

RESURRECTION AS ATONEMENT:  
REDISCOVERING THE NONVIOLENCE OF CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY USING  
GIRARD'S PRINCIPLE OF METAPHYSICAL DESIRE AS A HEURISTIC KEY

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Colloquium on Violence and Religion  
June 19, 2008



There is a contradiction between the nonviolent ethics of Jesus on the one hand, and the commonplace Christian doctrine on the other hand, that we are reconciled to God by the violent death of Jesus. Toleration for this contradiction is in steep decline of late, especially among liberal theologians, who are seeking an alternative atonement theory. Girard's mimetic theory may offer the alternative we seek.

Mimetic theory suggests that it was not God who demanded the crucifixion of Christ, but sinful humankind.<sup>1</sup> But although God does not demand the crucifixion, neither does God resist it. Instead, in the crucifixion God uses sacrifice against itself, forcing it into the open, out of the obscurity it requires, so that it loses its reconciling power. The crucifixion of Christ represents the annulment of sacrifice; it breaks the machinery of sacrifice on the cross. That is how, as mimetic theorists well know, Girard's theory deconstructs the doctrine of the penal substitutionary atonement. Jesus' death does not reconcile us to God, but on the contrary, it cancels any notion that God requires redemptive violence. Now an increasingly urgent question arises: the Bible is clear that Christ reconciles us to God; but if not by violence, then how? The crucifixion turns us away from the Devil, but what turns us toward God?

Perhaps the answer is the resurrection. The resurrection may be the central atoning event of the gospel. Surely there is warrant for this in the Christian tradition. Christians worship on the day of the resurrection. In the scriptural tradition, we find that all the documents in the New Testament put the resurrection in the place of first importance:

...because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.<sup>2</sup>

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ... was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, , or , or

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 10:9.

sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. . . . Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?<sup>3</sup>

Turning to historical Christology, we find that it is only the risen and ascended Christ that makes the doctrine of the two natures of Christ necessary, with all that implies for the place of the Son in the Trinity. A paganizing reading of Jesus' crucifixion would have no trouble claiming he was divine, and would then cover over the historical event with metaphysical and mythical obfuscation, thereby preserving the sacrificial mechanism. An opposite strategy for preserving the sacrificial mechanism would be to claim that Jesus was only human, coming to establish an ethical code. In order to counter both of these strategies, orthodox Christianity must insist on both the crucifixion and the resurrection, i.e., on both the human and the divine natures of Christ. It is upon the shoals of this paradoxical revelation that the ship of sacrifice is wrecked. The gospel reveals, according to Girard, that archaic gods emerge from actual murders in profane time. It reveals this by narrating an event whereby the Son of God (risen from the dead) is murdered in historical (profane, human) form. The resurrection is a critical component of orthodox Christianity's heroic effort to preserve the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Because the Christian tradition has given so much weight to the resurrection, perhaps we ought to restore the resurrection to its rightful place at the heart of the atoning Christ event.

It must be noted that the term "atonement," though it is habitually equated with the crucifixion, certainly need not be, from a lexical standpoint. It derives from a simple conjunction of words: "at-one-ment." It denotes ultimate reconciliation of the disciple with God and neighbor. Since there is nothing in the term itself suggesting crucifixion, it can be applied to the resurrection of Christ as validly as to his crucifixion. Contrary to much contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 15:3-7, 12. By the elision of the relatively brief reference to the death of Christ in this passage, its real emphasis on the resurrection appears in sharper relief.

proclamation, the resurrection need not be considered a subordinate dimension of the atonement. The other elements of the atonement – the birth of Jesus, his ministry, his teachings, and his crucifixion – might well be subordinate to the resurrection.

It is unfortunate that the resurrection is almost always subordinated, in the theology of atonement, to other factors. Jesus' resurrection, it is said, is proof that he was the Son of God; or it is proof that the crucifixion was a sufficient satisfaction for our sins; or it is proof that he truly is the example of the right way to live. Thus the resurrection is relegated to secondary status. It serves only as an indicator of another event as the atoning moment. But these interpretations cannot be right. As a point of faith, the resurrection of Jesus cannot prove or validate anything. A proof is by definition something that everyone agrees is true, which demonstrates that something else, something disputed, is also true. But the resurrection is something that must be taken on faith; therefore it cannot serve as any sort of proof or validation. Its power must be sought elsewhere.

Among Girardian thinkers, the leader in this quest has been James Alison, most notably in his book *Raising Abel*.<sup>4</sup> Alison attributes atoning power to the resurrection in two ways. One of these is the power of the forgiving victim. Alison shows that the risen Christ holds no resentment against his persecutors (which by extension means "the whole world"). The resurrection of Christ, according to Alison, is a revelation of God's forgiveness of persecutors by canceling the effect of our crime. This forgiveness is liberation for all of us from the "Sin of the World," i.e., the founding of human culture in violence. Second, Alison represents God as "having nothing to do with death." Since death is the founding principle of human culture, this means that God is utterly uninfluenced by human cultural machinations. The revelation of this in the rising of Christ has the effect of profoundly undermining and desacralizing culture, thereby

once again liberating humanity from “the Sin of the World.” The resurrection narratives de-legitimize sacrifice by canceling the religious awe of death. Without detracting from Alison’s superlative and original contribution, I would like to point out one more atoning dimension of the resurrection.

### The Misery of Metaphysical Desire

The principle of “metaphysical desire” is one of Girard’s major discoveries, first described in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*.<sup>5</sup> He describes it as desire for the “being” of the mimetic model / rival. Through mimesis, two individuals come to desire the same object – an automobile, let us say. The desire for the same finite object brings them into conflict over it. Mimesis then intensifies their rivalry as they imitate each other’s hostility. At some indeterminate point, their desire refocuses onto a new object, namely, *to be the one who gets the automobile*. Amidst the conflict, the car itself is reduced to a token, a trophy, a representation of the newly emergent object of desire, namely *being*. This quality of being derives from the fact that people regard the ultimate possessor of the car as the “winner.” This is a quality of being, “being a winner.” It is a counterfeit of being, an illusion, since its only substance consists of *other people’s regard*. This is metaphysical desire: the desire for other people to regard one as a winner. The rivals compete to possess the car for the sake of the sensation of “being” that it bears with it.

A critical characteristic that emerges from metaphysical desire is that its satisfaction never comes in the form of a fixed quantity; it is always a matter of acquiring *more* than the model / rival. Given these conditions for human relationship, life in community readily becomes a zero-sum game of rivalry, overt and subliminal. Neighbors become scandalized by each other, in Girard’s technical sense: they are rivals who offend each other but who define one another’s

identity. They are likewise alienated from God, which they reduce to an instrumentality to serve their rivalry, as in Janis Joplin's famous song:

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz  
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.<sup>6</sup>

And also as proven by the success of the prosperity gospel proclaimed by the likes of Joel Osteen and T.D. Jakes. Such rivalries produce all sorts of destructive consequences, from the Seven Deadly Sins to neuroses, addictions, obsessions and a host of physical ailments.

With this diagnosis of the human condition in place, we can see how resurrection faith might bring about at-one-ment with God and neighbor. Jesus said,

Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.<sup>7</sup>

What is the spiritual power that brings about this transformation? How does the disciple become such a spring of living water? It has to do with the New Testament insistence that the disciple shares in Jesus' resurrection. Jesus' resurrection is part and parcel with the general resurrection of his disciples:

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.<sup>8</sup>

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.<sup>9</sup>

The spiritual effect of this faith is that the "being" sought after in the rivalries of

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<sup>7</sup> John 4:13-14.

<sup>8</sup> John 11:25-26.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 15:16-23.

metaphysical desire, i.e., “the water that leaves us thirsty again,” loses its value. Faith in our resurrection with Christ fulfills all metaphysical desire, and therefore cancels our rivalries; we “will never be thirsty.” Consequently, being freed from rivalry, we find that we are naturally generous toward others: the believer becomes “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

When Paul writes,

“Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life....if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him,”<sup>10</sup>

he suggests that this liberation from metaphysical rivalry is a two stage process. First, in baptism we deliberately concede defeat in these rivalries. We forfeit the game and become failures, which according to the “old self,” (the “flesh”) is precisely the meaning and terror of death. Next, rising from the water, we live with the trust that we have inherited with Christ, the resurrection to eternal life. The narcissistic concern for others’ regard is at last revealed as the chimera it always was.

It could be argued that this resurrection faith, with its exodus from metaphysical desire, is no less chimerical than the illusions I am claiming it dispels. If we concede that there is no compelling empirical proof that Christ rose from the dead, then we have to concede also that this faith is based solely on a decision to believe in a miraculous event. But the same can be said of our belief that possession of a fancy car will fulfill our ontological yearning. The car is only a cultural symbol – a comfortable and useful one, admittedly – but still only a mimetic trophy. It is only our belief about its meaning in our lives that gives it enormous power over our behavior – even our health. So there is no reason why the *meaning* of the resurrection cannot be the most important thing about it – after all, the same must also be said about the crucifixion, the life of Jesus, the Mercedes Benz – or the dollar! The choice is not between a material benefit versus a

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<sup>10</sup> Rom. 6:4,8.

religious article of faith. The choice is between faith in a commodity constituted in rivalry, or faith in a promise given in grace. The evidence for the resurrection appears mostly in the effect its meaning has in the spiritual lives of believers. A fancy car is tangibly present, but its reality for us is mostly a matter of cultural symbols. It is tangibly present, and spiritually poisonous. We could say that it is actually less real than the resurrection, which is intangible to our senses, but food for our souls.

### Implications for Christian Praxis

Life in community is transformed by resurrection faith – even if the community to begin with has no more than a single person set free. This is probably what Paul meant when he wrote, “...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”<sup>11</sup> The emergence of a single liberated (“born again”) individual produces an instant “relief valve” for the rivalries that afflict the group. The individual who has “died with Christ” has the same reconciling effect on the community as the death of a sacrificial victim, except that this person remains alive. A living person has mimetic force. The reconciling effect that one such individual can have is therefore exponentially greater than what a sacrificed scapegoat might provide. This individual imitated by others, becomes contagious. This is the sort of thing that validates faith in the resurrection: the spiritual benefits in the faith community being powerful, palpable, and seemingly supernatural.

John Dominic Crossan in *The Birth of Christianity* profiles the first generations of Christians as communities marked particularly by a practice of sharing without rivalry.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Walter Brueggemann suggests in an article entitled *Liturgy of Abundance, Myth of Scarcity*, that the economy of the Kingdom of God is one of open sharing.<sup>13</sup> With this as a lens to

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Cor. 5:17.

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examine the scriptures, we can see that the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, the Last Supper, the commands to give without asking anything in return, and many other passages confirm precisely this as the New Testament model of the church. By resurrection faith, the church becomes a community of people freed of mimetic rivalry. They are not afraid to forfeit the game of metaphysical desire. They think nothing of “counting others greater than [themselves],”<sup>14</sup> and “[outdoing] one another in showing honor.”<sup>15</sup> This is how resurrection faith can be recognized as the atoning revelation *par excellence* of the New Testament and the Christian faith.

What is proposed here is in effect an ecclesiology based on mimetic theory. The church can be understood to be a people on an exodus. Led by resurrection faith, they are being liberated from metaphysical desire. As I hope this essay has shown, this theory of the church resolves several theological problems in a new way. Now let us consider some of the consequences and implications of this ecclesiology in Christian praxis.

First, under this paradigm, an ancient problem forcefully re-emerges: the parasite. The New Testament is unable to resolve this issue nonviolently.<sup>16</sup> The parasite is the person who enjoys the generosity of the Kingdom community, but without himself being born again. He threatens the community in two ways. First of all, he will tend to bankrupt it by taking without contributing. We see traces of this problem in 2 Thessalonians: 3:10, “...if a man will not work, he shall not eat.” But more importantly, he will tend to corrupt it by presenting a “carnal” mimetic model trapped in the old worldly rivalries, tempting the saints to become resentful once again. The New Testament reserves its strongest language of condemnation for such behavior. Judas dies horribly;<sup>17</sup> the selfish brothers and sisters at Corinth eat and drink to their own

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<sup>14</sup> Phil. 2:4.

<sup>15</sup> Rom. 12:10b.

<sup>16</sup> But see Matt. 13:24-30, the parable of the wheat and the tares.

<sup>17</sup> Matt. 27:5, Acts 1:16-18.

condemnation,<sup>18</sup> and Ananias and Sapphira, who attempt to withhold some of their own wealth while pretending to share everything, are *executed* by the Holy Spirit!<sup>19</sup>

A second implication of this atonement theory has to do with ethics. The atoning force of resurrection faith, it is important to note, is not a new kind of ethic. Ethical systems are inherently violent because they always imply a division between the “obedient” and the “disobedient.” But resurrection faith sets aside the concern for ethics, preferring the “fruit of the spirit” to legalistic systems which amount to “works of the flesh.” The Apostle Paul draws this contrast in his great exhortation against works righteousness, in the letter to the Galatians. The “works of the flesh” are indeed hard work. Our rivalries require constant vigilance lest our neighbor overtake us, yet the harder we work, the less peaceful we become. The works are manifold.

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>20</sup>

We are like dumb animals chasing each other around a “great millstone” tied to our necks. Paul suggests even our best ethical system scarcely rise beyond the realm of “works of the flesh.” The works of the law – principles of ethics – do not resolve the problem. Just as soon as we outlaw one sinful practice, another one appears. Ethical systems force us to play a game of cultural “whack-a-mole,” always watching for the next mimetic conflict to pop up so we can knock it down with another imperative. On the other hand, the “fruit of the spirit” is singular, a cluster of sweet wonders.

By contrast, the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control....And those who belong to Christ Jesus have

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<sup>18</sup> 1 Cor. 11:26-34.

<sup>19</sup> Acts 5:1-11.

<sup>20</sup> Gal. 5:19-21.

crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.<sup>21</sup>

Like grapes growing on a vine, it emerges naturally, without struggle, once we learn to trust that with the risen Christ we will never be hungry.

A third implication is that resurrection faith inspires frugality. Mimetic rivalry is expensive; people must acquire immensely more than they need, in their desperation to keep ahead of the metaphysical Joneses. But the community that is liberated from this struggle finds that its real material needs are vastly reduced. This may have important implications for environmental stewardship, which seeks above all to reduce our economic exploitation of nature. Resurrection faith may be the only non-violent route to an effective praxis of stewardship of the environment, because it does not depend on ethical rules.

#### Conclusion

By interpreting the resurrection in the light of Girard's theory of metaphysical desire and mimetic rivalry, several new openings appear for us to better understand the religious challenges facing us today. We find that our search for the non-violent atonement may be ended; the biblical witness can be harmonized in unexpected ways; a new kind of meta-ethics, particularly environmental ethics, becomes possible; the classic orthodox doctrines take on new significance; and ecclesiology as a field acquires a new richness. But one major perennial problem, which this approach brings into relief in the New Testament text, is that of the community parasite. But perhaps even this problem can be resolved by the mimetic force of a deeper understanding of, and commitment to, the atoning power of the resurrection.

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<sup>21</sup> Gal. 5:22-24.

