

Girard for a Prophetic Trialogue

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This 2022 war-torn Lent, I felt urged to evaluate my Girard-inspired interreligious efforts ever since I returned to Africa with his study on sacred violence in my bag, some 50 years ago. Western Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam's honoring of Jesus are presently rivals. The 21st century is dripping with blood because of this three-way rivalry rooted in Gospel texts. Western Christianity is built on Paul's *theologia crucis*, notably dominating the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Eastern Orthodoxy stresses the theology of eschatological glory, highlighted by the Gospel of John. But there is a third tradition, the Q-text (hypothesized sources of material common to Matthew and Luke but not Mark), that focusses mainly Jesus' prophetic message of agape. Muhammed, seeing Christian infighting, relies (partly) on this third line of sayings by Jesus (Isa in the Quran's Arabic).

Before reading Girard, I had seen priests in Ghana use a faulty etymology to read the divine name *Mawu* as "the Unsurpassable." Then, reading *Violence and the Sacred* as I prepared a pastoral center in Central Africa, I noted insensibility for the ethnological curiosity of a patrilineal Banda-tribe using the word *eyi* (meaning: mother) to express superiority and mastership. Later, while lecturing on such peculiarities in Girardian perspective, I was asked, as a secretary to the foreign affairs unit of the Dutch Council of Churches, to help in world-wide mediation efforts, from South-Africa and Israel to the Balkans.

The Balkans' rivaling three brother-nations, each claiming to be the true, God-fearing adepts of Jesus/Isa, led me to ruminate on Girard's view of the Bible's prophetic message. I did value St. Paul, translating his saving encounter with the risen Crucified near Damascus as a *theologia crucis*, yet I sensed how, bound to Platonic and other metaphysics, this theology rooted Western hierarchical structures in a sacrificial reading of Jesus' reconciliation of sinners to the Absolute. Both the Reformation and the secularizing Enlightenment stayed in this groove, although the Pauline-Synoptic hermeneutics were recognized as one-sidedly underrating the Johannine tradition, so dear to Eastern Europe.

When I was asked to help Polish students apply Girard's mimetic theory to Catholic sacramentology, we pondered the split of New Testament studies along tripartite lines, calling for a re-harmonization. We understood Jesus' order to imitate his Eucharistic gesture to mean a partaking in his self-donation as mutual food, rather than the consumption of his saving sacrificial graces; his Cana wedding-sign didn't intend to free sexuality of "inherent sinfulness" by some ritual blessing, but to engage in liberating gendered links from the Eden Fall into rivalries; baptism means breaking with the narcissistic grip of one's self-image; and ordained ministry is a daily exposure to contentious servitude. While sacraments thus disclosed their prophetic depth, we were shocked by the Christian divide along Poland's Eastern border getting a murderous face, as the Kremlin chose to blow up Poland's presidential plane, with the President and 95 top-functionaries on board, bound for the 2010 ceremony at Smolensk's memorial for 22,000 Polish POWs Russia executed in WW II. This widely ignored clue to Putin's further designs—a revenge for the Polish Catholic Pope's role in the Warsaw Pact's demise—fed on an age-old Christian feud and on a church-backed, embittered design to save Eastern-Europe from the West's deviated faith. While the West hailed uprisings in Ukraine, Belarus and Arab lands, Putin's resolve got stiffened in religious rhetoric.

I leave it for others to apply mimetic theory to the atrocities that now sully our screens; I just want to spell out some of our subsequent Girardian musings. Given exegetical studies' move away from research on the historical Jesus to redactional themes in various NT-texts—although this had Mohammed cry foul for falsifying Jesus' Gospel/*Injil*—we noted that Synoptic and Johannine visions were increasingly complemented by findings from the Q-tradition. Mark's gospel itself, counting as the prime synoptic text, shows a tripartite blend, with an atonement model that modified the sacrificial take on Isaiah's Suffering Servant. While citing Isaiah, it leans heavily on Daniel's vision of God replacing the Temple by His own eschatological presence in His "new people," celebrating the divine liturgy and living in a charitable *ummah*—as advocated by the Qur'an. It made us perceive a triad of Orthodox faith singing the divine glory, Muslim-type charitable solidarity, and a Western future-oriented hope of Christ's redemption, including its humanist reformulation. A three-way biblical hermeneutics, with Q-accent proving pivotal. An ecumenical call to halt the bickering about the new Jerusalem's prophetic ideals. Keeping Girard's innovation of the human sciences in mind, while seeing the global weight shift to the Pacific, we perceived this call for a Jesus-inspired dialogue.

Meanwhile, the Dutch Girard group reflected on Islam's denial of Jesus' sacrificial death and explored Sir Mohammad Iqbal's compatibility to mimetic theory. About a century ago, this Muslim reformer, seeking to remedy his people's lethargy, had reconstructed Islamic thought in line with Western sciences, with Bergson, and with Whitehead's process-thinking. His texts about selfhood seemed open to the interindividual positive mimesis of Girardian-Augustinian ilk, stressing God's work in us to turn us into mutually inspirational models, not unlike the neo-patristic personalism in Orthodox authors like Zizioulas. Here again, a Girardian outlook on a dialogue emerged, integrating the three hermeneutics. While valuing the paschal symbol of Jesus' saving presence in the Eucharist, it resists opposing the atonement rhetoric of sacrificial redemption vs. the celebration of God's eschatological presence. Referring to the Abrahamic-Mosaic covenant-tradition, it rather reads the blood of Mark 14: 24 not as a redemption of past guilt, but as a purifying symbol in building the self-in-community by undoing mimetic rivalry.

Sensitizing people by Jesus/Isa's inspiration for a constructive bonding in the spiritual union of God's creative force and compassionate grace may thus form the way to integrate the Gospel/*Injil*'s three hermeneutic lines. And the West's recent affronts with the Orthodox and Muslim co-heirs of the Jewish prophetic message may hopefully be remedied with the help of mimetic theory soothing these rivalries and enabling such a timely dialogue. A dream worthy of turning into an agenda!