

# *Girard's Christology*

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*Who Jesus Christ is  
becomes known in his saving action  
Melancton*

*We cannot think about the ideal of a humanity that is pleasing to God  
other than by the idea of a man who would be willing not only to perform  
all human duty himself and at the same time spread good as widely as possible  
through teaching and example, but also, though tempted by the greatest enticements,  
to assume all suffering, even to the point of the most ignominious death, for the sake of the best in the world  
and even for his enemies.  
Kant*

## **Christology as a Way to Understand Violence**

The main problem among humans is violence. If people could solve the problem of violence, most other problems would also be solved. Mimetic theory localizes the problem in rivalistic desires. Every time imitation turns into severe rivalry between human beings, violence, either physical or psychological seems to get the upper hand. Before long the rivals will have forgotten what they were rivaling about. They have become doubles, preoccupied mostly with subverting the other. This is the human dilemma which seems absolutely insoluble - despite an ever increasing focus on the devastating effects of violence.

In mimetic theory, Christ is seen as the remedy for the problem of violence. To imitate through Christ, means imitating a loving and non-rivalistic model. Christ, according to mimetic theory, has played a decisive role in changing human behaviour; both by revealing the *innocence* of the victim<sup>1</sup> and by attempting to save humanity from an immeasurably violent existence. The Passion, according to mimetic theory, was born out of love for the other. According to James Alison, the imitation of Christ can liberate men from desiring each other in a rivalistic manner, and create a new I, which, through the act of exchanging models,

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<sup>1</sup> On the victim's innocence, see Girard. *The Scapegoat*, *Job. The Victim of His People*, See especially chapter 21 (The God of Victims), *Things Hidden*, 141-280, and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (see especially Introduction).

will help us give up the encompassing desire for reputation and make us capable of participating with people of poor repute.<sup>2</sup>

### **Christology Starts by Interpreting the Victim's Role in Tanak**

In order to understand mimetic theory, one first of all has to understand the role Christ is given in relation to imitation, desire and violence. Thus, christology is fundamentally a hermeneutical task. It attempts to mediate the Jesus of the past with a present-day belief in Christ. The task of christology, according to Wolfhart Pannenberg, is to establish the true understanding of Jesus from his history.<sup>3</sup> Thus christology means going behind the New Testament to the historical Jesus.<sup>4</sup> It also tries to combine scientific knowledge with belief.<sup>5</sup> If the breach between science and faith becomes too evident, theology and, in this context, christology, has a problem of legitimation.

Christology usually begins with the historical Jesus. According to Moltmann, 'a universally relevant christological conception of the incarnate Son of God, of the redeemer or of the exemplary human being cannot be Christian, without an indispensable reference to his unique person and history.'<sup>6</sup> With an understanding of christology such as this, mimetic theory runs into a number of formal problems. Firstly, mimetic theory does not start with the historical Jesus (Jesus' life) but *with the effects of it*. It does not, however, disregard the findings concerning the historical Jesus. On the other hand, mimetic theology is seldom regulated by such findings. Hamerton-Kelly, when giving a Girardian interpretation of the Gospel of Mark, claims that 'the text has been structured by the impact of Jesus on the deep structure of human existence, and this can be discerned without certifying any simple event or saying as coming from the historical Jesus himself.'<sup>7</sup> This is a very optimistic view, indeed. Hamerton-Kelly seems to suggest that through the use of mimetic theory, one can decipher the core of Christianity and, at the same time, discard both general historical knowledge and the *Sitz im Leben* approach.

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<sup>2</sup> James Alison. *Living in the End Times* (London, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 180-189.

<sup>3</sup> Pannenberg. *Jesus - God and Man* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Pannenberg's christological position can be seen to be a critique of Bultmann who lets existence determine the content of christological thinking. (See Svein Rise. *The christology of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Identity and Relevance* (Lewiston Queenston Lampet: Mellen U.P., 1997), 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Moltmann. *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 103.

<sup>7</sup> Hamerton-Kelly. *The Gospel & the Sacred, Poetics of Violence in Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 14.

Christ's role in mimetic theory is primarily interpreted by means of the anthropological structures derived from the Gospels. And christology in this theory is a christology from below,<sup>8</sup> emphasizing a human christology.<sup>9</sup> The context, however, from where Girard interprets the roots of Christ's historical role, is located in different texts from *Tanak*.<sup>10</sup> Girard clearly cottons on to the christological trend of the day, emphasizing Jesus' Jewishness. In this respect Girard is in accordance with what Theissen calls the *third quest for the historical Jesus*.<sup>11</sup> However, the christology which can be derived from Girard's work does not, as in most exegetes of the day, emphasize the non-eschatological, cynical Jesus based on the *Gospel of Thomas* and other non-canonical literature.<sup>12</sup>

Christ as the key to revealing violent humanity clearly has, in mimetic theory, a regressive hermeneutical function. His words and actions illuminate the violent past of human beings. Christ sets the victim in its midst. Thus the role of the victim was already an essential part of the Jewish religion many hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Sacrifice in the *Tanak* is at times revealed as a bloody and violent business in opposition to God's will. However, the victimage mechanism was only partly revealed. The pattern in the *Tanak* (when we consider violence) is the same as in any story of cultural foundation. Cain kills Abel and a new culture is founded. But there is a fundamental difference in this story (compared to many other foundation myths).<sup>13</sup> The text *does not legitimate the murder*. Unlike the story, for example, of Romulus and Remus, Cain's violent action is not endowed with any rationale or legitimation. The killing is seen as murder and sin.<sup>14</sup> The murder of Remus, on the other hand, is given a rationale as he does not respect the borders marking the inside and outside of the city.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Moltmann, a christology from above begins with the doctrine of God, and then develops a christology about the Son of God who has become a human being. A christology from below starts with the human Jesus of Nazareth, and from that develops a theology. The christology from above, according to Moltmann, has a general metaphysical theology as premise, while the christology from below has a general anthropology as premise. (See Moltmann. *The Way of Jesus Christ. Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (London: SCM Press, 1999) 68.

<sup>9</sup> Theissen/Merz. *The Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 560.

<sup>10</sup> This is, of course, nothing new. On the contrary, when considering the different christologies, derived from the New Testament or later, one must agree with Terence E. Fretheim, that, 'without the Old Testament, there would be no adequate christology'. Kenneth E. Fretheim. 'Christology and the Old Testament' in Powell/Bauer. *Who Do You Say that I am? Essays on Christology* (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 201

<sup>11</sup> Theissen/Merz. *The Historical Jesus*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (London: Athlone Press. 1987), 144-149.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

In *Ancient Judaism*, Max Weber claims that the biblical writers tended to take the side of the victim. Weber, however, does not regard this as a genuinely religious insight but sees it from the perspective of the Jews as a downtrodden people who had not been able to conquer and establish any great empire.<sup>15</sup> Thus resentment seems to be the reason for siding with the victim. From a mimetic point of view, concern for the victim and his/her innocence marks the most profound cultural change. It introduces a new mentality which gradually grows capable of turning a culture away from its violent foundation.

The *Tanak* is, due to its moral concern for the victims, capable of demythologizing violence and scapegoating. At the same time there is a tendency, especially in the Prophetic literature, to subvert myth, sacrifice and prohibition. From a particular Judaeo-Christian perspective, concern for the victim paves the way for truth in a religious sense, although this truth, religious in content is worked out from a critique of religion.<sup>16</sup> Parts of the Prophetic literature in the *Tanak* tend to reveal the truth underlying the scapegoat mechanism. The prophet's message, condemning violence against victims, leads to violence against those who reveal the violence. The prophet who brings the victimage mechanism to light, also tends to become the victim of the people.

The four Songs of the Servant are, in mimetic theory, seen as a revelation of the role of the scapegoat.<sup>17</sup> The servant's innocent suffering becomes a guideline for the people. The suffering servant reminds one of the Greek *pharmakos*, functioning both as a poison and a remedy against the poison. The difference, however, is that the servant is presented as innocent in his suffering.<sup>18</sup> Gans furthers this understanding by claiming that the suffering servant marks an eschatological morality by a submission of historical difference.<sup>19</sup> The Song of the Servant reveals its religious foundations by describing this violent expulsion from the victim's point of view. Taking the victim's point of view seems to mark a new mentality. However, according to Girard, the author resorts to mythology when describing Jahve's role as the will to bruise the servant (Isaiah 53.10).<sup>20</sup> In the *Tanak* there is often ambivalence in its understanding of the victimage mechanism. The scapegoat's innocence and God's non-

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<sup>15</sup> Weber. *Ancient Judaism* (New York: The Free Press, 1952), XXIII-XXVI.

<sup>16</sup> For example the story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50) emphasizes the victim's innocence, and by doing so presents a story devoid of any demonic and divine acts. See *Things Hidden*, 150-152 and Girard. 'The Bible is not a Myth.'

<sup>17</sup> *Things Hidden*, 155-158.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>19</sup> Gans. *The End of Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 303.

<sup>20</sup> *Things Hidden*, 156-157.

sacrificial nature is, according to mimetic theory, not consistent and not taken far enough. All the same, certain fundamental traits of Christ is preconceived in the *Tanak*: the revelation of communities built on violence, the expulsion of victims, the victim's innocence, a non-violent attitude and a suffering God, are all present. One can perhaps speak of a pre-christology in the *Tanak*, not because of any future speculation inherent in the prophetic writings but in the way the central themes concerning the victim are presented (and later given a new meaning). The anthropological interpretation of the *Tanak* inherent in mimetic theory actually reintroduces the disclaimed figural interpretation, not in any *a priori* way, but by presenting, in a somewhat evolutionary manner, different manifestations of the victim.

### **Non-Sacrificial Christology in the New Testament**

In mimetic theory, the Gospels' revelation of violence is seen as reaching a more decisive stage. According to certain texts in the Gospels, the order of humanity is built on murder, and often new murders have been committed in order to conceal previous murders.<sup>21</sup> Jesus' fate is seen to be exactly the same as several of the prophets in the *Tanak*. This means that the same mechanisms are at work. By killing Jesus, one is mimetically repeating the same violent past. The killing of Jesus repeats the previous cycle of innocent killings. Thus the murder of Abel, from the perspective of the *Tanak*, goes back to the origins of humanity and the foundations of the first cultural order.<sup>22</sup> Christ reveals a violent foundation inherent in human culture, not only through his words, but through himself becoming a victim of violence by the act of revealing the murderous origins as something continuing in his own culture. Schwager interprets this as a universal revelation of mankind.<sup>23</sup> According to Schwager, the Gospels, as the only literature in the world (at that time) were able to reveal the hidden truth about the scapegoat.<sup>24</sup> If Christianity were merely one of many religions, the fundamental mechanism would have to be hidden as it is in others<sup>25</sup> as this is, in essence, the foundation of religion.

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<sup>21</sup> When confronting the Pharisees Christ uses them as an intermediary to expose the killing of victims down through history, from the first killing of Abel to the last killing named in the historical chronicle in the Second Book of Chronicles: Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, that upon you will come all the blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation. (Matthew 23. 34-36)

<sup>22</sup> *Things Hidden*, 159.

<sup>23</sup> Schwager. *Must there be Scapegoats?* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 153.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 136

<sup>25</sup> Girard. 'Das Evangelium legt die Gewalt bloss,' *Orientierung* 38 (1974): 53.

Thus, it is by the rejection of Christ that the scapegoat mechanism becomes visible. This means that it is a combination of rejection and non-violent reaction which provokes the revelation of the mechanism.

According to mimetic theory, the Passion highlights violent humanity. The act of victimizing and then deifying the victim is revealed as unjustified murder. As long as the victim comes across as innocent, the act of hiding the misdeed by deification does not succeed. Thus, sacrifice has, from a christological point of view, been reversed. Deification is seen as disguised murder. Thus, Christ sheds new light on the victimizing process by revealing it as murder. By using Christ as the key to an anthropological interpretation of religious scriptures, mimetic theory claims that humans' interpretation of violence and (violent) religious rites signify the opposite of what they think. Stubbornness and delusion are the determining factors according to New Testament hermeneutics, Schwager says.<sup>26</sup> The blindness with which humans interpret their acts reveals something terrible and sombre. In the act of killing, people think that they are acting upon the will of God. Both religiously and anthropologically, people's violent acts seem to be enacted in a state of blindness.

The whole sacrificial system begins to crumble when the victim is seen as innocent. Christ brings down the sacrificial system by himself becoming an unsuccessful victim, unsuccessful in the sense that there was no unanimous consent to the killing of Christ. On the other hand, the victim brings reconciliation and safety, restoring life to the community.<sup>27</sup> From this point of view, the hermeneutics in mimetic theory may seem slightly dubious. Sacrifice has served its purpose by holding a society together. The cost, however, has been murder and religious delusion. Mimetic theory seems to indicate that without a christological approach, scapegoating would probably have been seen as something good, keeping a society together by offering one victim in exchange for the benefit to the whole community. This leads us to consider the interpretation of the sacrifice of Christ in mimetic theory.

### **A Non-Sacrificial Christology in Things Hidden**

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<sup>26</sup> Schwager. *Must there be Scapegoats?*, 138.

<sup>27</sup> *Things Hidden*, 143.

In *Things Hidden* Girard claims that Christ's passion is not a sacrifice in any of the accepted meanings.<sup>28</sup> What he means by this is that Christ's sacrifice functioned neither as a regulating mechanism, nor by convincing people that it was willed by God. But sacrifice in its traditional interpretation does contain the belief that life stems from death (that is murder of the victim). Thus sacrifice is built on the belief that violence is sacred. In the Gospels the sacrifice of Jesus is presented as murder and not as a life-giving ritual. Girard does not claim that the killing of Jesus was not sacrificial. Rather, he claims that it is the meaning or understanding of Jesus' death that the Gospels present in a non-sacrificial way. Christ may be presented as the underlying principle of both mimesis and sacrifice in that he reverses both. From a theological point of view Girard concludes that the death of Jesus was *not* God-willed. This point is extremely central as it marks an attempt to deconstruct a violent and sacrificial theology which, from a historical point of view, has dominated Christendom. Sacrificial systems represent the opposite of the Kingdom of God. The Passion does not mean that God sacrificed his son for the sake of humanity. Jesus was sacrificed because his attempt to represent the Kingdom of God meant revealing violent sacrificial systems. The Kingdom of God meant a replacement of sacrifice and prohibitions by love.<sup>29</sup> These sacrificial systems can be located as the sacred foundation of culture. By attempting to replace a sacrificial system with non-violence and undifferentiated love, Christ became a danger to the upholding of Jewish society. But considering that the Jewish religion, more than most other religious societies, through the aid of their prophets, had begun to question a sacrificial theology, this would probably mean that wherever Jesus would have proclaimed the Gospel, he would have been eliminated.

Christ's message, in a mimetic reading of the Gospels, is twofold: firstly, it reveals the foundations of human violent origin. Secondly, Christ attempts to replace a sacrificial society with The Kingdom of God, renouncing violence and replacing it with undifferentiated love for one's neighbour. Putting an end to the mimetic crisis would mean deconstructing sacrificial violence. As the powers of the world are violent, Christ's mission is to deconstruct them, Girard says.<sup>30</sup> This deconstruction can only be done by someone who represents a non-violent God. Christ is therefore, according to mimetic theory, divine in that he represents the non-violent and loving nature of God.<sup>31</sup> The mimesis of Christ becomes essential in this respect. If there were no emphasis on imitating Christ, Girard's christology would, as Milbank

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 180-185, 205-215.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 191.

claims, consist only of revealing man's destructive side without any attempt to work out a mimetic understanding of the Kingdom of God.<sup>32</sup> Imitating Christ means becoming a part of the same loving and non-sacrificial nature of God. Violence, on the other hand, gives humans a falsified image of existence.<sup>33</sup> This does not mean, however, that in the realm of a false existence one cannot believe in God. On the contrary, it is *especially from a standpoint of violence that most beliefs are founded*. But these faiths refer to a sacrificial god, a god of violence. Thus Christ becomes a mediation, from a violent imitation between humans, towards an imitation of a non-violent God. In this respect Christ represents God; he gives people the possibility of peering into a realm of non-violent and life-giving existence and, finally, a way to build a human culture where violence is not the dominating force.

### **Revealing Sacrificial Violence**

By postulating a non-sacrificial christology as a *starting point* and also as a *hermeneutical tool* in mimetic theory, it seems essential to consider the cultural climate stemming from a non-sacrificial mentality. The non-sacrificial mentality represents a secular, individualistic, differentiated and liberal society. This society, however, is vulnerable as it is not endowed with the sacrificial protections of traditional societies. Christ decodes the sacrificial system first by unmasking its violence and then making it impotent by reversing its use. It is not the victim who is guilty, but the perpetrators. By turning the sacrificial system upside down, sacrifice loses its force for the people who are capable of seeing its illusory foundation. But this was initially, from a historical point of view, a very marginal revelation which began only slowly to be integrated into the Roman world by gradually changing its violent mentality. The paradox, however, is that within a non-sacrificial society violence risks becoming worse than ever before. Without the sacrificial protections of a traditional society, violence threatens to become apocalyptic. This apocalyptic possibility is a consequence of a Christian society where sacrificial protection has, by and large, vanished. According to Girard, this difference in the interpretation of sacrifice has run through the whole of Western thought.<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 218-223.

<sup>32</sup> John Milbank. *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1991), 395.

<sup>33</sup> *Things Hidden*, 197.

<sup>34</sup> According to Girard, the pre-Socratic understanding of Logos is fundamentally violent while the Johannine understanding emphasizes the expulsion of Logos, the violent manner in which it was received. The Johannine understanding of Christ as the Logos is, despite borrowing the concept from Greek philosophy, in breach with the Greek meaning of Logos. (See *Things Hidden*, 263-280.) Heidegger for example, inspired by Nietzsche and Hegel,

consequence has, according to mimetic theory, a terrifying prospect. Alongside the expulsion, the crumbling of sacrificial systems and violent hierarchies, one is finally faced with the apocalyptic threat of total extinction. The Christian Logos, however, by dismissing violence to the extent that it became a victim of violence, has shown its rationale in the way that culture has been changed and reinvigorated by its concern for victims. This, however, does not mean seeing Christ's role as one that unites people. Nor does Christ's role consist in forging unity by rites and prohibitions. Christ's primary function, in mimetic theory, is revelation and encouraging a violent human race, which initially stands in opposition to the Kingdom of God, to give up its violent deeds and imitate Christ's love for one's neighbour.<sup>35</sup> In this respect one can see the Church as something secondary, growing out of the attempt to imitate the love of Christ.

### **Christology is the Basis for Mimetic Theology**

Girard's christology is the main presupposition for understanding mimetic desire. The whole concept of religion in mimetic theory consists in seeing violent mimesis as leading to scapegoating and, afterwards, to deification. The mimesis of Christ, however, hinders scapegoating. Christ, in both his words and deeds, can be seen to be a basic hermeneutical principle in mimetic theory. Mimetic theory is born out of reflections on Christ: central motifs such as mimesis, scapegoating, violence and love seem to arise from reflecting on the effects of Christ's life. Girard's christological reflections have coloured all these motifs and they

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saw both the Greek and the Christian Logos as violent.(See *Things Hidden*, 265-266.) The difference, according to Heidegger, therefore, is not manifested as a totally different approach to violence. Heidegger differentiates the Greek and Johannine Logos in a slave-master context where the Greek Logos is conceived by free men and the Johannine Logos is violence visited upon slaves. (*Things Hidden*, 266.) Girard's attempt to differentiate the two concepts of Logos is partly an attempt to reveal the difference between a sacrificial and a non-sacrificial worldview. (*Things Hidden*, 263-280.) With hindsight, one might call this fundamental difference a mimetic fight between the Greek and Christian worldview. The Christian Logos is, as the Gospel of John describes it, perceived through expulsion. The divine Logos was not received by his own. ('He came to his own and his own people received him not' John 1.10-11.) The Greek Logos initiates expulsion by its violence. Different approaches to the Logos will necessarily, according to James Williams, bring about a very different attitude when dealing with victims. (See James Williams foreword in Girard's book. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, XXII.) Clearly, Girard sees the life of Jesus and the Johannine Logos as one and the same. *Things Hidden*, 270-276. Both were expelled, both represented God and incarnated love. There does not seem, however, to be a direct transference from christology to ecclesiology. Girard's christology seems, initially, distanced from the role of church building. On the discussion of Christ's role, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, one of the two co-discussion partners in *Things Hidden*, gives a greater emphasis to how Christ's message, through the ages, has been changed into a sacrificial message. Thus Oughourlian cannot see that Girard's christology can correspond to the shape Christianity developed into in its historical manifestations. (*Things Hidden*, 209-210) It can seem that Girard, since the writing of *Things Hidden*, has developed his theory more in accordance to a traditional understanding of Christ as the body of the historical church.

<sup>35</sup> *Things Hidden*, 204.

cannot be seen as isolated from a general anthropology. Thus christology may be seen as the hermeneutical principle or even the main tool for understanding mimetic theory as a religious theory. While Modernist and post-Modernist thinkers claim that their deconstruction of sacrificial and anti-humanistic thought also means a deconstruction of Christianity, mimetic theory seems to point to Christianity as the ideology which has made it possible for those thinkers to deconstruct.<sup>36</sup> In other words, they are unconsciously part of the Gospel revelation. Thus it seems reasonable to interpret mimetic theory from the same perspective, namely from the ideal of imitating Christ.

### **The Imitation of Christ**

Imitating Christ, meaning mimesis based on Christ, is mostly discussed in the context of Christian norms. In the case of Thomas a Kempis, imitating Christ would mean transforming one's personality into the likeness of Christ. From the point of view of mimetic theory, however, it could also mean realizing pacifist norms and ideals. The imitation of Christ, from a mimetic point of view, appears relevant anywhere where violence is in the process of being moderated. Over the last 2000 years there has been much emphasis, within Western culture, on the ideal of imitating Christ (outwardly at least), however violent and sacrificial a form a society has taken. And despite the fact that some of the most abominable sacrifices have become part of Christian culture, sometimes even enacted because of what was considered to be imitating Christ, the norm of being Christ-like remains present. Christian ideals, even in the most violent periods of Western history, were common and loudly preached, even if the pacifist and non-sacrificial ideals seem to have been crucial only of late and only enacted upon by the few. The *imitatio Christi* motif seems to have survived in some kind of overreaching fashion, throughout the ages of Christian culture, despite, at times, being understood in an idealistic and otherworldly manner.

The *imitatio Christi* motif was and is one of the most central religious motifs in Christendom, despite the fact that there has been very little pronounced knowledge of the imitative nature of human beings. One might say, in a somewhat heterodox Freudian manner, that one of the most basic drives in European civilization has been the desire to be like Jesus, either consciously or unconsciously. One only has to think back to one's own norms at school,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 191.

where practically every song and every ethical ideal had some affinity with the ideal of Christ. And for every generation, if one goes back in history, Christian ethics were presented, forcefully and authoritatively, as the ultimate true worldview.

### **Jesus' Imitation**

In mimetic theory mimesis is based not only on the understanding that every human is imitative and that we imitate each other. Nor is religious mimesis restricted to humans imitating God or Christ. Mimetic theory also emphasizes, from a theological point of view, Christ's imitation of his Father. Jesus' imitation of God is basically seen as an imitation in love. There is no rivalry and no acquisition involved in the way the Son imitates the Father. Hence Christ's imitation is radically different from the imitation among men, which tends to be rivalistic and easily ends in violence. Girard emphasizes in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* that Christ also imitates. He is not putting a stop to imitation by directing it towards himself; he invites humans to imitate his own imitation.<sup>37</sup> Jesus, according to Girard, does not claim to desire from himself.<sup>38</sup> He does not obey his own desire. His goal is to become the perfect image of God.<sup>39</sup> Jesus advocates mimetic desire (imitate me, imitate my Father).<sup>40</sup> In this respect Christ is the mediator towards God. And because of this imitation, Christ inherits the same loving and non-violent nature as God. Thus Christ is seen to be God. Theologically, the Trinity can be interpreted as a relationship based on total interdependence devoid of rivalry and acquisition. The openness between the hypostases' that make up the Godhead and the non-rivalistic manner in which the Trinity is seen to function, stand in marked contrast to the hidden and rivalistic manner in which people imitate each other. Because imitation among humans traps people into different forms of rivalry,<sup>41</sup> Girard focuses emphatically on the imitation of Christ. And Girard's version of the imitation of Christ may be labelled what Soon-Gu Kwon calls a *relational interpretation*.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *The Girard Reader*, (Ed. James Williams. NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 63. (An interview with Girard.)

<sup>41</sup> *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> See Soon-Gu Kwon. *Christ as Example. The Imitatio Christi Motive in Biblical and Christian Ethics*, (Dissertation) Uppsala: Uppsala Studies in Social Ethics 21 (1998): Chapter 9, 194-210.

## Girard's Version of Imitatio Christi

One's way of interpreting the imitation of Christ will vary according to how one understands the life of Jesus. Therefore, the importance of the imitatio motif depends on what one considers to be the main themes in Christianity. Paul's emphasis on the justification of the ungodly through faith, for example, is decisive for his image of Christ as the saviour of all mankind. Imitation of Christ is therefore the Christian's *continuation* of salvation. The central theme in the New Testament, according to mimetic theory, is Jesus' revelation of violence through his dissolving the scapegoat mechanism. This theme is therefore decisive for the *imitatio Christi* motif. From *Deceit, Desire & the Novel* onwards, there has been a certain emphasis, in Girard's work, on the *imitatio Christi* motif. One could even say that Girard's religious thinking starts with the *imitatio Christi* motif and is later developed into a non-sacrificial theology. In mimetic theory, the imitation of Christ is a direct consequence of christology as it combines a general anthropological drive with religious imitation.

This notion of a divine model devoid of violent desires was, as mentioned above, already established in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. In this work the road to freedom from metaphysical desire lay in choosing the divine model.<sup>43</sup> Girard claims that there is a qualitative difference between the human and the divine model. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* can actually be read as a conversion story where the pains of metaphysical desire force a change in imitative models. However, the focus is much greater on the laws and structures of desire than on the liberation from these same desires. Despite this, Girard seems to advocate a conversion which entails imitating Christ, but the work does not discuss the content of such an imitation at any great length. In *Things Hidden* there is, considering the scope and emphasis on Christ in this work, little direct emphasis on the imitation of Christ. It is basically in the last two pages that Girard introduces directly the theme of imitating Christ. Girard's christological reflections have so far dealt mostly with interpreting the Gospels in a non-sacrificial manner. However, the whole discussion leads to the conclusion that imitating Christ is the only way out of a violent existence. In the section called '*The Divinity of Christ*', Girard claims that Christ is the only agent capable of helping us escape from the violent structures and freeing us from their dominion.<sup>44</sup> Girard connects here the themes of *non-*

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<sup>43</sup> *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1965, 58.

<sup>44</sup> *Things Hidden*, 219.

*violence* and *non-sacrifice* with the imitation of Christ.<sup>45</sup> Non-violence can be seen as the consequence of turning away from mimetic desire.<sup>46</sup> Thus imitation of Christ means mimesis without obstacles and violent opposition between doubles.<sup>47</sup>

Through the imitation of Christ humans can possibly avoid the danger of turning the model into a fascinating rival. Christ does not possess any form of acquisitive desire, rivalry or mimetic interference.<sup>48</sup> Thus, imitating Jesus is seen as a natural consequence of conversion. Neither in the Gospels nor in the other texts of the New Testament is there any professed prohibition against imitation. They recommend, Girard writes, the imitation of Christ.

*The Gospels and the New Testament (...) 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 the way children imitate – of being transformed into a fascinating rival. (Things Hidden, 430.)*

However, in *Things Hidden*, there seems to be a certain reluctance towards accepting the effects of mimetic phenomena as such, a reluctance which, as a whole, is not present in his later works.<sup>49</sup> Part of the lack of clarity concerning mimetic desire consists in Girard's different uses of the same concepts. One passage in *Things Hidden* especially seems to blur his main view on mimesis. After recommending the imitation of Christ, Girard says that '*following Christ means giving up mimetic desire*'.<sup>50</sup> If following Christ means giving up mimesis or imitation, Girard is contradicting the mimetic theory that implies that the most basic aspects of human beings is imitation. The theme here, however, seems confined to giving up rivalistic imitation, the kind of imitation that is acquisitive and governed by desire. However, there are sections in *Things Hidden* which contradicts again this view of renouncing mimesis.

## **Imitating Christ's Role as a Scapegoat**

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 400, 427.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 400, 431.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 430.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> The problem, in relation to imitation, is that Girard in *Things Hidden*, professes, at times, a rather negative attitude towards mimetic desire. He mostly operates within a dualistic understanding of mimesis, where imitating Christ is good while all other kinds of imitation is seen as destructive. There is in this decisive work an element of renouncing the whole business of mundane imitation. However, after writing *Things Hidden*, Girard has come to take a much more positive approach to imitation as a whole. This dualism between the imitation of Christ and mimetic desire in general was later criticized by Girard because it contained too negative an approach to mimesis. (See An interview with Girard in *The Girard Reader*, 63.)

The image of Jesus as scapegoat could be seen to be the consequence of his imitation of God. The scapegoat, however, is not something necessarily imitable. The imitable would be the attitude of non-retribution and forgiveness when one becomes a scapegoat. In this sense one has to distinguish between violent forms of imitation, which lead to scapegoating, and the non-violent imitation of Christ. Christ represents a new model, a new Adam who has deconstructed violence by an act of love. Christ is, according to mimetic theory, a mimetic model devoid of violence and therefore capable of mediating God's love. Christ is therefore the main model for good mimesis. Christ's imitation of his Father reflects a new and radical kind of love. This imitation is conceptualized in the ideal of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is an attitude where the values and distinctions of the ordinary world are overturned.<sup>51</sup> The mimetic rivalries concerning power, prestige and possessions are contrasted to God's values. This means that the Kingdom of God, which is not a location or place,<sup>52</sup> is marked by inclusion. Criteria such as clan, family, economy, gender and age are dissolved as being in any way decisive.<sup>53</sup>

### **Passion and Scapegoating**

Girard's introduction of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures in *Things Hidden* seems, in relation to victimizing, to be motivated nevertheless by a more general starting point. The Passion drama becomes more than a general scapegoating scene because it changes humanity's approach towards the victim. Although Girard's introduction of the Passion may seem motivated by the more general theme of scapegoating, my investigation has led me to conclude that Girard's work is based on an *a priori* or indicated christology. I suspect that Girard's work, viewed *in toto*, corresponds to Dieter Henrich's thesis that no way leads to God which does not begin with God himself.<sup>54</sup> This actually makes mimetic theory look like a theology, and it is from such a theological point of view, that it seems most relevant to consider the role of Jesus.

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<sup>50</sup> *Things Hidden*, 431.

<sup>51</sup> *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, XX.

<sup>52</sup> Jacob Jervell. *Historiens Jesus* (Oslo: Land og Kirke/Gyldendal, 1978). See especially footnote number 22 & 132.

<sup>53</sup> The people excluded in Jesus' attempt to realize the Kingdom of God, were those who found themselves too superior or too orthodox to be a part of such a group. Thus the exclusion consists in self-exclusion.

<sup>54</sup> Dieter Henrich. *Der ontologische Gottesbeweis. Sein Problem und seine Geschichte in der Neuzeit* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967).

## Moltmann's Christology of the Cross

In relation to the symbiotic themes of imitation and scapegoating, I wish to introduce the thought of Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann's work on the suffering Christ clearly corresponds to Girard's scapegoat theory, although it does differ, as we shall briefly see, in its more political emphasis on the social dimension of Christ. Moltmann's focus lies on a christology from below with an emphasis on the rejected and suffering Christ. *Theologia crucis* is, according to Moltmann, not a single chapter in theology, but the point from which all theological statements are viewed.<sup>55</sup> In Moltmann's work, *rejection* is seen as part of following Christ and corresponds somewhat to Girard's understanding of victimizing.<sup>56</sup> One could say that Moltmann begins with the cross, Girard with the scapegoat. And, it must be said, finding God in the crucified does not differ much in content from finding God in the victim. According to Moltmann, the Christian outlook on the world should be that seen through the eyes of its victims.<sup>57</sup> Moltmann, however, clearly lays more emphasis both on Christ's suffering and on the Church's suffering. This is especially evident in *The Crucified God*, where Moltmann claims that suffering is only overcome through suffering.<sup>58</sup> Despite his emphasizing suffering, there is a clear non-sacrificial tone in the way suffering is understood.<sup>59</sup> His non-sacrificial attitude to the sacrifice of Christ becomes quite obvious when he claims that Christ's sacrifice cannot be seen in the light of the eternal return (Eliade), as it breaks out of the compulsive repetition of the cult.<sup>60</sup> The crucifixion abolishes the division between the sacred and the profane, he adds.<sup>61</sup> In a sense, Moltmann introduces a christology which is a profanation of religion by religion.

In his christology Moltmann clearly emphasizes the social dimension inherent in Christianity. Christianity is, he says, alien to the world, including the syncretistic world of present-day bourgeois Christianity.<sup>62</sup> He makes this claim quite concrete when he says that the idea of following Christ has been neglected by bourgeois Protestantism, because it no longer

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<sup>55</sup> Jürgen Moltmann. *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 72.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>57</sup> Moltmann. *The Way of Jesus Christ. Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 65.

<sup>58</sup> Moltmann. *The Crucified God*, 55.

<sup>59</sup> Neither in Girard nor in Moltmann does one find the image of suffering for Christ, suffering means rather suffering with Christ.

<sup>60</sup> Moltmann. *The Crucified God*, 43-44.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

recognized or wished to recognize the suffering Church.<sup>63</sup> Moltmann's social profile actually indicates that any orthodox christology would mean identifying both Christ and his message with the poor and oppressed. Christ's suffering is not only part of this identification; it is also the result of this identification.<sup>64</sup>

Although Moltmann, like most theologians of today, claim that following Christ does not mean imitating him (as that could mean trying to become a Jesus oneself),<sup>65</sup> the *imitatio* aspect in Moltmann's theology appears to have its relevance in imitating Christ's concern for the rejected and despised. Although there is no direct imitative theology in Moltmann's work, the mimetic nature of Christ is hinted at when he claims that Jesus' centre is outside of himself.<sup>66</sup> This outside of oneself means in Moltmann's work more a focus on other people than on becoming, as Girard proposes, an image of God.<sup>67</sup> Thus, Moltmann's focus on the social role of Jesus clearly indicates a political stance<sup>68</sup> which is very difficult to find in Girard's work. Despite Girard's focus on victims, he never tries to give his theory any political direction. (Nor is there any critique of contemporary bourgeois Christianity.) Girard's christological reflections thus give no hint of any politicized version of Christ.

## Following Jesus

In the wake of Girard's christology, there have been attempts to formulate a clearer understanding of what imitating and following Jesus could mean. The Gospels themselves never use the word *mimesis* or imitation of Jesus. The Greek noun *mimesis* and verb *mimeomai* never occur in relation to Jesus or to how people should relate to him.<sup>69</sup> Instead the word *akoloutheo* (follow) is used numerous times as the right response to Jesus' teaching. According to Walter J. Ong, this fact actually supports Girardian theory because it exempts Jesus' role from mimetic desire. Jesus' death

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 105-106.

<sup>67</sup> 'The invitation to imitate the desire of Jesus may seem paradoxical, for Jesus does not claim to possess a desire proper, a desire of his very own. Contrary to what we ourselves claim, he does not claim to "be himself"; he does not flatter himself that he obeys only his own desire. His goal is to become the perfect image of God. Therefore he commits all his powers to imitating his Father. In inviting us to imitate him, he invites us to imitate his own imitation.' (*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 13.)

<sup>68</sup> Moltmann. *The Crucified God*, Chapter 8 (Towards a Political Liberation of Man.)

<sup>69</sup> Walter J. Ong, SJ. 'Mimesis and the Following of Christ,' in *Religion and Literature*. vol.26, 2. (Summer 1994): 74.

and passion, are, according to Ong, different from any other sacrifice.<sup>70</sup> To follow Jesus means to opt out of mimetic desire. Following means a freer, more human and less mechanically copying way of practicing the calling of Jesus, Ong claims.<sup>71</sup> Ong's view is supported by Schwager who claims that modern theology makes a clear distinction between imitating and following Christ.<sup>72</sup> According to Schwager, imitation of Christ would lead to deadly moralism and immersion into an alien world.<sup>73</sup> Such an imitation could easily lead to violence instead of love, he claims.<sup>74</sup> Schwager sees imitation as something superficial, like copying Jesus in an external way.<sup>75</sup> But imitation or mimesis does not only imply a conscious copying. It describes the whole process of opening oneself up towards the other.

Ong claims that the word *follow* gives a more varied and venturesome meaning to the relationship with Jesus. Also, according to Soon-Gu Kwon, following is more spatial and physical.<sup>76</sup> Edvin Larsson, on the other hand, explains *imitation* (in relation to imitation of Christ) as intentional, willing and active.<sup>77</sup> Following and imitating do both indicate, however, motivation. And imitate does mean, from the context of imitative desire, that the relationship with Jesus responds to a basic desire: the desire according to the other which, in the imitation-context, is Christ.

The claim that the words mimesis and imitation are never used in the Gospels, does *not*, in my view, strengthen what Girard says about imitating Christ. It would, however, strengthen the view that mimetic desire is wholly bad, and that the phrase *mimetic desire* should be exempt from religious practice. This would imply that *imitation of Christ* would mean desire, while *following Christ* would mean no desire. Thus one could, if trying to dismiss the concept of imitating Christ, discourage people from interpreting the imitation of Jesus as containing acquisitive and rivalistic desires. On the other hand, the Gospels' lack of words such as mimesis and imitation is probably due to the authors' ignorance of Platonic and Sophistic vocabulary. Paul, who was acquainted with this vocabulary, uses the word imitate in relation to Jesus several times: In 1 Corinthians 11.1 Paul says 'imitate me as I imitate Christ (mimetai mou ginesthe, kathos kago Christou), thus

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>72</sup> Schwager. *Must there be Scapegoats?*, 176.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>75</sup> It is somewhat strange that Schwager, who elsewhere puts such emphasis on the imitative nature of human beings, should interpret the imitation of Christ as superficial copying.

<sup>76</sup> Kwon. Christ as Example. The Imitatio Christi Motive in Biblical and Christian Ethics, 60-61.

<sup>77</sup> Edvin Larsson. *Christus als Vorbild: Eine Untersuchung zu den paulinischen Tauf- und Eikontexten* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962), 17.

legitimizing both himself and Christ as mimetic models and, thereby, revealing the fluid structure of mimesis.<sup>78</sup> Paul, on the other hand, never uses the word 'follow', which could indicate, as Betz has shown, that Paul is an interpreter of an *image-theology* of Hellenistic theological origin.<sup>79</sup>

The weakness in Ong's argumentation is his Platonic view of mimesis: mimesis seems to be something less genuine and cheaper than the original.<sup>80</sup> He seems to forget that imitating is something closely connected to the model, and, therefore, expresses something essential in the relationship with Christ. The wish for oneness is salient in the phrase *imitation of Christ*. Imitation is a necessary supplement to the word follow. On the other hand, imitation and mimesis can bring associations to the act of copying, from which the word follow is more distant. But to try to copy Jesus, or behave like Jesus, is rather futile because neither the Gospels nor Paul give any proper descriptions of Jesus' personality; his tastes, temperament, looks etc. In this respect Jesus is not in the least original.<sup>81</sup> The act of imitating Christ is practically impossible in the way one can imitate pop-stars and movie stars – or neighbours, because imitating Christ does not attract nor evoke those kinds of desires. Imitation can also be interpreted as a more open and many-layered type of relationship with Christ. One should remember that following often also refers to the master-pupil relationship and is, therefore, limited to discipleship. Imitating Christ thus indicates a more common and everyday relationship.<sup>82</sup>

Girard could, as I have indicated, have used Ong's attempt to revise mimetic theory on the theme of imitating Christ, in order to avoid the word 'mimesis' to Christ. By doing this he would both avoid using the concept mimetic desire in a religious context and, at the same time, render Christ's sacrifice unique by making it something not contaminated by mimetic desire. In fact, Girard has gone the other way. Firstly, since the late 1990s, he has interpreted Christ's Passion more according to traditional religious sacrifice, while secondly, in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, he claims mimesis to be both the way one should relate to Jesus, and the way Jesus related to the Father.<sup>83</sup> From the Son's imitation of his Father, one sees that

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<sup>78</sup> 'The Corinthians through the Imitatio Pauli join in the power of the cross of Christ' (...) Also in 1 Cor 1,10 -4,13 Paul concludes with the exhortation 'be imitators of me'. Thus Paul's 'parakalein' appears to consist of concrete specifications of his general exhortation of 'be imitators of me'. His 'parakalein' is God's 'parakalein' and subsequently he serves only as God's mouth, the interpreter of divine salvation.' Soon-Gu Kwon. *Christ as Example. The Imitatio Christi Motive in Biblical and Christian Ethics*, 79-80.

<sup>79</sup> Dieter H. Betz. *Nachfolge und Nachahmung Jesu Christi im Neuen Testament* (Tubingen: JCB. Mohr, 1967).

<sup>80</sup> Ong. 'Mimesis and the Following of Christ,' 74.

<sup>81</sup> As regards to teaching and interpersonal relationships, however, his originality is remarkable.

<sup>82</sup> Kwon. *Christ as Example. The Imitatio Christi Motive in Biblical and Christian Ethics*, 60.

<sup>83</sup> *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 13.

in Girard's world *to imitate is more fundamental and essential than to follow*. To follow does not indicate the sameness, the homogeneity implied by imitation. Neither does it imply the relational aspect in the same way as imitation does. Thus Girard's work can be seen as a kind of *restoration-work as regards the genuine prospects for imitation*.

### **Imitation and Non-Violence**

If one were to take the concept of imitating Jesus further into a more ethical context, Girard, especially in *Things Hidden*, emphasizes non-violence as an effect of imitating Christ. Christ is a non-violent model; he is not only non-violent, but a person who reveals violence down through the ages.<sup>84</sup> Imitation of Christ means for Girard that violence is revealed as such, and is not given any legitimation. By imitating Christ human beings can see that violence is violence, and contains nothing divine or transcendental. Imitating Christ means giving up physical and psychological violence, not because one will be totally liberated from violence, but because the model is totally free of it. I do not, however, interpret Girard's ideal of imitating Christ as meaning total pacifism. This would mean that one had the luxury of behaving as if the world were no longer sacrificial.<sup>85</sup>

### **Violence and Doubles**

Imitating Christ in mimetic theory is primarily an individual and psychological act of breaking away from the violence of doubles.<sup>86</sup> People tend to live under the illusion that they can become less violent by differing from others.<sup>87</sup> According to mimetic theory, doubles give rise to conflict, but the desire to be different is no solution to the problem. The solution is the

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<sup>84</sup> *Things Hidden*, 158-161.

<sup>85</sup> In a lecture delivered at Oxford in November 1997 Girard claimed that he had great respect for pacifists, but went on to say that pacifism can prove to be too easy a way out of the problem, hinting at the problem with pacifism when a force like Hitler comes to power. (See 'René Girard Responds to Questions.' Double Tape, New Malden Surrey: W.Hewett/Inigo Enterprises, 1998.) In a conversation I had with Girard at a Colloquium at Stanford in October 2001 (some weeks after September 11), Girard said that sometimes turning the other cheek could actually provoke violence. These more personal remarks in conversations and lectures are clearly less pacifistic than what one receives from reading his work. On the other hand, Girard never recommends total pacifism in his work. Despite this lack of any politically motivated pacifism, Girard, as regards the Gospels, has to be one of the Christian thinkers, alongside Tolstoy, who emphasizes the dimension of non-violence most emphatically in relation to Christ's message. This pacifism, however, is not based on any idealistic view of humans as such. On the contrary, the mimetic principle, reveals human beings as rivalistic and, potentially, violent.

<sup>86</sup> *Things Hidden*, 400, 430.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 400

harder one: the humility of admitting one's sameness, even towards the loathed double. This self-understanding is the first step towards non-violence as admitting one's likeness helps not to provoke opposition towards the other.

To break the spiral of violence is to imitate Christ in the way advised in the 'Sermon on the Mount'. By giving the other what he demands, or even more than he demands, the spiral of violence can be broken.<sup>88</sup> This understanding seems, however, to be limited to individual ethics. The act of surrendering to the violator by an active love is not emphasized to the same degree when Girard comments upon international politics. Mimetic theory, however, does not interpret mass violence as something different from individual violence, requiring different methods, but mimetic theory has not been expanded, on the other hand, by the introduction of non-violent solutions to different political situations. Neither are there inherent in the theory recommendations for any pacifistic, peace-process ideals in relation to a given political situation, although, indirectly, mimetic theory could clearly be interpreted to indicating an extension of the individual process of imitating Christ to more collective areas of imitation.<sup>89</sup>

### **The Content of Imitating Jesus**

When speaking of imitating Christ, Girard uses terms such as innocence, childlike, non-rivalistic and non-violent - often together.<sup>90</sup> All these terms are regarded as antithetic to conflictual desire. An innocent and childlike manner of imitation could mean that one is not trying to acquire anything other than what one is imitating. Innocence is the act of imitating without hidden motives, an imitation based on Christ's qualities, which again is based on Christ's imitation of God. The childlike imitation of Christ is, however, a somewhat problematic concept. What does it mean? Childlike imitation could mean imitating without understanding or foreseeing the consequences. Childlike also refers to innocence, which is clearly something recommendable. According to Girard, children are mimetically open, meaning that they can imitate whatever they like, without

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<sup>88</sup> Girard. *Quand ces choses commenceront...*, Entretiens avec Michel Treguer (Paris: arlèa, 1994), 76. See also Per Bjørnar Grande. 'Vold og konflikt – en løsning.' Kirke og Kultur 3, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget (2002).

<sup>89</sup> The more collective and political aspects of mimetic theory could present a new and important challenge for scholars working on mimetic theory.

<sup>90</sup> See *Things Hidden*, 427. See also 'Satan' 197 and 'The Question of Anti-Semitism in the Gospels', 215, both articles in *The Girard Reader*.

knowing if it is good or bad.<sup>91</sup> This can hardly be what Girard implies by the concept of childlike imitation of Christ. Nor can childlike, in Girard's thinking, mean imitation devoid of acquisition. The example he gives about the fight over toys contradicts such naïvety.<sup>92</sup> Childlike imitation of Christ is therefore problematic and unclear concept for describing the quality of imitating Christ. The most positive way in which I can conceive of childlike imitation (besides innocence) is the child's unquestionable trust towards the imitative model.

## Mediating God

A number of theological implications arise from Girard's theory on divine imitation. One is the orthodox view of Christ as being divine from birth. If it is Christ's perfect imitation of God that makes him divine, can he then be considered divine from the beginning? Will the act of imitation turn him into both the mediator and the representation of God? A rather crucial question, from a theological perspective, is whether Girard interprets Christ as being the Son of God through imitation. If imitating God makes Christ divine, which is clearly a prospect in mimetic theory, Girard's christology, according to a three-stage christology (pre-existence, existence, post-existence),<sup>93</sup> focuses mostly on the existent and post-existent Christ, as imitation must be seen to be an effect of Christ's life. Another question is: if Christ imitates God, is he not considered to be something beneath God? If it is through imitation that Christ becomes God, there could be reasons for conceiving of him as a mediator, something between human and God. On the other hand, if Christ's imitation of God represents the same as God, he could be interpreted as God in the orthodox sense. In fact, it all depends on how one understands imitation. If imitation is not something lower than what one imitates, there is no reason to regard Christ's imitation of God as something lesser. If, on the other hand, one regards mimesis as Plato regarded mimesis, as something lesser and more false than the original, religious imitation would have to be dismissed as a falsified imitation.<sup>94</sup> However, the difference between Christ and humanity, from a mimetic perspective, must be seen as a difference in degree rather than in kind.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> See *Things Hidden*, 290.

<sup>92</sup> 'Place a certain number of identical toys in a room with the same number of children; there is every chance that he toys will not be distributed without quarrels.' (*Things Hidden*, 9.)

<sup>93</sup> Leander E. Keck. 'Christology of the New Testament: What, then, is New Testament Christology?' in Powell/Bauer. *Who Do You Say that I am? Essays on Christology* (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 187.

<sup>94</sup> I do not aim to detect any Neo-Arian tendencies in mimetic theory, because all theories emphasizing anthropology will start with the human sides of Christ. Few theological reflections and systems that start from anthropological models are, as far as I can see, able to reveal the symmetry between God and Christ in such a rational manner as the

## Imitating Christ's Non-Sacrificial Attitude

Christ can be seen from the perspective of violence in society, as an arbitrary victim. From the perspective of revealing the victim's innocence, however, he is the least arbitrary of all victims.<sup>96</sup> According to Cesáreo Bandera, Christ must, from a sacrificial point of view, be expelled, as he reveals the violent injustice inherent in the scapegoat mechanism.

*All the other victims could have been spared. Each of them could have been replaced by something else, leaving the system intact and fully operational, that is, as incapable as ever of facing up to the unspeakable truth. The only victim the sacrificial system cannot spare without immediately running the risk of self-destruction, is the one who reveals, exposes, the truth. (Bandera. The Sacred Game, 25.)*

This passage marvellously illuminates the effects of Christ's death. Christ's revelation of human violence is a revelation of the sacrificial system. Although Christ, as presented in the Gospels, does not perpetually criticize sacrifice and violence, the Gospels' main theme can nonetheless be regarded as non-sacrificial in that Christ's death and non-violent response reveal a religion built on non-sacrifice. Scubla's claim that non-violence and non-sacrifice are seldom mentioned by Jesus,<sup>97</sup> is not unreasonable when considering Jesus' teaching (although his claim is modified by a number of examples where these themes are highly acute). Jesus' attitude of non-violence and non-sacrifice is, however, most apparent from the perspective of the Passion. Seeing Jesus essentially from the perspective of the Passion, from the victim's point of view, reveals an understanding of history as determined by victimizing.<sup>98</sup> In such a context the meaning of history cannot be understood solely as empiricism or crude facticity.<sup>99</sup> Thus victimizing becomes the hermeneutical basis in relation to which one can locate historical development and meaning. Non-sacrifice, however, is perpetuated by mimesis, by imitating the non-violent attitude of Christ. In this respect the Gospels' good news, the new

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mimetic theory, as well as show the qualitative difference between Christ and humans.

<sup>95</sup> See John Macquarrie. *Christology Revisited* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 59.

<sup>96</sup> According to Gebauer and Wulf, in principle each and every person could be chosen to be a scapegoat. But the selection of one person (or group of persons) is justified in retrospect by a multitude of factual, imaginary, or attributed particularities: the evil eye, physical deformities, peculiar habits, the status of an outsider (foreigner). (Gebauer & Wulf. *Mimesis* (California: University of California Press, 1995), 258.)

<sup>97</sup> Lucien Scubla. 'The Christianity of René Girard and the Nature of Religion' in Dumouchel (Ed.). *Violence and Truth*, London: The Athlone Press, 1988,

<sup>98</sup> See Tony Bartlett. 'The Work of James Williams' in *COV&R* Nr 21 (September 2002): 7.

<sup>99</sup> Bartlett. 'The Work of James Williams' 7.

religion, cannot be realized without the act of imitating Christ. Thus religion may be practised, either by imitating sacrifice or by imitating the one who ended sacrifice.

The stages of mimesis have the following chronology: mimetic desire – conflict – scapegoating – violence - peace. Mimesis is the centre, around which all the other concepts cluster. Desire and scapegoating are brought about by mimesis and end in violence. Violence is the product of conflictual mimesis, and most cultural prohibitions are established in order to control and reduce violence. This is, according to mimetic theory, the primary function of (primitive) religion, which may be defined as an attempt to regulate a society by means of the victimage mechanism. Religion, like all ancient cultural forms, uses violence, but in order to restore peace.<sup>100</sup> The violence in victimizing is a means of keeping a society together after an eruption of violence. And the surrogate victim is the key to this violent mimetic process.<sup>101</sup>

Thus the imitation of Christ is each individual's response to the process of dissolving violence and sacrifice. In this respect imitating Christ is the individual's continuation of Christ's work. While the Passion was clearly a sacrificial phenomenon, imitating Christ can be seen as the ethical implication of the Passion. This also means that imitating Christ is the practical step forward, derived from a reflection on Christ. In this sense imitation is a response to christology and, at the same time, ethically speaking, perhaps the most important part of christology.

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<sup>100</sup> *Violence and the Sacred* (Maryland Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.), 1986), 132-34.

<sup>101</sup> *Things Hidden*, 63.