

# ***The Transubstantiated Word***

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper will explore the relation between Walter Ong's "Presence of the word" and René Girard's anthropological understanding of the Hebreo-Christian revelation. Girard's insights into mimetic desire and the role of the victim in culture suggest how the Judeo-Christian revelation subverts the cultural mechanisms of violence. Examining the convergences between Girard's insights and Ong's work on the presence of the word offers opportunity for expanding our understanding of the Word and revelation from an anthropological perspective. Girard's insights are gaining greater acceptance and currency in mainstream and Catholic scholarly and clerical circles, eg. the Pontifical Household preacher, Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, used Girard's insights in a Lenten meditation in 2005. This article seeks to further the dialogue between Girard's insights, Ong's communication studies and Catholic theology.

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## **A Brief Introduction to Girard's Mimetic Insight**

Through literary and anthropological analysis, René Girard (1965, 1977, 1986, 1987b & 2001) has proposed that humans are uniquely structured by their imitated or *mimetic desire*, i.e., humans desire according to the desire of another.<sup>2</sup> Girard uses the word "desire" in a broad sense to denote a fundamental movement of human being. Humans are brought into relationship by shared desires that form human identity. However, instead of desiring the other's good, mimetic desire is often distorted into desiring what the other has or is. Thus, when common objects of desire are fought over, mimetic desire is distorted into rivalry and conflict. The accumulation of these conflicts results in cultural breakdown.

According to Girard (1977, 1986, 1987b & 2001), mimetic rivalries are resolved on a cultural level in the unification of desire that occurs in scapegoating a victim, e.g. Oedipus is identified as a scapegoat for the plague occurring in Thebes. By analysing a varied array of ancient and modern cultures, rituals and texts, Girard (1977, 1986, 1987a & 1987b) says this

scapegoating produces a newfound cultural unity and order built on the lie and frenzy of unanimous violence that the victim is guilty. To perpetuate the cultural order, Girard (1986, 55, 1987b, 10-47 & 126-40, ) says that sacrificial rituals emerge to imitate the original scapegoating violence; myths develop to obscure the violence as legitimate; and sacred prohibitions are made that control and channel mimetic rivalries and violence.

In his analysis of ancient and modern literature and culture, Girard (1986, 1987a, 1987b & 2001) found that the scapegoating that lay at the heart of human culture was discussed in a different way by the Bible than that in comparable myths. Girard (1986, 1987a, 1987b & 2001) argues that the victim's role in culture and myth seems to be steadily exposed by the Hebrews and is definitively revealed in Christ, who is killed as victim for his loving self-giving. Christ is raised so as to expose the distorted cycle of desire and violence in human culture and reveal the true form of mimesis in his self-giving relationship with the Father. Therefore, Girard's mimetic insight is conventionally divided into three major parts (See Kirwan, 2004; Fleming, 2002 & 2004):

- 1) human desire is mimetic or imitated;
- 2) human cultures use scapegoats or victims to resolve mimetic conflict and create unity; and,
- 3) the Hebreo-Christian revelation, in contrast to myth and sacrificial ritual, reveals the scapegoat mechanism within culture as well as human desire as mimetic, and provides an alternative way for structuring desire and culture.

### **The Word made Present as Revelation**

Girard has provided some anthropological explicability to the Hebreo-Christian revelation. Walter Ong, a renowned expert in communication studies, provides a different social scientific perspective on the uniqueness of the biblical tradition. Ong and Girard's works seem to have some interesting convergences in their understandings of revelation and "the Word". Let us begin with a quote from Ong (1967, 12):

Many religions make much of the word of God or of gods, or simply of the word as a source of wisdom. But the distinctively personal cast of the relationship between man and God in the Hebreo-Christian tradition heightens from the earliest Old Testament times the importance of the word as the focus of personal communication. God calls to Abraham, "Abraham!" and Abraham answers "Here I am" (Gen. 22:1). A similar thing happens to Jacob, who is called by an angel of God (later recognised to be God himself), "Jacob!" and who likewise answers, "Here I am" (Gen. 31:11). As Erich Auerbach has made clear in the first chapter of his *Mimesis*, this direct and unexplained confrontation – a verbal assault on a given person by God – is not the sort of thing one meets with in Greek or other nonbiblical tradition. God's word impinges on the human person as a two-edged sword.

What precisely makes up this "unexplained confrontation"? Why do we not meet it in the non-biblical tradition? In what sense is God's Word a two-edged sword? How does revelation cut both ways? In Ong's (1967, 13) words: "The Word of God is... reciprocating. If the Word who became man is God's communication to man, he is also man's response to God." Ong is speaking about how revelation happens in general terms. He stops short of pointing to the specific nature of revelation; as do the non-biblical traditions. Girard (1977, 1986, 1987 & 2001) provides anthropological specificity to the Hebreo-Christian revelation by showing how it exposes the non-biblical traditions' cover up of the place and role of the victim. This revelation of the victim has important implications for the meaning of Ong's identification of the unique dialogue between God and humanity in the Hebreo-Christian tradition. Ong does not make explicit the place of the innocent victim, which is Girard's unique and important contribution. This paper posits that Girard's explication of the place of the victim and violent mimesis in human culture, which he argues is an important part of the unique content of the Christian revelation, can provide *grounding* for Ong's work on communication and the Word in a traditional, biblical understanding of the *Logos*.

For Ong, the heart of the epistemological privilege of Christianity is in the Word as spoken and written, opening up human experience. Ong is not unaware of the importance of the victim<sup>3</sup>, but hasn't recognised what Andrew

McKenna calls the “epistemological privilege of the victim”. Furthermore, the spoken remains for Ong (1967, 17) at the heart of communication and the Word. Ong (1967, 15) describes communication thus:

Only we must be clear that by communications we understand here not simply new gimmicks enabling man to “contact” his fellows but, more completely, the person’s means of entering into the life and consciousness of others and thereby into his own life. Communications in this sense obviously relate to man’s sense of his own presence to himself and to other men and to his sense of God’s presence.

In this way, Joseph Ratzinger (1969, 69-70), now Pope Benedict XVI, says that the *Logos* is not absolutely singular but relative and reciprocal: “God ... is not only *logos* but also *dia-logos*, not only idea and meaning but speech and word in the reciprocal exchanges of conversation... (I)n the one and indivisible God there exists the phenomenon of dialogue, the reciprocal exchange of word and love” (Ratzinger, 1969, 131). Thus, we return to the definitive and eternal communication: “The Word of God is... reciprocating. If the Word who became man is God’s communication to man, he is also man’s response to God” (Ong, 1967, 13). The essence of this reciprocity is mimesis – an ontological exchange between God and humanity in which humanity is moved by God’s desire for their good to which Christ responds with self-giving love. Christ reveals the Father’s self-giving love as his perfect Word – as the perfect expression of self-giving love – and makes a response to the Father on humanity’s behalf. There is a double mimetic reciprocity in Christ: from and for God; and from and for humanity.

This exchange of love in the Word is the definitive communication as it brings true meaning and purpose to human mimesis. The communication between God and humanity is in the Word, i.e., the incarnated divinity whose very being *is* love. Thus, communication is shown to not only occur between humans but between humans and God. God offers himself in the Son as offering for humanity to enable humanity’s true mimetic offering in the Son. God is gift, giver and receiver.

The mimetic dimension links the two, Word and revelation, as God liberates humanity to desire and act by the following of Christ. In other words, God is offering himself as Word – as he has done since the beginning of Creation – to reveal and liberate humanity. He who eternally offers himself and who has been rejected since the beginning of time is received and incarnated in the woman, who is free from original sin, i.e., from the distorted mimesis that places blocks and boundaries between humanity and God (see Alison, 1998b). God's Word – the crucified and risen victim, Jesus – reveals to humanity the definitive existential grounding and relationship by sharing the self-giving mimesis of the Trinitarian God. The Trinity is the source of pacific, loving mimesis in which the Father and Son seek the absolute good of the Other as their revealed ontological substance. Though this revelation does not reveal God in God's self, it does reveal the Creator God moving Creation to its fullness in the mimesis of self-giving love. This is exemplified in the giving of the Son to the Father on the Cross and the giving of the Father to the Son in the Resurrection that reveals the eternal exchange of love of Father and Son in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the substance of the loving exchange between the Father and Son; a love that is as "ontologically dense" as the two Persons who exchange (Henri de Lubac in Bailie, 1997, 132). As God's purpose is revealed in His own incarnated Word, God is mimetically *moving* all creatures made in His image to participate in the Holy Spirit through internalising the desire for the good of the other in relationship with Christ as the true substance of being.

The Spirit carries on the work of Resurrection as the loving mimesis of the Trinity is fully revealed and shared with the world *through the Son becoming victim*. The Crucifixion and Resurrection reveal the essence of the Trinitarian exchange and are accomplished through the incarnated Word, who is revealed to be *the crucified and risen Victim*. Thus, God's definitive communication of himself is as *victim*, who is sacrificed to the unanimous mimetic violence of the mob which unifies both Jew and Gentile against Jesus. As victim, God accomplishes the Crucifixion and Resurrection are accomplished not for His own sake but *for humanity's good* to enable their encounter with true mimesis. In this encounter, humans recognise their

distorted mimetic condition and learn to desire the good of the other, rather than desire what the other is or has.

As the loving substance of the Trinity, the Spirit is the constant sharing of revelation and “the presence of the Word” – the presence of the loving victim who comes from God – that irrupts into human culture and communication (cf. Ong, 1967). This irruption subverts the closed-off exchanges of violence in human culture to enable humans to enter into dialogic relationships – real exchanges of word and meaning – that come into being in the pacific mimesis of the Word: “...the real word from which all words proceed and which all words are always seeking to express” (Ratzinger, 1969, 60). The Word is a constant and dynamic presence as the Spirit is its constant and dynamic process that is ever communicating through a whole variety of media.

### **To be Transubstantiated: *The Following of Christ***

Therefore, pacific reciprocity with God – our loving victim – underpins true communication. It gives the Word its unique “presence”. As one enters into this presence, this true communication, this pacific mimesis, the Word becomes “mimetically internalised” and “made flesh” in the believer:

...we could say that to believe as a Christian means understanding our existence as answer to the word, the *logos*, that bears up and holds all things. It means affirming that the meaning which we do not make but can only receive is already granted to us, so that we have only to take it and entrust ourselves to it (Ratzinger, 1969, 43).

This mimetic reciprocity flows from the Resurrection, and is sacramentally realised in the Eucharist, the giving of life to humanity through the re-imagining of life and death transcended and united in one: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (Jn. 1:3-4). Creation is being achieved by the salvific mimesis that holds and keeps us in being through the perfect, pacific relationship of the Trinity. The culture and scandal of death that inhibits and denies life is conquered by the overcoming of the fear of death in this pacific mimesis. The fear of death itself,

that which tempts us by lies and misconceptions into the cessation of our being, is at the heart of our grasping desires and mimetic violence centred on our innocent victims. This victory could only be achieved by the revelation of God in the innocent victim, “the Word made flesh”: “He was in the world, and the world came into being *through him*; and the world *knew him not*. He came to those who were his very own, and his own received *him not*” (Jn. 1:10-11).

Thus, the world came into being through God the Father’s loving exchange with his Son. However, the world did not know the loving mimesis of God because it constantly expelled the Other – who was the subject of human envy in the Garden – as victim. Kirwan (2004, 83) says: “Such cultures are founded on the other ‘logos’ of Greek philosophy, which only knows ‘strife as king and father of all things’.” This cycle is revealed by the Son, who came in human flesh as love and was still expelled and killed. Girard (1987, 271) says that “the Johannine Logos is foreign to any kind of violence; it is therefore expelled, an absent Logos that never has had any direct determining influence over human cultures.”

Therefore, real dialogue and communication, which reveals what it is to be human, comes from entrusting ourselves to the Word, who is our innocent victim giving us meaning through loving forgiveness. God then speaks us into loving forgiveness as we enter into the presence of the Word. Creation is fulfilled as the loving Word comes to liberate the world from the lies and violence of death that strangles it into rejecting its own true nature:

...The process of faith in the life of the person is therefore precisely the learning to relax into the suggestion of this other “Other,” a process that is arduous because what is being undone is the way in which our selves are formed and constituted by the “worldly” other, which is at many points in denial of the peaceful mimesis, which is the new “Other’s” way into us. ...The element of supernatural faith is, therefore, present, as leading us out of our formation by the harassment of the old “other.” This means that it is a form of learning relaxation in the midst of struggle. It is a reality present while there is still a worldly other forming and pulling us (Alison, 1998b, 60).

Thus, the presence of the Word – the victimised Other – is forming us in the proportion that it is subverting and liberating us from the violent other. The *Logos* is absent from the distorted mimesis of culture but through real communication as our forgiving victim enters into this distorted mimesis to liberate us from death:

Imagine what it is like to be approached by your forgiving victim. What a pity none of us like very much to think about our being approached by our forgiving victim! What is it like to actually undergo being forgiven? We are not going to resolve this by saying, “Oh, it’s not being forgiven that matters. It’s *forgiving*: I must forgive!” So we work ourselves up into a moral stupor about straining ourselves to “forgive the bastard!” It’s very, very complicated. But in fact the Christian understanding is quite the reverse: it’s because we are undergoing being forgiven that we can forgive; and we need to forgive in order to *continue* undergoing *being* forgiven. But remember: it’s because we are approached by our victim, that we start to be undone. Or in Paul’s language: “even though you were dead in your sins he has made you alive together in Christ.” Someone was approaching you even when you didn’t realize there was a problem, so that you begin to discover, “Oh! So that’s what I’ve been involved in.” (Alison, 2004, 13).<sup>4</sup>

What the Gospel of John describes as the Incarnate *Logos*, “the Word made Flesh”, is, in part, the revelation of the victim in human culture and the presence of God in that victim. The Word becomes “mimetically internalised” and “made flesh” in the believer, as it was and is incarnate in Jesus, through the encounter with and following of Christ, who as forgiving victim is the Father’s perfect Word. The presence of the Word approaching us as our forgiving victim enables us to accept and embrace even physical death as an integral part of life’s movement into the mystery of the human and the divine. It is the revelation of life and being as continually “transubstantiated”, i.e. moving further into *relatio*, true relationship in the Divine Persons, beyond the limits and degradations of our own “substance”, our creaturely being and contingent physicality in distorted desire: “But as many as received him, he endowed them with authority to become children of God, to those believing in his very name, who neither by blood nor the desire of flesh nor the desire of man, but of God were born” (Jn. 1:12-3). God is one with us, but we are not all with God. Instead we are born “of blood”, of sacrificial victims, by the rivalistic



mimetic distortion of human desire. Yet, by the irruption of the Word into human life, we have the chance to be re-made as the divine substance overcomes the distorted human mimesis:

Where the Genesis narrative sets up a rivalry between God and the human beings created by him, the Prologue assures us that those who believe in Christ are invited to become 'children of God'. In other words, the very identity which Adam and Eve snatched at in Genesis is here being offered as a free gift. ...Because Jesus has his origin not in the will of man, nor urge of the flesh, but in God, a perfect non-violent love is a possibility for him (Kirwan, 2004, 83-4).

To be one with God, as the Son modelled to Creation by giving his will and desire to the Father, is not to be sacrificial slaves but "children [*tekna*, 'offspring'] of God". The children of God respond to the crucified and risen victim speaking to us from his position of complete vulnerability and openness in pacific union with God the Father: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the father's only begotten son, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). This "glory" [*doxa*] is not of a human kind but "of a Father's only Son", not sacrificed for God, but for humans, so they can come into real relationship with God and share in the glory of the one, true victim, "full of grace and truth". James Alison (1996, 180-5) describes this glory as that of the reputation of the despised victim who is full of forgiving grace and the liberating truth of human existence – the true model of mimetic reciprocity and communication. This is the double impact, the "two edged-sword" of the revelatory Word: the saving death of the gracious Victim speaking forgiveness and a way out of our mimetic violence; and, the liberating truth endowing us with the dignity of God's children enabling us to accept forgiveness through *love*. Thus, we are called "as followers, *forgiven sinners*", to share and be transformed, or transubstantiated, by our forgiving victim, into the good news, the Word made present in Christ (Ong, 1994, 77). Further, Ong (1994, 73-7) highlights the use of the word "following" (*akoloutheo*) in the Gospels, as in one who *responds to the call*, as we entrust ourselves to God who "speaks" us out of the scandal of death and distorted mimesis into pacific relationship and reciprocity with the *Logos* that creates us in His own image.

### **Communion with God: The Word and Eucharist**

The gift of bread and wine, the act of gathering, celebrating and eating, are the substance of our human participation in the exchange between the Father, Son and Spirit. By opening himself to humanity as a human victim in each Eucharist, Christ, present in His Spirit, “trans-substantiates” those who accept him into his own “real presence”, i.e., into relationship with the Father in loving mimesis. Humans are moved into “the real presence”, which is the ontological density of Christ, mysteriously present as all Creation yearns for *the* Resurrection, i.e., the full consummation of Creation in the Trinity. Christ’s Resurrection, which is at the source of each Eucharist, has revealed life as beyond our complicity in the scandal of death and moved, or “transubstantiated”, us into a new way of being and living: “For man is the more himself the more he is with ‘the other’. He only comes *to* himself by moving away *from* himself. Only through ‘the other’ and through ‘being’ with ‘the other’ does he come to himself” (Ratzinger, 1969, 175).

Eucharist is the joyful celebration of Creation in which Creation begins to be transubstantiated into its real substance, its real relationship, its unity of destiny: “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). It is the salvation story, expressed in the Word and experienced in the Eucharist, in which we gather to celebrate the crucified-and-risen Christ, the divine victim, who moves humanity out of its own mimetic violence and into loving communion with the divine. As the human *logos* is liberated from violent, rivalistic mimesis it is transubstantiated into the divine *Logos*, Christ our true nature. The anthropological substance of this movement is the “subjecting” or giving over of one’s desire, i.e., one’s mimetic or ontological substance, to the Son, who in the exchange of love with the Father, subjects and gives over everything – himself and all Creation – to the Other “so that God may be all in all”.

Thus, the foundation and substance of Creation is an exchange of self-giving love to which all humanity is called to fully participate in communion with God

through the following of Christ as Word and Sacrament. In Christ, we can seek the fulfilment for which we all yearn, leading us to the encounter with God by following Christ's own free and revelatory words on the Cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." It is in giving over one's self for those loved by the Father that humans, who are lost in their aimless and meaningless desires, are given their true purpose by Christ and are loosened, or "forgiven", from the slavery of the violent other (Alison, 1998a, 45). Humans can follow Christ by recognising their complicity in mimetic violence to which they had sought purpose and reconciliation for their desire. Thereby, in recognising the true meaning of their desire, humans start to accept God's offer of union as "children/offspring of God", revealed in the loving mimetic exchange of the Trinity: "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (Jn. 17:26).

The Son's relationship with and revelation of the Father makes love known in being the sacrificed and risen victim; a love that continually proceeds as Spirit flowing from the Resurrection. This is eloquently evoked in the communion rite with the words: "Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say *the Word* [sed tantum *dic verbo*] and I shall be healed". These words can be heard on many levels. The Word spoken by God *is* the incarnate Word that pitches his tent among us, that empowers us to receive our own true nature, which is Christ himself. We respond by recognising that we are not only incapable (as creatures) but unworthy (as sinners) to receive the one, true sacrifice given to us once and for all – not as expiation but as a pure act of love. In our sinfulness, we have been brought to face the unworthiness, the *grasping*, that led to the need for this sacrifice. We become aware of the lies that we use to fill up our desires with empty and violent things. Our "fallen state", our "unworthiness", is that we are always drawn into (and ignore the call out of) this violent mimesis.

Yet, the *Logos* that holds us in being, creates and transubstantiates us by Its Presence, making us whole by the crucified-and-risen Christ. The one, true sacrifice as the revelation and redemption of humanity subsumes all sacrifices

and victimisations in it by Christ's pure act and being of love. This stands in stark contrast to archaic religiosity, the non-biblical tradition, that invoked an angry deity to cure a fallen, violent humanity. The Word, as it is most fully expressed in Christ's sacrifice as the "direct and unexplained confrontation" of the pacific and loving God, evokes in humanity its divine calling which "knows not death" (Ong, 1967, 12, Alison, 1996, 59). It heals the wounds of violent human mimesis "making us worthy", that is to say "justifying" us, as it calls us into true life and freedom as divine offspring in which violent mimesis, victimisation and death *are not*.

Thus, we are called to receive the Word not only with a human word but by opening ourselves to his real presence in his Body. By welcoming his approach as crucified and risen victim and digesting his Body, he can transubstantiate us from the inside with his love that lives beyond death and invades our inmost being. We are called to receive Christ in the Eucharist as the only true sacrifice, not as the flesh and blood of a sacrificial victim but as the real substance of God's love made fully-present and ever-present in Christ. The Eucharist is not just a memorial feast but the universal gift of grace through the Resurrection in "the gratuity of the self-giving victim" (Alison, 1998b, 81). The Eucharistic sacrifice is realised as it reveals the loving God to us subverting and healing our violent identities in the *remembering* of our victims. We are called into communion with God in and as the body of Christ, "transubstantiating" us, liberating us from our distorted human condition into Christ's union with God. Remembering our original quote from Ong, we can begin to see what real communication is and how God's communication to us through God's Word impinges on us, in the Hebreo-Christian tradition like no other. Joseph Ratzinger (1969, 220) describes God's communication as a way of being that unites God and humanity in Eucharistic sacrifice:

The Christian sacrifice is nothing other than the exodus of the "For" that abandons itself, a process perfected in the man who is all exodus, all self-surpassing love. The governing principle of Christian worship is consequently this movement of exodus with its two-in-one direction towards God and fellow man. By carrying humanity to God, Christ incorporates it in his salvation.

The reason why the happening on the cross is the bread of life “for the many” (Luke 22.19) is that he who was crucified has smelted the body of humanity into the “yes” of worship. It is completely “anthropocentric”, entirely related to man, because it was radical theocentricity, delivery of the “I” and therefore of the creature man to God. Now to the extent that this exodus of love is the ec-stasy of man outside himself, in which he is stretched out infinitely beyond himself, torn apart, as it were, far beyond his apparent capacity for being stretched, *to the same extent* worship (sacrifice) is always at the same time the cross, the pain of being torn apart, the dying of the grain of wheat that can only come to fruition in death. But it is thus at the same time clear that this element of pain is a secondary one, resulting only from a preceding primary one, from which alone it draws its meaning. The governing principle of the sacrifice is not destruction, but love. And even this principle only belongs to the sacrifice to the extent that love breaks down, opens up, crucifies, tears – as the form that love takes in a world characterized by death and self-seeking.

This tearing and transformation, worship and sacrifice, “transubstantiates” us into union with God through grace, the gift of the Word as the twin nature of divinity and humanity. In being given and taking on this twin nature, humanity faces a twofold destiny: the pain of being torn from the distorted mimetic condition of the world as it is freed to live and love like Christ in unity with God himself. The paradoxical and mysterious nature of the incarnated Word – who is present at the source of all Creation with the Father and is at the same time the crucified and risen victim – draws humanity out of its addiction to mimetic violence into the “yes” of worship, i.e., of loving self-giving relationship with God. Transubstantiation from pain, death and violence is Christ “carrying humanity to God” issuing humanity the invitation to take up the communication of loving mimesis. “Indeed, perhaps the mystery of God is from the start the most compulsive challenge – one that can never be carried to a final conclusion – ever issued to man to take up the dia-logue which, however much it may be obstructed and disturbed, causes the *logos* to resound, the real word from which all words proceed and which all words are always seeking to express” (Ratzinger, 1969, 60). It is this universal resonance of the Word – in the mysterious depths of the Father’s love – that reverberates in the human person and all Creation, called into being as the image and likeness of the “Beloved, in whom I am well pleased” (cf. Mk 1:11).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge Dr Draško Dizdar for his assistance in writing this paper.

<sup>2</sup> This brief summary of Girard's work is only meant to be an introduction, not a defense of Girard's insights. This summary draws on Girard's works (1965, 1977, 1978, 1986, 1987a, 1987b, 2000 & 2001), and introductions to his work. For fuller exposition of Girard's insights consult these works. See also Alison (1996, 1998a & 1998b), Bailie (1995), Fleming (2002 & 2004), Golsan (2002), Kirwan (2004) and Simonsen's (1992) anthropological work in Africa and his application of Girard's insights.

<sup>3</sup> See Ong's article, "Mimesis and the Following of Christ" (1994, 73-7).

<sup>4</sup> See also Alison, 2006, 64-5.

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## **The Transubstantiated Word: A Response**

**Simon De Keukelaere**

In this response to Hodge's article I would like to address two issues: the Eucharist in relation to René Girard's mimetic theory and the reciprocation of "the Word" in a world that cannot receive it, a conundrum Hodge's article suggest but does not explicitly try to elucidate.

### **The real presence of the Victim and the Eucharist**

I profoundly share Hodge's basic intuition that the way out of violent mimesis, victimization and death is deeply Eucharistic,\* but all the implications of this intuition still need to be explored. In an interesting paper Petra Steinmair-Pösel also suggests a link between the Eucharist and "positive mimesis" (Hodge would rather say "pacific, loving mimesis"). "Explaining positive mimesis needs the recourse to theological categories." and the best "theological categories" are—as she suggests—the Eucharistic ones:

The experience of having gratuitously received, forms the foundation of positive mimesis. It is cultivated wherever human beings experience themselves as having received a gratuitous gift and consequently are willing to pass on what they have got freely and without calculation. In an outstanding and explicit way this happens in the Eucharist. The Greek term Eucharist refers to the given benefaction as well as the thanking answer to it. And the verb "eucharistein" means to behave as presentee. Thus celebrating the Eucharist, means cultivating the experience of living out of bestowed abundance. This experience is the source of positive mimesis. (Pösel 2006)

Pösel's idea of the free gift as the source of "positive mimesis" resonates with what is written in Hodge's abstract. What Hodge writes is even more interesting and more complete, I think, since it also embraces the "revelation of God in the victim", a non-negligible issue in Girard's anthropology of the Cross, an issue that cannot be overlooked in the context of "positive mimesis":



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[The] Word is the gradual revelation of God *in the victim* in human history by *the free gift of grace in love and forgiveness*. This is expressed in the Catholic liturgy by the words during the communion rite, “Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say *the Word* and I shall be healed”. (Hodge 2007, my italics)

Reading this quote with the quote from Kirwan suggests a paradoxical similarity between the the Fall and the Eucharist: “The very identity which Adam and Eve snatched at in Genesis is here being offered as a free gift.” (Kirwan 2004, 83) In Genesis the snake encourages the first humans to snatch at the fruit. In the liturgy of the Eucharist the priest says: “take this and eat” (lending his voice to Christ, the fruit of Mary’s womb, who freely gives Himself to us in the Eucharist). In Genesis the serpent makes a false promise: “You certainly will not die!”. After the “Lord, I am not worthy...” the priest, like the snake, says that we will not die: “may the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ preserve your soul unto life everlasting.” The similarity between the two scenes (Fall and Eucharist) strikes me. But being so like they should then be so incredibly unlike, that is the shock and the enigma (to use a Chestertonian diction). What comes from the “prince of the world” are caricatures, distortions. As Hodge writes: the “unity against the victim is a human distortion of true mimetic *communion*” (I love this insight!)

The same similarity *and* abysmal divergence also exists between the archaic sacrifice and “the one, true sacrifice given to us once and for all – not as expiation but as a pure act of love.” (Hodge 2007, 10), the unique sacrifice made present in the liturgy of the Eucharist. It is, in short, the difference between our violence that—according to mimetic theory—produces the illusory sacred and... Love, God’s being.

The [positive/loving] “mimesis flows from the Eucharist and Resurrection, the giving of life to humanity through the re-imagining of life and death transcended and united in one. It is the revelation of life and being as continually “transubstantiated”. [...] Death is “conquered” by not being feared or denied, as we are freed from our grasping desires . (Hodge 2007, 1)

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I believe that in one of the most important chapters of Girard's book on Shakespeare, the French-American anthropologist suggests the same connection between the Eucharist and "positive mimesis" or (to borrow Nikolaus Wandering's excellent term) "receptive mimesis": being freed from our *grasping* desires. In the last scene of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* the main character, Leontes, is able to see that the victim of his jealousy, his wife, is not a dead statue but really alive (*in the flesh*) as he is freed from his grasping desires (see Girard 1990, chapter 38). In his comment on this scene Girard suggests that bad mimesis leads to a loss of *substance*. Girard describes the inverse movement (conversion) by using quintessentially Eucharistic categories, such as the category of the *real presence*.

Leontes' victory over temptation parallels the scene imagined [and staged] by Paulina. If mimetic desire is a kind of demon that eats away reality and eventually destroys it, renunciation of [the bad] mimetic desire should produce an inverse result. A Leontes liberated from that desire should rediscover Being, the *real presence*... (Girard 1990, 340)

### **How to reciprocate the Word in a world that cannot receive it?**

A crucial question that Hodge's article suggests but does not explicitly answer is this: how to reciprocate the Word in a world that cannot receive it? Girard's whole oeuvre seems to suggest that it is extremely difficult, not to say impossible for humanity to hear God's non-violent word, not because it is somehow intrinsically elusive, but because of *our* violence. As Hodge writes: "Our "fallen state", our "unworthiness", is that we are always drawn into (and ignore the call out of) violent mimesis." (Hodge 2007, 10) We do not hear the Word because we drive it out, as Hodge argues quoting Girard (1987, 271) and Kirwan (204, 83). Humanity's *driving out* of the Word is of course very much connected to original sin, to our "fallen state". "His own received him not..." (John 1, 11) The consequences of original sin become most clearly visible on the cross. (see Alison 1998) Now, the big question is how—taking into account these circumstances—the Word could nevertheless be *received* and become flesh in the first place!

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Shouldn't this girl chosen among the chosen people to give birth to the Word be without original sin? In *Thing Hidden* Girard has this to say about Mary: her "perfect submission to the non-violent will of the God of the Gospels [...] in this way prefigures Christ himself." (Girard 1987). And he continues, quoting from Luke:

'Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you! (Luke 1, 28)

The unprecedented event brings no scandal with it. *Mary does not set up any obstacle between herself and the Word of God.*

'Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' (Luke 1, 38)

Mary does not set up any barrier between herself and the Word of God, the thing we, fallen humanity, have always been doing. Indeed, "it is not God who sets up barriers between himself and mankind, but mankind itself." (Girard 1987, 215). So, also in this sense, Mary is really the new Eve and Christ the new Adam, the *only* Son, the One who remained absolutely faithful to God's Word:

By remaining absolutely faithful to God's Word, in a world that had not received the Word, [the Son] succeeded in transmitting it all the same. He managed to inscribe in the gospel text the reception that mankind in its slavery to violence was obliged to offer him—a reception that amounted to driving him out. If we go beyond this point, we would become involved in questions of *faith* and *grace*, which our anthropological perspective is not competent to address." (Girard 1987, 216)

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## NOTES

\* See also: Gil Bailie  
[http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt\\_5/Bailie.htm](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_5/Bailie.htm)

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