Chapter Eleven

Original Sin, Grace, and Positive Mimesis

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In the last four decades, René Girard has, like hardly anyone else, dealt with questions of violence and antagonistic mimesis. Currently, God's mimetic theory is attracting more and more public attention in Europe, where his recent publications have been very positively reviewed in big German newspapers. He has received high awards like the admission into the *Academie Française* and the Leopold-Lucas-Prize of the Protestant Theological Faculty in Tübingen, which he received in May 2006. The explanatory power of mimetic theory with regard to conflicts and violence is highly appreciated.

However, mimetic theory faces a number of critiques. One of the most frequent objections is that Girard ontologizes violence[1] and that the problem of conflict and violence is given too much significance within mimetic theory. Even though the suspicion of ontologizing violence can and must certainly be rejected—Wolfgang Palaver has done this convincingly in his introduction to mimetic theory (2003, 283f)—especially in the early writings some passages can be found which might nurture such a suspicion. Rebecca Adams (2000, 282) points to one such passage susceptible to misunderstanding at the end of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*:

> The Gospels and the New Testament do not preach a morality of spontaneous action. They do not claim that humans must get rid of imitation; they recommend imitating the sole model who never runs the danger—if we really imitate in the way that children imitate—of being transformed into a fascinating rival. . . . On one side are the prisoners of violent imitation, which always leads to a dead end, and on the other are the adherents of non-violent imitation, who will meet with no obstacle. As we have seen, the victims of mimetic desire knock at all the doors that are firmly closed and search only where nothing is

> to be found. . . . Following Christ means giving up mimetic desire. (Girard 1987, 430–31)

Especially in the earlier books, Girard's tendency to address primarily the negative, i.e., the conflictual and violent dimensions of mimesis and mimetic desire (these two terms are basically used synonymously) can be observed. On the other hand, in recent years, Girard has time and again pointed out that only mimetic desire and not violence plays a primordial role within his theory and that mimetic desire is intrinsically good (even where it seems to be bad because it leads to conflictual mimesis), because it is connected with the radical opening of the human person towards the transcendent (Adams 2000, 282). In spite of this repeated emphasis on the fundamental goodness of mimetic desire, Girard's more recent writings continue to speak more about acquisitive and conflictual mimetic structures than about positive and peaceful mimesis. More than ten years ago, Raymund Schwager argued that this emphasis on the conflictive and violent dimension of human life can only be well understood against the background of the theological doctrine of original sin (Schwager 1992, 357; Palaver 2003, 284).

However, among those who adopt mimetic theory, the notion of "positive," "loving," "creative," and "non-violent" mimesis becomes more and more widespread (Adams 2000). But what are the significant differences between positive and negative mimesis? How can positive mimesis be characterized? What renders it possible and how does it differ from negative, antagonistic mimesis?

I want to enter into the field marked by these questions in three big steps. In the process, I will relate terms of mimetic theory to theological concepts, because I am convinced that these theological concepts—while benefiting from mimetic theory—might in turn help to clarify certain aspects of the theory. In the first step, I will link mimetic desire (which Girard characterizes as intrinsically good) with creational grace, with the creation of the human person oriented towards the divine. In the second step I will illuminate negative, antagonistic mimesis from the perspective of the theological concept of original sin. And in the third step, I want to show that positive mimesis is not feasible by mere human efforts, but owes itself to God's gracious self-giving.

MIMETIC DESIRE AND CREATIONAL GRACE

At the beginning of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), we find the following words:

> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. [. . .] And God saw everything that he had

> made, and behold, it was very good. (Genesis 1:27, 31, Revised Standard Version)

The Christian tradition has always believed that these lines from the first creation account show that God has created human beings in their relatedness to each other and to God and that this creation was very good. Against the background of a Trinitarian understanding of the divine, which also comprehends the relations between the divine persons, the relatedness and radical openness of the human person proves to be one of the essential aspects of a person's likeness to God. We can say it is part of creational grace. As God's image and likeness, the human person is always striving beyond him/herself—to God as his/her model/prefiguration. Therefore, human beings are restless,[2] never completely satisfied with themselves, imperfect, aware of their frailty and always searching for something that could bestow them with perfection and fulfill the yearning deep within their hearts. In the theological tradition, this fundamental yearning and openness of the human person towards transcendence was called "*desiderium naturale in visionem beatificam*" by St. Thomas Aquinas; the Second Vatican Council called it "*profundior et universalior appetitio*" in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS 9), and Karl Rahner referred to it as the "*übernatürliches Existential*"—the supernatural existential (1959, 1301). Thus, the human person is open to transcendence, *capax Dei*. However, the ultimate end of the human yearning—the divine—normally is not directly accessible to the human person, but only through the mediation of his/her fellow human beings, who also have been created in God's image and likeness.

What I just have been describing on the theological level, mimetic theory describes on the anthropological level as the primordial and intrinsically good mimetic desire, which constitutes the human being. Since it aims at transcendence, this fundamental mimetic desire is thematically undetermined. On the anthropological level, Girard introduces it in his book *Violence and the Sacred* in the following way:

> Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being* , something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. (1977, 146)

This fundamental desire, which un-thematically aims at being or—theologically speaking—at transcendence, is immediately interlinked with the mimetic nature of the human person.[3] It is mimetic desire that characterizes humanity—Girard emphasized this again in his lecture on the occasion of the bestowal of the Lucas-Prize (see Girard 2007 for the complete text). It is mimetic desire that distinguishes the human person from animals, which are

determined by their instincts. It is mimetic desire that makes a person receptive to her/his fellow human beings as well as to the divine.

> If our desires were not mimetic, they would be forever fixed on predetermined objects; they would be a particular form of instinct. Human beings could no more change their desire than cows their appetite for grass. Without mimetic desire there would be neither freedom nor humanity. Mimetic desire is intrinsically good. . . . If desire were not mimetic, we would not be open to what is human or what is divine. (Girard 2001, 15–16)

Especially in the last sentence above, from *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard associates mimetic desire with the openness to the divine, underlining the legitimacy of the interpretation presented. Therefore, at the end of this first step, we may conclude that the anthropological statements on the intrinsically good mimetic desire (that desire, which opens us to what is human and to what is divine) finally converge with the theological notion of the grace of creation, the grace of the human person created in God's likeness and the capacity of the human person for the transcendent. Moreover, from a theological perspective, it becomes evident why this mimetic desire has to be called "intrinsically good": It is because it refers us to our creator, the absolutely good giver of life.

However, the question arises, why—given the intrinsic goodness of mimetic desire—we so quickly descend to those conflictual forms of mimesis, which receive much attention within mimetic theory. Girard addresses the ambivalent nature of mimesis, writing:

> It [mimetic desire] is responsible for the best and the worst in us, for what lowers us below the animal level as well as what elevates us above it. Our unending discords are the ransom of our freedom. (Girard 2001, 16)

How can we explain the fact that an intrinsically good mimetic desire can lead us to our true calling as well as into the abysses of rivalry and violence? What decides, whether mimetic desire ends up in negative or positive mimesis?

CONFLICTUAL MIMESIS AND ORIGINAL SIN

Can we find an answer to this question in a distinction, which Girard presents to us in the book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, between external and internal mediation? External mediation doesn't lead to violent rivalries, because the distance (not the physical but the mental distance) between the mediator and the imitator are big enough for them not to become rivals. In contrast, internal mediation easily leads to violent competition between mediator and imitator, because their spheres of possibilities are overlapping.

The distance between model and imitator is a contingent reality. For example it can easily diminish when social norms, circumstances, or structures change. The difference between external and internal mediation is a shift from being like the other—as in a young athlete wanting to emulate someone who is a star—to wanting to be the other—as in an accomplished athlete who can imagine being the star. At a certain point, a young person can rival the mentor/exemplar, indicating that a change of distance has changed the nature of the mimetic dynamics from external to internal mediation. But is that enough to explain why mimesis sometimes leads to resentment and violence, while sometimes it doesn't?

In the same book, we get another hint, when Girard alludes to the notion of a "deviated transcendency" (1988, 61). We can elect our model and thereby we are faced with a fundamental choice: "Choice always involves choosing a model, and true freedom lies in the basic choice between a human or a divine model" (1988, 58). If we imitate a human instead of a divine model, transcendency is diverted form the other world into our world, from "*au-delà* to the *en-deçà*" (1988, 59) as Girard writes. The human model soon turns out to be a rival, and violent conflicts are almost inevitable. Passages of *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* point in a similar direction. Here, God and Satan are described as "the two supreme models, 'arch models'." On the one hand, there are those

> models who never become obstacles and rivals for their disciples because they desire nothing in a greedy and competitive way and [on the other hand there are] models whose greed for whatever they desire has immediate repercussions on their imitators, transforming them right away into diabolic obstacles. (2001, 40)

In order to further elaborate on the question why good mimetic desire becomes negative mimesis, let us now turn for the second time to Christian theology and ask how it can contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of negative mimesis. Theologically, the question of why evil exists, even though God's creation was originally good, is answered by referring to human freedom and the doctrine of original sin. Recently, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk called the concept of conflictual mimesis the "scientific version of the doctrine of original sin" (2002, 250).[4] Symbolically, the scene of origin is described by the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve in paradise. This story tells us about the serpent, which is traditionally identified as a satanic figure and which Schwager interprets as a symbol for conflictive mimesis (2007, 174). This serpent fallaciously distorts Gods words and thus presents God as a rival to the human beings. The serpent insinuates that God withholds something from humankind so that they may not be like God. By means of this distortion, God suddenly doesn't seem to be the gracious giver

of all life anymore. Rather, God appears as a rival to human beings, wanting to guard "his" position against "God's" rivals. Deviated transcendency has its seeds in exactly this confrontation of God and humanity. Consequently, the human attitude of grateful receiving gives way to acquisitive and rivalrous desire. By distorting the experience of the divine, the serpent prompts the human beings to imitate God in an antagonistic way. This rivalrous imitation of God means that human beings try to be like God—but not in accordance to their creation and vocation, not by gratefully receiving their being the image and likeness of God, but by trying to be like God out of their own effort, without God and against God.

Without further analyzing the story or elaborating on the symbolism of the serpent, the tree, etc., we may conclude: The garden story shows how a counterfeit image of God goes along with rivalrous mimesis. What follows are conflicts and finally the violent death of human beings as well as the tendency to put the blame on someone else (Adam accuses Eve, and Eve accuses the serpent) as well as conflicts and finally the violent death of human beings (Cain and Abel). The dramatic escalation of violence addressed in the book of Genesis points out how this perverted religious experience is likely to be intensified in the course of time.

On the basis of the insights of mimetic theory, Raymund Schwager and James Alison have tried to show how the original perversion and distortion of the experience of the divine could have happened, historically. Both theologians have drawn up a scenario of this original perversion. Schwager imagines that the anthropoids, who had just attained the capacity for self-transcendence, culpably remained behind their newly bestowed possibilities. Alison says that, in a situation of mimetic conflict, anthropoids, who weren't controlled by instincts anymore, didn't tread the path of yielding to each other but the path of violence.

The same motive of fallacious distortion and perverse imitation of God which we have encountered in the narration of the Fall can also be found in the New Testament. Schwager argues that in the scene of the temptation of Jesus,

> we have precisely the same occurrence of temptation before us as in the garden story. First of all the Tempter imitates God's words in the same counterfeit way and then he himself presents a perverse image of God to be directly imitated. In one case the creator God is presented as a rival, in the other he himself as the god of this world. (2007, 41)[5]

Thus imagining God as human's rival turns out to be the primordial satanic temptation, which radically disturbs the relations between humans and God and consequently also among humans themselves. And since God normally is not accessible to human beings directly and immediately, one easily falls

for a deceptive notion. Schwager writes: “The step from the imitation of God to imitation of an idol can come to pass almost imperceptibly” (2007, 60). Thereby, the basis is provided for the kind of conflictual and rivalrous mimesis, which is the focus of attention of mimetic analysis. Once caught up in the maelstrom of antagonistic mimesis, the only way out consists in creative renouncement, in being prepared to yield everything to your rival (Palaver 2003, 280). But how is that possible? How can humanity break free from the maelstrom of conflictive mimesis?

GRACE AND POSITIVE MIMESIS

Let us for the last time turn to the theological level. We have seen how the perverse imitation of God is closely connected to the violent history of antagonistic mimesis. But alongside this history (and closely interwoven with it) there is another history: the history of grace, which time and again renders possible moments of positive and loving mimesis. This history also starts—like the history of negative mimesis and even before that history—at the very beginning of creation. The theological concept of creation has shown that already the capacity of human beings for transcendence is a bestowed gift—creational grace. And since every human being is an image of God—even if the likeness is distorted by sin—it is true, as well, that the mutual imitation of human beings doesn’t necessarily lead to perdition. In this context, the relevance of law, especially the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament also has to be taken into account: The Old Testament Law provides a framework within which positive mimesis can be realized. Moreover, there have always been people who represented this image and likeness of God in an especially lucid way. Such figures were, for example, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and particularly the Servant of the Lord (see Isaiah 52–53). In its purest and most unaltered way (at least for Christians), this image and likeness of God appears in Jesus Christ. He is—like the Second Vatican Council confesses—the *homo perfectus*, the perfect man, who is at the same time the undisguised image of God.

Like Adam in the garden story, Jesus is also led into temptation, the Tempter also wants him to adopt a counterfeit image of God. But Jesus “does not in any way let himself be drawn into the deceptive world of the enemy” (Schwager 2007, 41). His significance can—as Nikolaus Wandinger shows—be found in the breaking through of the vicious circle of counterfeit imitation and distorted image of God (2003, 310). This breaking through happens on several levels and affects the *distorted image of God* as well as the *quality of imitation*. On the level of his *preaching*, Jesus communicates the undisguised image of God: God is the loving and merciful Father, whose unconditional forgiveness is offered to everybody and who wants to give us

everything—even Godself—as a present. However, the drama of Jesus' life and death reveals that under the precondition of original sin—under the precondition of the ensnarement of humanity into antagonistic mimesis—the mere message of the merciful father is not enough to correct the distorted image of God. Rather, people drag Jesus into their own perverted notions of God; they consequently accuse him of blasphemy and finally kill him. In this situation of an intensifying conflict, a correction of the image of God is only possible by Jesus' own way of acting. Confronted with human violence, Jesus renounces counter-violence and finally even gives his own life for his opponents. After all of this, the risen Christ returns to the guilty humankind with words of peace and forgiveness. Thus he allows for a new experience of God, an experience of a God, who doesn't react to human failure and sin with revenge but with loving forgiveness.

How can Jesus act like that? Is it mere ascetic self-control? Jesus says about himself, that he imitates his heavenly Father. Yet he doesn't imitate him in a rivalrous but in a positive and non-violent way. How is such positive mimesis possible?

Jesus' imitation of the Father doesn't end in the blind alley of rivalry, because—as Girard says—it is not based on a greedy and egoistic form of desire (Schwager 2001, 13f). Rather, Jesus' way of imitation is in itself an unmerited gift. Christian theology locates the fundamental reason for this fact in Trinitarian theology, in the passionate relations of the divine Persons for each other. In his paper, *Extra Media Nulla Salus? Attempt at a Theological Synthesis*, Józef Niewiadomski points out that Jesus "became independent of mimetic projections," because his "relation to his God had become the innermost core of his own self-experience and of his own person" (2005, 495). The concrete man—Jesus of Nazareth—is stamped by his passion for the communicating God, a passion that arises from participation. Thus Jesus' image of the Father is not that of a rivalrous God, who wants to withhold something from God's creatures but is that of a loving Father who wants to give Godself as a present. Moreover, Jesus is not an autonomous subject imitating the Father by virtue of his own efforts but by virtue of the Holy Spirit given to him. According to the New Testament, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in baptism. Thereby, Jesus is designated as the beloved Son of God and the bearer of the divine Spirit. This experience in baptism plays an essential role for positive mimesis to become possible. In virtue of the Spirit bestowed on him by the Father, Jesus imitates the Father in a consummate way. Thus, Schwager argues that during his life and death, Jesus perfectly represents his heavenly Father.

By means of his life and death and the sending of the divine Spirit after his ascension, Jesus—the *homo perfectus*—the undistorted image of God, makes possible a new, undisguised experience of God and consequently also new inter-human relationships, relationships which don't follow the structure

of antagonistic mimesis. This new form of relationships—positive mimesis—becomes possible because of the new image or rather the *new experience of God*, which Jesus communicates by means of his own life and acting.

God isn't the rival of humanity; God respects human freedom and wants salvation for all human beings. On the other side, there is also need for a new *quality of imitation*, a quality that does not lead into mimetic conflicts, because it doesn't arise from an attitude of scarcity but from the experience of gratuitous forgiveness and from newly bestowed possibilities for life. This form of positive mimesis, given by this new experience of God and the new quality of imitation, doesn't aim at taking the place of the model and finally of God. *Positive mimesis doesn't aim at replacement but at gratuitous participation—ultimately participation in the divine life.*

The experience of having gratuitously received forms the foundation of positive mimesis. It is cultivated wherever human beings experience themselves as having received a gratuitous gift and consequently are willing to pass on what they have received freely and without calculation.

In an outstanding and explicit way, this happens in the Eucharist. The Greek term *Eucharist* refers to the given benefaction as well as the thankful answer to it. And the verb *eucharistein* means to behave as presentee. Thus, celebrating the Eucharist means cultivating the experience of living out of bestowed abundance. This experience is the source of positive mimesis, and also the source of a community, the Church, where positive mimesis is realized. Inasmuch as the Church lives from the Eucharist, it is the community of those who follow Christ and who realize positive mimesis. But since the Church isn't only the community of those celebrating the Eucharist but also a community acting within the ambivalent context of human institutions, positive mimesis is realized there only in a very fragile and fragmentary way. The theological term of the *ecclesia mixta* addresses this brokenness and incompleteness.

CONCLUSIONS

Let me summarize the understanding of mimetic desire, of negative and positive mimesis, which I have just tried to develop:

- Mimetic desire, meaning the openness of the human person to what is human and to what is divine, has its theological counterpart in the capacity for transcendence which is given to the human person as creational grace. Thus it is intrinsically good. Since God is not directly accessible to humans, mimetic desire can easily be perverted.
- Negative mimesis can theologically be understood in the context of humankind affected by original sin. As acquisitive mimesis, it aims at taking

the place of the model—ultimately at taking the place of God. Thus, rivalry and violence are quasi-predetermined.
- The question of how positive mimesis can emerge in a world distorted by violent imitation can hardly be answered without entering the theological field of soteriology and grace. Positive mimesis is based upon God's prevenient grace. Thus explaining positive mimesis needs the recourse to theological categories.

Perhaps, at this point, we have finally reached the deeper reason why Girard hasn't written much about positive mimesis, until now. As far as possible, he tries to argue on the levels of anthropology and sociology. And in order to get to positive mimesis, one has to go beyond these levels, as a quotation from *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* indicates: "To break the power of [violent] mimetic unanimity, we must postulate a power superior to violent contagion. If we have learned one thing in this study, it is that none exists on earth" (2001, 189).

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NOTES

1. Especially, theologians in the German speaking world have accused Girard of ontologizing violence and of advocating a violent human nature. This criticism is based on Girard's distancing himself from Rousseau's idealistic view of the good human, emphasizing the significance of evil in human life. Also, some of Girard's wordings, perhaps not selected carefully enough and taken out of their context, might support the suggestion that Girard argues in favor of a principle of violence that controls humanity.
2. In this context, the famous passage from St. Augustine's Confessions (Confessions 1.1) in which Saint Augustine states, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you," has to be mentioned.
3. In this context, the question could be raised: whether the unthematical desire directed towards transcendence constitutes the origin of mimesis or—inversely—the mimetic nature of desire lies at the origin of its direction towards transcendence. In order to correctly answer this question, a detailed and thorough study would be necessary which cannot be provided within the scope of this chapter. However, for the further argument in our context it is enough to point out the close interlinkage between the desire directed towards transcendence and the mimetic nature of desire.
4. Quotation translated by Petra Steinmair-Pösel. In German, Sloterdijk calls it a "wissenschaftliche Fassung der Erbsündenlehre."
5. Quotation translated by Petra Steinmair-Pösel.