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Morphing Crowd into Community: Eucharist as Ritual and Anti-ritual

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Abstract

When culture develops as a tomb, rituals serve a preservative embalming function on the body of the victims, ensuring peace as only the world can give. The mimetic theory unravels the hitherto prevalent *méconnaissance* about the sacrificial foundations of rituals and reveals the pharmacological use of controlled violence in ritual to mitigate uncontrolled spasms of violence threatening the society. According to René Girard, the Gospels' revelation of the scapegoat mechanism and the victimary resolution of conflicts—the “things hidden since the foundation of the world”—has left religious rituals ineffective in healing violence. Christianity has thus become the end of all religion. However, the very kenotic-agapeic sacrifice of Christ becomes the essence of the Eucharist, the central ritual of Christian praxis. Is the Eucharist, being a religious ritual, rendered ineffective? The present paper seeks to engage this question. It looks at the Eucharist from diverse angles: ritual theory, doctrinal, theological, spiritual, psychological, and socio-political perspectives. It draws specially from the clinical theory and practice of Jung and Grotstein, the contextualized theology of Cavanaugh that explores the relationship between tortured body and the Eucharistic body, and the analytic functions of the Eucharist as addressing the constitutive lack in human nature, as espoused by Pound. Reading these theories within the context of the mimetic theory, the paper argues that the Eucharist is a ritual as well as an anti-ritual, seeking to transform the faithful from being a crowd into a community through a process of conversion and commitment to victims in and through the Victim *par excellence*.

Morphing Crowd into Community: Eucharist as Ritual and Anti-ritual

“Christianity, . . . is in a profound sense the *end of all religion*” (Schmemann, 1973, p. 19). On first hearing, the sentence sounds like a typical Girardian pronouncement. However, it actually belongs to protopresbyter Alexander Schmemann reflecting on the meaning and relevance of sacraments in the modern world. In the context of the mimetic theory, Girard concludes that thanks to Judeo-Christian revelation that has unraveled the victimary and sacrificial foundations of religions and cultures, religions have lost their rationale and rituals are rendered ineffective (Girard, 1978/1987; Girard, Antonello, & Rocha, 2007). Yet, the heart and soul of Christian praxis is the sacramental ritual of the Eucharist. The question arises then: is the Eucharistic ritual ineffective? The present paper is an attempt to answer this question in the context of the mimetic theory. I argue that the Eucharist is a ritual as well as an anti-ritual, a positively subversive sacrament that calls for conversion and transformation of human society from being a scapegoating crowd to an inclusive community. As the readers [participants in the Conference] are presumably familiar with the mimetic theory, I will only attempt a minimal contextual recapitulation of the theory for the limited purpose of this paper.

Rituals and Mimetic Theory

Etymologically, the word “ritual” derives from the Latin word *rītuālis*, meaning “of rites,” *rītus* being the word for rite (Merriam-Webster’s, 2007). The *Encyclopedia of Anthropology* defines ritual in terms of its generic function: “A religious ritual is a prescribed, routinized, and ceremonial action or set of actions, the function of which is symbolic and has specific significance to the performer and the performer’s community” (Lamb, 2006, p. 2011). There exist many definitions of ritual based on its cognitive grammar, psychological import, sociological signification, or religious meanings (Zuesse, 2005, p. 7833).

Rituals are a cultural constant, though its expressions change over time. They “reveal values at their deepest level . . . men express in ritual what moves them most” and in rituals we see “the essential constitution of human societies” (Wilson, 1954, as cited in Turner, 1969/ 1977, p. 6). Indeed, “ritual is a necessity rather than a mere option” (Grimes, 1995, p. 42) as they are “practices that illuminate our shared humanity” (Bell, 1997, p. 267). In Jung’s view, “man is in need of a symbolic life—badly in need” (1939/1980, p. 273 [*CW* 18, ¶ 625]). A ritual answers this need through a dominant symbol that evokes powerful emotions and intellection at the service of life (Turner, 1967). The symbols capture the primal encounter at the core of the rituals, a hierophany –manifestation of the sacred (Eliade, 1954/1971, 1959). Through rituals, human beings connect with it and recreate the same in the here and now.

Theories abound on the origins of ritual. One of the earliest theories belongs to Xunzi of 3rd century BCE, who places the origins squarely on the need for regulating human desire:

From whence did ritual arise? I reply: People are born with desires (*yu*). If they are unable to get what they desire, then they cannot help seeking it (*qiu*) all the more. If their seeking is not regulated and set within prescribed boundaries (*fen jie*), they will unavoidably contend with each other. Contending, they will grow disorderly; disorderly, they will wear themselves out. The ancient kings hated such disorder, so they established ritual principles (*li yi*) in order to contain (*fen*) it by training people’s desires and providing that which they sought. By these means they ensured that desire did not exhaust the goods desired and that goods did not fall short of what was desired. By thus holding these two [goods and desires] in balance, each was allowed to flourish. This is how ritual arose (13.1a; cf. W89). (Company, 1992/1996, p. 94)

Freud (1907/1959) places origin of rituals in the psychological defense mechanisms of repression and displacement whereas Erikson (1968/1996) grants rituals a biological necessity. For Otto (1923/1958) rituals emerge from an encounter with the sacred as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, an encounter that ignites human desire to imitate acts of gods (Eliade, 1960). For Turner, there is an element of conflict at the root of rituals (1969/1977).

Girard (1972/1977, 1978/1987, 1982/1989, 1999/2008, 2007) offers a uniquely comprehensive theory on the origins and functions of ritual as well as human culture. As per his mimetic theory, desire forms the essence of human nature, a desire that is mimetic, seeking to imitate the desire of an other. Such acquisitive mimesis may gradually become metaphysical, a desire for the being of the other, “personal significance understood as substantial being” (Hamerton-Kelly, 1994, p. ix). Such desire eventually forces human beings to become models and rivals to each other, resulting in crisis and conflict that ultimately lead to violence. Violence, being contagious, permeates the whole collective that finally purges itself through an act of scapegoating and sacrificing a victim. The sacrifice provides a cathartic effect, and the society finds “peace.” Such an act impresses upon the collective a realization that the victim is sacred—the one who caused the crisis has given its cure as well, by offering up his or her life. Girard, like Hubert and Mauss (1898/1964), argues that gods and goddesses were thus born of sacrifice which is the original ritual. It becomes a template for later rituals to be performed whenever a real or imagined crisis threatens the collective. Girard (1972/1977) concludes:

The extraordinary number of commemorative rites that have to do with killing leads us to imagine that the original event must have been a murder. . . . And the remarkable similarities among the sacrificial rites of various localities suggest that the murder was always of the same general type. . . . The rite is therefore a repetition of the original, spontaneous “lynching” that restored order in the community by reestablishing, around the figure of the surrogate victim, that sentiment of social accord that had been destroyed in the onslaught of reciprocal violence. (pp. 92, 95)

The purpose of a ritual is to “keep violence *outside* the community” (Girard, 1972/1977, p. 92). But this is achieved through a controlled act of violence. Therefore, for a ritual to be effective, it must be built on some *méconnaissance*, misunderstanding—the victimary foundation of the ritual together with the innocence of the victim should remain unconscious (pp. 103-105). However, the effectiveness of rituals has progressively declined in the modern society, partly due to emergence of political and judicial mechanisms of justice, themselves rooted in victimary

mechanism, but primarily due to the Judeo-Christian revelation that made conscious “things hidden since the foundation of the world” (Mt 13:35; Girard, 1978/1987). The God of the Bible is a god who defends the victim and denounces victimary mechanism. Such revelation is perfected in the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, who willingly undergoes society’s victimary mechanism and becomes a “collective victim” (Girard, 1999/2008, p. 121). In the process, Christ and the Gospel refuse to continue the cycle of violence, proclaim the innocence of the victim and the sinfulness of the collective. “A thoroughgoing refusal of mythic expulsions: that is what the biblical account teaches us” (p. 112). According to Girard, what is made conscious cannot become unconscious again, and hence, rituals built on the unconscious dynamics of sacrificial resolution are now rendered ineffective.

Eucharist as Ritual and Anti-Ritual

The above thesis begs the question: if the Judeo-Christian revelation is the end of all religion and renders rituals ineffective, how about the Eucharist, the central Christian, especially Catholic, ritual that captures the mystery of Christ?

That the Eucharist is a ritual is beyond dispute. It fulfils much of the dynamics of the ritual I briefly discussed earlier. It has a dominant symbol—bread and wine, and it re-enacts an act of god, Christ’s sacrifice. It is a ritual believed to be instituted by Christ (1 Cor 11:23-26; Mark 14:22-24; Matthew 26:26-30; Luke 22:14-23; John 6:25-59), hence proclaimed to be the “Sacrament of sacraments” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, p. 336), and practiced from the early days of the Church (Bouyer, 1968). Affirmed and upheld by various Councils and considered “the fount and apex of the whole Christian life” (Paul, 1964, ¶ 11), it is a mandatory ritual for Christians. For a detailed review of the evolution of the Eucharistic doctrine across the ages, the readers may consult Bouyer (1968), Mazza (1999), and O’Connor (2005). Neuner and

Dupuis (2001) provides chronicled excerpts from the documents of the Church on the Eucharist. It only suffices to state here that the Eucharist is the central ritual of Christian faith. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) states,

There is no surer pledge or clearer sign of [the] great hope in the new heavens and new earth “in which righteousness dwells,” than the Eucharist. Every time this mystery is celebrated, “the work of our redemption is carried on” and we “break the one bread that provides the medicine of immortality, the anti-dote for death, and the food that makes us live for ever in Jesus Christ.” (¶ 1405)

However, the Eucharist is a unique ritual in that it differs from other rituals in its constitution and dynamics. While being a ritual, it is also a critique of ritual, an *anti-ritual*. I argue that it is this unique dynamics that accounts for its effectiveness and potential for redemptive transformation. I shall state my defense in six key ideas.

1. *The Eucharist consciously and purposefully honors the Victim par excellence, revealing his innocence and identity.*

According to Girard (1978/1987), myths and rituals seek to keep the victimary mechanism hidden for the peace of the collective. The underlying philosophy is that of Caiaphas: it is better that one person perishes to save the collective (John 11:50). The Eucharist moves in a counterdirection: it reveals and honors the one who willingly became the sacrificial victim so that there shall no more be victims or blood sacrifices, but everyone shall be members of one family. Love, and not violence, shall be the foundation of the new humanity. If the tomb is the cultural symbol (Girard, 1978/1987, p. 83), the Eucharistic symbol is the empty tomb. The theology of the Eucharist affirms it repeatedly: it is “a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity” (Paul, 1963, ¶ 47); “a meal of brotherly solidarity” (Paul, 1965a, ¶ 38); “sign and cause” of unity (Paul, 1965b, ¶ 70); an “epiphany of communion” (John Paul, 2004, ¶ 21) with Christ and people. Thus, the Eucharist celebrates the revelation of the things hidden since the foundation of the world and offers the means of redemption for the whole humanity.

2. *In and through the body of Christ, the Victim, the Eucharist makes visible the tortured body of the victims of the society, calling for reconciliation.*

As Victim par excellence, Christ stands for all and every victim of the society. The question Christ asks Saul, confronting the latter's violence in a vision, is revealing: "Why are you persecuting *me* [emphasis added]?" (Acts 9: 4). Through the bread that is broken and held before the collective, the Eucharist makes visible the tortured body of the victims of our everyday scapegoating. The Eucharist challenges the classical notions of beauty by honoring the disfigured body of the Crucified, and invites us to partake of his beauty in order to be able to see the goodness and beauty of every disfigured body around us (Astell, 2006).

The power of the Eucharist to make visible the tortured body of victims is well captured by Cavanaugh (1998) in his analysis of torture in Chile during the Pinochet regime. Whereas torture as state liturgy dehumanizes, fragments, and atomizes the body, the Eucharist counters it by boldly making visible, empowering, and uniting the broken bodies.

Where torture is an anti-liturgy for the realization of the state's power on the bodies of others, Eucharist is the liturgical realization of Christ's suffering and redemptive body in the bodies of His followers . . . Torture creates victims; Eucharist creates witnesses, *martyrs*. Isolation is overcome in the Eucharist by the building of a communal body which resists the state's attempt to disappear it. (p. 206)

The Eucharist enables one to imagine the world differently. Cavanaugh's study documents how the Church responded effectively to torture through practices rooted in Eucharistic imagination. Hodge (2007) documents similar Eucharistic practices in East Timor. Bishop Romero's defense of the victims in El Salvador is yet another classic case (Brockman, 1989).

3. *The Eucharist honors a sacrifice, with a difference.*

The sacrificial reading of Christ's death has been a moot point within the Girardian scheme. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978/1987) Girard rejects the

sacrificial reading and upholds the non-sacrificial reading of the Gospels. However, 20 years down the lane (2007), Girard revises his position and comments:

Most of my ideas are there [in THSFW] but with two mistakes that I was able to amend only in later books The first is the rejection of the word ‘sacrifice’ in relation to Christianity. The second is the hasty and wrongheaded dismissal of the Epistle to the Hebrews. (p. 40)

The ideal perspective is a “both-and” reading—both sacrificial and non-sacrificial. Sacrifice is a deeply rooted dimension of human psyche, and the Eucharist *must* address it, as psychiatrist Jung (1942/1969) observes: “In Christ’s sacrifice and the Communion one of the deepest chords in the human psyche is struck: human sacrifice and ritual anthropophagy” (p. 222 [CW 11, ¶ 339]). However, Jesus’ is a sacrifice that puts an end to all victimary sacrifices, but invites us to make a kenotic sacrifice at the service of life and love (Philippians 2:1-11). The Eucharist relives this mature dynamic which makes the Eucharist “*the rite of the individuation process*” (Jung, p. 273 [CW 11, ¶ 414]), the highest goal of human development in the Jungian dispensation. Therefore, the Eucharist, being a bloodless sacrifice that honors Christ’s sacrifice and impels us towards kenotic and inclusive loving, becomes “a highly differentiated artifact” which contributes to its ineffable beauty and efficacy (p. 267 [CW 11, ¶ 405]).

4. The Eucharist demands examination of the status quo and conversion.

If rituals are generally about affirming and preserving the innocence of the collective and the guilty difference of the victim, the Eucharist moves in the opposite direction. It directly confronts the guilt of the collective and demands conversion. A poignant movement within the Eucharistic choreography is the penitential rite. The assembly is invited to examine its conscience in the light of Christ, acknowledge its sins of omission and commission, and seek forgiveness and reconciliation. This follows Christ’s mandate: “If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother [or sister] has anything against you, leave your gift there at the

altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother [or sister], and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). Girard (2007) writes about conversion:

Conversion means to become aware that we are persecutors. It means choosing Christ or Christlike individual as a model for our desires. It also means seeing oneself as being in the process of imitating from the very beginning. Conversion is the discovery that we have always, without being aware of it, been imitating the wrong kind of models who lead us into the vicious circle of scandals and perpetual frustration. (p. 223)

This impulse for conversion and repentance that the Eucharistic space offers is beautifully captured in this experience of psychoanalyst Grotstein (1997):

This chronically depressed, early middle-aged Canadian Jewish physician had been in analysis with me for seven years at the time of this incident and had been in a state of prolonged and weary resistance for some time. During a vacation to Paris he visited the Cathedral de le Sacre Coeur, where he reported that he had a “religious experience.” He gazed upon the statue of Christ who, with His bleeding wounds, seemed to have reached out mercifully and forgivingly to the patient. The patient then exclaimed to me, “I don’t need psychoanalysis! I need God in order to regain my innocence!”

The patient had no way of knowing that during this session and even presciently during previous sessions with him I had been countersubjectively visualizing the image of Michelangelo’s Pietà and, equally mysteriously to me, silently reciting to myself, “washed in the blood of the Lamb!” (p. 193)

5. Authenticity of the Eucharist is in washing the feet.

The Eucharist has a very anti-ritualistic end: The converted assembly is dismissed (“Ite, Missa est”) to go out and *be* the Eucharist in the world. The Mass is never ended, only the specifically ritualistic half of the Mass ends in the church, but the Eucharistic imperative continues into the “world.” This is precisely why, when the synoptic gospels narrate the Last Supper, the generative event of the Eucharist, John’s gospel focuses on Jesus washing the feet of the disciples (Jn 13:1-17), a menial job performed only by a servant or slave in those days.

Reflecting on this event, John Paul II (2004) writes:

There is one other point which I would like to emphasize, since it significantly affects the authenticity of our communal sharing in the Eucharist. It is the impulse which the Eucharist gives to the community for *a practical commitment to building a more just and*

fraternal society. . . . It is not by chance that the Gospel of John contains no account of the institution of the Eucharist, but instead relates the “washing of feet” (cf. *Jn* 13:1-20): by bending down to wash the feet of his disciples, Jesus explains the meaning of the Eucharist unequivocally. (¶ 28)

This “unequivocal” meaning of the Eucharist and its “authenticity” in love and service—not only to the victims but to the “perpetrators” as well—have been a constant in theological reflections (Benedict, 2007; Watkins, 2003; Cavanaugh, 1998; Collins, 1987; Fleming, 1987; Kelly, 1993, 2001; Lamb, 1982; Power, 2006; Scott, 2009). Isn’t this act of washing the feet a corrective to the stamping of the victims in the myths and rituals of the Dinkas, the Ceram Islanders, and the Ngadju-Dayaks of Borneo (Girard, 1972/1977)?

6. *The Eucharist addresses constitutive lack, cleanses desire, offers an unrivalistic model.*

Lacan (2006) speaks of a constitutive lack in human beings that becomes formative in the emergence of desire. His solution is to reconcile to the lack and assume one’s desire so as to live with it. Pound (2007) revisits Lacanian theory through Kierkegaardian lens and argues that the Christ-mystery opens us to a lack that emerges from an abundance—the lack of human structures adequate enough to contain the plenitude of grace that God offers us. Here the sacraments serve “as a filter, like a pair of sunglasses, to funnel the divine radiance lest one should burn one’s eyes” (p. 169). Thus, “whereas Lacan consigns the subject to a despairing lack, Eucharistic devotion points the subject towards the divine plenitude of God’s love” (p. 155). This plenitude provides us with a true object (subject) of desire: God in Christ who is an unrivalistic model. For, his plenitude can never be exhausted and is present totally and infinitely to everyone, and it is a “vertical,” “transcendent relationship” (Oughourlian, 2010, p. 51). Referring to the mystery of Transubstantiation in the Eucharist, Pound (2007) writes:

In this moment our desire for God is matched by God’s desire for us. The Eucharist creates the conditions for the assumption of desire: the contradiction contained therein forces the earnestness of faith; one must leave behind the shared comfort of reason for the

‘madness’ . . . of Christianity and in doing so become subjectively engaged in eucharistic practice. (pp. 173-174)

Such dynamics cleanses our desires, heals us of our violent impulses and makes us capable of universal, inclusive loving. Referring to the practice of gazing at the Eucharist, Weil (1973) argues that attention to the Eucharist can bring destruction of evil within us, as the Eucharist, in its absolute purity, can absorb and destroy the evil within us.

Conclusion: Morphing Crowd into Community

The brief examination of the nature of the Eucharist as ritual and anti-ritual can be summed up thus: the Eucharistic practice changes us from being a crowd into a community. It morphs us from being an undifferentiated mass with no personality but that of mimetic contagion convulsing with violence into a differentiated but united community of disciples penitently conscious of its sin of scapegoating, and resolutely intent on a kenotic loving that is inclusive of the whole creation under one God. The ritualistic dimension of the Eucharist channels the divine grace for such conversion whereas the anti-ritualistic dimension of the Eucharist empowers the community to authenticate the celebration in daily living. It is not without reason that during the Paschal Triduum in the Holy Week the Church leaves the tabernacle empty: The Victim is no more here, but is out there, in the Galilees of the world, among the living (Mark 16:6-7).

Girard talks of the sacred being infused with violence, but affirms the differential the Judeo-Christian revelation introduces: “The God of the Bible is at first the God of the sacred, and then more and more the God of the holy, foreign to all violence, the God of the Gospels” (2007, p. 218). The Eucharist captures this transformation for us: it helps us evolve from participation in the sacred (being a crowd) into participation in the holy (being a community). Indeed, if “violence is the heart and the secret soul of the sacred” (1972/1977, p. 31), then the Eucharist is the heart and the open soul of the Holy.

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