Imitation & Scapegoating.
How to Understand Religion in the Work of René Girard

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A Certain Critique of the Theory

In my view mimesis is the force governing all human relationships and cultural life. The hypothesis that people are mimetic had been scarcely elaborated before Girard's theory had been worked out (and it is still in the process of being worked out). And Girard's main hypothesis: *culture is formed by mimetic desire and thereby transformed into scapegoating*, indicates a new theory on cultural origins and development. Before Girard's work, neither mimetic desire nor the scapegoat mechanism had been given any central position in explaining the principles governing people and culture.

Most religious scholars and theologians who are preoccupied with, or who have commented at least on Girardian theory, focus their attention on scapegoating. Their interest in mimetic desire may be strong, but there seem to be some difficulty as how to reflect mimetic desire into the tradition of theology and the science of religion with the same ease as the victimage mechanism. My view is that mimesis is the most fundamental factor, not only because it precedes victimizing, but also because it can, from a certain perspective, also engender all kinds of religious phenomena.

Thinking religion as a part of mimetic desire means thinking religion primarily as a force exerting an influence in society. And it is my view that religious thought devoid of mimesis may mean missing out on certain generative aspects of religion and, simultaneously, convey the somewhat exotic feeling of something vaguely distant, important perhaps for understanding people in the past or from more primitive backgrounds, but not something that really grasps the structures of daily existence.[1] Rituals, myths, sacrifice, evil, apocalypse,

[1] This feeling is not necessarily the fault of religious studies. It can also be the result of structures, trends and values in our society, that encourage a somewhat indifferent attitude towards imitation, often taking it for granted.

which are typical religious motifs, have often been seen as metaphysical concepts and autonomous ideas, devoid of a mimetic structure. These highly essential phenomena should be seen as being linked to one another, as well as to other less central religious phenomena. Mimetic desire could be interpreted as one way of mediating such phenomena. In the field of theology there seems to be a similar problem with regard to introducing mimesis. The study of rites, myth, sacrifice, sin, evil, good, God, Christ and the Paraclete are usually regarded, if imitative at all, then imitative in a Platonic way, and therefore presented as representations. But rites, myths, sin, evil and other theological motifs, might turn out to be more concrete and relevant if related to desire and acquisition. Theology has often shown great respect for philology and philosophy, but has somewhat disregarded anthropology and psychology, thereby, at times, giving the student, if he or she comes from a Christian environment, a familiar feeling of 'monologues in heaven' or, if he or she comes from a more secular background, a rather distant feeling of ‘monologues in heaven.’ This, however, does not mean that mimesis will necessarily bridge the gap between religious studies and secular culture – although I think it could have beneficial effects, perhaps even reinvigorating the study of religion and theology by integrating the cultural context into a more religious mode of thinking, and vice versa. If the science of religion and theology have a communication problem, mimetic desire could perhaps function as a kind of bridge in mediating religious phenomena as anthropologically relevant.

Viewing Mimetic Theory as Essentially Religious

Instead of merely postulating a christology from the anthropological findings in mimetic theory, it seems fruitful to view mimetic theory as essentially founded on religious belief. Therefore, I will interpret Girard’s anthropology from a religious perspective. This is, I suspect, a more authentic way of understanding mimetic theory than trying, as is usual, to go from anthropology to religion, and then find the answers to these quests in Christianity. Turning Girard's approach around seems to be a necessary undertaking because of the religious ideas and motifs that come to the fore. I also suspect that the method of going from anthropology to christology has, in Girard’s case, been is a cunning attempt to make the theory more acceptable to the (unconscious) despisers of religion. But in doing this, the whole hypothesis of a religious origin seems to have been postponed to a later stage, thus making

mimesis and desire appear as a purely secular phenomena. Therefore, my interpretation is based on seeing both mimesis and desire in a religious context, in order to understand the anthropology in mimetic theory. Thus mimetic desire can be seen as something worked out from christological reflection and driven by Christian belief and ending up with what one might call a Christian anthropology.

Thus Girard's christology or christological reflections may be used, in so far as I can figure out, as basic background for interpreting mimetic theory. Mimetic desire can therefore be seen as something worked out from a Christian anthropology. My aim, in contrast to the tendency to focus on Girard's theory as a general anthropology (which it could possibly be seen to be if the religious elements were censored) is to interpret mimetic theory as basically worked out from christological reflections and driven by Christian belief. This, however, is intended less in a missionary vein than the reader might suspect. My basic assumption here is that our culture is so totally engrossed in Christian orthodox and heterodox motifs that it is impossible to separate Christian culture from a general culture. Also, Girard has been writing, from the late 1950s, from the perspective of a born again Catholic.[2] There is nothing, in my eyes, which makes his theory less scientific if these presuppositions are brought out.

Although I see his theory on the victimage mechanism as brilliant and highly relevant,[3] I do, however, think the scapegoat theory has a certain universal relevance, but I do not think that it is so common in everyday life as Girard postulates it to be. There are, in my view, many, many examples of mimetic interaction which do not lead to scapegoating. However, I assume Girard's christology to be the basis or axiom for mimetic theory. Such a hypothesis indicates that mimetic theory is a religious theory centred round a non-sacrificial interpretation of the Passion.

One of the reasons for neglecting the mimetic dimension is that the the starting point among theologians and religious scholars for understanding Girardian theory. is often *Violence and the Sacred*. It is therefore understandable that there has been a tendency to give scapegoating and violence priority, and that many scholars, after giving a general description of mimesis, tend to neglect the mimetic principle that lies behind scapegoating and violence.

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[2] See Girard. *Quand ces choses commenceront…,* Entretiens avec Michel Treguer (Paris: arlèa, 1994), 190-199.
[3] Anyone who has put his nose inside a classroom or an office cannot be ignorant of how extremely near at hand the scapegoat mechanism can be. But there are, in contrast, families and larger unites that live together relatively free of scapegoating one another.

In *Violence and the Sacred* Girard devotes his first five chapters to sacrifice before mimesis is introduced in chapter six under the heading: 'From Mimesis to the monstrous Double.' In chapter five, when interpreting Euripides' *Bacchae* Girard dismisses psychological motivation in order to understand rites.[4] But by deleting psychological motivation, both in its conscious and unconscious form, also means not drawing out the full consequences of mimesis, the force which motivates sacrifice. This, in my view, marks a deviation from the primacy of the mimetic principle in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, where desire towards the other is clearly motivated by a mimetic-psychological force.

Mimetic Desire and Desire in the Bible

In my view, desire in Girard's work is closely linked to the prohibitions in the Ten Commandments, based on wanting something to which one is not entitled, and which will do harm both to oneself and others if the desire is acted upon. Especially the ninth and tenth commandments function as prohibitions against desiring things belonging to the other. The prohibitions in the commandments provide a kind of *a priori* basis in the Christian world for an understanding of desire. These prohibitions concerning desire, however, give no elaborate explanation of the process of desire. They merely state that breaking the commandments means breaking away from the will of God. Both the analysis of desire in mimetic theory and the negation of desire in the Ten Commandments calls for the need for prohibitions.[5] In the Hebrew Bible (*Old Testament*), however, there is more an attempt to warn against desire than describe the phenomenon. In the New Testament, meanwhile, there is a certain attempt in the *Epistle of James* to give a more elaborate description of desire.

> *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death. (The Epistle of James 1, 14-15.)*

In this passage there is a process, from individual desires to submission to the same desires, to sin and finally to death.[6] This process clearly follows a similar pattern to the process of metaphysical desire: desire for an object, desire for everything which owns or leads to the object,

[4] *Violence and the Sacred*, 132.
[5] *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 14.
[6] A similar development of desire is outlined by Hamerton-Kelly when he claims that it begins by wishing to be like the rival, then wishes to conquer the rival (envy) and finally to destroy the rival. (Hamerton-Kelly. *The Gospel and the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 134.)

rivalry for the object, rivalry leading to death. This biblical understanding of desire is, in my view, already outlined in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*.[7] Girard's work on desire can be seen as an attempt to make a biblical anthropology coherent and vital, a way by which to interpret modern, secularized society from a mimetic point of view. One should not underestimate the missionary strategies in Girard's work.

From Ritual to Individual Desire

The transition from ritual to individual desire refers to the most basic and most astonishing transition in Girard's reflection on desire. This hypothesis tries to make sense of the transition from sacrificial societies to post-sacrificial societies. In the process of ending scapegoating, sacrificial mentalities become more individual. James Alison clearly supports this thesis of seeing desire as a part of an individualization process in a post-sacrificial society, when he claims that 'desire is the "interdividual" living out of a sacrificial crisis without public resolution.'[8] Thus, we can see that even when the scapegoating systems are revealed, scapegoating has not vanished. There is, however, a metamorphosis from collective to individual desire, and this latter desire (stemming from the scapegoat mechanism) materializes into individual rivalry and violence. In extremely chaotic periods of history post-sacrificial societies[9] revert to systems of sacrifice - Nazi Germany being perhaps the most obvious and violent example. It is, however, important to emphasize that a post-sacrificial society does not have to be less violent, even if the revealing of the scapegoat mechanism constitutes a revealing of violence. In extreme cases such as World War II, violence can actually grow more severe, because certain collective regulations and prohibitions that operated in a sacrificial society have disappeared and individual desires play a more obvious and therefore powerful role. There is also the fact that post-sacrificial societies permit a greater degree of competition, which leads to a more advanced technological stage, which in turn creates more potentially destructive weapons. The process of killing with ever more effective and longer range weapons can be seen as an attempt to rid a community of direct

[7] In Girard's first major work (*Deceit Desire and the Novel*) desire is outlined, but within a much more narrow scope than in *Things Hidden*. *Deceit Desire and the Novel* is limited to a discussion on the development of desire, from the 17th century until mid 20th century. Desire in *Deceit Desire and the Novel* is understood as a desire to imitate a mediator. In this book Girard introduces a paradoxical movement from an external and transparent imitation, to an internal and hidden imitation. The paradox is that this hidden, internal mimesis is more fundamental and possessive and much more intense than the external imitation in the 17th and 18th century. Desire in the early stages of Girard's work is understood as the desire to be as the mediator. And the desire towards the mediator is seen as a consequence of desiring man instead of God.

[8] James Alison. *The Joy of Being Wrong* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 14.

[9] A post-sacrificial society is not a society devoid of sacrifice, but a society where the victimage mechanism has been revealed as such. In this respect my introduction of this term can easily be misinterpreted.

violence, but in using more technological weapons, violence is actually escalating. The paradox is that non-sacrificial desire seldom legitimizes violence, while, at the same time, it is potentially extremely violent. This violent consequence of modern desire can be linked partly to Paul Virilio's theory of *dromology*,[10] where speed is seen as violence, and where secular violence operates with enormous speed, thus distancing and modifying the guilt of the killer. Mimetic theory, however, is clearly different from the theory of speed. According to mimetic theory, the superiority of modern, desacralized culture is shown in the way it modifies violence and is, in actual fact, less violent (imagine the consequences of atom bombs in Antiquity) than previous sacrificial societies, even though modern society has the means for mass destruction. However, desire should be seen as playing a part in technology, not the least in the misuse of technology, and the process of accelerating speed, meaning more potential violence. In this respect speed can be seen to be connected to desire. But, on the other hand, speed, from a mimetic point of view, cannot be seen as a direct consequence of desire.

Girard claims that desire liberates humans from certain maleficent forms of sacralization. In other words, desire has a positive effect on certain sacrificial phenomena. This liberation can be seen to be a heightened awareness of violence. These positive effects are modified by the claim that many new desirous and non-sacrificial approaches end up rather lifeless and sterile. The statement, however, makes it difficult to claim that Girard in *Things Hidden* regards desire in a totally negative way. There is also the fact that he is not consistent when distinguishing between desire and mimetic desire. At times these concepts are blurred, sometimes meaning the same and, in another context, meaning something different. In the following lines Girard uses the term mimetic desire to describe the positive effects desire has had on the modern world.

> Everything that makes our world the most energetic and creative that has ever been in art, politics, modes of thought and, especially, science and technology is a consequence of the liberation of mimetic desire. (Things Hidden, 285.)

Desire in mimetic theory can, when linked to the process of permitting rivalry and demystification, be seen as a creative force. It is therefore essential to focus on the liberating effects of desire, in order to understand the double effect of desire. One of the liberating effects of desire consists in tolerating rivalry.

[10] Paul Virilio. *Speed and Politics. An Essay on Dromology* (New York: Semoitext(e), 1977).

> *Modern society is extremely refined and developed in the symbolic sense. It can permit and encourage growth of mimetic rivalries that are normally forbidden to man. (Things Hidden, 93.)*

Rivalry in a sacrificial society has to be controlled by strict prohibitions in order to avoid violence. In a desacralized world desire is let loose. The consequence is enhanced rivalry and a speeding up of production. The threat from violence is less strong. Toleration towards desire can only materialise when violence is moderated, or aggressions have been channelled.

In Girardian thought this kind of desacralization constitutes a progress, but progress not in any straightforward way such as the liberals imagined it. Firstly, the victimage mechanism is seen as partly beneficial since it has regulated society and limited violence. This also means that violence is less motivated by contingent and absolute violence. Secondly, the deconstruction of prohibitions creates a world of individual rivalry, which leads to new and differentiated forms of violence. The tensions caused by heightened rivalry can also lead to creativity, for example in the technological field, which in due time may lead to mass destruction. Thirdly, when the prohibitions and penal systems are modified, the incitement to commit lawless and immoral acts becomes easier. The liberation of desire creates a freer society, but desire is still there, and creates new kinds of problems. The liberation of desire demands that individuals are able to control their desires, and so the question arises: can a society dominated by desire, control undesirable desire?

The Gospel's Liberating Effect

From a superficial point of view, it might seem as though desire had engendered a non-sacrificial, liberal society. This, however, would imply that desire embodies tolerance, openness, love and forgiveness. This is hardly the case when desire is seen as a negative product of desacralization. In most cases Girard does not consider desire as the prime engine behind desacralisation. He claims that the Gospels have revealed the scapegoat mechanism, and, as a secondary consequence of this non-sacrificial mentality, desire has evolved, both liberating and damaging at the same time. Therefore, it is not desire that is the primary force behind modern society. In fact, according to mimetic theory, it is religion. Religion is both the force behind the scapegoat mechanism and the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. And because of the latter, the Christian demythologization of scapegoating has engendered the mentality of the modern world. Thus, the side-effect of the modern is the flowing of desires.

Therefore, in my view, it is absurd to try to understand mimetic theory without considering religion as a motive in the way desire works.

When interpreting desire in relation to religion, due to the emphasis mimetic theory puts on the Passion of Christ as a revelatory mechanism, one needs to understand the shift in desire evoked by this new mentality. Before post-sacrificial societies appeared, desires were checked and balanced through the scapegoat mechanism and one can speak of collective desires being channelled into victimizing. In a sense Girard is saying that desires understood in a individual way are only possible in a post-sacrificial society, which also means that individuality can evolve only as the victimage mechanism has been revealed.

Christology as a Way to Understand 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[11] 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, will help us give up the encompassing desire for reputation and make us capable of participating with people of poor repute.[12]

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.[13] Thus christology means going behind the New Testament to the historical Jesus.[14] It also tries to combine scientific knowledge with belief.[15]

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[11] 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 Lightnin*g (see especially Introduction).
[12] James Alison. *Living in the End Times* (London, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 180-189.
[13] Pannenberg. *Jesus - God and Man* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 12.
[14] Ibid., 11.
[15] Pannenberg's christological position can be seen to be a critique of Bultmann who lets existence determine the

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.'[16] 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.'[17] 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.

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,[18] emphasizing a human christology.[19] The context, however, from where Girard interprets the roots of Christ's historical role, is located in different texts from the *Old Testament*.[20] 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*

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content of christological thinking. (See Svein Rise. *The christology of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Identity and Relevance* (Lewiston Qeenston Lampet: Mellen U.P., 1997), 14-15.

[16] Jürgen Moltmann. *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 103.

[17] Hamerton-Kelly. *The Gospel & the Sacred*, 14.

[18] 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.

[19] Theissen/Merz. *The Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 560.

[20] 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 (Loisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 201

quest for the historical Jesus.[21] 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.[22]

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 *Old Testament* 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 *Old Testament* (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).[23] 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.[24] 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.

The *Old Testament* 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. [25] Parts of the Prophetic literature in the *Old Testament* 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.

[21] Theissen/Merz. *The Historical Jesus,* 11.
[22] Ibid., 10.
[23] *Things Hidden*. 144-149.
[24] Ibid.
[25] 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.'

The four Songs of the Servant are, in mimetic theory, seen as a revelation of the role of the scapegoat.[26] 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.[27] 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).[28] In the *Old Testament* there is often ambivalence in its understanding of the victimage mechanism. The scapegoat's innocence and God's non-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 *Old Testament*: 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 *Old Testament*, 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 *Old Testament* 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-Violent Christology

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.[29] Jesus' fate is seen to be exactly the same as several of the prophets in the *Old Testament*. This means that the same mechanisms are at work. By killing Jesus, one is mimetically repeating the same

[26] *Things Hidden*, 155-158.
[27] Ibid., 155.
[28] *Things Hidden*, 156-157.
[29] 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)*

violent past. The killing of Jesus repeates the previous cycle of innocent killings. Thus the murder of Abel, from the perspective of the *Old Testament*, goes back to the origins of humanity and the foundations of the first cultural order.[30] 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.[31] 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. [32] If Christianity were merely one of many religions, the fundamental mechanism would have to be hidden as it is in others[33] as this is, in essence, the foundation of religion. 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 determing factors according to New Testament hermeneutics, Schwager says.[34] 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,

[30] *Things Hidden*, 159.
[31] Raymund Schwager. Must there be Scapegoats? (N.Y./Herefordshire: The Crossroad P.C./Gracewing, 2000), 153.
[32] Ibid., 136
[33] Girard.'Das Evangelium legt die Gewalt bloss,' Orientierung 38 (1974): 53.
[34] Schwager. *Must there be Scapegoats*?, 138.

the victim brings reconciliation and safety, restoring life to the community.[35] 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

In *Things Hidden* Girard claims that Christ's passion is not a sacrifice in any of the accepted meanings.[36] 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 sacrifical systems. The Kingdom of God meant a replacement of sacrifice and prohibitions by love.[37] 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.

[35] *Things Hidden*, 143.
[36] Ibid., 180-185,205-215.
[37] Ibid., 196.

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.[38] 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.[39] The mimesis of Christ becomes essential in this respect. If there were no emphasis on imitating Christ, Girard's christology would, as Milbank claims, consist only of revealing man's destructive side without any attempt to work out a mimetic understanding of the Kingdom of God.[40] 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.[41] 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

[38] Ibid., 191.
[39] Ibid., 218-223.
[40] John Milbank. *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1991), 395.
[41] *Things Hidden*, 197.

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. [42] The 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 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.[43] 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

[42] 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, 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.

[43] *Things Hidden*, 204.

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 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.[44] 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.

[44] Ibid., 191.