Doing Political Theology in the Time of Violence: Unmasking Violence with René Girard and Walter Wink

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Abstract: This paper examines René Girard's mimetic theory and uses it to surface the nonviolent resistance offered by Jesus to counter the violence that is waged by certain groups of people who use the sacred texts to perpetuate and legitimize their acts of violence. I use Bonaventure's journey toward God as a lens to explicate how Girard's conversion deepens his concept of mimetic desire. Toward the later part of this paper, I proposed pairing Girard's mimetic theory with the framework of Walter Wink in engaging powers through nonviolent resistance. Mimetic desire could only be countered by desiring God whose presence and language is love, and whose ways are humble, just, and nonviolent as exemplified and lived by Jesus.

Keywords: mimetic desire, violence, nonviolent resistance, engaging powers, René Girard, Walter Wink, St. Bonaventure

A look into religious violence

Defining religious violence could be problematic especially since acts of violence committed by people who adhere to a particular religion and subscribe to its

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tenets have much in common with those committed by secular or military groups.[1] Put another way, violence is violence whether sponsored by a duly elected political body, sanctified or blessed by a religious leader, or committed by common criminals. We could, however, rightly address it if we know its source.

What can be gleaned from Reader[2] is that violence could have a religious orientation. In this sense, religious violence could be viewed as acts that are rooted or could be traced directly to "religious causes and teachings and whose commission was conditioned and framed by the religious orientations of the perpetrators and that could only have come about because of the religious milieu and modes of thought and practice within which they lived and operated."[3] Based on this explanation, religious violence is not new; take, for example, the crusades. But even with these acts of violence, it still remains problematic to categorize religion as violent, especially since it interfaces with other forces in society that include nationalism and politics.[4] Based on Reader's survey, while there have been cases of violence involving religion, these are considered small and not significant. Then, too, from a sociological standpoint, while acts of violence are committed by a group of people with religious affiliations, a conclusive statement on religious violence could still not be drawn because religion is not free from other social influences outside of its sphere. What could be emphasized, however, is that violence could have a religious orientation and could possibly be incubated or hosted within a particular

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[1] See Ian Reader, "Religion and Violence," in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations* (London, Routledge, 2016), 480.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 486.

[4] Ibid., 487.

religion. And this is where political theology could take its cues.

From the cases presented by Reader, the two major trends common to these so-called religious violence involve: the fight for their holy lands and the use of the sacred text to justify violent acts.[5] This sociological investigation prompts us to rethink our theological views of sacrifice, especially on the suffering of Jesus on the cross; and reconstruct a political theology of nonviolence. Here, the works of René Girard and Walter Wink are relevant.

Girard and Wink could offer ways of dealing with violence without succumbing to the temptation of replicating or repressing it. Both Wink and Girard present a way of re-reading and interpreting the Scriptures, especially on the view of the cross. For them, Jesus' way on the cross is not a blood sacrifice to placate an angry god, but rather an ultimate form of resistance to the "logic of 'redistributive justice' that is at the core of both Christian theology and politics."[6] Girard's approach surfaces the concept of violence that emanates from scapegoating brought about by mimetic desire; while Wink's deals with power by naming, unmasking, and engaging it. Both works bear this thought: "For theology to be political, it must engage the Powers; but for politics to be theological, it must aspire to nonviolence."[7]

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[5] Reader, "Religion and Violence."

[6] Ched Meyers, "Confronting the Powers," in *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Theology*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh, J.W. Bailey, and C. Hovey (Michigan USA/Cambridge, U.K: Wm Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 340.

[7] Meyers, "Confronting the Powers," 341.

René Girard: mimetic desire and scapegoating

Girard's literary criticism of the great works in Western literature by five novelists, Cervantes, Proust, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, and Stendhal led him to conceptualize "triangular desire."[8] This notion becomes the take-off point of mimetic desire. It points to the fact that we do not have innate desires, because we learn from others whom we observe and imitate. Our desire for an object is always stirred by another person's pre-established desire (the model) for the same object. Thus, every subject's route toward the object of desire is not direct but mediated by the model, the mediator, who also acts as a challenger or a rival. As a result, there develops a state of mimetic rivalry over desired objects and this would escalate into a "mimetic contagion" where every member of society is driven by imitation. "The mediator can no longer act his role of model without also acting or appearing to act the role of obstacle."[9] In this unconsciously shaped state of rivalry, the model/mediator Other, is actually the one who is sought, the object of the Self's pursuit or dreams. The mediator between the Self and the Other is the lever that propels the Self to either mimic the desire of the Other, or break away from it in order to reclaim what is true to one's Self. The role of this mediator, a meta-physical presence in Girardian sense, has a bearing on the way we understand our God and the way we live and organize ourselves. In other words, mimetic rivalry and contagion produce certain ways of thinking as well as forms of social order, arrangement, or social stratification and classification that determine behavior.

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[8] Rene Girard. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure.* Trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), 1-52.

[9] Ibid., 7.

Formulated from his literary criticism, triangular desire is a concept that becomes the staging area of Girard's mimetic theory. One might ask, if this concept is derived from literary criticism, how valid and reliable could this be in examining violence? Here, I would let Girard explain himself and the significance of his methodology, especially on the value of explicating truth and reality from great body of literary works.

> All types of structural thinking assume that human reality is intelligible; it is a logos and, as such, it is an incipient logic, or it degrades itself into a logic. It can thus be systematized, at least up to a point, however unsystematic, irrational, and chaotic it may appear even to those, or rather especially to those who operate the system. A basic contention of this essay is that the great writers apprehend intuitively and concretely, through the medium of their art, if not formally, the system in which they were first imprisoned together with their contemporaries. Literary interpretation must be systematic because it is the continuation of literature. It should formalize implicit or already half-explicit systems. To maintain that criticism will never be systematic is to maintain that it will never be real knowledge.[10]

From this literary horizon, Girard also forays into the Hebrew Scriptures ("Old Testament") and Christian Scriptures ("New Testament") and, from there, he sees a way out or a transformation of this mimetic desire that leads to rivalry and, thus, violence.

It is worth noting that while Girard mentions the logos that structures the intelligibility of human reality,

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[10] Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 3.

it is his experience of religious conversion that deepens his conceptualization of mimetic desire. Girard undergoes a religious conversion himself that first happens at the aesthetic level and later permeates his life when he re-embraces his Roman Catholic faith.[11]

Girard's conversion, or turning toward God,[12] refocuses his view of the mediator and sees this as an empty space within the Self. This void makes it possible for the Self to mimic the Other's desire. The emptiness within resonates with the emptiness of the Other thus to fill this space, the Self tends to imitate the Other. Girard recognizes that this mimicry as explicated from the struggles of the heroes and heroines in the novels, was their feeble attempts at self-divinization.[13] It is a lie that shapes the consciousness of the heroes to believe that they are autonomous, yet their mimicry of each other's desires lays bare their dependence on one another. Girard expounds on this:

> All the heroes surrender their most fundamental individual prerogative, that of choosing their own desire; we cannot attribute this unanimous abandonment to the always different qualities of the heroes. For a single phenomenon a single cause must be found. All heroes of novels hate themselves on a more essential level than that of "qualities." It is exactly as the narrator says at the beginning of Swann's Way: 'Everything which was not myself, the earth and the creatures upon it, seemed to me more

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[11] See Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (London, UK & New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2009), 1-3.

[12] I use the Bonaventurian lens to explicate how Girard's conversion deepens his conceptual framework on mimetic desire. See Ilia Delio, *Simply Bonaventure.* (New York: New City Press, 2001), 99-114.

[13] Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 3.

> precious and more important, endowed with a more real existence.' The curse with which the hero is burdened is indistinguishable from his subjectivity.[14]

Girard sees this as the false promise of autonomy and the resulting attempt of the Self to one's divinization. Here Girard posits, "Only when the false divinity which attaches itself to the desiring hero and to his or her model is renounced can a genuine transcendence be opened up."[15] And this is where Girard brings Christianity into his horizon and considers it as one that "directs existence toward a vanishing point, either toward God or toward the Other. Choice always involves choosing a model."[16] This echoes Augustine's exposition of desire as an orientation of the heart. The models in Augustine's desire are the earthly city and the heavenly city, where the orientation toward the first tend to power over, dominate, and exploit things and people; while desire oriented toward the second, seeks to love things and people for their own worth and find its greatest fulfillment in God. This choice couched in Augustine's notion of free will is the pivot point of desires that could lead either to violence (caused by sin, a turning away from God); or peace (that seeks to do what is good based on loving God, self, and one another).

Choosing a model entails a movement toward it. And here Girard, like Augustine, moves toward God, through a conversion of consciousness revealed in his unmasking of the mediator in mimetic desire. He names this as pride, the one that occupies the autonomy of both the Self and the Other. It is an autonomy founded on a false promise of freedom. Like Augustine, Girard regards

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[14] Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 55.
[15] Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 3.
[16] Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 58.

freedom as the "basic choice between a human or a divine model."[17] This pride, as an impostor, occupies the autonomous Self and the Other and it could only be unmasked by humility. Or put simply, humility resists pride. By poring through the characters of the great works of the five novelists that he studied, Girard uncovers the structure of this religious truth and reality: "The false prophets proclaim that in tomorrow's world *men will be gods for each other*." He continues that the passion that drives humans to seize or gain more possessions "is not materialistic; it is the triumph of the mediator, the god with the human face."[18] This is to say that transcendence could still be achieved whether one moves toward God or the Other. But the movement toward the Other creates a desire that is not true to one's Self thus transcendence here happens through the creation of an idol. Albert Camus refers to this as a "metaphysical rebellion,"[19] or perhaps a human attempt to "take the place of God," hence the tendency of "humans to worship one another."[20] This tendency is

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[17] Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 58.

[18] Ibid., 61.

[19] "Metaphysical rebellion is the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation. It is metaphysical because it contests the ends of man and of creation. The slave protests against the condition in which he finds himself within his state of slavery; the metaphysical rebel protests against the condition in which he finds himself as a man. The rebel slave affirms that there is something in him that will not tolerate the manner in which his master treats him; the metaphysical rebel declares that he is frustrated by the universe. For both of them, it is not only a question of pure and simple negation. In both cases, in fact, we find a value judgment in the name of which the rebel refuses to approve the condition in which he finds himself." Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt,* trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 90

[20] See, Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, Trans. by Gabriel Borrud (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2013), 29.

exhibited in desiring what the Other desires. And because it is mimetic, neither innate nor original, it creates sameness and uniformity. Imitation obliterates the distinction between the one who imitates and the other who is imitated. Thus, to want to possess and acquire what the Other desires creates a competition. And conflict ensues when the Self and the Other desire the same thing that is merely a replica of what each truly desires. Taking on Augustine's formula, Girard claims that the pride that occupies both the Self and the Other "is more exterior to us than the external world."[21] Thus for Girard, the movement toward God is a retreat into the Self, a movement inward, that later flows outward.

This is the conceptual field where Girard's mimetic desire could be used as the interpretive key to unlock the message of the Scripture on peace and violence, seen through the sacrifice and crucifixion of Jesus. Here Girard surfaces the concept of violence that emanates from the scapegoat mechanism resulting from the containment of mimetic desire. How does violence appear in mimetic desire?

Girard posits that mimetic violence and the scapegoat mechanism exist in ancient mythologies as well as in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Here Girard goes beyond his studies of the great European novels as he forays into classic and mythic literatures including the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to study violence and ritual sacrifices. The desire for violence is not original since there is no desire that is independently directed to it, unless instigated by a model.[22] Girard shows how this is played out in the Christian Scriptures and how Jesus teaches his disciples to resist the temptation of desiring violence and in the process,

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[21] Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 58.
[22]Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Desire*, 129.

subvert the violent system of the world caused by mimetic contagion and the scapegoat mechanism.

He singles out the death of John the Baptist (considered as the prophet who bridges the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures) to show how mimetic contagion could lead to a violent death, in this case of the prophet John, who is blamed for disturbing the household of Herod and Herodias who are in an illicit relationship.

The story is found in both the Gospels of Mark (Mk. 6:14-29) and Matthew (Mt. 14:1-12). John the Baptist's death sentence resulted from the dance of Salome, staged by her mother Herodias who "had a grudge against him and wanted to kill him but could not" (Mk. 6:19-20). Herodias is the wife of Philip, the brother of Herod who married Herodias and was called out by John the Baptist because of this illicit act. According to Girard, Herod taking the wife of his brother Philip is a classic example of mimetic desire that resulted in dire consequences, in this case the death of an unsuspecting victim, John the Baptist.

> To have Herodias, to carry her off, is forbidden to Herod not by virtue of some formal rule but because his possession can only be at the expense of a dispossessed brother. The prophet warns his royal listener against the evil effects of mimetic desire. There is no illusion in the Gospels about the possibility of arbitration between the brothers.[23]

However the rivalry between the two brothers, Herod and Philip, seem to have been contained because the animosity is directed to a scapegoat, John himself. It is Herodias who bears ill thoughts against him.

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[23] René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, Trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 128.

According to Girard, John is a "scandal" to Herodias because he speaks the truth about her relationship with Herod. Girard expounds, "there is no worse enemy of desire than truth."[24] So Herodias convinces Herod to arrest John. But since Herod considers John as a "holy and righteous man" (Mk 6:20), he spared John's life. However, this decision is soon overturned by a dance. According to Girard, ancient people typically considered ritual dancing as the "most mimetic of all arts,"[25] thus in this particular Markan scene on the dance of Salome, Herod promised to grant anything that she desires. But Salome, not sure of what to ask, rushed instead to Herodias and asked what her mother desires. Herodias urged Salome to ask for "John's head." Herod consented against his better judgment because the guests (crowd) urged him on to fulfill his promise to Salome. John is the scapegoat in the looming trouble in the household of Herod: a brother is dispossessed of his wife, and the wife seethes with anger at her failure to convince Herod to kill John the Baptist so she turns to her daughter, Salome, to accomplish the task.[26] Thus even if Herod is inclined to spare John's life, he gives in to what Salome and the crowd desire, "John's head." This mimetic contagion choreographed by Herodias, spared no one, not even the powerful person, Herod. This same contagion also influenced Pontius Pilate to sentence Jesus to death despite his conviction that Jesus is innocent. As Girard points out, "leaders who do not stand up to violent crowds are bound to join them."[27] And this is how violence is perpetuated and becomes uncontrollable that could overwhelm even strong, powerful men, like Herod and Pilate. How does Jesus

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[24] Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 133.
[25] Girard, "Are the Gospels Mythical?," paragraph 5.
[26] Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 129-30.
[27] Girard, "Are the Gospels Mythical?," paragraph 5.

deal with such violence?

Girard cites Peter as one who "spectacularly illustrates this mimetic contagion. When surrounded by people hostile to Jesus, he imitates their hostility."[28] In Matthew 26:52 when Jesus was arrested, Peter struck the ear of the servant of the high priest. Jesus rebuked Peter and ordered him to put his sword back, to resist the temptation of succumbing to the same violent act as those arresting him. Prior to his arrest Jesus already predicted that "he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Mt. 16:21). Peter was scandalized at this revelation so he wanted to put sense into Jesus not to go through what he just said but rather live and rule the world as a Messiah. At this instigation, Jesus rebuked Peter, "Get behind me, Satan, you are a *skandalon* to me."[29] Here Jesus names the instigator, Satan, a *skandalon*, a stumbling block to God's will whom Jesus obeys and follows.[30] Jesus is trying to break the spell of mimetic contagion that grips humanity in its vicious cycle of violence. Jesus is modeling a new way of resisting a *skandalon*.[31] The scandal here takes on a new turn from the scandal of John the Baptist who speaks truth to Herod and Herodias.

This scene with Peter is not the first time that Jesus named and confronted a *skandalon.* Before he began his public ministry, Jesus was led into the wilderness and

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[28] Girard, "Are the Gospels Mythical?," paragraph 7.

[29] Girard, "Are the Gospels Mythical?," paragraph 8.

[30] In the Christian Scriptures, the Hebrew word שָׂטָן (satan) is either retained as Σατανᾶς (satanas) or translated into the Greek διάβολος (diabolos), devil.

[31] In the Septuagint, mi̱kšōl (מִכְשׁוֹל) is translated into Koine Greek skandalon (σκανδαλον), a word which occurs only in Hellenistic literature, in the sense "snare for an enemy; cause of moral stumbling". See, http://biblehub.com/greek/4625.htm.

was tempted by the devil. When he was famished after fasting for forty days and forty nights, the tempter taunted him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mt 4:3). Despite his hunger, Jesus resisted, "It is written: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' (Mt. 4:4). Undeterred, the devil insisted, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone'" (Mt 4:5). Jesus resisted, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Mt. 4:6). The devil is persistent, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." (Mt. 4:9). Jesus stood his ground, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'"(Mt. 4:10).

Notice that in this exchange, the devil mimics the Scriptural passages to entice Jesus to do what God says in the Scripture. But Jesus sees through it and calls it out by unveiling what the Scriptures truly say: abide in every word of God, do not put the Lord your God to the test, and worship the Lord your God, and serve only God. This is the same command written in Deuteronomy (6:4-5), "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The key to resisting the *skandalon* is to love God. Jesus brings this even further, "But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt. 5:44). To resist is to love so that one could unseat the mediator in one's Self and the Other. This mediator is a presence that masquerades as "divine," it is a replica, an idol. It produces deceit like the *skandalon* that entices Jesus to do as it wills by mouthing the words of God. Jesus quotes Isaiah when he rebukes those who pretend

to do the will of God yet their hearts are far from God, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines' (Mt 15:8-9). This is at the very core of idolatry. Girard considers the unmasking of idolatry as the essential aspect of the Scripture, the key that sets it apart from archaic myth.[32] Echoing Augustine's thoughts on desire played out in the earthly city, Girard drives home the point that humans who usurp the power of God to their own ends "inevitably fall victim to [a] metaphysical desire that ends in reciprocal violence and death."[33] And here lies the valuable contribution of Girard in exposing violence and the resistance Jesus offered to counter it, paradoxically, through the violent act of the way of the cross. Girard emphasizes that the sacrifice of Jesus is shown in his prayer, "Not my will, but [Yours] be done."[34] In that regard, the following is remarkably enlightening:

> Imitation is characteristic of both Jesus and Satan. We always imitate someone when we desire, either Jesus or Satan…Since Jesus recommends imitation, mimetic desire is good. It is even very good, the best thing in the world, since it is the only road to the true God. But it is the same as human freedom, and it is also the road to Satan. What is the difference between the mimetic desire of Jesus and the mimetic desire of Satan? The difference is that Satan imitates God in a spirit of rivalry. Jesus imitates God in a spirit of childlike and innocent obedience and this is what he advises us to do as well. Since there is no acquisitive desire in God, the docile

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[32] Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, 207.
[33] Ibid., 205.
[34] McDonald, "Violence and the Lamb Slain," 341.

imitation of God cannot generate rivalry.[35]

It is through this lens where Girard shows how Jesus models his life to the will of the Father and why he vehemently addressed Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" because he saw Peter obstructing his way toward the Father.[36] For Girard, Satan is the "prince of the world," regardless if Satan is a personal being or not.[37] From this context, worldly existence is "Satanically" structured insofar as it propagates lies and murder,[38] the centrifugal force that fortifies the cycle of violence. The death of Jesus, Girard propounds, is not the "death that [could] make [humans] feel confirmed in their lives, but to call [humans] into question."[39] As to the use of the sacred text to justify acts of violence, we could learn from Girard's insights:

> *Everything which happened to Jesus is now happening to the gospel texts.* They are scapegoated. They are blamed for what is wrong. And yet it is precisely these texts that have brought scapegoating mechanism to light![40]

The Gospel texts are intelligible to human minds that are turned toward God because the texts carry the Logos, the Word made flesh. A human mind not turned to God, is more likely to miss the mark and fail to grasp the language of God who is love.[41] Jesus' counsel to love

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[35] René Girard, "Satan," *The Girard Reader*, James G. Williams, ed. (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 1996), 197.

[36] McDonald, "Violence and the Lamb Slain," 352.

[37] Ibid., 351.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 352.

[40] Ibid.

[41] A mind turned toward God is a Bonaventuran concept which I have layered in my analysis of Girard's mimetic theory. See Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, 12.

one's enemy makes sense only when one embraces what Jesus says about being children of the Father in heaven who "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Mt 5:45). The sun, the moon, the stars, the universe, they do not discriminate against us, albeit we are capable of conquering or extinguishing them. This same freedom of God to create is given to us through our free will thus we could fall away from the good not because we are naturally corrupt but because we can defile what we have and inhabit.[42] This, in theological (Augustine) term, is what it means to be fallen, which Walter Wink gives a deeper perspective in the following section of this paper. God is free and so are we, but in Camus's term, we stage a "metaphysical revolt"[43] against the very source of our freedom. Like Satan, we could mimic and mouth the words of God simply because we hold the same freedom to be like a god, either as God's true image or god's replica, a mimesis, an idol.

Turning toward God—key to overcoming mimetic contagion

The Creator's freedom is not equal to the creature's freedom although both have the same attribute of being able to do what each one wills. God's freedom is defined by God being infinite (immortal) while human freedom is bound by it being finite (mortal), subject to the limits of space and time the human inhabits. Hence, without abiding in God,[44] humans could only mirror each other's

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[42] Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Augustine," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 44.

[43] Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory,* 29.

[44] This is the same thought on conceit and deceit offered by John Duns Scotus. See William A. Frank, "Don Scotus on Autonomous Freedom and Co-causality," in Scott MacDonald, ed., *Medieval*

mortal selves, making the ground ripe for mimetic contagion. Girard uncovers this truth in his earlier works thus he posits that "the ultimate meaning of desire is death but death is not the novel's ultimate meaning."[45] Death could satisfy a desire that is misdirected and mimetic. In his rigorous literary criticism of the five European novelists, Girard finds echo of their works in this verse, "If the seed does not die after it has been sown, it will remain alone, but if it dies it will bear much fruit."[46] And he claims that all of the novelists that he reviewed describe how their heroes/heroines undergo conversion where self-divinity is renounced leading to their freedom from slavery (idolatry).[47] In this state of conversion, "Deception gives way to truth, anguish to remembrance, agitation to repose, hatred to love, humiliation to humility, mediated desire to autonomy, deviated transcendency to vertical transcendency."[48] Girard points out that all these great works use this Christian symbolism of death and resurrection, but it is kept hidden by their use of literary devices.

> All the great novelists respond to this fundamental appeal but sometimes they manage to hide from themselves the meaning of their response. Stendhal uses irony. Proust masks the true face of novelistic experience with romantic commonplaces but he gives the stale symbols a profound and secret brilliance. In his work symbols of immortality and resurrection appear

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Philosophy and Theology, vol 2 (Open access, Philosophy Documentation Center, 1992), 151 [142-164]; doi: 10.5840/medievalpt 199228; https://www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/purchase?openform&fp=medievalpt&id=medievalpt_1992_0002_0000_0142_0164, accessed 11 June 2018.

[45] Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 290.

[46] Ibid., 311.

[47] Ibid., 294.

[48] Ibid.

> in a purely aesthetic context and only surreptitiously do they transcend the banal meaning to which romanticism reduces them.[49]

Without the blinders of romanticism, we could reread Jesus' way of loving and nonviolent resistance to evil that eventually led him to the cross.

Jesus' way: claiming one's identity in God

Like John the Baptist, Jesus dies innocent of the crime leveled against him. But unlike John, Jesus enters into his death fully aware of what is going to happen hence he resisted the *skandalon* that would obstruct his way toward the Father, toward his sacrifice that reveals all that is wrong with mimetic violence and scapegoating. Jesus imparts to his followers what it is like to live as children of God, which is different from being a mere image or a replica.

Jesus' Sonship

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is presented as the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel. He is not an afterthought or an abrupt addition to salvation history.[50] And Matthew's (1:1-17) genealogy of Jesus is recognized by most scholars for its carefully ordered structure,[51] hence this particular section shows how systematic and organized Matthew is in presenting his materials. Because of this, the reader could notice the break in Matthew's narrative pattern in verse 16 when

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[49] Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 312.

[50] Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdsman Publishing Company, 1999), 78.

[51] W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdsman Publishing Company, 2001), 161.

he proclaims the birth of Jesus by Mary: "Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah." Raymond Brown claims that with this radical shift in the narrative, Matthew presents the "total absence of the father's begetting, establishing that Jesus was actually begotten through God's Holy Spirit."[52] Read in this context, I could say that the credibility of Jesus' teachings on how to live as children of God springs from his authority as the Son. And Jesus' identification with his Father is important as this is his origin.

After conversion, the other key to overturning violence brought by mimetic contagion and the scapegoat mechanism is to claim one's originality that is rooted in one's origin. And this is where the anthropology of Girard assumes its importance. If violence is perpetuated by the human propensity to mimic the desire of the other then there is no exit except for the total destruction of each other's replica, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (Mt. 5:38). But in Jesus, Girard sees a different model, a different victim of violence.

> One can call him an incomparable victim without any sentimental piety or suspect emotion. He is incomparable in that he never succumbs in any way, at any point, to the perspective of the persecutor-neither in a positive way, by openly agreeing with his executioners, nor in a negative way, by taking a position of vengeance, which is none other than the inverse reproduction of the original representation of persecution, its mimetic repetition.[53]

Jesus models a way out of this vicious cycle, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek

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[52] Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, (The New Updated Version; The Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 74.

[53] Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 129.

and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves" (Mt. 11:29). Jesus' humility is shown in his resistance to Satan taunting him to show his power that is equal to God's, "If you are the Son of God, show it!" He did not prove his Sonship on Satan's terms, but rather empties himself of his divinity (Phil. 2:7). He goes through the stages of what it is to be human before God, even dying on the cross. Yet even here, Satan did not get what he desired for Jesus to call on the angels to save him. Satan at the scene of the crucifixion has inhabited the crowd who mocked Jesus, replicating the way Jesus was tempted in the desert. Jesus' resistance to Satan's instigation has reached its final stage in his death. Still, Satan did not have the upper hand here despite Jesus feeling abandoned by his Father. Jesus resisted till he breathed his last. But those who witnessed his death, like the centurion and his companions declared, "Truly this man was God's Son" (Mt. 27:54). This recognition comes from those who executed his death sentence.

On the cross, Jesus conquers the evil force that seeks to annihilate what is good in this world. His act of sacrifice reveals what holds both his human and divine natures together: love. A *skandalon* fails to capture this essence because a humble God shifts and redefines power. Jesus' humble and nonviolent ways are active resistance to power that obstructs and divides the people from acting on their own will and God's. It is in this context where Jesus' declaration that he comes "not to bring peace, but division" could be understood. The presence of the instigator still remains to sow discord among the people. Thus Jesus shows how this could be resisted and overcome.

His whole passion is geared toward revealing the Father's salvific and gratuitous love to all of humankind in this world, the sun shines to both the just and the

unjust. Jesus manifests his Sonship by responding to God's love and embracing his life even in the face of great injustice and suffering. This is what Girard sees as the marked departure of Christ Gospels from all the mythic tales of religion.[54] Jesus owns his narrative from beginning to end. The authority of his teachings on nonviolent resistance and love comes from his own integrity as the Son. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Mt. 5:9). Jesus has closely interwoven his Sonship with the Father because the Creator becomes the created partaking in the mortality of the creatures. This is an uneven exchange lopsidedly in favor of the mortals which ancient Israel has long recognized, "What is man that you are mindful of him, and a son of man that you care for him?" (Ps. 8:5). Again in Matthew, the evangelist presents Jesus as the goal to which Israel's history pointed[55] but as a Messiah, Jesus also belongs to all peoples. In this context, Jesus is the fulcrum of history, he is very much connected with the heritage of Israel as he is with other peoples, including the Gentiles who walked with him, and those others who follow him in succeeding generations.[56] The Gospel of John (1:1-14) would even bring this further by proclaiming that Jesus, the Word, is in the beginning with God. And Jesus shows what God's love and power is about as he embodies It. This is the God who subjected the God's Self to human rule so God can show the people what it is like to rule as God, on the cross. Jesus himself declares, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Mt. 5:17),

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[54] Girard, *The Scapegoat,* 126.

[55] Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 77.

[56] Donald Senior, "Direction in Matthean Studies," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study,* ed. David E. Aune (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdsman Publishing Company, 2001), 29.

making it explicit that to follow his way is the new rule as it is the fulfillment of God's law. This is where Jesus subverts the violent mechanism of the instigator and brings the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures into one seamless whole. And here Girard contends that the Gospels expel the scapegoat mechanism and the violence attendant to it.

> The interest of the Gospels lies in the future offered mankind by this revelation, the end of Satan's mechanism. The good news is that scapegoats can no longer save men, the persecutors' accounts of their persecutions are no longer valid, and truth shines into dark places. God is not violent, the true God has nothing to do with violence, and he speaks to us not through distant intermediaries but directly. The Son he sends us is one with him. The Kingdom of God is at hand.[57]

It is through his power that Jesus himself shows how mimetic contagion could be tackled. He has to come to terms with himself as the beloved Son of God, before he sets out in his mission and chooses his companions. Like the people of Israel who continually discern their covenantal relationship with YWHW and eventually embrace their identity as YWHW's people,[58] Jesus goes through the same process of claiming his origin as the Son of God. And united in his Father's love, Jesus' power uplifts the lowly, enriches the poor, glorifies the humble, and resurrects the dead. To be filled with this kind of power entails turning toward God, or a conversion. Hatred and vainglory resulting to idolatry

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[57] Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 189.

[58] See Walter Brueggemann, "Scripture: Old Testament," in Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 8.

are the conditions that Girard consistently mentions in his scapegoat mechanism and mimetic theory. To turn toward God, to freely choose God as a model - is to resist the temptation of a *skandalon* to usurp God's power to one's end.

This violence wrought by idolatry, as the consummate expression of mimetic desire, could be countered when we bear witness to God's gratuitous love. Our Christian moral and public life portrays the story that is closest to our hearts, and our action flows from this experience. A constructive move on political theology builds upon the narrative of the nearness of God, Emmanuel, a God who is with us (Mt. 1:23). This is where I bring Walter Wink into the frame to unpack power: of the good that ordains it and the evil that corrupts it.

Walter Wink: Engaging the Powers[59]

From this Girardian theory of mimetic desire as the incubator of violence through scapegoating, I bring in Wink who unpacks the source of violence in the exercise of power and the evil that sustains it.

For both Girard and Wink, the satanic structures—structures borne out of generalized imitation of pursuits and models that shape self glorification or produce violence to humans—need to be unveiled, exposed, and unmasked in order to continue and uphold the Reign of God already inaugurated by Jesus. From the inward movement toward God, the response is always the movement toward the world, not apart from it. And this framework radically departs from Augustine's view of the world. This is where St. Bonaventurian becomes

[59] Drawn from the title of Walter Wink's book, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a Word of Domination.* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

relevant. The human person, according to Bonaventure, embraces the world and does not flee from it, in order to be drawn to its source: God.[60] In this sense, Wink's framework could provide a way where the one who truly desires God could counter, together with the faithful community, the institutional powers that are founded on mimetic desire where self glorification and idolatry are deeply entrenched. There could be other frameworks where Girard's anthropologic view of mimetic desire could be housed. But for the purpose of this paper, Wink's framework is chosen as it too touches upon idolatry and satanic structures that prop powers toward acts of violence and injustice. Nonviolence and the unmasking of idolatry are two crucial points raised by Girard in his mimetic theory.

Wink provides a theological framework to understand the nature of power and anchors it on the theological themes of the good, the fallen, and the redeemed.[61] This framework does not make evil absolute but rather views it from the fallen nature of systems created and designed to address human needs, that include religious, economic, educational, social, and political institutions. Wink sees evil as not just personal but structural and spiritual as well; and regards it as systemic where no human individual has full control of its consequences.[62] This hews closely to what Bonaventure posits that the human person "having fallen and lying on the ground needs a helping hand to raise" him/her up.[63] From this perspective, Wink form-

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[60] Delio, *Simply Bonaventure,* 101.

[61] Walter Wink, "Identifying the Powers," in *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Theology*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh, J.W. Bailey, and C. Hovey (Michigan USA/Cambridge, U.K: Wm Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 364.

[62] Wink, "Identifying the Powers," 364.

[63] Delio, *Simply Bonaventure,* 101.

ulates a theological framework that regards: Powers are good; Powers are fallen; Powers must be redeemed.[64] He expounds that they are good insofar as they are created to serve the "humanizing purposes of God;" they are fallen when they look after their own interests at the expense of the others; but they can be redeemed because "what fell in time can be redeemed in time."[65] The tensions inherent in these three conditions are held all at once to resist the temptation of demonizing those who do evil. This is the foundation of Wink's nonviolent resistance to evil—also avoiding mimetic violence. Powers are there with a God-given purpose but this could be thwarted when Powers usurp or arrogate to themselves what is good, exploiting others in the process, something that is learned or imitated by humans as they follow the structured ways of thinking or are embedded in ordered, arranged, or classified environments. But exploitative and oppressive environments wrought by Powers are not without hope because what falls can rise again.[66]

Power in the biblical world is both invisible and visible contained in the language of the demons, spirits, and the angels and performed by the rulers, kings, and priests. In modern times however, the spirit that animates every institution or corporation is no longer supernatural but one that imbues and permeates the language of the corporate culture or contained in the institutional vision, mission, and goals. The theological and spiritual challenge is how to discern whether these institutions are fulfilling their God-given vocation or simply imitating the common frenetic pursuit of capitals[67] or the bottom line. By identifying their

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[64] Wink, "Identifying the Powers," 365.

[65] Ibid., 366.

[66] Ibid.

[67] See, Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in J.

idolatrous acts (those that pervert the purposes of God) we could unmask them and recall their powers to go back to their divine vocation of serving the highest good. Thus for Wink, the task of unmasking and recalling the powers to serve what is good falls on the church, the *ekklesia* or assembly. This is to say that any attempt to transform power would involve the collective efforts of communities where forms of solidarity and not rivalry and mimetic competition would prevail. This finds echo in James M. Gustafson's *The Church as Moral Decision-Maker* where he emphasizes that the humankind's common life or community is where God sustains human existence in the world.[68]

In Wink's theological framework, while we acknowledge the presence of God in each person and human community or the world, we also cannot deny the existence of structures that create a hostile environment to human lives. Powers could corrupt, pervert, and distort the purposes to which they are ordained. But they too are in need of "God's creative, ordering and redeeming presence. They are constantly in need of prophetic criticism and reformation; indeed, they also await the full redemption that is to come."[69] By recognizing power in its goodness, in its corrupt state, and its need for redemption, we could resist evil nonviolently because we do not destroy something that is good nor eliminate a system that could be restored.

By identifying and unmasking power when it obstructs the flourishing of the good, we could avoid reverting to the scapegoat mechanism. Bringing back Girard into this frame, we could reread the persecution

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Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York, Greenwood, 1986), 241-258.

[68] James M. Gustafson, *The Church as Moral Decision-Maker* (Philadelphia, PA: United Church Press, 1970), 68.

[69] Ibid., 71.

of Jesus in the Bible by looking at it from the notion of mimetic contagion. Here Girard posits that those who persecute do not realize that they influence one another mimetically, but this ignorance does not cancel their responsibility, it only lessens it. This is where we could gain a deeper appreciation of Jesus' utterance on the cross, "Father, forgive them," Jesus cries, "for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).[70] By confronting power and opening our eyes to our complicity to mimetic violence, Wink and Girard offer us a pathway toward resisting evil and redeeming "Satanic" structures that could obstruct the way toward God.

The theological-anthropological view of Girard allows us to go deep into our resources and identify our own personal "satanic" structures that create idols that either incite or contribute to violence. Being conscious of our own idols we could curb the mimetic contagion in the world already reeling from its own destructive desires.

Wink's framework, on the other hand, gives us a space to forgive our own failings and work together to restore what have been corrupted and perverted because we have a theological view of a God that is good and One who unites what is good in us through the love shown by Jesus on the cross. The nonviolent resistance is both personal and communal because the violence that we confront has been embedded in our political structures. These structures have been blinded by a *skandalon*, obstructing the power that is God's. The mischief of this *skandalon* elicits desires that are not our own.

Girard and Wink reopen our eyes to this power and rekindle a desire for the good, a true desire for God. Theirs is a Gospel of Nonviolence that could counter the

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[70] Girard, "Are the Gospels Mythical?," paragraph 15.

acts of violence committed in the name of religion, particularly in the Christian tradition. Both Girard and Wink do not deny the existence of Satan but they jolt our collective memories and remind us not to submit to its terms but to resist it according to the way of Jesus, "give the other cheek," "walk another mile," or simply put, "Don't react violently against the one who is evil."[71]

Other pubic theologians, like the 20th century American thinker and theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, could be very critical of principled nonviolence claiming that such an act is naïve and that it cannot be sustained in a sinful world.[72] Niebuhr subscribes to Augustine's notion of original sin and rationalizes the use of force in bringing about peace and justice. However, the world altering events of the 20th century like the World War II, the Cold War, the rise of communism, the threat of nuclear war, and Vietnam War, made him rethink his earlier positions on nonviolence and the use of force. Especially with the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war, Niebuhr developed a more nuanced view of the world that is no longer black or white, good or evil, virtuous or sinful.[73] In his book, *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr posits that both virtues and vices are inextricably joined in us, and that "there is a hidden kinship between the vices of even the most vicious and the virtues of even the most upright.[74] This is also what Wink is trying to present in: powers are good, powers are fallen, and powers are redeemed. This is the same

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[71] See, Walter Wink, "Jesus' Third Way," https://cpt.org/files/BN-Jesus' Third Way.pdf, accessed 22 October 2017.

[72] Ira Chernus, *American Nonviolence: The History of an Idea* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 111-12

[73] See Paul Elie, "A Man for All Reasons," *Atlantic Magazine.* http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/11/a-man-for-all-reasons/6337/2/

[74] Reinhold Niehbur. *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 147.

message that Jesus imparts to his followers in his parable on the wheat and the weeds (Mt. 13:24-30) where he counsels to let the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest, signaling that weeding out belongs to the Creator not to the creatures. The task is to continue to till the field, care for the crops, until the harvest. The power of the Creator is not equal to the power of the creatures although both have the capacity to do what they will.

The power of the Gospel lies on the witnesses of those who have walked Jesus' way, those who resist evil, and reveal God's mercy and love. The world is good. The world is fallen. The world is in need of redemption. To those who might question the realism of this Christian faith and political theology, we might refer them to Jesus' own realistic view of the world when he entrusted his mission to his disciples, "Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves" (Mt. 10:16). And from an anthropological perspective, Girard insists that there is one desire worth having for our own sake, "The time has come for us to forgive one another."[75] Our mortal time is finite and so is the world that we inhabit. But all through this, God's mercy remains, "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20). This mercy is the only thing that can save the world from human arrogance, destructive desires, and frailties.

Conclusion

Mimetic desire that leads to violence could only be countered by desiring God whose presence and language is love, and whose ways are humble, just, and nonviolent as exemplified and lived by Jesus, the Son of

[75] Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 212.

God. The world is "replete with the power, wisdom, and goodness of God,"[76] thus powers need to be reoriented to this original source. Powers are good. Powers are fallen. Powers are in need of redemption. The task in political theology is to conform powers to the image of the Reign of God already inaugurated and proclaimed as good. Let it be. So be it.

[76] Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, 101.