

MIMESIS AND DOMINION  
THE DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND THE IMITATION  
OF CHRIST IN MAXIMUS CONFESSOR\*

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Violence is the single most frightening reality facing humanity. Nineteen hundred and ninety saw more murders in North America than any other previous year. The crisis in the Middle East is only exacerbated by claims on both sides that God or Allah will triumph. And ever since Constantine became both emperor and Christian, the church has been involved in the justification of human violence. The gospel of love was subverted.

One of the merits of dialogue in theology between East and West may lie in getting beyond the impasse created by the apparent divine sanction of violence and sacrifice. The work of René Girard, literary critic at Stanford University, offers a new and exciting paradigm of understanding human violence and divine love. The implications of Girard's work are currently filtering into virtually every discipline, from anthropology to literary criticism, from psychology to theology.<sup>1</sup>

It is our contention that Girard's description of human violence is paralleled in the writings of Maximus the Confessor, most specifically the "Four Hundred Chapters on Love."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In addition to studies mentioned in this essay see also *Diacritics* 8.1 (Spring 1978); *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion* 10 (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1981); Michel Deguy and Jean Pierre-Dupuy *René Girard et le problème du mal* (Paris: Grasset, 1982); *Violence et vérité: autour de René Girard* (Paris: Grasset, 1982); *To Honor René Girard* (Stanford French and Italian Studies 34, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>Citations from Maximus' writings will be taken from *Maximus Confessor* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

This should come as no surprise, for Girard's earliest work as a literary critic was in Dostoevsky.<sup>3</sup> This unorthodox Orthodox Russian writer illumined Girard's understanding of human relationships. One would expect to find that certain of the "fathers" of Eastern Orthodoxy would also share similar insights into the human condition.

### *Girard's Hypothesis*

Girard contends that human culture is founded on violence done to a random victim. His work is the extension and critique of the early pioneers of theories of the origins of hominization. Somewhere in the dim mists of pre-history a human being was slaughtered to protect the community from a more complete self-annihilation. In the earliest beginnings of human culture, humanity is separated from all other living creatures by an act of violence, an act of irrational life-taking. As Andrew McKenna wryly puts it, "In the beginning was the victim."<sup>4</sup> Girard contends that it is mimetic desire which led to this violence, to the expulsion of the victim, and finally the ritual process. Mimetic desire or mimesis refers to desire directed and energized by the covetous dynamics of imitation.<sup>5</sup>

Girard's description of "acquisitive mimesis" is the cornerstone of his hypothesis. Picture two children in a room full of toys. As soon as one of them reaches out for a toy, and not before that, that one toy becomes the object of desire. The first child becomes a model. The second child imitates the first child. As the two children focus their attention on the toy, a rivalry ensues. The model issues a double-bind in his act of reaching. On the one hand, he makes the toy an object of desire by reaching for it, occasioning mimesis. On the other hand, as soon as he reaches for the toy an implied prohibition is expressed; the toy belongs to him since he reached for it

<sup>3</sup>René Girard *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1965); *Dostoievski: du Double à la unité* (Paris: Plon, 1963); "Strategies of Madness" in *To Double Business Bound* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 61-83.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew McKenna, "Introduction" to *Semeia*, Vol. 33, 1985, 5.

<sup>5</sup>René Girard *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1972), 146.

first. The rivalry, as most parents can attest, inevitably turns to violence. This violence ends with the expulsion or victimizing of one of the two rivals vying for the toy.

In the same way, Girard argues that similar mimesis can be found in the origins of the hominization process. Girard uses as an example the myth found in Livy of the founding of Rome by the two brothers, Romulus and Remus. Romulus has just finished tracing the boundaries of the city when Remus jumps those boundaries. This act of mimesis in a display of authority turns into a rivalry in which Remus ends up being murdered by the angry crowd.<sup>6</sup> One can also point to the suggestive founding murder in Genesis 4, where two brothers seek the attention of God and one brother kills the other to end the rivalry.<sup>7</sup>

Girard points out that Freud correctly identified the significance of the founding murder but failed to explore its meaning.<sup>8</sup> That is, Freud originally explored mimesis as the mechanism underlying the Oedipus complex, but failed to carry through his insights into his later works.<sup>9</sup> The founding murder in Freud is misunderstood, according to Girard. Girard contends that the modern re-discovery of the collective murder originates with Freud. However, as Girard observes with respect to the murder:

Freud astutely surmised the necessity for this act, but because the mechanism of the surrogate victim eluded him, he failed to grasp its *modus operandi*. This mechanism provides the only feasible explanation of how a sacrificial murder, originally regarded as a crime, can literally be transformed into an act of piety.<sup>10</sup>

In moving beyond Freud and by locating mimetic desire at the heart of the phenomenon of violence (the victimage

<sup>6</sup>René Girard *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986), 88-94.

<sup>7</sup>René Girard *Things Hidden From the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 144-149.

<sup>8</sup>Esp. *Violence and the Sacred*, 173.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 169-172.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 197.

mechanism), Girard is able to suggest a paradigm which explains the function of both myth and ritual in the hominization process. As an explanation for myth, the victimage mechanism could also participate in the development of the symbolic process in general and the formation of linguistic symbols and ultimately texts.<sup>11</sup>

According to Girard, this founding murder is, until the gospel texts, shrouded in a mythological deception. Texts written from the perspective of the persecutor are mythic and false, preserved by the community to rationalize and sacralize persecution. In myths and persecution texts,<sup>12</sup> the victim is always judged as guilty, blamed for the woes that have befallen the community.<sup>13</sup> As victim, the persecuted becomes the focus of the hostility generated in the mimetic process.

However, once expelled or murdered, the victim becomes transformed in the perception of the community when, as a result of the transference of communal hostility to the innocent scapegoat, cohesion is restored. The transformation of the persecuted victim into the Bringer of Peace, the One who restores cohesion and blessing to the community, is the process of sacralizing. This sudden change is usually attributed to the appeasement of the transcendent as the most viable source for the remarkable cessation of hostility and onset of cohesive tranquility. It is this process of sacralizing, operational as a principle of interpretation of both texts and situations, which Girard refers to as the sacrificial hermeneutic.<sup>14</sup>

It is ironic but true that violence can effect reconciliation. The beneficial effects of the scapegoat are the grounds of ritual in which the community from that point on, will engage. Ritual reenactment of the sacrificial victimage mechanism now safeguards the community from further spontaneous outbursts of mimetic violence. Ritual channels mimesis so that the community's violence does not get out of hand but instead

<sup>11</sup>Robert Hammerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 129.

<sup>12</sup>The connection between myths and persecution texts is argued in *The Scapegoat*, 24-44; *Violent Origins*, 112 ff.

<sup>13</sup>René Girard *Job: The Victim of His People* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).

<sup>14</sup>*Violent Origins*, 91 ff; *The Scapegoat*, 44.

is displaced onto a single victim. Ritual reenactment of the victimage mechanism is a feigned disintegration of the community to ward off the threat of a real mimetic crisis. The sacrificial hermeneutic is thus justified in the community's myths and ritually reenacted in the community's life.

The gospel texts, according to Girard, reveal the innocence of the victim and the guilt of the persecutors. As texts, they challenge the mythological hermeneutic found in any other text which attributes guilt to the victim. The Gospel texts demystify all other texts which conceal the victimage mechanism under the sacralizing impact of the sacrificial hermeneutic.

The sacrificial hermeneutic places a deceptive cover over the victim, making the victim appear guilty of all the crimes of which he is accused, protecting and justifying the victimizing person or community. The death of the victim is seen as necessary or divinely sanctioned to relieve the mimetic crisis of the community.

The alternative to this mimetic model of human relationships is that of love, modeled for us by Jesus in the Gospel story. This alternative we have elsewhere termed "dominion."<sup>15</sup> These two models of human relationships are already juxtaposed in Maximus Confessor.

### *Maximus Confessor*

In "The Four Hundred Chapters on Love," Maximus details the spiritual life through the stereo-opticon lens of mimesis and dominion.

Like Girard, Maximus perceived that the dynamic of human relations is structured according to an imitative quality. Humans imitate each other's desires for the same object. In

<sup>15</sup>Edwin Hallsten and Michael Hardin, "Violence: A Basic Biblical Paradigm: René Girard's 'Mimesis' and 'Dominion,'" presented to the *International Congress on Christian Counseling*, Atlanta 1988. The term "dominion" carries a lot of negative baggage, and perhaps a better term may later be found. We have borrowed it from the works of Douglas John Hall, who uses it to express the positive character of the wholistic stewardship of life.

a helpful distinction between objects, their representations, and imitative desire, Maximus observes that we do not battle against either objects which are external or which we have internalized. Rather we battle the desire of mimetic differentiation. He says,

Thing, representation, and passion are different realities. A thing is, for example, a man, a woman, gold, and so forth. A representation is, for example, a simple recollection of any of these things. Passion, however, is an irrational affection or senseless hate for any of these things (3.42, cf. 2.16).

Like Girard, Maximus observes that the covetous dynamics of mimesis stem from self-love and issue in violence (3.56). He astutely observes the role played by the object when he says, "passions are hidden in the soul, and are revealed when the object appears" (3.78).

Like a stone which weighs the passion to the object (3.56) or a little sparrow whose foot is tied to the ground (1.85), covetousness is the root of all downward human drives, it is "greed which gives life and growth to passion" (1.84). The dynamics of mimesis can issue in lust and hatred (1.14), grudges (1.20), gossip (1.55), abuse of parents (1.59), anger (1.75), bondage (2.3), irrational love and senseless hate (2.7), scandal (2.31), greed, vengeance (2.68), and war (3.15). Examples could be multiplied.

While the imitative aspects of mimesis are not as clear as we might wish them to be, nevertheless, there is a clear connection between greed and covetousness and ultimately the violence which destroys community.

Objects in themselves are not the issue, rather they are neutral. It is mimesis which determines the value of any given object (4.66). The desire to have what another has produces false desire. He contends, "it is not food which is evil, but gluttony, not the begetting of children but fornication, not possessions but greed, not reputation but vainglory. And if this is so, there is nothing evil in creatures but misuse" (3.4).

Money can be the object of desire for which humans engage in mimetic conflict (1.23). Maximus contends that what makes money [gold] enviable as a medium of exchange is

what it can “provide for their pleasures” (3.16-19). As one Girardian interpreter puts it, “money becomes the basis of social evaluation because the whole community identifies with it. Therefore what is at stake in the subject’s relation to money is not conformity to a hypothetical nature but the approval of society itself.”<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein Maximus asserts that “the hedonist loves money because with it he lives in luxury; the vain person because with it he can be praised” (3.18, 3.83).

The mimetic relationship issues in a relationship of doubles by which the imitated becomes a stumbling block, a *skandalon*. The undifferentiation that exists between doubles can lead to “unambiguous language” by which one may “goad a brother.” This in turn brings “the same from him in turn and drive[s] away the disposition of love from . . . both” (4.32). Indeed, the mimetic conflict is set up because “it is a characteristic of the one who still loves empty glory or who is attached to some material thing to take offense at men for the sake of passing things, or to bear resentment or to have hate for them or to be a slave to shameful thoughts” (4.41).

Maximus with precision observes how mimesis occasions the crisis of doubles. He observes that “when the mind receives the representation of things, it of course patterns itself after each representation. In contemplating them spiritually, it is variously conformed to each object contemplated” (3.97). This insight is identical to that of Girard, who contends that object rivalry swiftly moves to metaphysical desire when the object of desire drops out and the fascination with the relationship of doubles escalates the mimetic crisis.<sup>17</sup>

Scandal, or occasions for mimesis, are to be avoided at all cost. The one who desires God is not to tolerate even suspicions against anyone that “would be the occasion of scandal for you” (1.69).

When scandalized because of another’s mimesis, the Christian is not to hate the offender, but rather “the offense and the demon who contrived the offense” (4.83).

<sup>16</sup>André Orléan, “Money and Mimetic Speculation” in Paul Dumochel ed., *Violence and Truth* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 111.

<sup>17</sup>*Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 29 ff, 299 ff.

Maximus connects mimesis with the demonic on several occasions. Girard has also observed that the satanic element in the gospel is equivalent to the mimetic conflict.<sup>18</sup> He observes that the scandal is never the material object but rather the alienated relationship that results from mimetic rivalry. The model easily turns into rival. Indeed Girard contends that,

scandal is a relationship that has equally bad consequences for the person who provokes it and for the person who submits to it. Scandal is always a relationship of doubles, and the distinction between the person provoking the scandal and the person undergoing it will always tend to vanish; the passive object of scandal becomes an agent of it and contributes to its diffusion.<sup>19</sup>

Girard contends that Satan is the master of mimetic trickery. The gospel texts engage in a deconstructive effort by "equating Satan with the mimetic principle."<sup>20</sup> Maximus's observations about the role of the demonic are always connected with the mimetic rivalry between brothers [and sisters!]. The gospels, Maximus, and Girard are all contending that the mimetic rivalry which issues in violence is at its core nothing other than the demonic.

In fact, the demons can become weakened when mimetic rivalry is diminished and "they perish when finally they are obliterated through detachment of soul, since they no longer find anything by which they might gain and do battle against it" (2.22).<sup>21</sup> That is, when mimetic rivalry begun over imitation of desire for an object is refused, then it is possible for another alternative to occur.

This alternative we have termed dominion. In the gospels, there is a positive imitation as well as a negative one. The

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>21</sup>The stripping of power from the Satan is at the heart of Orthodox soteriology. The biblical-theological dimension of satanic power and its vanquishing is explored by Walter Wink in *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) and *Unmasking the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

positive imitation is twofold: Jesus imitates the Father, and His followers are called to imitate Him.

Maximus affirms that just ridding oneself of mimesis is not enough. It is akin to the man who cleaned the demon out of his house but did not dwell in it himself. The demon came back with seven others and his end was worse than his beginning. Indeed, knowledge of mimesis without a corresponding positive *imitatio* only puffs up. Here, King Saul is adduced as an example. Maximus painfully observes,

Thus one finds many men with considerable knowledge who yet wallow in the passions of the flesh like pigs in mud. For in reaching through their diligence a certain degree of purification and in acquiring knowledge but later growing careless they can be compared to Saul, who after being given the kingship conducted himself unworthily and was dismissed from it with terrible wrath (3.66).

The upshot is that one who does not move to a positive imitation, to “spiritual contemplation” will once again revert to bodily passions (3.70). Indeed, one who does not move into a dominion model of spirituality after having defeated mimesis, will end up a religious *skandalon*, a stumbling block to others (3.84).

A “transfer” must take place by which God becomes the object of desire for the human, rather than the brother or sister (3.64). If this transfer does not happen, one will never break free from mimetic rivalry.

Dominion occurs when God is the object of desire. When, in maturity the spiritual person has become focused on God alone, “the grace of theology” is given, and the mind “will consider the essence of God himself through the Spirit, insofar as it is possible to the human mind” (2.26).<sup>22</sup> The apophatic character of spirituality is underscored on numerous occasions. This is so because no one can claim to “know” God, this

<sup>22</sup>See my “Reflections on the Spirituality of Soren Kierkegaard” *Scottish Journal of Theology* (forthcoming) for a discussion of apophatic spirituality and human knowledge.

would be a gnostic elitism which in turn would only produce mimetic rivalry. On the contrary, the apophatic nature of knowledge of God underscores the inability for anyone to imitate another in knowledge of God.

The way of love, of self-giving love breaks down mimesis. Love "edifies, because it neither envies nor grows angry with those who do envy, nor does it make a public display of what is the object of envy . . ." (4.60). It is to Maximus's credit that he begins his little book with a clear description of this way of *agape*. Love, like mimesis, is indiscriminate (1.17). Like mimetic violence which plays no favorites, love too shows no partiality (1.24-25). To love is to love one's enemies, even to the point of dying as Jesus did (1.71). This way of love does not distinguish between love of God and love of neighbor, but loves God in loving the neighbor, and loves the neighbor in loving God.

In this way of loving, any violent retaliation is precluded (1.28, 30, 1.37).<sup>23</sup> Unlike mimesis which ends in violence, expulsion, and scapegoating, love ends in the giving of life, not the taking of life, for God is "the Lord and Giver of life."

Like the work of Christ which reconciles us to God, the one who rids self of mimesis will also be reconciled to his brothers and sisters (1.53, 3.13, 3.89-90, 4.19). As there is no mimesis in God, i.e., "no contrary quality" (3.27), so there is to be no mimetic competition among the people of God.

How is one to move from mimesis to dominion? According to Maximus the spiritual disciplines allow one to fend off mimesis. These include prayer, contemplation, fasting, alms-giving, and love or service to one's neighbor (1.44, 1.64, 1.79, 2.26, 2.100, 3.50, 4.86). The practical application for the Christian is to imitate Jesus, who models the life of God for us. In the imitation of Christ there is freedom from any mimetic rivalry and the ability to live humbly and vulnerably. That is, like Christ, His followers can live the very life of the Father also.

Two important corollaries suggest themselves from these observations.

<sup>23</sup>See the important essay on non-violence in Maximus by Charles McCarthy in Joseph T. Culliton ed., *Non-Violence: Central to Christian Spirituality* (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1982), 63-86.

First, violence must be seen as a human activity, not a divine one. There is no mimesis in God, hence there can be no violence. In the words of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, “violence (*bia*) is no attribute of God.” God’s *autexousia* is a freely determined dominion, a self-surrendering for humanity. Dumitru Staniloae describes this love of God. He contends that,

The foundation of our own sacrifice and the source of its power, the source of our love for the Father in which is our true life, is the sacrifice of Christ, his spotless self-surrender to the Father accomplished out of love for the Father and of us, and out of love for the Father which he has on our behalf as a man.<sup>24</sup>

God’s love is the axiom from which Christian theology must begin and end.<sup>25</sup> Maximus also realized this when he began and ended his “Four Hundred Chapters on Love” in similar fashion.

The second corollary is that Christian theology informed by the axiomatic love of God in the destructuring of religion must reframe our understanding of soteriology. Vladimir Lossky points out that one aspect of true dominion is that it allows, indeed encourages, dialogue between God and man. The *autexousia* of God has its anthropological counterpart in the *imago Dei*. Humans are truly free in their relationship to the Creator. This *autexousia* of God in relation to humanity has plagued western theology in that evil is often attributed to God who is seen as its ultimate cause.<sup>26</sup>

Lossky points out that in the divine there is a “risk” which is proper to God, and that rationalist theology which conceives of God *in abstracto* attributes a lifelessness to God when it makes God incapable of such risks.<sup>27</sup> Dominion has

<sup>24</sup>Dumitru Staniloae, *Theology and the Church* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1980), 196. Arthur McGill has opened the way for Western theology to do precisely this in his Athanasian inspired *Suffering: A Test Case of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968).

<sup>25</sup>So Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

<sup>26</sup>Vladimir Lossky *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1974), 211-227.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 214.

nothing to do with domination, external constraint upon the will of another.<sup>28</sup> Rather it has to do with God's giving of Himself to the creature. It refers to God's inner self-surrender for humanity. The greatest risk taken by God was the sending of the Son to be the ultimate scapegoat, in order to reveal human "religion" in all its evil.

This is most clearly seen in the Book of Job. Like Girard, Lossky observes that Job's friends participate in a false vision of God. The dialogue of the friends lends support to a "god" who victimizes his creation, and who in turn is appeased by victimizing. In Girardian language, Lossky contends that we must see dominion through the victimage mechanism, through "a theology of the cross" (Luther), where evil is used by God to subvert and conquer the satanic.<sup>29</sup>

This means that there was simply no other way for God to reveal the human character of mimesis and violence except through the victimage mechanism. There is no going around it, only through it. By going through it and revealing it for what it is, purely human evil, God strips violence of its mythologizing ability to include Him in it. The anthropological center of human religion, the scapegoat, could only be broken down by the One who could not participate in the mechanism any other way. Human religion is deconstructed by divine revelation.

In the world there will be sacrifice and violence, but there ought not to be such in the church.<sup>30</sup> Scapegoating, as part of the victimage mechanism has no role in the church. Lossky submits that,

all other conflicts in which we are obliged to take part in this world are restricted to the interests of a group, a party, a country, a human ideology; they inevitably exclude and sacrifice our enemies. Here,

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>30</sup>Unfortunately both Byzantine and Western ecclesial life are replete with periods of victimage. When the churches take ownership of their participation in victimage they take the first step toward breaking through mimesis and violence. Documentation is provided in the two-volume work by Frederick Norwood, *Strangers and Exiles: A History of Religious Refugees* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

however, no one is excluded or sacrificed: even when the church takes action against men, it is still for the salvation of these men that she continues to strive.<sup>31</sup>

Dominion exercised by the church exposes the "fallen" character of mimesis and violence, and unlike human religious systems it will exclude no one. Rather, the church is called to the post of the scapegoat to do as Christ did, to reveal the impotence of violence as a means of reconciliation and justice. It is significant that there is no justification of violence in Orthodox soteriology, as one finds, e.g., in Augustine.<sup>32</sup> Rather, redemption is perceived in terms of dominion, i.e., integration and restoration.<sup>33</sup> Dominion soteriology is always "good news" because it includes, invites, and encompasses all.

Several times Maximus contends that we are to love as Christ has loved us. And this specifically includes standing by those who are being scapegoated (4.95-98). It is significant that the true display of love with which Maximus ends his little book is the display of solidarity with the extruded scapegoat! Redemption is thus the inclusion of the extruded, those whom humanity will use to justify religious life. But in standing by the marginalized, the Christian community lives its non-violent ethic and reveals that it alone has the capacity to bring light and healing and vindication through resurrection. It trusts in God, who raised the scapegoat Jesus from the dead, and who will always take the side of those extruded (Matthew 25).

Maximus the Confessor is thus a vital witness to the twin aspects of imitation; negative imitation or *mimesis*, and positive imitation or *dominion*. Girard's observations are supported by this father of Byzantine Orthodoxy. The writings of Maximus are as relevant today as they were in the sixth and seventh centuries. Not simply a witness against monotheletism, Maximus is also a witness for a healthy spirituality in a world broken by mimesis, rivalry, and violence.

<sup>31</sup>*In the Image and Likeness of God*, 226-227.

<sup>32</sup>Peter Brown calls Augustine "the first theorist of the Inquisition," *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 240.

<sup>33</sup>John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham, 1974), 138-150.