press. 2001.

<sup>58</sup> My own congregation’s decisions are made by a cadre of church leaders. The pastor, who has considerable but not overwhelming personal charisma, appoints as his elders and deacons people with low personal charisma. Loyalty is top virtue. Congregational democracies may be more open to rivalry and manipulation. The hierarchical churches (Catholic, Episcopalian, Orthodox, Methodist, etc.) may handle mimetic conflict better but at the loss of the full gifts and participation of the congregation. The Shepherding movement was an abuse within certain charismatic circles where leaders imposed decisions of marriage, finance, and home quarters on members.

<sup>59</sup> “Anyone who speaks up for another aspect, a different point of view obliges the other believers to reconsider things, to ask themselves questions about the validity of their beliefs...diversity is always a source of further questions, of self-criticism, and thus of possible doubt. And once doubt appears, everything snaps: patterns of behavior and traditional commandments no longer suffice; it’s a debacle.” Jacques Ellul. *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983). P. 110. Rene Girard of course points out in his writings the meltdown of religio-culture when its mechanism is unmasked.

view of the Bible seems essential for a theology of miracles, prophesying, exorcism, healing, and tongues. In this light, historical-critical hermeneutics are too dangerous to explore. Explaining evil and suffering as works of the Devil and demons seems simpler than understanding human psychology, health, and social dynamics. Evolutionary biology appears as a threat to the literal word of scripture as well as relegating God to a less engaged role in creation. And Charismatics believe in a very active, involved God.

In the Pentecostal and Third Wave churches, soteriology inclines to satisfaction and penal substitution atonement theories. That is, the death of Jesus satisfies the wrath of God in our stead. Eschatology tends toward Dispensational Premillennialism. Jesus is called upon to turn back Satan's attacks, to deliver healing, and to bring salvation.<sup>60</sup> The ethical teachings of Jesus such as in the Sermon On The Mount tend to underplayed, in my experience. However, catholic and other mainstream church charismatics would tend to have beliefs more in line with their denominations.

6. The outlandish practices of Renewalists have their backlash within the political landscape. Former US Attorney General John Ashcroft was roundly snickered at for his Pentecostalism, and now Sarah Palin is getting her licks. For example, during Palin's run for Vice-President, a YouTube video made the rounds showing a Kenyan preacher, Thomas Muthee, laying hands on her and praying protection for her against witchcraft. Pundit commentary on the video was that Palin was superstitious and outmoded due to the witchcraft reference. Renewalist circles regard witchcraft not in terms of Halloween night broomstick flying crones, but rather as manipulation. A witch uses spiritual power to manipulate. Jean-Michael Oughourlian, a collaborator with Rene Girard, and professor of Psychotherapy at the Sorbonne, takes enchantment, sorcery, and witchcraft seriously within the framework of the mimetic theory.<sup>61</sup> His study has some congruence with Palin's intuition, that is, the dark manipulation of mimetic power. The virulent scapegoating Palin is receiving for her religious views seems to lend credence.

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<sup>60</sup> In my circles, the conquering power of Jesus is emphasized. Jesus as lion, as king, as warrior.

<sup>61</sup> See numerous sections Oughourlian's *The Puppet of Desire*.

The current 111<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress has two members who are Pentecostals, a significantly low disparity compared within the religious demographics of the U.S. citizenry.<sup>62</sup> Pentecostalism within the U.S. African-American churches differs politically from that of white counterparts. Ethnic voting patterns seem to trump. While white Pentecostals and Charismatics voted overwhelmingly for Republican candidates in the 2008 election, African-American Pentecostals voted Barack Obama. Relevance of issues also varies within the races as it does in mainstream culture. Joshua DuBois, a 27 year-old African-American Pentecostal preacher, now heads up President Obama's Council for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

7. While Renewalist religion can induce powerful mimetic cathartic experiences in newcomers, the question arises as to long term sustainability. Membership turnover is high in some quarters, leading me to conjecture a hypothesis that mimetically susceptible people can be pulled by competing mimetic attractions.<sup>63</sup> Can one become addicted to mimetically supercharged services? And would such an addiction require ever more increased "dosage?" Moreover, does centering mimetic appeal upon the charisma of ministers, musicians, and specially anointed leaders tempt fate with rivalry? Maintaining differentiation between leadership and laity seems to be a constant subconscious concern. In my experience, visiting evangelists make special efforts to polish the local leadership in the eyes of the laity all the while apportioning choice morsels of ministry to the laity. The key seems to be holding periodic events of high mimetic catharsis that bleed off resentment with resultant unity. Churches less successful with mimetic catharsis might use scapegoating of other church groups' supposed doctrinal errors to maintain differentiation sufficiently to hold their members. All these mimetic interplays within the Renewalist spectrum bear much further exploration and analysis.

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<sup>62</sup> <http://pewforum.org/Government/Faith-on-the-Hill-The-Religious-Affiliations-of-Members-of-Congress.aspx>

<sup>63</sup> In his parable of the sower, Jesus likens the seed sown on rocky ground that springs up quickly yet terminally to one who receives the word with joy yet has no root and falls away when trouble comes. Matthew 13.

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