

# **The Transcendence of State-Sanctioned Violence & Christian Prayer: East Timor and the end of the Indonesian Occupation**

**Joel Hodge**

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I am going to reflect on two different forms of transcendence – one marked by mob violence; and the other by Christian solidarity in prayer. I am going to do this by way of a particular story taken from East Timor, a half-island nation in south-east Asia that was brutally occupied by Indonesia from 1975 to 1999. Through this story, I aim to reflect on the nature of state-sanctioned violence as structured by violent transcendence; and that which challenges and transforms this violent transcendence in Christian solidarity informed by a different type of transcendence. I will look at a specific case where Christian prayer transformed the violence of a mob in order to examine some of the dimensions of a pacific transcendence located in Christ that awakens a consciousness of the victim in vulnerable, disinterested self-giving.

## **Girard's Mimetic Insights & Transcendence**

Transcendence can be defined as the human disposition toward the Other; and to move freely beyond oneself toward the Other for identity and ontological satisfaction. This transcendent disposition and movement is structured by mimetic desire. As desire has an inherent other-centred movement, it involves a transcendent dimension. As desire leads humans to seek fulfilling relationship with the utterly and perfect Other, it acquires a transcendent dimension. In transcendence, the human seeks the definitive movement of their being in mimetic desire that takes them out of themselves into mimetic unity and reconciliation with the Other, and so, all others. I will, then, discuss mimetic transcendence as that form of solidarity with the other that seeks ontological and mimetic fulfilment. My argument is grounded in the work of cultural anthropologist, René Girard<sup>1</sup>. Girard's line of reasoning is: (1) that human desire is mimetic (i.e., humans desire according to the desire of another, and thus, learn by imitation and stimulation from a model, which can be distorted into rivalry when one seeks to acquire what the model has or is); (2) that human cultures are founded on scapegoating victims, which stabilises and controls desire and rivalries; and (3) that the Judeo-Christian tradition reveals the nature of human desire and

---

<sup>1</sup> René Girard is a French academic who has taught at various American universities and finished his academic career as Professor of French Language, Literature and Civilisation at Stanford University. He has received numerous honours, honorary doctorates and awards, including a chair in France's most prestigious academic body *L'Académie française* ("The French Academy"). Various groups and scholarly associations, such as the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R), have developed to explore, critique and apply Girard's insights.

culture (based on victimisation) through the biblical revelation that climaxes in the self-giving sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The effects of mimetically-formed transcendence were evident in East Timor when the people were confronted with existential, mimetic crisis. It is common for humans to resort to the power of mob violence to answer their existential and mimetic crises, as was seen in the Indonesian-sponsored violence in East Timor. Mob violence, as Girard shows, resolves these crises through “false transcendence”, in which the “miraculous” mimetic movement and reconciliation of unanimous violence against a murdered victim is agreed to be sacred and divine.<sup>2</sup> The all-encompassing nature of this violence receives a sacred or divine blessing because of its powerful effect to reconcile and structure human life. This false transcendence predicated on sacred violence, Girard argues, is crucial for containing violence and forming culture based on false deities and sacral myths, rituals and laws. On the other hand, there is the possibility for a different form of transcendence that I identify as occurring in the experience of the East Timorese under the Indonesian occupation in their encounter with the self-giving victim, Christ.<sup>3</sup> This form of transcendence could be called “pacific transcendence” located in Christ.

The experience of the Other – that is, the crucified and risen Christ – as self-giving and forgiving victim provides a way of understanding how East Timorese people answered the continual oppression and violent crises facing them with hope and purpose; resulting in one of the highest rates of conversion to Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1975, when the former colonial power, Portugal, was forcibly removed from East Timor by Indonesia the Catholic population amongst the East Timorese was approximately 25%.<sup>4</sup> By the 1990s, this figure was over 90%; almost all Roman Catholic. There are various factors for this, including an Indonesian law that mandated religious identification that was not animist. However, the rate and fervour of conversion during this time requires more explanation; and I argue that we can locate some of this explanation in how Christian faith was able to give existential, mimetic and eschatological resources to the East Timorese in the face of brutal and overwhelming violence. For example, as oppressed and lost peoples who could suffer the wrath of the conquering power at any time, the Timorese began to see Christ in a new

---

<sup>2</sup> R. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. J. G. Williams, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 96-8.

<sup>3</sup> R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory, (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> R Archer, “The Catholic Church in East Timor,” in *East Timor at the Crossroads : The Forging of a Nation*, ed. P. Carey & G.C. Bentley (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995), p. 127; James Dunn, *East Timor: A Rough Passage to Independence*, (Double Bay, Aus: Longueville Books, 2003), pp. 39-42. Kohen describes the percentage of Catholics as 20% (A. Kohen, “The Catholic Church and the Independence of East Timor” in *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers: East Timor, Indonesia, and the World Community*, ed. R. Tanter, M. Selden & S.R. Shalom (Sydney, Aus: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 46.

way: as victim who had stood before them in the place of violence and who offered relationship with them.<sup>5</sup> In sharing the space of oppression and victimage, the effect of the relationship with Christ was to induct East Timorese people into a different form of mimesis that contrasted with the violent mimesis of the mob leading them to belief, and ultimately, to stand with those being victimised. As they suffered the violence of the Indonesian regime, the lives of the East Timorese were informed by the pacific transcendence of their Christian faith that moved them to courageously stand alongside the victim in Christ and resist the powerful lure of mimetic violence.<sup>6</sup> Based on this discussion of transcendence, I argue that there is an important relationship between faith and mimesis on the level of ontology in which Christian faith gives mimetic direction to the lives of those in violent crisis.

### **East Timor under Indonesian Occupation**

For most of the East Timorese populace, the Indonesian occupation was marked by a struggle with violence and death that occurred in the confrontation with the overwhelming force of the state military and their supporting militias and mobs (most of which were populated by Timorese). The UN-sponsored Commission on Truth and Reconciliation reported that at least 183,000 people died from unnatural causes during the Indonesian occupation.<sup>7</sup> This total came from a population of approximately 700,000 when the Indonesians invaded, which makes one of the worst per capita losses of life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Many died directly at the hands of the state military and militias, including after the announcement of the result of the independence referendum in September, 1999. In this vote, the East Timorese courageously rejected autonomy within Indonesia for independence from Indonesia, under the threat of violence and destruction. This threat resulted in numerous deaths and massacres during

---

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note, the East Timorese did not equate themselves with Christ but identified their experience with him: Christ had gone through death and despair for them in order to make it possible to gain meaning and purpose beyond the power of violence. Furthermore, to be anthropologically correct, the East Timorese people in general are not victims until they are expelled or killed by a mob. However, in a general sense, they were oppressed as they occupied a losing position in relation to the Indonesians, as part of which they were threatened with the death at any time.

<sup>6</sup> This stance was founded on faith in the Resurrection. This faith in the risen Christ did not represent identification with a more violent form of justice than that of the militia. The significance of the Resurrection lay in its vindication of Christ as self-giving victim. If it was otherwise, Jesus would have been another in the long list of misguided messiahs crucified by the Romans. Jesus' life was not another "cause celebre". Its meaning lay in what he did and his authority in who he was, which was definitively revealed and vindicated by the Resurrection (Kasper, 1976, 124). In the Resurrection, Christ's self-giving way of being, which was consistently enacted in his life and death in accordance with God's will, is vindicated and revealed by God the Father who shares his life with His Son in self-giving love (the Spirit).

<sup>7</sup> Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation Timor-Leste (CAVR), *Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation Timor-Leste (CAVR)*. CAVR, 2005, Retrieved from: <http://www.cavr-timorleste.org/cheгаReport.htm>.

1999 as the Indonesian military and militias intimidated the populace to vote in favour of autonomy within Indonesia.

After the announcement of the referendum result, the Indonesian military and militias undertook a campaign of generalised violence resulting in more than 1500 deaths, the forced removal of a quarter or third of the population from East Timor, and the destruction of most of the country. This was done in retribution for the vote, under the guise that the East Timorese were the ones causing the violence by fighting amongst themselves.<sup>8</sup> A former Australian intelligence officer and now an academic, Clinton Fernandes gives an account of how the Indonesian authorities deliberately fomented violence between pro- and anti- Indonesian groups in 1999. They did this in order to make it appear that East Timor had descended into civil war as a result of what the Indonesians called an “illegitimate” referendum vote administered by the United Nations. However, it was clear to those inside and outside East Timor that the Indonesian military and state officials were deliberately causing violence to construct a false situation in which Indonesia supposedly needed to stay in East Timor. This constructed story, which was meant to ensure Indonesia’s continued presence in East Timor, was revealed to be a lie by those inside and outside of East Timor; and the most striking witnesses to the falsity of this story were the innocent victims and martyrs who died innocently at the hands of the Indonesian military and militias; and whose stories and witness in faith became powerful sources of shared cultural memory that undermined the cycles of violence and victimage.

All East Timorese people have a story of their experience in 1999 that played out the drama of state-sanctioned violence and that presents the power of the violent transcendence of the military and militias. One story that exemplifies the experience of 1999 was of an Indonesian-backed militia that had rounded up a group of Timorese men in order to kill them. This was part of the internal effort at retribution for the vote and enforcement of the regime’s will against selected victims; an effort that was reported to the international community as internal Timorese brutality that required the Indonesian state’s intervention to restore order. This false story echoes the archaic myths that justify sacred violence, though this Indonesian story was perhaps more consciously and deliberately constructed. This situation also accords with the work of William Cavanaugh who argues that the modern nation-state constructs itself as the arbiter of violence and the guarantor of social order by

---

<sup>8</sup> C. Fernandes, *Reluctant Saviour : Australia, Indonesia, and the independence of East Timor*, (Carlton North, Aus: Scribe Publications, 2004), pp. 47-85.

controlling warring internal parties within the state by monopolising violence and expelling those parties from the public sphere of violence.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in this particular account, the military and militia had targeted certain male Timorese for execution and collected them together at the beach side. The justification for doing this was tenuous, of course, but it was made under the accusation that these men were independence supporters; or at least, their deaths would send a message to independence supporters. In fact, these men were arbitrarily chosen and accused as they undertook their increasingly frenzied rampages and killings. As I have said, the underlying motivation was revenge for the Timorese rejection of the Indonesian state in the 1999 referendum vote. The Timorese had frustrated the desires of the Indonesian officials and militias to keep East Timor; a frustration that led to ever greater violence and more arbitrary attacks and massacres, including on the Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup> The Indonesians, though, were savvy (or needy) enough to perpetuate the lie that the different Timorese factions were to blame for this violence. This “story” was mimetically fed by militia violence supported and directed by the Indonesian military, state officials and police.

The militia and military rounded up the group on the beach, where executions were often performed usually because the sea provided an easy place of disposal for the bodies. As the militia readied to kill, the prisoners scrambled for position before the militia. One of the interviewees recounts how he tried to get to the middle of the group so that he could pretend to die as he had seen others previously do on other occasions in order to survive. As they did this, a Roman Catholic priest arrived at the scene and intervened. The priest bravely asked the militia to stop and allow him to pray with the group, especially if they were going to die. The militia remarkably allowed him to do

---

<sup>9</sup> Cavanaugh argues that the origins of the nation-state in early modern Europe are in the supposed need of the state to intervene in religious wars; which were in fact mostly of the state’s own making as certain aristocrats and leaders sought to centralise the state in Europe at the expense of the nobility, local communities and the Church.

<sup>10</sup> Those with faith in Christ were a particular affront to the Indonesian military and militias because they could not be contained or controlled by violence. This affront led the Indonesian military to be scandalised by the Church whom they grew to regard as their enemy because they were ‘stealing’ the people from them. Although the Church enacted peaceful resistance and charitable service, the Indonesian military and militias targeted them for giving hope and support to the people. The Indonesians needed to control the lives and consciences of the people, which the Church threatened. In 1999, the Church was targeted in all parts of the country, such as in the massacres at Lautem, Dili, Liquiçá<sup>10</sup> and Suai, for supporting independence and threatening the Indonesian regime (See Dunn, *East Timor*, pp. 356-8). Robinson comments that the targeting of the Church was “one of the most shocking aspects of the pro-autonomy strategy” in 1999 (Robinson, “East Timor 1999”, p. 255). In fact, the then Indonesian-appointed governor of East Timor, Abilio Soares, explicitly told militia leaders and Indonesian supporters that the Church needed to be targeted: “We have to kill the priests and nuns because they have done a lot to help the people of Falintil and the civilian underground.” (Jill Jolliffe, *Balibo*, (Melbourne, Aus: Scribe, 2009), p. 254). Tomás Gonçalves, an Indonesian supporter and Timorese leader, who reported these words, was reportedly shocked at this statement and later defected. As Dunn says, this statement by the governor was a major departure from the previous policy to respect the Church (Dunn, *East Timor*, p. 346). This shift showed an increasing desperation to target perceived enemies of the state.

so. The group then knelt praying together to God through Christ and Mary. Following this, the militia decided not to kill the group. The group was trucked away with many other Timorese toward the border with Indonesia. In commenting on this happening, the interviewee said “Maromak boot” which roughly means God is all-powerful with the implication that He is all-powerful in mercy and goodness, even in the worst circumstances.

## **The Transcendence of Violence**

In reflecting on this story, I want to examine the different types of group solidarity, structured by certain forms of mimetic transcendence, evident in this account; and how the violence of the mob was interrupted and transformed by the priest and the group praying. While the false transcendence of violence had attracted some elements of the Timorese population to the Indonesian state, the Christian transcendence of prayer and faith centred on Christ acted as a “mimetic circuit-breaker” to state violence that formed the Timorese response to their long confrontation with state-sanctioned violence; and in this case, Christian prayer reminded the mob (as well as the potential victims) of their humanity before God in self-giving mimesis. I will reflect on this case in three points.

Firstly, let us examine the situation of violence and how it was possible to break this mimetic cycle. It was in the circumstance of intense violence and disintegrating social order that this group of Timorese was gathered together for execution by the militias and military. As Girard shows, it is almost impossible for humans to escape from the reciprocity of violence:

In reality, no purely intellectual process and no experience of a purely philosophical nature can secure the individual the slightest victory over mimetic desire and its victimage delusions. Intellection can achieve only displacement and substitution, though these may give individuals the sense of having achieved a victory. For there to be even the slightest degree of progress, the victimage delusion must be vanquished on the most intimate level of experience.<sup>11</sup>

In the situation of reciprocity and frustrated desire, vengeance becomes regarded as the ultimate arbiter and power that forms egotistical, self-assertive human beings. The reciprocity of vengeance can result in endless violence (as Girard shows) that places priority on the violent transcendence of the mob.<sup>12</sup> Vengeance gives rise to the belief that my rights are absolute, violence is final and there

---

<sup>11</sup> René Girard with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. S. Bann & M. Metteer, (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1987a), p. 399.

<sup>12</sup> As McCabe's (2008) argues, in his insightful work on Aquinas' examination of virtues, emotions and senses, vengeance is a natural reaction of the virtue of justice when someone is not given their due, especially when someone is killed or hurt unjustly. However, this desire for justice that seeks to re-dress the violence and restore the victim's due

is no higher power than death. How did the group of Timorese avoid this violent transcendence and awaken the mob to consciousness of the victim? To refrain from and undermine vengeance requires belief in something different; in something more mimetically and existentially engaging and substantial. For the group, their faith in Christ impelled them to refrain from violence and seek a different answer by seeing the sad condition of the human beings before them and praying.

The cycle of violence in East Timor – which had become so highly charged with mimetic contagion – was broken, in this case, by prayer. There are a number of important factors that can explain how Christian prayer could break this violent contagion. Most importantly, it gave space for both the executioners and the soon-to-be victims to be separated and to *remember* themselves. Violence, as Girard shows, is built on scandal; and scandal drives humans to act in quick and unconscious ways against a rival with whom one has become fixated. The Indonesian military and militias had collectively become fixated on their rivals – the Timorese who had resisted their rule, supported by the Catholic Church. Thus, when common objects of desire are fought over (such as the land and power which the Indonesians sought by invading and occupying East Timor in opposition to the Portuguese, and their later rivals, the local East Timorese resistance and the Church<sup>13</sup>), mimetic desire is distorted into scandal, rivalry and conflict. This rivalry is grounded in an ontological yearning and distortion: through mimetic desire, the subject is seeking ontological fullness; and so, when the subject sees the model possessing an object which seems to lend the model “ontological

---

cannot ultimately be accomplished with the same violence that caused the first injustice as it would cause further hurt and injustice. While traditional societies believed in the reciprocity of violence (eventually codified in the biblical principle “an eye for an eye” that sought to contain this type of violence), this kind of violence does not ultimately restore relationships (except in a cold sense) It does not respect the value of life and relationships that are creatively given and which cannot be restored through destructive means. This insight into justice and vengeance is an important implication of Christ’s own death in which the Father does not restore the position of the Christ through violence against his killers but by restoring his full life so that he could offer absolute forgiveness to humanity. In other words, a self-giving love that seeks to move people out of mimetic violence is the ultimate answer to humanity’s search for transcendence: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil ...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:17 & 21). This love does not neglect the demands of justice but incorporates justice into its very substance and moves justice into a higher realm by restoring the victim in God’s own life and so giving the victim her proper due. This is a creative restoration of justice in charity (self-giving love), not a destructive reciprocity that temporarily satisfies but which ultimately cries out for more blood until a temporary victim can be found to unite the warring groups. In vindicating the victim, God makes his life available to all in order to restore the true aim and potential of human nature and its desire for justice in God’s life of love (see Benedict XVI, 2009, for a discussion of the unity of justice and charity).

<sup>13</sup> The Indonesian dictator and political and military elite wanted to incorporate East Timor into its territory because the Portuguese owned it and the Indonesians saw it as part of their entitlement as rulers of the Indonesian islands; an entitlement that was exacerbated by claims of communism in East Timor that supposedly threatened Indonesia ideologically (presumably because they could lose power and land). The desire of the Indonesian (primarily, Javanese) elite is complex and historically grounded in their successful supplanting of the Dutch colonisers resulting in their control of the whole Indonesian archipelago. The dominance of the Javanese elite in Indonesia led to them using the military to consolidate territory over the diverse cultures and islands of the archipelago. Thus, while there was a religious divide in East Timor between the largely Muslim Indonesian army and the Christian Timorese populace, the motivating factor for the state-sanctioned violence in East Timor was more nationalistic than religious (although both are connected).

density”, the subject seeks to acquire the object to acquire that ontological density. For example, while the Timorese group led by the priest had given up on acquisitive desire, the Indonesian state and militia were envious and jealous of the Independence supporters (and the Church, in general) and saw them as rivals for the control and loyalty of the local people. As was seen in the militia’s action, their grasping at the object of their desire (the loyalty and control of the populace) sought ontological fullness through violence, which was flawed and led to greater dissatisfaction and frustration. As Girard shows in his analysis of scapegoating violence, such Indonesian violence against Timorese victims needed to be routinely repeated to maintain order, like a drug that provided only temporary satisfaction.<sup>14</sup> The priest’s intervention allowed the mob as well as the victims to remember themselves apart from scandal and rivalry. It gave them a moment to break through scandal, which Girard says is the place and moment when violence is difficult to avoid. To provide this growth, the Anglican archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, argues that the importance of Christianity is that it opens spaces that undermine the violent, acquisitive stories in the world:

[The Church’s]...main task is to create “spaces” for an alternative story.... This is in no way a bid for religious takeover or confessional monopoly, but it does make a claim for the visibility of Christian community—and other religious communities. ...it means that the religious community needs to be clear about its primary responsibility as a place where people are formed in moral vision by shared practice; and such practice, says Cavanaugh, is both the ritual practice by which the basic story is learned and repeated and stories of alternative human behaviour shaped by this. Christian involvement in the public sphere is a visible celebration of the sacramental reality by which believers live, and the devising and implementing of usually small-scale projects suggesting possibilities for human beings different from those assumed by contractual and acquisitive stories. Cavanaugh’s book ends with a moving narrative bringing these two elements together: following the murder in 1977 of a Salvadorean priest who had resisted government injustice, Archbishop Oscar Romero had decided that the requiem for this priest should be the only mass celebrated in the diocese on the Sunday following, so as to ‘collapse the spatial barriers separating the rich and the poor.’ The reader will recall Romero’s own death not long afterwards, in the context of another eucharistic celebration:

---

<sup>14</sup> Thus the result was the increasing brutality of the Indonesian state during its occupation of East Timor and during the violence of 1999. In relation to the effect of mimetic violence, the leader of Team Alpha who led the attack on the Sisters and their group recently testified that he was under the influence of a drug when he killed the nuns and their group. The drug was given to him by the Indonesian military to supposedly relieve headaches. Yet, the effect of this drug was deadly: "It was like killing animals. I did not see the sisters, the priest and the journalist as human beings". While not discounting the possible effect of the drug, this statement relates a common experience of mob violence. During and after the killing, the victim is not seen as a human being by the mob. The victim is seen as a non-person, often in the form of an animal, demon or supernatural entity. The victim is not human but is an unnatural threat, and so, the killing is justified. Girard has written extensively on the mythical illusions that the mob suffers during and after their violence because, however one becomes involved, one’s mimetic identity easily becomes tied to the unanimous violence. Furthermore, Robinson’s report (2003, 245-7) on the events of 1999 shows the premeditated and brutal nature of the killing in Suai. While violence may have obscured the memory and judgement of the militia members, they were clear in their objective. The militia leader was reported to have instructed: ““Now we will wait for the Sisters who will be coming towards Baucau...and when they come we will kill them all” (Robinson, 2003, 246). Moreover, the execution of the militia’s plan was a frenzied bloodbath that specifically targeted the church group because they were supposedly representative of the political resistance: “Kill them all! They are all CNRT!” (Robinson, 2003, 246). While chemical inducements may have heightened their illusions, the members of the militia were led to *believe*, by their own complicity in seeking power and mimetic violence, in the “threat” of the nuns and their group as enemies, and so, executed a brutal massacre.

drawing rich and poor together in this way is also to draw near to real danger in some political contexts.<sup>15</sup>

## **The Christian Transcendence of Prayer**

The nature of the social space opened by Christianity in the Timorese case brings me to my second point: that the space opened by the priest in prayer has a discernible mimetic substance founded in the pacific transcendence of Christ. It is in the mimetic substance of the priest's action that provides an explanation for the mob's relenting and failure to execute their violence. Notwithstanding other factors, the priest's self-giving intervention and prayer allowed the mob to remember the victim; and on this occasion, to overcome their violence. His self-giving intervention and the prayer acted as a mimetic circuit-breaker to the violence of the mob that undermined it and halted it by providing a source of alternative mimetic transcendence. The violence of the mob – whose members were caught in the contagion of mimetic violence that gave them a sense of existential direction and purpose beyond themselves centred on their violent action for the state – was disrupted by the action and prayer of the priest who directed the prisoners and the mob away from mimetic violence to a transcendence modelled on Christ. In his own death, Christ prayed to God the Father for forgiveness of the mob in the despair of his forsaken condition. Similarly, the priest led the prisoners in prayer directing them (and the mob) toward God who stands outside the violence of the world offering an alternative to the violent transcendence of the mob in self-giving mimesis that lives through death and offers peace in the midst of it. The Timorese resisted by locating transcendence in the pacific and self-giving love of Christ, not the violence of the nation-state.

The group's prayer provided an opportunity to break the immediacy and imperative of violence through a certain type of self-giving mimesis that reminded all involved of the innocence of the victim and of their true humanity. According to Girard, the innocence of the victim and the injustice of human violence and culture are definitively revealed in Jesus Christ, who was killed as victim for his loving self-giving.<sup>16</sup> Christ is raised from death so as to expose the distorted cycle of desire and violence in human culture and reveal the true form of mimetic desire in his loving, self-giving relationship with God the Father:<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Rowan Williams, "Convictions, Loyalties and the Secular State", *Political Theology* 6, no. 2 (2005), p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> See, in particular, Girard, *The Scapegoat, Things Hidden & I See Satan Fall*.

<sup>17</sup> For fuller expositions, consult these works: J. Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998a; *Knowing Jesus*, new ed. (London: SPCK, 1998b); G. Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*, (Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1995); C. Fleming, "Mimesis and Violence – An Introduction to the Thought of René Girard," *Australian Religion Studies Review* 15, no. 1 (2002): pp. 57-72; René

The intelligence of the victim [in Jesus] comes from a freedom in giving oneself to others, in not being moved by the violence of others, even when it perceives that this free self-giving is going to be lynched as a result. ...He [Jesus] taught people how to loosen themselves from relationships of violence with each other, where their personalities were constituted by the reciprocal give and take of that violence, and instead start to side with the victims and those who can easily be victimized, even though, as an inevitable consequence of this breaking out of the violent determinism of the world, they would be liable to become victims themselves.<sup>18</sup>

The Resurrection, according to Girard (2001, 123), vindicates Jesus as the innocent victim. This vindication is not a violent, exclusive act but an inclusive one: it offers humanity a way out of violence through non-violent love. By dying on the Cross and being raised, Jesus is making present God's gratuitous mimesis to all humanity, i.e., a self-giving love that does not seek to acquire identity and satisfy desire through acquisitive violence but that is self-offering for the good of the other. This kind of mimesis seems to be consistent with the priest's action in the Timorese case as he acted like Christ and offered himself in solidarity with the prisoners through the pacific transcendence of his prayer. In this way, the priest and the prisoners located the full way of being human in Christ, who incarnated God's loving will before the violence of humanity. Their mimetic unity was forged through a transcendent focus on Christ in self-giving mimesis. Thus, the priest and his group were enacting a Gospel witness that proclaims that death does not have the ultimate say over the victim, nor is violence the ultimate arbiter of human life. Instead, the victim is revealed by action in conformity with Christ's love in which humans are shown that they can live without violence, which most importantly subverts the power of the mob by disrupting its unanimous support:

The essential factor ... is that the persecutors' perception of their persecution is finally defeated. In order to achieve the greatest effect that defeat must take place under the most difficult circumstances, in a situation that is the least conducive to truth and the most likely to produce mythology. This is why the Gospel text constantly insists on the irrationality ("without a cause") of the sentence passed against the just and at the same time on the absolute unity of the persecutors, of all those who believe or appear to believe in the existence and validity of the cause, the *ad causam*, the accusation, and who try to impose that belief on everyone (Girard, 1986, 109).

---

*Girard: Violence and Mimesis*. (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004); M. Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004); *Girard and Theology*, (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2009). J-M. Oughourlian, *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*. trans. E. Webb, (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1991); *The Genesis of Desire*, trans. E. Webb, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press; 2010); R. Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. M.L. Assad, (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, & New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000); S. Simonse, *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centalism and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1992). See especially Simonse's (1992) anthropological work in Africa and his application of Girard's insights.

<sup>18</sup> Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, p. 45.

By taking Jesus as the central reference point, Girard (1986, 1987 & 2001) argues that Christianity and the Gospels expose and disrupt the unanimous power of mimetic violence. This violence powerfully draws in all people, even Jesus' own friends and fellow Jews in the case of Jesus' crucifixion, in what Girard defines as "false transcendence" (Girard, 1986, 105-6 & 150-64, 1987, 217, 2001, 96-8). Girard (1986, 100-164, 2001, 19-31 & 121-60, 2004) explains that the Gospels disclose the power of mimetic violence and false transcendence through a number of events and themes: Roman Governor Pilate's lack of control of the crowd and his attempted appeasement of them, such as with a substitute victim, Barabbas; the crowd's satisfaction in achieving the guilt of its chosen scapegoat; the effect of the scapegoating cycle that overpowers the authorities and even unifies them, such as by making Pilate and King Herod into friends after being lifelong enemies; and, the unanimous nature of the scapegoating exemplified when Jesus' leading follower, Peter, denies Jesus. Girard (1987) also highlights important statements within the Gospels, some which draw on and re-interpret the Hebrew Scriptures. These statements show the Gospels' complete awareness of the scapegoat mechanism: "You fail to see it is better for one man to die than for the whole nation to be destroyed" (Jn 11:50) that highlights the nature of culture in victimage; "They hated me without a cause" (Jn 15:25) that shows the baseless nature of the mob's accusations and mimetic violence; "He let himself be taken for a criminal" (Lk 22:37; Mk 15:28) that shows Jesus' willing sacrifice in being accused of guilt by the violent human crowd; and, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:24) that expresses Jesus' faithfulness and self-giving to both God and humanity in the midst of victimisation and despair and shows the unconscious dictatorship of violence and distorted desire over human beings.

There are two important themes that Girard particularly highlights about the Christian Gospels. Firstly, the Gospels' awareness of the mimetic violence of the mob that seeks a victim. Girard says the "two words, *without cause*, [from the Book of Psalms and Gospel of John] marvellously describe the behaviour of human packs."<sup>19</sup> Girard also highlights a text from Acts of the Apostles that shows the ignorance of the mob: "Now I know, brothers, that neither you nor your leaders had any idea of what you were really doing."<sup>20</sup> This last passage is from a speech by St. Peter, who after Jesus' Resurrection suddenly understood the cycle of violence that had occurred and preached 'Christ crucified' as God to the mob that had killed Jesus. Secondly, the Gospels' realisation of Jesus' conscious and purposeful sacrifice in which he accepted death on a cross *for* humanity. This realisation enabled the Gospels to see how Jesus lived outside of mimetic violence and offered a

---

<sup>19</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup> Girard, *The Scapegoat*, p. 111.

new, loving way of being to free humanity from their “persecutory unconscious”<sup>21</sup>: “A non-violent deity can only signal his existence to mankind by having himself driven out by violence – by demonstrating that he is not able to establish himself in the Kingdom of Violence.”<sup>22</sup> The Gospels’ recognition of the injustice and self-sacrifice of Jesus’ death, which led to their awareness of mimetic violence, saw them re-locate the experience of the transcendent Other in the non-violent love of Jesus, rather than in the violence of the mob.<sup>23</sup> Jesus’ words on the Cross, “Forgive them for they know not what they do”<sup>24</sup>, highlights the burgeoning Christian consciousness of the victim (and of the real nature of human life) in forgiveness and the mob’s amnesia in violence.

In this experience of loving and pacific transcendence in Christ, Girard argues that Jesus’ Resurrection provides the Gospels and the Christian community with the anthropological key to see the innocence of the victim and the lies of the mob.<sup>25</sup> The mob’s story is finally defeated because their distorted *belief* in violence and envy is overcome by the gratuitous love of God as victim, who offers a new avenue for human being by confronting violence and death with forgiveness. Thus, Christ’s pacific transcendence – that which takes the human being beyond herself into union with the Other in self-giving mimesis<sup>26</sup> – undermines the violent transcendence of the mob (that locates unity and power in victimisation).

The priest’s action, then, can be seen to participate in Christ’s own subversion of the violent world in its direct contrast with the mob’s violence: the mob in the Timorese case sought to acquire their desire by force from the other; while the priest – who in Catholic belief is ordained ministerially into the priesthood of Christ – acted for the good of the group of victims and even for the mob to break them all free from violence. The priest who led the group in prayer became a reminder of Christ who took on the place of victim for the good of humanity; and the prayer was an expression of their faith in Christ – who has ultimate power over violence and injustice and would bring them

---

<sup>21</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> Girard, *Things Hidden*, p. 219.

<sup>23</sup> Girard, *Things Hidden*, pp. 169-70; *I See Satan Fall*, pp. 96-8.

<sup>24</sup> Lk 23:34.

<sup>25</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, p. 131.

<sup>26</sup> The way in which I am talking about transcendence is the way it is based on the nature of human desire, which is relational and seeking outside of and beyond itself for fulfilment. In transcendence, the human seeks the definitive movement of their being in desire that takes them out of themselves into mimetic unity and reconciliation with the Other, and so, all others. The transcendent movement of human desire (and reason) outside of itself has implicit within it basic questions about what it means to be human; why did I come from and where am I going; how do I live and desire; how do I relate with the other. These existential questions do not seem to be answered by an intellectual decision or personal preference, but have more to do with a commitment of one’s whole being. This commitment is what Christianity refers to as “faith”; a way of being that the path chosen with the Other will lead to ontological and existential fulfilment through full relationship and communion. Faith’s domain, then, is existential, ontological and anthropological: it has to fundamentally do with what it is to be human; and that is how it is understood in this paper.

to life through death – and their active participation with Christ in his self-giving to God the Father, in which he prayed for his victimisers and partook of the despair of human alienation in suffering and violence. The pacific, self-giving transcendence of the prisoners led by the priest starkly contrasted to the violence of the mob: one was built on self-giving mimesis that desired the good of the other; while the other sought to acquire what the other had in order to possess it, and in so doing, make the other a sacrifice for the state. The pacific transcendence of the priest's group was structured by a self-giving mimesis as they entered into and imitated Christ's own transcendent self-giving to the Father and humanity. In other words, the self-giving mimesis of the group was not predicated on anything original to the group or any remarkable virtue of the priest. The group themselves attribute it to God; it was built on Christ's sacrificial way of being sharing in the loving self-giving of and to the Father which vanquishes the victimage delusion "on the most intimate level of experience."

Thus, in this space of Christian (or Trinitarian) transcendence, the priest was able to intervene through Christ's own way of praying in the midst of death and violence that appealed to the executioners. This prayer seemingly awakened the mob to the innocence of the victim and the false and arbitrary nature of their actions by awakening them to a Christian form of relationality and transcendence. The presence of the priest and the common prayer was able to remind the mob of the innocent victim by making a direct appeal to Christ: the Catholic priest – who acts in the office of Christ as victim *par excellence* and who stands with the victims – and the soon-to-be-victims – who stood in the position of victim like Christ – were able to awaken some form of conscious awareness in the mob. The mob was awakened to their own humanity as well as to the humanity of the victims – the victims were not just rivals who had disrupted their social order and they, as executioners, were not just enforcers of that social order. By being awakened to Christ, they remembered something essential about themselves and their victims that brought them into relationship for enough time to save the prisoners' lives. The victims themselves reported praying intensely and placing themselves in God's hands, like Christ. Prayer was not an escape for them, but a way to directly and peacefully engage with the reality of death and violence befalling them; a reality that they faced with Christ. God in this instance was not linked with a violent social order or the will of the mob, but stood with them as victims. This was an important and hard lesson for the Timorese to learn over 24 years of Indonesian occupation; and I believe it helps explain the massive rate of conversion to Catholicism during this time. God did not stand as guarantor of social order through myth, ritual and law, but stood with the victimised through faith learned in solidarity and union with Christ.

## **Solidarity & Conversion**

This leads to the third and final point. The victims were able to appeal to the conscience of the mob – some of whom were Timorese Christians themselves – by incarnating and living a different form of mimetic transcendence from the mob that resulted in a different form of mimetic solidarity. As mentioned, prayer represented a different form of mimetic transcendence: the pacific transcendence of Christ as opposed to the violent transcendence of the mob. This transcendence of Christ was structured by a particular form of mimesis and brought forth faith within the group - faith in the God revealed by Christ - despite the violence and death surrounding them, which resulted in faithful solidarity with each other. As Timorese remark, it is hard for an outsider to imagine the overwhelming environment of violence that existed in the Indonesian period; and that was intensely manifest in 1999 like in the story I have recounted. For something to break through that dictatorship of violence required the deepest existential and mimetic support “on the most intimate level of experience” that forms the person in a new way of being; what I have called a new mimetic direction that is made possible by faith. The belief in Christ’s way of being – in which one receives one’s good from the Father and seeks that good for others and God – requires conversion on the deepest level of being: a turning away from mimetic violence toward “the forgiving victim”, who stands outside our human violence and who moves into its centre to transform it. As James Alison says (2004, 13), “Imagine what it is like to be approached by your forgiving victim. What a pity none of us like very much to think about our being approached by our forgiving victim!” It is this encounter with Christ that Alison believe transforms humanity and its violence. In the case of the prisoners in East Timor, it is this forgiving victim to whom they turned by praying: they were appealing to God’s merciful love; and in doing so, made present that forgiving victim to the mob. In offering himself to humanity, God has enabled humanity to participate in his offering through Christ: by incarnating him as forgiving and self-giving victim.

This encounter with the forgiving victim, then, formed a stance of faith in the solidarity of the Timorese group. They did not face the mob as frightened and self-assertive individuals but as persons in relationship with the crucified and risen victim, and so, with each other: “The essence of faith is that I do not meet with something that has been thought up, but that here something meets me that is greater than anything we can think of for ourselves.... Since faith demands our whole existence, our will, our love, since it requires letting go of ourselves, it necessarily always goes

beyond a mere knowledge, beyond what is demonstrable” (Ratzinger, 2002, 29 & 35).<sup>27</sup> It is this kind of commitment that seemed to be required in the way the Timorese group faced and confronted violence – letting go of their fear and distorted desire through the initiative of the victimised Other. It is this commitment, which seems beyond human means tainted by distorted desire, that sheds important light on the faith of the group grounded in Christ.

Hamerton-Kelly (1992, 60) argues that the distortions of the founding murder and sacrificial victimage can only be rectified by a hermeneutic based on the revelation of the self-giving victim, which he calls “a hermeneutic of the Cross.” Gil Bailie (1995, 234-59) argues that the Cross bursts the hermeneutical circle that violently justifies itself by circling around the victim. It does this as the first truthful sign of mimetic life whose substance is self-giving forgiveness. “Forgive them for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34; KJV) is the definitive break and healing of human violence that awakens consciousness and being to mimetic desire through gratuitous self-giving.<sup>28</sup> Christian faith takes the victim, Christ, as its starting point and the generating centre of the hermeneutical circle. With this centre, faith that sets out on the path of truth as it responds to the Other’s self-giving love. Without this centre, humans are left to circle the victim in self-deceit. In Christ, humans are given ontological grounding by an “authentic” anthropological experience in encountering the forgiving victim. The victim approaches humans and leads them to receive full mimetic desire and thereby making it possible for humans to be stripped of their violent selves, egos and desires.

Thus, when the choice of being is occasioned by the approach of the forgiving victim, humans are opened to a new mimetic *possibility*. If the other who forms humans only does so in violence, there is no possibility for anything else. However, if the pacific Other irrupts into this violent circle, he gives humans a possibility not thought possible—an option that breaks the human heart and forms it anew:

The problem is that the social other which forms us is, and was before we came along, a violent other, full of the distortions, cruelty, murder and exploitation which abound all over the planet. That is to say, along with the way in which it brings us into being human, which is a good thing, there are introduced at the same time all sorts of violences and disturbances. Each of us is locked into the social other in a series of vicious circles. That we can perceive this at all is thanks only to the presence of the crucified and risen Jesus. There would be no way for us even to perceive fully the violence of the other which forms us unless there were something different, if you like, a different sort of other,

---

<sup>27</sup> While faith can be intellectually demonstrable, Ratzinger (1994, 103) argues: “The courage to believe cannot be communicated today, as formerly, in a purely intellectual manner. It requires first and foremost witnesses who verify faith as the correct path through their living and their suffering.”

<sup>28</sup> In this regard, Ratzinger (1990) highlights the “scandal of particularity” which prevents people from accepting the revelatory nature of the Jewish experience of God and Christ’s death and resurrection.

which is not part of the violent other which forms us. That is precisely what is made present by the gratuitously self-giving victim (Alison, 1998a, 98).

It is the option of a new mimesis which gives rise to *belief* in the possibility for a fully reconciled mimetic life in the love of the Other, rather than over against the other. This eschatologically-formed belief is grounded in Christ's own form of mimetic transcendence and solidarity. It is this new mimesis realised in faith that seems to open up the possibilities for humans in the midst of violence and death; to move humans to see the depths of who they are and who the Other is, free from the confines of mimetic scandal and violence.

This important and substantial mimetic movement and solidarity in Christ helps to explain the ultimate success of the Timorese in keeping the story of their victimage alive and proclaiming it. Despite the violence perpetrated against them, the Timorese continued to resist and seek for others to know the truth of their situation, based in their own remembering of the victims and martyrs in the Church. The local and international forces arrayed against the Timorese were remarkably overcome. The rare nature of the victory of the East Timorese to gain independence from an overwhelming military force, which has been commented on by various authors<sup>29</sup>, involved overturning the dominance of the "persecutor's perception" locally and internationally. There was a belief in East Timor that once the truth of their persecution was told and recognised, amidst all the lies of the Indonesian military and their allies (including Australia), they could be saved. Though the Indonesian state tried to create a story to the contrary, the East Timorese plight as victims eventually became accepted as fact and affected the consciences of those in neighboring countries and in multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations where the Indonesian invasion of East Timor had never been recognised.<sup>30</sup> However, as the Indonesian strategy of violence met resistance, it became more extreme as they attempted to establish an absolute power over violence.<sup>31</sup>

As it is exemplified in the priest's ability to break-through the contagion of violence by provoking an awareness of the victim, the East Timorese were successful in resisting the Indonesians through local and international support. They harnessed this support by directly resisting the central element of the state's attempts to legitimate itself, i.e., the creation of enemies and appropriation of the

---

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Fernandes (2004, 1-3) and Scott (2005, 5-11).

<sup>30</sup> Despite some significant allies, the repeated failure of Indonesia to gain recognition at the UN of its sovereignty over East Timor was a major blow to its political legitimacy. This failure was due to efforts of countries like Portugal and a strong lobbying effort by East Timorese leaders such as Jose Ramos-Horta and the international solidarity movement.

<sup>31</sup> The attempt of the Indonesians to monopolise violence in East Timor bears resemblance to the effort of any nation-state, though the means employed to achieve this goal resulted in a significant lack of local and international support and resulted in the ultimate failure of the Indonesian state.

victim's story. The perception of the good order of the Indonesian state and its benign intentions was undermined by the Catholic Church, the local resistance and international supporters by presenting the *victims* of the Indonesian state to the East Timorese, Indonesian and international communities. Their actions eventually eroded the claims of the Indonesian state by showing the truth of what occurred in East Timor, which had little to do with protecting the people. As mentioned, the filming of the Santa Cruz massacre in 1991 was a major turning point for the international community to recognise what was occurring in East Timor. Max Stahl, the film-maker who witnessed and filmed the Santa Cruz massacre, commented that it was a special occurrence in East Timor that the sacrifice of ordinary people on a large scale overturned the "logic of force" (Adams, 2007b). This sacrifice, he says, made a significant impact not only on the East Timorese people but on the international community. This sacrifice, as Girard argues, centres on the proclamation and revelation of the innocence of the victim, which is at the heart of how the martyr is remembered by the Christian community. Showing the innocence of the victims in East Timor at the hands of the violent Indonesian state was central in the appeal of the East Timorese to the conscience of the international community; an appeal which eventually overcame the "logic of force" through faith in Christ who inaugurated a way of being in the midst of violence and death structured by the self-giving, pacific transcendence shared with God the Father.