

Mimetic Desire: Linking Violence with Sacrifice

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In many rituals, the sacrificial act assumes two opposing aspects, appearing at times as a sacred obligation to be neglected at grave peril, at other times as a sort of criminal activity entailing peril of equal gravity.¹

Rene Girard is neither a theologian by profession nor a sociologist of religion. He has embarked on literary criticism, shifted to social science and advanced in biblical theology. He has intertwined these different texts drawn from various fields which effectively contributed to his brand of cultural theory. In his intellectual undertaking, he is pulled into religious discourse via his studies on classical literature. In his critical analysis, he has discovered the culture of violence revealed by these literary works and buttressed by historical events. Although he has ventured on different texts, he has never given up his passionate interest on textual analysis uncovering the underlying motifs of these great literary works. In analyzing these texts, he claims to have discovered the mechanism linking violence with religious sacrifice. This discovery has led him to posit his theory of mimetic desire which underlies cultural order. According to Girard, human culture is founded on two inseparable principles that make up his theory of mimetic desire, namely, 'mimetic rivalry' and 'surrogate victimage.'

¹ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (London & New York: Continuum, 2005), 1.

In a nutshell, Girard insight is this: desire is mimetic and, because of this, it is an acquisitive impulse which progresses into competitive struggle that engenders conflictive violence. Desire is attracted to overpowering violence and strives to realize this conquering drive.² Mimetic desire is the source of this competition. This desire lies the origin or foundation of culture. In fact, culture is merely a result of this violence in religion which is instituted by the community so that it can put under social control its aggressive drive. Although this proposed theory is intriguing and daring, it has by no means cogently reached the stage of empirical verification. There are historical atrocities and anthropological evidences that we can cite as examples, but we cannot make a direct relation or causal link between theory and fact. Thus, in many cases, it is difficult to verify his theory. However, his theory provides us a way of understanding our culture. In fact, through his theory, we can deepen our understanding of the theology of the cross in Christianity.

Mimetic Rivalry

Girard proposes that human behavior is largely built on mimesis defined as a comprehensive desire in imitating the other. Desire is social because it involves the self and the other in the process of imitation. In order to sustain this desire, the subject needs the other. As we shall see, desire requires a rival.³ He employs the term 'mimesis' to indicate that this imitation of another's desire is neither a conscious process nor a behavioral duplication but rather a propensity of people to imitate another. In mimesis, desire is always aroused by the desire of another, that is, we desire what the other desires. In this perspective, mimesis is a force or a drive which directs behavior and influences interaction of people. Social relationship is essentially and radically marked by imitation: we learn from the desire of the other and we come to desire the same object. Thus, the starting point of his theory rests on what he terms 'acquisitive mimesis' which focuses on the appropriation or possession of the object. This acquisitive proclivity is occasioned and activated by the desire of the other.

² Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 160.

³ Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 21.

The Girardian theory forms a triangular scheme composed of the other, the object and the subject. Briefly, this theory works in the following way: the model stimulates the desire of the subject that imitates her/his desire in acquiring the same object. The theory imagines a situation whereby two individuals designated as the other and the subject desire the same object. In the beginning, the object is trivial and banal for the subject. The subject senses a lack of her/his being and the other seems to possess it. S/he directs that amorphous desire to an admirable other to see what might remedy her/his lack.⁴ Moreover, the subject literally does not know what to desire and, in order to find out what to desire, s/he watches the other by imitating her/his desire. The subject sees that the other desires a specific object. Since the other desires the object, the subject is motivated to imitate the other by desiring the same object. This object arouses her/his desire. Thus, the subject learns to desire according to the other. Both model and imitator inevitably desire the same object.

As they attempt to wrestle with the object, they compete for it since they vie and pit for the same thing. Thus, the 'acquisitive mimesis' which is a simple imitation of desire for the object progressively evolves into a 'conflictive mimesis' which leads to a rivalry between them. The model and imitator become rivals for the same object. Thus, they fall into a struggle for gaining victory. In the process, this conflictive mimesis ensues into a violent confrontation because each one prevents the other in obtaining the object they both desire through hostile or vicious means.⁵ In this struggle, these rivals appear to compete just for the same object, but in fact, they do not merely pursue for the object *per se* but the clash arouses violent desire. The object merely stimulates competition or rivalry, but it is really desire that sustains the rivalry. In this case, violence is the relationship between desire and rivalry staged by the other and the subject.⁶

⁴ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 155.

⁵ Rene Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 9.

⁶ Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, 20.

Thus, the crucial element in this scheme rests crucially on the other that acts as a model for the subject. As a model, s/he mediates the subject with the object by stimulating her/his desire and by indicating its desirability. The subject imitates the desire of the other in possessing the object. The object is conceived as anything which the other desires or possesses that the subject lacks or wants. Initially, the model overtly desires the object or already possesses the object that the subject eventually imitates to desire and possibly possess it. Thus, the model foments and forms in the subject this desire for the object. Following the lead of the model, the subject also begins to desire the same object. The subject identifies with and is attracted to the model. In effect, desire hinges neither on the subject nor on the object but on the other that provides the model of desire which mediates the subject with the object.⁷

The other who acts as a rival assumes a dominant role in the altercation.⁸ As desire intensifies, the other gradually moves from being a model to being a rival in the acquisition of the object. Eventually, the object recedes from the scene and desire overtakes the subject in displacing the other. Thus, the model becomes a rival. "Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, the subject desires the object because the rival desires it."⁹ In desiring the object, the subject eventually poses a threat to model who possess the object that s/he wants to monopolize. Thus, they quickly become rivals. Since the model becomes a rival, s/he stands as an obstacle for the subject in the satisfaction of her/his desire. The admiration ascribed to the model that inspires the subject in desiring the object is turned into a deadly hatred in obstructing her/his desire.¹⁰ Thus, the other becomes a double assuming both a model and a rival status for the subject. In the perception of the subject, the other blends a contradictory terms: the model is adored because

⁷ Rene Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, trans. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 144.

⁸ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 154.

⁹ *Ibidem.*, 154.

¹⁰ Rene Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 10-11.

s/he shows the subject what is desirable and, at the same time, hated because s/he prohibits the possession of it. The situation has evolved into rivalry since they are no longer preoccupied with acquiring the object but are determined in overcoming the rival. The subject fixes her/his desire for the object by surmounting the other who as a rival becomes an obstacle in the acquisition of the object and the satisfaction of desire. In this rivalry, the subject must conquer the other.

The subject's desire, however, is not the object itself, but the prestige or value bestowed on the object by the model and the ensuing rivalry. The subject who pits with the other wants to seize that prestige by competing with the model. However, both of them desire to control the same object because it is endowed with value, the possession of which confers prestige to the owner or possessor. Thus, their desire for the same object is nothing else but the desire for prestige that would elevate or increment their status.¹¹ As the rivalry intensifies, the value of the object increases.¹² Thus, rivalry adds value to the object. In effect, the object's value brings about an overwhelming wish to surpass the other, to capture the object and to succeed in the competition. Thus, they pit with one another hoping that they will eventually garner the prize by winning the competition. This value is awarded to the possessor of the object or to the winner of the contest that confers her/him prestige. Thus, envy creeps into their competitive relationship. Envy subordinates the desired object to the possessor of it. To put it in another way, envy is directed toward the possessor and not toward the possessed object. The possessor of the object enjoys a privileged relationship with it.¹³

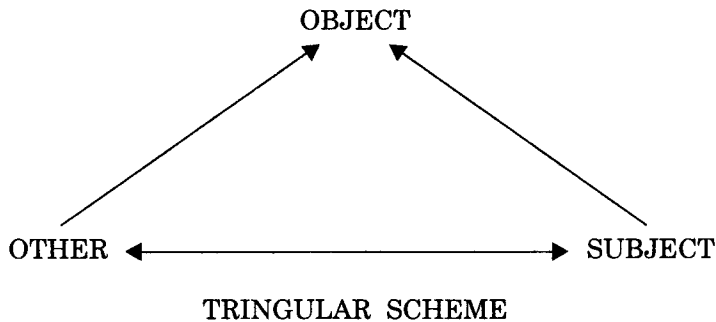
In their rivalry, the difference between the other and the subject is abolished and the object eventually fades from the scene. Only the desire by the other and the subject rules that competition

¹¹ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 153.

¹² Rene Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 145.

¹³ Desire is mediated by another. Girard differentiates between internal mediation and external mediation. Rivalry is more like to occur when the model-turned-rival belongs to a near or equal status (internal mediation) than to a distant or higher status (external mediation).

for the same object. Thus, the cultural order that provides the categories and governs distinctions between the self and the other collapses in mimetic desire. "Culture is somehow eclipsed as it becomes less differentiated."¹⁴ This differentiation furnished by cultural order is a reference mark that separates the other and the subject conformed by the community. This cultural order is a regulated system of distinctions in which the identity of the subject and the other is differentiated and contrasted.¹⁵ However, in their rivalry, "the self and the other have become each other's doubles" and "mediate each other's desire."¹⁶ Thus, desire transgresses the cultural order. Since they become doubles, the rivals resemble each other and erase their differences. "What started as a one-way imitation becomes a two-way imitation, each copying the desire of the other until they are identical."¹⁷



In Girard's analysis, the mimetic desire is a threat to the very existence of human society because it leads to its dislocation or annihilation if this rivalry or competition persists among members. The relationship between the subject and the other turns violent because they want to obtain the same object to satisfy their desire. Their competitive endeavor would ensue into violence in society. Mimetic desire evolves from a simple acquisitive mimesis to complex conflictive mimesis. "If acquisitive mimesis divides by

¹⁴ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 14.

¹⁵ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 52.

¹⁶ Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*, 23.

leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same object with the view to appropriating it, conflictive mimesis will inevitably unify by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same adversary that all wish to strike down.”¹⁸ In this stage, desire does not only want to acquire the object, but also to destroy the rival. The desire to acquire what the other has is the root of violence.

Surrogate Victimage

To avert the ominous or imminent violence of the feuding groups, the community singles out a surrogate victim. This surrogate victim is arbitrarily selected by the community due to some atypical or uncommon qualities that s/he possesses or exhibits. S/he is perceived to be apparently different or her/his feature is patently ambiguous. S/he is neither an outsider nor an insider, neither familiar nor foreign, neither interior nor exterior to the community. Apparently, s/he is a ‘resident alien’ or a ‘monstrous creature’ because s/he inhabits the border or margin that defies a straightforward categorization. With that ambivalent position, the victim blurs and vitiates the sacrosanct division imposed by the cultural order. Since s/he cannot be clearly classified or subsumed within the cultural order, this person is a pollutant or recalcitrant in the community. Being a dread or a threat, the community expels this person so that the community is insulated from any contagion.

In this looming violence, the community seeks relief from this dread through a substitutionary act. This substitution displaces or shifts the object from community member to a surrogate victim. Instead of confronting its hostility and rectifying its wrong, the community lays blame on this surrogate victim and passes on the bloodshed toward this proxy. Through substitution, the violence is deflected to another person that, in effect, preserves the social cohesion bonded by the community but sacrifices this victim in behalf of the community. “Violence has the capacity to substitute one object for another.”¹⁹ The substitutability of the object of vio-

¹⁸ Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Michael Matteer & Stephen Bann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 26.

¹⁹ Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, 25.

lence justifies the surrogate victimage mechanism. Thus, the violence of the community is passed on to a surrogate victim by convincing themselves that the ills besetting it are caused by this person and therefore faulted on her/him. The surrogate victim is made into a scapegoat.²⁰ Understandably, "any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat."²¹ The scapegoat is held responsible for the collapse of unity and order in the community. The truth is that the victim is entirely innocent and hated without reasonable cause.

Thus, the surrogate victim is sacrificed as the scapegoat of the whole community. The feuding members of the community are molded and forged into unanimity by unconsciously replacing their pernicious 'war of all against all' into a peaceable 'war of all against one.' In this war, the community rallies against the victim by sacrificing her/him. When we say 'sacrifice,' we mean that the victim is offered by being persecuted or murdered by the community. The innocent victim takes on the hostility and vengeance of the feuding parties by being expelled or banished from the community. The departure of the surrogate victim results into the restoration of peace and order in the community.²² This jovial departure permits the purification of the cultural order and allows the restoration of the social cohesion of the community. In effect, this sacrifice results in peaceful or orderly existence of the community. Thus, the community lives through a new peace accord around the surrogate victim. The victim is a testimony of the restoration of public order in the community.²³

Thus, the victim is a double: her/his life poses a threat and chaos and her/his death brings harmony and unanimity to the community.²⁴ The surrogate victim is a polluted object that threatens to contaminate the whole community but also a saving grace that purges the community of the social ills of chaos. Since her/his

²⁰ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 39.

²¹ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 84.

²² *Ibidem.*, 90.

²³ *Ibidem.*, 100.

²⁴ *Ibidem.*, 172.

existence causes violent chaos in the community, her/his death brings about peaceful unanimity. "This duality reflects the metamorphoses the ritual victim is designed to effect: the victim draws to itself all the violence infecting the original victim and through its own death transforms this baneful violence into beneficial violence into harmony and abundance."²⁵ In the sacrifice, violence is expelled from the community and projected to the victim. In this sense, the victim is very powerful because through her/him, s/he takes away the threat and havoc of violence and, at the same time, brings back cultural order that provides stability and durability of the community.

Thus, the original violence inflicted on the surrogate victim is reenacted in a ritual sacrifice. This sacrifice is not the original event that occurred in the community but it is "a ritualized form of the original outburst of violent community."²⁶ Gathering together, the community immortalizes and remembers the peace-giving effect of the scapegoat. This sacrifice is institutionalized in order to quell or subdue the possible threat of mayhem or the eruption of conflict in the community.²⁷ By continually reenacting it, the threat of social chaos is continually averted and the community is confidently insulated from violent hostility and vengeance. Thus, the ritual sacrifice does not only reenact the surrogate victimage but also the insulation of the community from violence.²⁸ Peace is restored because, magically and mysteriously, the victim offered in a sacrifice assumes the violence of the community. "The community is both attracted and repelled by its own origins. It feels the constant need to re-experience them, albeit in veiled and transfigured form. By means of the rites the community manages to cajole and somewhat subdue the forces of destruction. But the true nature and real function of these forcers will always elude its grasp, precisely because the source of the evil is the community itself."²⁹

²⁵ *Ibidem.*, 100.

²⁶ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 112.

²⁷ *Ibidem.*, 12 & 21.

²⁸ *Ibidem.*, 98.

²⁹ *Ibidem.*, 104.

In this scenario, the victim that is dreaded is now remembered as the savior of the community that halts the feuds among its members. Due to this power, the victim is paradoxically turned into a saving god. Not only is the victim the cause of the violence, s/he also becomes the redemption of the community. Since this victim-turned-god permits the magical cessation of violence, the community idealizes the situation and recreates their recollection of the event. In that ritual sacrifice, the victim is turned into a god of the community.³⁰ Since this god is both the embodiment of both menace and a grace, s/he is a monster transcending the cultural order of the community. The community projects all their hostilities to this god who absorbs and receives them. Having projected its violence to the god, the community fears the sacred because, once provoked or disgruntled, this god can discharge or unleash this violence and vengeance to the community. Thus, the community needs to continually offer a ritual sacrifice for this god in order to appease her/him. "[F]or each successive sacrifice evokes in diminishing degree the immense calm produced by the act of generative unanimity by the initial appearance of the god."³¹ By receiving and taking the sacrifice, this god maintains the peace and order of the community.

However, the truth is that the community merely renews the unanimity of the community. By reenacting the slaughter of the surrogate victim, the community reaffirms its peaceful existence around the victim. In reality, the community only wants to forget its horrendous crime by foregrounding the camaraderie generated by its collective violence to a surrogate victim. By continually reenacting that originary murder of the victim, the ritual sacrifice

³⁰ Girard believes in evolution of people and cultures. Evolutionarily, there has been a long series of repeated or endless murders where such murders bring about peace to the community. This pattern is the foundation of what Girard calls the "surrogate victim mechanism." Often the dead person is revered as a bearer of peace to the community. To curb the repetition of this violence, people make ritual sacrifices to resolve the crisis in order to re-channel this violence. The community achieves stability and durability by discharging the crisis or tension created by mimetic rivalry and jealousy. The scapegoat expels violence from the community.

³¹ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 280.

prevents the recurrence of violence in the future. When violence is contained, the community exits in peace, albeit transitory and superficial. The camaraderie is sustained by this ritual sacrifice that prevents the repetition of this mimetic inferno. Thus, sacrifice is a way of social control designed to prohibit scenarios of mimetic rivalry.³²

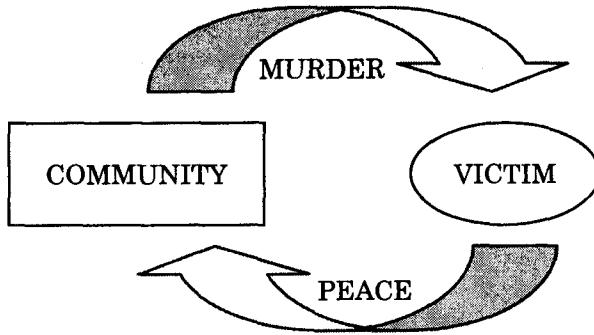
This paradox of the scapegoat as wrongdoer and as peace-maker is the result of a double transference. The community hates and also reveres the victim. The death of the victim is the birth of a society. The violence dies with the murder of the victim. The sacrifice of the victim ends the violence and establishes peace. Thus, the source of disorder is also the source of order. Culture as a way of life emerges out of the murder of the surrogate victim which is continually reenacted in ritual sacrifice. "It goes without saying that the rite has its violent aspects, but these always involve a lesser violence, proffered as a bulwark against a far more virulent violence."³³ This ritual sacrifice is institutionalized into a religious practice that reenacts the sacrifice of the surrogate victim. Thus, the surrogate victimage precedes the establishment of a religious institution which commemorates the originary murder of the surrogate victim. "Sacrifice is here visualized as engendering religion."³⁴ Thus, religion is a founding moment of society which lays down the prohibitions of the recurrence of destructive violence. "Prohibition focuses on the negative side of the process, the mimetic rivalry that caused a crisis, while ritual focuses on the positive side, the surrogate victim that reconciled the adversaries."³⁵

³² This repetitive process of violence is called the 'generative mimetic scapegoating mechanism' or in short GSM which is coined by R. Hamerton-Kelly. This process is generative because it separates the self and the other; this process is mimetic because desire drives it; this process is scapegoating because the purpose is substitution; this process is a mechanism because it works like a machine. See Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: The Hermeneutics of the Cross in the Theology of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) & *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutics of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

³³ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 108.

³⁴ *Ibidem.*, 94.

³⁵ Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, 29.



CYCLE OF SCAPEGOAT MECHANISM

The violence is reenacted and commemorated in ritual sacrifice. Sacrifice is a symptom of communal violence and, at the same time, a means of salvation through which society attempts to cover up crime and ward off chaos. The violence of a society is imputed on a person who is made into a sacrificial victim. The ritual act of executing the victim both stops violence and assuages the community. Persecutors regularly seek social cause for the social chaos they perceive in society that would justify their collective violence. Instead of pointing to the mimetic rivalry and the surrogate victimage, the community blames the victim by sacrificing her/him.³⁶ The community finds a scapegoat credited with a supernatural power due to its intervention that restores its harmony. "If mimetic violence divides each against each, scapegoating violence unites all against one. This is what Girard terms "unanimity-minus-one of the surrogate victim."³⁷ The scapegoat produces a unifying experience, the peace and relief of which makes such a profound impact on the community that over time the scapegoat is made into a saving god.

Crucified Jesus

During the time of Jesus, Jerusalem was governed by the Jewish Sanhedrin composed primarily of the high priest and his council. The high priest in concert with the chief priests of the

³⁶ Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, 26.

³⁷ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 273.

council wielded power in the community, especially in the Temple of Jerusalem, which was the center of Jewish worship. Some of these priests belonged to the groups of the aristocratic Sadducees and the ordinary Pharisees of the common Judaism in Palestine. They generally followed the Mosaic Laws as laid down in the Hebrew Scriptures.³⁸ Although they were different groups, the Sadducees and the Pharisees overlapped in membership. The Sadducees party was composed of some scribes or rabbis within their rank who most of them were Pharisees. The Pharisees were concerned with the restoration of the deteriorating Jewish religiosity. They wanted to stimulate religious reforms within Judaism by returning to the Law handed down by tradition. Thus, they tended to be legalistic because of this overarching concern. This legalism rewarded the faithful followers and punished the wicked members. For them, the salvation of Israel hinged on the fidelity to the Law. The Sadducees clung on the ancient tradition and rejected any ritual innovation. Thus, they conserved the *status quo* of Israel. Like the Pharisees, they also believed in reward and punishment given in the afterlife.³⁹

If we carefully read the Gospels, we discover that the fate of Jesus was a result of mimetic rivalry and surrogate victimage. Although the mimetic rivalry is not very self-evident or totally manifest, it can still be traced from the Gospels and applied to the texts. The theory of mimetic rivalry can be gleaned from the conflict between the Sanhedrin, prominent of which is the group of the Pharisees, and Jesus which centers on the controversy arising from the violation of the sabbath law and the ritual purity, as laid down in the Mosaic Law that upholds the difference or distinction between the sacred and the profane, between god and people in accordance with their cultural order. Supposedly, the Pharisees are the models in the observance of the Mosaic Law as they express their obedience to the commandments of God geared toward the salvation of Israel. However, they overstrain the people on the details of their prescribed laws that they have to rigidly and

³⁸ E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. (London: Penguin Press, 1993), 21 & 41.

³⁹ Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985), 12-14.

closely follow in their everyday life. Jesus always criticizes them for their hypocrisy and conceit in the observance of the Law.

In the Gospels, Jesus is in constant conflict with the Pharisees with regard to sabbath law and ritual purity. They are portrayed in collision or confrontation in various occasions. Although both of them have the same object of worship – God or Yahweh, they differ in their respective interpretation of the Law and practice of religion that governs human behavior in relation to God as mandated by their common cultural order. In their open confrontation, they become rivals or competitors since Jesus has established his popularity and authority among the people. They consider Jesus as their harsh opponent or critic that openly castigates and embarrasses them in public. This confrontation earns the ire of the Sanhedrin. For them, Jesus deserves to be avenged and eliminated from their sight because he is an eyesore to them. The Pharisees want to take over God on their side because possession of God would bestow them with prestige in Jewish society. The claim of God would then legitimize their privilege and status in the Temple of Jerusalem. However, Jesus claims the side of God being the prophet of God or even the Son of God.

On a sabbath, Jesus was teaching the people in the synagogue. In that occasion, there was a man who was sick. The scribes and Pharisees watched over his move so that once he breached the sabbath law, they could charge him of an offense. Knowing their thinking, Jesus still called the sick man to step forward. Jesus asked his critics around whether it was right to do good and save life or do harm and destroy it. Jesus put them into a dilemma that demanded an intelligent and righteous response. Without any second thought, Jesus immediately cured him in their sight. In this instance, Jesus was not only saying that he was Lord over the sabbath but that the welfare of people preceded the observance of the law. He plainly violated the law for a greater good or nobler purpose – to heal the sick man on the sabbath. His critics were infuriated with the actuation of Jesus.

On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an

accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. *But they were filled with fury* and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. (Lk. 5:6-11 NRSV).

In dinning, Jesus eats without washing his hands. The Pharisees spot this horrendous offense. For them, this act constitutes a violation of the ritual purity which demands an observance of the commensal rite before eating food. Jesus is therefore liable for his offensive act and so accused of infringement of the law. In response to their criticism, Jesus calls them fools (in other instances, he calls them hypocrites) because of their duplicity and conceit. They are so obsessed with the external observance of the law that they neglect the important message of the Law such as mercy, justice and fidelity. In addition, they are filled with greed and wickedness that slowly corrode the inside. For Jesus, they merely clean the outside but overlook the inside. This externality is merely a display of arrogant superiority and complacency.

While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. The Pharisees was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. Now the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. *You fools!* Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you. (Lk. 11:37-41 NRSV).

When Jesus is arrested, he is brought to Caiaphas. The chief priests introduce some sham witnesses who present made-up testimonies against Jesus. Two witnesses come forward and relate the event in the Temple where Jesus is angered by the on-going business transaction so much so that the Temple is turned into a marketplace. The destruction and the reconstruction of the Temple that Jesus prophesies is the center of the inquest. The chief priests

interrogate him by fishing out reasons that would confirm the report so that they can then indict him of a crime. By insinuating that he is the messiah, the Son of God, the chief priests are convinced that he commits the crime of blasphemy. According to their interpretation, by claiming to be the messiah, the Son of God, Jesus muddles the distinction between God and humanity. Jesus assumes the status of God. Thus, the Pharisees impute offense and guilt on Jesus who, for them, commits a blasphemy. Under existing law, blasphemy is punishable by death.

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered [...]. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and build it in three days.'" The high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, "I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you: 'From now on you will see the Son of Man seated as the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.'" Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "*He has blasphemed!* Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard this blasphemy. What is your verdict?" They answered, "He deserves death." Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, "Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?" (Mt. 26: 57-68 NRSV)

By means of his authoritative teaching, Jesus effectively breaks up the crowds between the followers who believe in him and the skeptics who remain with the Pharisees. After being informed about Jesus, the chief priests and the Pharisees call a meeting of the council to plan for their strategy. To save the Jewish community from possible social breakdown, the high priest named Caiaphas reasons that the single man Jesus should rather be sacrificed as a scapegoat rather than letting the entire community suffer from an impending chaos. Thus, Jesus is singled out as the innocent victim.

The council finds a reason to mimetically transfer its collective hostility to the single victim and to cohere on the basis of that unanimity against this one. This is captured in the Gospel of John where the debate of the council centers on the crisis caused by the excessive popularity of Jesus. In this meeting, the high priest Caiaphas employs the scapegoating mechanism.

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we knew him go on like this, everyone will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that *it is better for you to have one man dies for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed*. He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death. (Jn. 11: 45-53, NRSV).

The reason behind their disgust to Jesus articulated in the Gospel is jealousy or envy for him. His opponents are carried away by their emotion in relating to or dealing with Jesus. In their jealousy, they conspire to kill Jesus because he poses a threat to their favor and status in Jewish society. Jesus outsmarts them in terms of his popularity in healing and authority in teaching. In that gathering, Pilate realizes that it is out of their jealousy that prompts the chief priests to impugn Jesus of a heinous crime. Pressured by the situation, Pilate asks the crowds to choose between Jesus and Barabbas. Stirred by the chief priests, the crowds are swayed to trade Jesus with Barabbas. Although Barabbas is a criminal charged with murder, he is acquitted of his crime and exchanged with Jesus. Barabbas is released while Jesus is condemned. Although he is innocent of the charge, Jesus is offered as a sacrificial victim in behalf of the nation through crucifixion. Thus, Jesus metes out the capital punishment of death imposed

on him by the law. In this instance, Pilate, the chief priests and the crowds participate in the action.⁴⁰

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them: "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he realized that *it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over*. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with this man you call the King of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" So Pilate wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them, and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. (Mk. 15: 6-15 NRSV).

The fate of Jesus portrayed in the Gospels is a showcase of the working of mimetic desire which exposes the malevolence of mimetic rivalry and surrogate victimage orchestrated by his opponents. In these narratives, the jealousy of the chief priests has fomented into a resolve to sacrifice Jesus as a scapegoat. These narratives show the plight of the innocent victim and the narrators focus on their sympathy on the scapegoat. By foregrounding the fate of the victim, the Gospels want to expose the evil of sacrifice of an innocent victim and eventually to end the cycle of this absurd violence. Jealousy in mimetic desire corrupts the person and poisons relationship. The opponents of Jesus are moved with bitter jealousy that founds and funds their evil design to kill him.

Traditionally, the death of Jesus has been commemorated by the church and the cross has been venerated by Christians. In fact, "the image of Jesus' death stood not only in the center of church life, but at the heart of western thought and culture as well."⁴¹ In different churches, the crucified Jesus occupies a central

⁴⁰ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 105-106.

⁴¹ Mark Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. (Michigan & Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 4.

place in worship that discloses the suffering of the sacrificial lamb which constitutes a foundation of our Christian religion. Girard laments that throughout its history, the church has largely focused on the slain sacrificial victim. For Girard, the death of Christ has been misinterpreted and misunderstood as merely a sacrificial offering to a God who demands a victim. In effect, the meaning of the cross is lost and the passion narrative is trivialized. Historically, Christians have unconsciously continued the uninterrupted cycle of scapegoating mechanism to others, especially to the Jews in the infamous and notorious holocaust of Europe. Thus, Girard appeals for a rectification of this tradition and a reexamination of the passion narrative in the Gospels. Christians need to reinterpret the cross not as a perpetuation or prolongation of the scapegoating mechanism but the termination of this senseless violence against an innocent victim. "Christ dies for us to save us from what killed him."⁴²

Boff already points this out this danger in his reinterpretation of the theology of the cross based on their appalling experience of economic injustice widespread in Latin America. Although God has taken up the cross, he has not meant to perpetuate or transfer it to others. He has continued the cause and struggle of the prophets and martyrs who were persecuted and murdered because of their unswerving fidelity to God. Jesus offers his life on the cross to end the victimization of the hapless victims on the cross. Thus, "God has assumed it because God means to put an end to all the crosses of history."⁴³ By assuming it to himself, God wants us not to suffer from this senseless violence; instead he wants us to stop the suffering of the innocent victim. Although he is innocent, he takes the cross out of his abundant love to prove his solidarity and sympathy with the victims by sharing their pains. Thus, we should not project to God the scapegoating mechanism in pressing a surrogate victim. We should rather acknowledge, not cover-up, the truth that the world rests on the sacrificial victims that substitute for the wrongdoings of the community. We must rectify the

⁴² Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 306.

⁴³ Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World: The Facts, Their Interpretation and Their Meaning Yesterday and Today*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 114.

myth of surrogate victimage. When they accept this injustice of the surrogate victimage not as a divine threat or will but as human concoction and convenience, then we can love God again as the nurturing rather than the punishing Father.

Heim curiously asks: "How do victims become visible? To put it in another way, where do our anti sacrificial sensibilities come from?" Echoing Girard, he answers that they "are rooted in biblical revelation, particularly in the Gospels, above all in the passion narratives."⁴⁴ Thus, we should revisit the passion narratives of Jesus by rereading them carefully. The texts depict the suffering of the innocent victim and the narrators sympathize with the scapegoat. The Passion narratives show the underlying scapegoat mechanism. Thus, the ploy of mimetic desire is revealed in the Scriptures which uncover the stereotypes laid upon the victim.⁴⁵ The revelatory force of the Gospels provides access to the unjust suffering of the innocent victim which lies at the heart of mimetic desire. The Gospels acknowledge that Jesus is persecuted and murdered for no good reason. They condemn the people who machinate this mortal mimicry of violence on an innocent victim that is slaughtered to death. The Gospels show us the way out to this violence. "The Gospels pulled back the veil of unanimous accusation to show the hidden truth of sacrifice, the undeserved suffering of the innocent victim. What was revealed was what was wrong, and what must be changed."⁴⁶

Conclusion

Imitation is an integral element of human formation and development. In various ways, we imitate others whether we do it consciously or unconsciously. We desire what others desire because they teach or show us what object to desire. This imitation influences our behavior and interaction. Although we cannot give up imitation, we can nonetheless redirect it. Since desire is not

⁴⁴ Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 11.

⁴⁵ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 101.

⁴⁶ Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 302.

fastened to a single object, it can still be relocated to another. The Gospels recommend the imitation of the model exemplified by Jesus. Jesus calls his prospective disciples with an invitation to come and follow him in his path of love and forgiveness. The commandment of love and forgiveness constitutes a significant teaching to his disciples and in his ministry. This commandment can interrupt the violent cycle of mimetic desire of rivalry and victimage. In his relations with his disciples, Jesus does not compete with them, but teaches them to empty themselves and to serve one another. Instead of treating them as servants, Jesus calls them friends, not rivals. Jesus shows his disciples a God of love, not of violence, that sympathizes with the marginalized and the impoverished in society. This is epitomized in his sympathy and identification with the victims such as the infirmed, the burdened, the oppressed and the deprived. The Scriptures depict a God who associates and empathizes with the victims. Far from demanding victims, God identifies with the victims. This identification is the central biblical revelation of our God. The Scriptures expose the mechanism of mimetic rivalry and surrogate victimage as a plain fraud and utter deception. God responds to violence with non-violent love.

Traditionally, the Church has misunderstood the death of Jesus as a surrogate victim offered to a God who demands a victim as a ransom. Girard significantly overturns this traditional conception about the meaning of Christ's death on the cross by rejecting the idea of a surrogate victimage. The Gospels reveal the futility of scapegoating mechanism which is not a necessary requirement of an irate God who demands a blood sacrifice to avenge God's justice and to appease God's wrath. In redefining Christ's death, Girard demystifies the crucifixion as a blood sacrifice. Such demystification contributes to the ending of the surrogate victimage prevalent in atonement theory in our traditional theology. Jesus did not die because the Father needed a victim; rather Jesus died to end the suffering of the victim. Jesus refuses to be drawn into this vicious mimetic desire by deconstructing the cycle of surrogate victimage. The crucified and risen Christ offers an antidote to this mimetic desire of rivalry and victimage. Even though violence nails Jesus to the cross, he refuses to retaliate;

instead hanging on the cross, he utters forgiveness: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34 NRSV). These words are crucial in the renunciation of violence that exposes the scapegoat mechanism. This act of forgiveness involves a recognition of the violence of mimetic desire that leads only to a bloody sacrifice of an innocent victim. In the crucifixion of Jesus, the climax is not the death of the scapegoat but the experience of liberation from this senseless violence. This is the moment of transcendence that overcomes mimetic rivalry and surrogate victimage and that renounce vengeful and jealous passion. "There is only one transcendence in the Gospels, the transcendence of divine love that triumphs over all manifestations of violence and the sacred by revealing their nothingness."⁴⁷ Through his acceptance of the cross, Jesus has made love of enemies and forgiveness of his tormentors the core of his commandment as an antidote to mimetic desire. His death is our redemption from mimetic desire.

The resurrection of Jesus points to a new beginning of hope. "The resurrection of the crucified one brought with it not righteous vengeance but the formation of an old new community that gathered around him."⁴⁸ The community of disciples witnesses the appearances of the risen Jesus that furnishes them with hope. The risen Jesus offers the disciples a new life to be commenced by a new community who believes in the risen Jesus. The resurrection proves that violence is not the last word, but rather articulates the vindication of the victim. The triumph of the crucified Jesus shows the preference and identification of God with the victim. Jesus' mission is not to continue this bloody sacrifice offered to a vengeful God who sought victims to atone for the sins of humanity but to rescue humanity from the cycle of violence through an example of love and forgiveness that interrupts this cycle. The Christians "celebrated not the unanimity against the victim, but their identification with the crucified one, and so with all those placed in a similar situation."⁴⁹ By showing us to the way of love and forgiveness,

⁴⁷ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 194.

⁴⁸ Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 18.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*, 18.

Jesus redirects our propensity for mimetic violence and scapegoating mechanism to a sympathy and identification with the victims of mimesis. "God reverses the violence of the cross and vindicates the victims executed on it."⁵⁰

Lamentably, the cycle of violence continues and reawakens in various forms. Religious communities and parochial organizations, individually as members and collectively as groups, compete for prestige. They desire the same object not God *per se*, but the prestige of membership. Within these communities and organizations, members compete for positions, riches and supporters in order to gain prestige or enhance their prestige. Violent competition is fed by envy or jealousy among members. This rivalry creates factions and cliques in these communities and organizations. The culture of envy and jealousy developed in these communities and organizations is the breeding ground of this violent competition and rivalry. If we choose Jesus as our model, we simultaneously renounce mimetic desire and choose his own model – God the Father – who sympathizes or identifies with the victims and not the victimizers. Devoid of violent desire, Jesus proclaims the possibility of freedom from this mimetic desire by means of love and forgiveness that can bring meaningful peace and unity in these communities and organizations. But if we choose mimetic desire, we find ourselves in endless cycle of violence that impedes the realization of the reign of God on earth. Either we give up and participate in the persecuting crowds or we resist and struggle against this destructive mimetic desire. The first way is the unanimous victimization of the scapegoat, while the second way is the termination of the bloody sacrifice of surrogate victimage. Instead of blaming the victims, the Gospels blame the victimizers and ends scapegoat mechanism. "God is not violent; the true God has nothing to do with violence."⁵¹ The reconciliation and peace forged by surrogate victimage is short-live because the underlying motive of jealousy and rivalry merely subside but it still persists. Evading the root will only prolong these divisions and dissensions. When

⁵⁰ Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 17.

⁵¹ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 189.

the mythical lie is publicly exposed and denounced, the unanimity of victimization looses its sway on these communities or organizations. Rather than imitating through mimetic desire, Christians should imitate Jesus who only imitates God. □