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The Human Soul and Evolution: A Mimetic Perspective

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Abstract

In much of the theological discourse concerning human evolution, the emergence of the human "soul" is commonly treated as off limits from any naturalistic analysis, lest one reduce human uniqueness or the immortality of the soul. This article offers a naturalistic approach to the "soul's" emergence in conversation with Catholic theological commitments, using René Girard's mimetic theory. I argue that locating "religion"—defined as the taboos, culture, and rituals that contained early human violence—as *prior* to cognition and language better orients our conceptions of what we mean by the human soul and how we evolved into our current form.

Keywords

Religion and human evolution, René Girard, Mimetic Theory, James Alison

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> Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God . . .
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> Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*[1]

> Human consciousness, culture, and signification came into being with the self-deception surrounding an act of victimization.
>
> James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*.[2]

[1] Pius XII, *Humani Generis* 36. "Animas enim a Deo immediate creari catholica fides nos retinere iubet."

[2] James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 225.

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I

While varieties of Catholic theology in the last generation have shown a relatively open posture toward evolutionary science,[3] I see a continued struggle among theologians to fully come to terms with the evolutionary emergence of a human "soul." Sometimes referred to as "ensoulment," this topic often concerns the uniqueness, origin, and nature of human consciousness—or, humanity's apparent difference from other animals in their freedom, morality, transcendence, cognition, etc. *Commonweal* writer John Farrel has deemed ensoulment as a defining topic of what makes us human and a key point of friction between Catholic faith and evolutionary theory. He states, "the church's conception of human nature seems to require a more clear-cut origin for *homo sapiens* than the fuzzy species boundaries acknowledged in evolution."[4] But can we in a post-Darwinian world embrace such clear-cut-ness?[5]

A common theological posture toward this problem is to regard the differences between humans and other creatures as so exceptional that they cannot be explained through evolutionary mechanisms—rather, our difference can only be explained as a miracle. And such special providence, coupled with the idea of our soul's immediate creation as Pius XII put it, tends to be regarded as a doctrinal safeguard for human dignity. Aiming to protect this divine miracle of humanity, some theologians then seek to reconcile Genesis' creation account with paleoanthropology, tracing the uniquely human "soul" to a single couple, or at least a region.[6] Or, for those less concerned with biblical literalism, others theorize at what point human consciousness came in touch with the beauty of transcendence, a moral sense, analytic rationality, or with the "religious spirit"—at which point we might again identify humanity's "soul," its distinction from the animals.[7]

[3] For just a few examples, see: *Scientific Insights Into the Evolution of the Universe and of Life*, eds. Werner Arber, Nicola Cabibbo, Marcelo Sorondo Sánchez, Pontificiae Academiae Scientiarum, Acta 20 (Vatican City: Ex Aedibus Academicis in Civitate Vaticana, 2009); *Evolution and the Fall*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh and James K.A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017).

[4] John Farrel, "Saving Adam: Evolution and Original Sin," *Commonweal*, June 25, 2018.

[5] "Learning about evolution" is apparently one of the reasons behind the U.S.'s religion-exodus: http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/.

[6] E.g. Kenneth W. Kemp, "Science, Theology, and Monogenesis," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 85.2 (2011) 217-236.

[7] For such an approach, see Fiorenzo Facchini, "Culture in Hominization and Its Implications in an Evolutionary View," in Arber et al, *Scientific Insights*, 379-91, at 381, 384, 387. Such optimism about humanity's "freedom" is linked to his method of bracketing out any naturalistic analysis of the "spirit's" emergence, which "can be dealt with only

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While the "conservative" method above tends to short-circuit a fully robust evolutionary and naturalistic analysis, the "liberal" method tends to have an unwarranted idealism about what we mean by a "religious spirit" in humanity's evolution. Both methods tend to reserve "religion" and "the soul" as proxies for humanity's divine unexplainability, against naturalistic analyses that supposedly explain away the sacred. This involves a God-of-the-gaps method, which Celia Deanne-Drummond describes as an error in its presupposing a

> divine intervention at the dawn of humanity that is metaphysically different from any other act of God's creation. This splits apart human becoming from the rest of evolution, and posits God as acting in the gaps of scientific knowledge; namely the mystery of the difference between humans and other animal kinds.[8]

Such uniqueness-approaches to ensoulment seem inclined toward what Joseph Ratzinger called theologians' "constant rearguard action" toward evolution: scientific explanations are feared as the enemy of mystery.[9] But scientific explanation need not mean "explaining away."[10] Instead of avoiding the fully evolutionary idiom through appeals to mystery, and instead of idealistic appeals to the "religious spirit" at the root of human evolution, I instead argue that we must seriously consider the pre-rational and violence-containing role that religion must have played in evolving humanity and its "soul." This will help us conceive how human evolution has indeed involved an "ontological leap"[11] while not short-circuiting an evolutionary analysis of humanity's striking difference from other animals. Too simplistically deeming humanity's leap as both unexplainable and univocally good fails to grasp the radical critique of human culture that is housed not only in the doctrine of original sin, but also in a branch of anthropological and evolutionary theory known as "mimetic theory." This theory, in which mimesis refers to our prerational imitation of one another, was originally generated by René Girard and is a topic

at the philosophical level" (386). This is coupled with a vague, univocally positive regard for humanity's "transcendent nature," evidenced by "manifestations of spiritual symbolism (art, religion, gratuitousness)." But such idealism withers once we ask about the empirics of such manifestations, finding lynchings under religious myths, group violence in Catalhuyuk's art, and human sacrifice in ritual.

[8] Celia Deanne-Drummond, "In Adam All Die?" in *Evolution and the Fall*, eds William T. Cavanaugh and Smith 24.

[9] Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 6.

[10] As G.K. Chesterton argues, we should not conclude that a description of mechanics equates with fully understanding their inner working. We superstitiously call our descriptions "laws of nature." Rather, the world, even when scientifically understood, is still *magic*. See his chapter "The Ethics of Elfland," from his *Orthodoxy*.

[11] E.g. John Paul II, "Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences," Oct 22, 1996, 6.

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of continued multi-disciplinary extrapolation today.[12] One of its explicit aims was to theorize how proto-humanity crossed the threshold into the current state of humanity. While I will describe that theory below, the above epigraph from one of its theological exegetes, James Alison, gets to the heart of its seeming conflict with most approaches to immediate ensoulment: human consciousness emerged through mimetic acts of victimization and a misapprehension about them. Mimetic theory, roughly speaking, argues that mimesis, as channeled through patterns of "scapegoating," helped usher proto-humanity into its current form of consciousness. Is there any room for an exchange between such a theory and Catholic theology of the soul?

This paper aims to answer in the affirmative and extrapolate how the notion of an "immediate creation of the soul by God" receives significant qualification in light of mimetic theory. I will do that by 1) briefly reviewing some approaches to ensoulment, 2) briefly clearing away some tempting misuses of the *imago dei* doctrine from Genesis when considering ensoulment. And 3) I will distill a mimetic theory approach toward the soul, with special reference to one of its theological exegetes, James Alison. Drawing upon mimetic theory, I hope to point a way toward theologically appreciating how the structure of human consciousness could emerge through the expansion of our mimetic faculty and the misapprehension that surrounds scapegoating.[13]

Brief Theological Background on Ensoulment

The Catholic need for a clearer-cut human origin and nature is stated firmly in the above papal epigraph from *Humani Generis*, wherein the "immediate creation" of the human soul is obligatory dogma in Catholic theology.[14] The encyclical is not very specific on this point, but we can infer that "soul" connotes something like

[12] See, for example: Scott Garrels ed., *Mimesis and Science* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011); Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford, eds., *Can We Survive Our Origins?* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2015a); Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford, eds., *How We Became Human: Mimetic Theory and the Science of Evolutionary Origins* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2015b); Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain* (Michigan State University Press, 2016).

[13] René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origin of Culture*, 1st ed (New York: Continuum, 2007) 86; René Girard, *Battling to the End* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010) 83.

[14] See *Humani generis* 36: "... the Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that, in conformity with the present state of human sciences and sacred theology, research and discussions, on the part of men experienced in both fields, take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as

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our unique endowment with rational consciousness, mind, reason, or apprehension, as it did for St. Augustine. Or, to avoid the idea that this means a disembodied spirit—like some extraneous and imputed spiritual letter inserted into the envelope of the body—we should recall that Augustine saw the "soul" as the whole bodily creature, who is uniquely endowed with "mind."[15] With this sense of distinguished human capacity, Ratzinger discussed the human soul with reference to our unique "ability to think and pray," and what Kant called our moral reason and freedom—marking humanity in the image of God and making us "more than earth."[16] Such an emphasis on human-uniqueness seems in use by others who contrast humanity's "higher-order consciousness" with the "primary consciousness" of nonhuman animals. In this sense, "consciousness," with its *social* denotation, is a fitting synonym for our unique souls: *con-scientia* implies intersubjective social consciousness.[17] Such a notion of consciousness will have to serve here as a sufficiently clear but broad definition of what the Catholic lexicon can mean by the human "soul": it encompasses dimensions of other-attention and openness, a sense of moral consciousness of others, and some acknowledged difference from other animals.[18] This broad definition tries to bridge the ideas of soul as "the whole human creature" and the more restricted approach that treats soul as "our unique form of consciousness."

As for the soul's "immediate" creation in the encyclical, this is not entirely clear. In one sense, it would seem to imply a punctuated emergence in time, delineating pre-human from human; and it would also seem to imply the rejection of a totally materialistic account of the mind—like, the mind as mere epiphenomenon of matter. But it another sense, one must ask if *any* created thing has a non-immediate relation to God. For if God knows all things into being and continually sustains all, then *immediate* and direct relation to

coming from pre-existent and living matter—for the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God."

[15] E.g. "'Man, placed in honor, fell, and is become like the beasts' (Ps 49:12; 20), and now he breeds like the beasts. Yet there is still in him a certain spark of that reason in respect of which he was made in the image of God; and this has not been wholly quenched . . . It is God Who has given the human soul a mind" (Augustine, *COG* XXII. Chapter 24, 1160).

[16] Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, 47, 48.

[17] Pierpaolo Antontello, in "The Emergence of Human Consciousness in a Religious Context," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, eds. James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 27.

[18] This paper is focused on the emergence of common human social consciousness; this does not deny a "soul" to those for whom severe disabilities seem to imply a lack of intersubjective social consciousness. If anything, this paper aids in concluding that the "dignity of life" should not be conflated with our form of consciousness nor the *imago dei* with rationality.

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God is omnipresent. In any case, in light of how the Church has long fended off the idea that the soul immediately *is* God—from the Manicheans to the Hegelians—we can infer *Humani Generis* was attempting a middle-way: treat the soul as not divine in itself, but a creature; yet, the soul is not a mere byproduct of matter.[19] This concept of the human soul, as situated between the heavens and the humus, is usually housed in the symbol of the "immortality" of the soul.[20]

The encyclical's next paragraph is also informative as to what is meant by the immediate creation of the soul. It rejects "polygenism," the belief that humans emerged disparately, in multiple places and genetic lines. The encyclical denounces such a theory on the grounds that it would violate the theological commitment to the doctrine of "original sin"—which it interprets to mean an act of sin from a singular pair of humans, passed on to all humans through generation.[21]

John Paull II echoed the claims of *Humani Generis*, declaring that "theories of evolution which, because of the philosophies which inspire them, regard the spirit either as emerging from the forces of living matter, or as a simple epiphenomenon of that matter, are incompatible with the truth about man."[22] Joseph Ratzinger, too, pronounced on the issue. Familiarized as he was in the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Ratzinger wrote with attention to the gradualism that the increasingly-stabilized evolutionary theory of his day suggested. He clarified that Genesis cannot mean a sense of humans created in a finished state; Genesis generously portrays humans as "beings en route, beings characterized by transition. They are not yet themselves."[23] And he referred to the soul-threshold with a *qualified*

[19] For the many points in Catholic tradition in which soul or mind ought not mean "divine substance," see any version of Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion synbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 20, 203, 235.5, 527.1,738, 1891.1.

[20] Denzinger, *Enchiridion* 1078.78, 1517.17, 2280. From the latter: "[Pernicious error] is contained in the forgetfulness of that mutual relationship between men and of the love which both a common origin and the equality of the rational nature of all men demands, to whatever races they belong . . . The Bible narrates that from the first marriage of man and woman all other men took their origin . . . and were scattered . . . we can behold and contemplate the human race as a unity . . . one in nature which consists of the materiality of the body and of the immortal and spiritual soul . . . "

[21] As for "polygenism, the children of the Church by no means enjoy such liberty. For the faithful cannot embrace that opinion which maintains that either after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all, or that Adam represents a certain number of first parents." The text requires an "original sin" that was "actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all and is in everyone as his own."

[22] John Paul II, "Message to the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences on Evolution," Oct 22, 1996.

[23] Ratzinger, *In the Beginning* 49, 51, 25. Also, Joseph Ratzinger, "Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences," 31 Oct. 2008; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 366.

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immediate relation to God: proto-humans became human in forming the first thought of God, the great Thou, "*however dimly*," "however stammeringly."[24] This first dim gesture toward the Transcendent in human evolution constitutes for Ratzinger "the properly human," in contrast to the proto-humanity "of the clay." Scripture and theological doctrines, for him, do not technically describe "our process of becoming"—this he was pleased to leave to the competency of evolutionary science, as a "complementary" knowledge.[25] Thus, theology does not compete as an evolutionary theory, but names *what makes us us*: "it is not the use of weapons or fire, not new methods of cruelty or of useful activity, that constitute man, but rather his ability to be immediately in relation to God."[26] And yet, amidst Ratzinger's subtle attention to humanity's dim, gradual becoming, he nonetheless insisted that humanity's crossing its soul-threshold must *not* be seen as a product "of chance or error."[27] But, can scientifically minded Catholics hold to both *Humani Generis*' immediate creation of a soul and this resistance to chance and error? It certainly leaves doubts among those who take as a scientific given the apparent nonteleological drift we find in species morphology.

James O'Sullivan recounts how theologians like Karl Rahner put critical pressure on *Humani Generis*, arguing that the special creation of the soul in some distinct proto-human pair (i.e. monogenism) was not logically tenable. Rather, conceiving of human origins through some "group" was sufficient (polygenesis) to accommodate for the messiness of evolution while maintaining a theological sense of a unified humanity who shares a common "original sin." In turn, he thought that a polyphyletic origin would dissipate this unity.[28]

[24] Christoph Cardinal Schönborn (citing Ratzinger), in *Creation and Evolution: A Conference With Pope Benedict XVI in Castel Gandolfo*, ed S.D.S. Stephen Horn (San Fransisco: Ignatius Press, 2008) 15-16.

[25] For Ratzinger on the absurdity of creationistic antagonism with science, see: "Meeting of the Holy Father Benedict XVI With the Clergy of the Dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso," July 24, 2007.

[26] Schönborn, *Creation and Evolution* 15; Ratzinger, *In the Beginning* 50.

[27] He also excludes seeing "the great projects of the living creation" as "products of a selective process to which divine predicates can be attributed in illogical, unscientific, and even mythic fashion" (Ratzinger, *In the Beginning* 56). That is, "human beings are not a mistake but something willed." He also objects to seeing "chance, necessity, errors and dissonances" in the emergence of humanity.

Ratzinger sets his footing partly on Einstein's idea of an Intelligence underlying all things: "there is revealed such a superior Reason that everything significant which has arisen out of human thought and arrangement is, in comparison with it the merest empty reflection" (Albert Einstein, *Mein Weltbild*, ed. C. Seelig (Vienna, 1953), 21; Ratzinger, *In the Beginning* 23).

[28] James P. O'Sullivan, "Catholics Re-examining Original Sin in light of Evolutionary Science: The State of the Question," *New Blackfriars* (2016) 653-74, at 661.

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Some theologians today avoid any "naturalistic" analysis of the soul's emergence, treating the "immediate creation of the soul" in a strict sense—seeing it basically as a supernatural infusion, for which the only evolutionary question is *when* it entered our species. As one example, Dr. Kenneth Kemp of the University of St. Thomas frames ensoulment as a divine "gift of a rational soul." That is, at some point in proto-humanity, "God selects two and endows them with intellects by creating for them rational souls, giving them at the same time those preternatural gifts the possession of which constitutes original justice."[29] He considers this a sort of fiat creation of the first philosophical, intellectual, and ultimately "theological" humans.

As will become apparent in my offering an alternative to this method, I see in such an approach no deep *intersection* between theological and scientific idioms. Instead of a fully bifocal integration of both idioms, the theological annexes the biological. For it offers no word on the *how*, the evolutionary mechanics that could have coincided with or even catalyzed the soul's emergence. Rather, the "soul" is *presumed*, defined as intellect or reason,[30] which is just unexplainably imputed into some *homo sapiens* through "a creative act of God,"[31] maybe as a "new gene" carrying the trait of ensoulment—supposedly different from all the other creative acts of God. While Kemp says his hope is to "accommodate the facts of paleoanthropology," this imputed notion of the soul short circuits thinking in an *evolutionary* way about humanity. That is, it takes it as un-explainable *how* there could emerge "an animal body capable of the brain activity prerequisite for rational thought." For in this more restrictive notion of immediate creation, "*God*" simply is the explanation.

Others, like Rev. Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco employ a slightly more naturalistic line of analysis in the emergence of the human soul. For him, ensoulment is homologous with the emergence of "language"—and with it, human rationality and abstract thought. For him, the genuinely "human" soul coincides with the emergence of language—and its concomitant rationality—within the last 100,000-50,000 years of the *homo sapiens* lineage.[32] He maintains that a

[29] Kemp, "Science, Theology, and Monogenesis," 232.

[30] E.g. "capacity for intellectual thought": Kemp, "Science, Theology, and Monogenesis," 231. He also speaks of, "the first rational human being" (233) whose apprehension of concepts distinguishes it from the learning and problem-solving of animals (234); "only beings with rational souls . . . are truly human" (232).

[31] Citing *Summa Theologica*, Ia, qu.90.

[32] Rev. Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, OP, "Defending Adam After Darwin: On the Origin of *Sapiens as a Natural Kind*," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 92.2 (2018) 337-352. A key point of difference with Girard here will be Austriaco's use of Berwick and Chomsky's thesis that "language evolved as an instrument of internal thought,

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"first" human ("the first speaking primate") must have somehow come upon this gift. While this supplies some greater empirical foothold for discussing this "soul," centered on our linguistic and rational capacity (using Chomsky's proposal that this capacity arose in a single human individual), it still lacks what Kemp lacked, leaving untheorized the *how* and why this language and rationality would have emerged. Whence the linguistic jump?

Amidst the varieties of approaches to the soul, it seems there is a shared hesitancy to engage in naturalistic analysis that might treat the human soul as anything but a mysterious fiat, lest the soul be "explained away." And there seems to be a habitual identification of the soul not with the whole biological creature (mediated, like all the cosmos, through evolutionary mechanisms), but with a *sui generis* reason and intellect—and presuming these align well with humanity's first gestures toward a Transcendent Thou. Mimetic theory, I will argue, offers a way of naturalistically re-conceptualizing human reason, our consciousness, and our religious origins—broadly, our "soul," so to speak—and *how* this could have emerged through certain social and biological phenomena. This will serve to qualify what exactly is *meant by* human reason, consciousness, our religious spirit, or our relationship to God. But to get there, I will clear away some exegetical presuppositions regarding the book of Genesis' supposed relation to human origins, especially its notion of the "image of God."

Genesis and the Image of God

Any standard exegesis of Genesis today involves comparative reference to Babylon's *Enuma Elish* creation myth, showing how Genesis appears to have, in part, adapted and adjusted extant mythic material from around the exilic period of the 6th Century B.C.E.[33] While *Humani Generis* conceded that Genesis' literary raw material could indeed have involved such sources, the encyclical also insisted that, Genesis' creation accounts, while using popular symbols, nevertheless pertains "to history in a true sense" and its concern is a "description of the origin of the human race."[34] We do well to qualify that encyclical with later interpretation, as seen in the *Catechism of the*

with externalization as a secondary process" (Robert C. Berwick and Noam Chomsky, *Why Only Us: Languagge and Evolution* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016] 74).

[33] *Humani Generis* 38-39.

[34] Such an interpretation is also evident in Pope Pius X, Pontifical Biblical Commission, June 30, 1909.

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Catholic Church, which argues for Genesis' figurative and not literal meaning, as well as the above nuances from Ratzinger and Rahner.[35]

A non-literalistic hermeneutic becomes even more warranted when we consider how Genesis' raw material, *Enuma Elish*, seen in its context, was not even a "creation story" at all.[36] Rather, the *Enuma* myth—modified over centuries to justify various political principalities—bears all the marks of an etiological myth of Babylon's political ascendancy in the Levant and the justification of its slave structure.[37] As such, *Enuma*'s genre at that time would have been less a meditation on human origins and more about "world" order, closer to what we now call socio-political propaganda. The myth bears more sociological payload than cosmological—or, rather, the two are inextricably woven together. We know this from accounts of *Enuma*'s annual public recitation in the Akitu festival amidst great political pomp.[38]

If we compare Babylon's deployment of *Enuma* with the myth's significant modifications by the authors of Genesis, the latter's revelatory meaning is boldfaced. The Babylonian myth is about a society's foundation being laid upon a conflict and a murder—and that the earth is composed of the torn apart body of a victim, Tiamat, slain by Marduk. This was common pattern in archaic creation myths; the story is not about the "universe," but the foundations of human order, culture, and thought—and their relation to a primordial violence. Parallels in ancient literature abound.[39] In stark contrast with this

[35] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 159, 279, 283, 284; *Providentissimus Deus* 14, 15 (on moving beyond the literal sense of Scripture when reason requires it); *Gaudium et Spes* 36.1. Yet, Gabriel Daly sees in the Catechism more an unsettled hermeneutic that vacillates between "symbolic" and "historical fact" (Brian O. McDermott, "Original Sin: Recent Developments" *Theological Studies* 38 [1977] 478-512, 478).

[36] Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963) 10.

[37] E.g. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 11, 120f. Of *Enuma*, "the epic poem was not written primarily as an account of origins, however. Rather, its purposes were to praise Marduk, the main god of Babylon; to explain his rise from a great but local deity to the head of the whole pantheon; and to honor Babylon itself as the most preeminent city" (Barbara Sproul, *Primal Myths: Creation Myths Around the World* [New York: Harper One, 1979] 91).

[38] Julye Bidmead, *The Akitu Festival: Religious Continuity and Royal Legitimation in Mesopotamia* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004).

[39] Numerous creation myths entail gods who were killed, creating the world through their body—the source of the tribe, nation, land, and culture. Hence the foundations of Rome are laid on the carcass of Remus; the assassinated Krishna makes the world; Purusa is dismembered to create the universe; the killed Tikarau of the Solomon Islands gives birth to the entire cultural order; Ninhursag creates "mankind out of clay and animates it with the blood of a slain god"; Omorka is cloven in half to make heaven and earth; the world is made of the body parts of P'an Ku, the Sumerian Lamga gods, or Kingu and Tiamat—and so on (Sproul, *Primal Myths* 19, 114, 121; *Rig Veda* 10.90; Raymond Firth, *Tikopia Ritual and Belief* [Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968] 230; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The

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common Babylonian political theology, Genesis proclaims that the world's foundations are originally laid in pacific simplicity, without bloodshed or the medium of a victim's body. Violence only enters this origins story much *later*, as not divine (though the Jahwist seems no pacifist) but as a corruption of the good through human hubris.

Keeping this contextual hermeneutic in mind deepens our appreciation for what Genesis accomplishes in relation to myths about the nature of humanity and royalty. This is especially important with respect to the *imago dei* concept. That humans are "created in the image of God" is often treated as some divine imputation of a unique rational soul. But, just as we know that *Enuma Elish's* genre is not merely cosmological but also sociological, so too the "image of God" must not be reduced to a "religious" reading of biology and human constitution. Rather the *imago dei* is firmly established in the Ancient Near East record as a widely-used religio-political concept, applied most commonly to royalty, kings, and rulers. Jan Assmann writes plainly of the ANE and Egypt: "the 'image of God' is a common royal epithet."[40] And particularly in the 6th century Babylonian context (around the time and place Genesis was likely redacted), the *imago* concept was employed in the aristocratic casting of those bearing the divine image, on the one hand, and slaves on the other.[41]

For Genesis' writer(s) to adopt this royal epithet and then apply it to *all* humans in the plenary—not just the royal class—is rightly seen as a courageous and brilliant proclamation. The stamp of divinity dispensed in such gratuity motions toward a more egalitarian understanding of humanity; it is an attack on caste, a critique of the charade of glory that was housed in ancient divine royalty. What is unique about Genesis' *imago dei* is not some endowment with reason that distinguishes humanity from the animals but its dissolving the distinctions between humans. Genesis' morphology of the *imago dei* concept suggests the "image of God" is not a static definition for theological anthropology, nor is it a claim of the origin point of the "soul" to be cross-checked with paleoanthropology. That reifies the text into some kind of "blueprint" notion of both God and humanity: an overly teleological reading of humanity as intentionally "made"

Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1-9," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 40.4 [1977] 147-55, at 155). Sproul calls this type of creation-from-a-body "typical."

[40] Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008) 62. It is not entirely impossible, however, for other humans and animals besides the king to be regarded as "images of God" (29). e.g. *The Instruction for King Merikare*, wisdom literature in early second millennium BCE, writes of creatures, "His images are they, having come forth from his body."

[41] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans E. Buchanan (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969). Brian Walsh, *Subversive Christianity: Imaging God in a Dangerous Time*, 2nd ed (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014). Ratzinger, *In the Beginning* 10, 12.

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to be the way it currently is.[42] This makes too much out of Genesis' being the "first" book in the canon, treating it as the book of origins-answers and design. Such a blueprint theology becomes especially dangerous and a distortive lens when superimposed over our analysis of the nature and emergence of *homo sapiens*. It presumes, *a priori*, some generic sense of what the dignified human soul is—the mind as reason, extraneously minted by God—and that it was infused into *hominins* at some point.

Instead, Genesis is rather a polemical, prophetic symbol which makes sense only in relation to its contextual proclamation: it reveals a dangerous truth in the face of imperial oppression, symbolically subverting it. It demythologizes not only politics but the world, making the heavenly bodies not gods and demons but mere "lights."[43] In sum, to read Genesis merely as an account of the origins of the cosmos and humanity reduces its prophetic meaning. Instead of a static document of origin-claims, Genesis is more a subversive intervention on trenchant socio-political myths of that time. This is *not* to reduce Genesis to mere "myth"; to the contrary, its similarity with its contextual myths only illuminates its important difference from them. With such prophetic differences established, theologies of mystical and spiritual valence—as we find in the rabbis, Origen, or Augustine—find their verve only intensified.[44]

For me to continue into a mimetic perspective on the soul, I will have to presume this above hermeneutical relationship to Genesis, decentering it as some blueprint with which we must force-fit into harmony with evolutionary theory, as this stretches the text's genre beyond reason. Ratzinger approximated this to an extent in his leaving room for the sciences to offer complementary explications of the process of human becoming. Such an evolutionary and naturalistic theory of the soul's emergence can find significant resources in Girard's mimetic theory.

[42] Such a blueprint approach is evident in Augustine: "Then there is the wonderful mobility with which his tongue and hands are equipped, so that he is able to speak and write and accomplish so many other arts and crafts. And does not all this show us clearly enough the kind of soul of which a body of this kind was intended to be an adjunct?...The beard exists as a manly adornment and not for purposes of protection is shown by the beardless faces of women, who are the weaker sex and for whom a beard would therefore be more suitable if it were a protective device . . . " (Augustine, *City of God* XX, chap 24, 1163-4).

[43] Ratzinger, *In the Beginning* 14, 33.

[44] E.g. Augustine, *Confessions*, books 10-13; Origen, *De Principiis*.

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Mimetic Evolutionary Theory and the Soul

René Girard (d2015) was an interdisciplinary theorist, working in anthropological, literary, psychological, and theological genres. His work, though not without controversy, has enjoyed generous reception, whether in his induction as an "Immortal" into the *Académie Française* or Michael Serres' praise that he is "the Darwin of the human sciences."[45] Engaging in materialistic or naturalist accounts of religion,[46] his *Violence and the Sacred* was framed as "atheistic" in method.[47] Though his method became quite complexified over time, he maintained throughout his work an explicit commitment to engage in science "devoid of religious and anti-religious assumptions," to not interrupt anthropological analyses with appeals to divinity—that is, to fill in the gaps of explanation with appeals to mystery.[48] This involved theorizing how religion may not have been originally connatural with the earliest human expressions of transcendence and rationality, but instead a *pre-rational social mechanism* whose "sole originary purpose" may have been to "prevent the recurrence of reciprocal violence."[49]

Like any scientific theory or chain of hypotheses concerning evolution, Girard's mimetic theory takes as a presupposition the phenomena of random genetic and cultural mutations, and that this has made possible a constant menu in the biosphere for the manifold changes in species. Such changes happen when some genetic or cultural mutation—in conjunction with ecological niche—proves to be adaptive (and, through fitness, nature "selects" these features to survive and grow). But, also, some changes in species can emerge, grow, and abide for no adaptive reason. Some features can become very pronounced, like obscenely ballooned antlers on moose or a peacock's effusive plumage. Such oddities may serve certain adaptive purposes in some species, while for others it can become maladaptive in the long run. And so virtually all species have genetic histories of dead-ends, die-offs of certain feature-variations, prolonged oddities, and so on. Some end up with features whose function is different from their original purpose: like electric eels, whose initial capacities served the

[45] Or, von Balthasar deemed Girard's work as "surely the most dramatic project to be undertaken today in the field of soteriology and theology in general" (Hans urs von Balthasar, *Theo Drama 4: The Action* [San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994] 299).

[46] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 125.

[47] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 125; G.H. De Radkowski, in *Le Monde* (Oct 27, 1972) deemed Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* "first authentically atheistic theory of religion and of the sacred."

[48] René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis: 2001) 192; Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 150.

[49] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 23, 55.

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purpose of electrical navigation in muddy water, and only later did this serve defense and predation. Such evolutionary principles suggest that one cannot look at species and conclude too much "design": in its blindness, nature doesn't always "select" what is best, or "build" features for an intentional "purpose."

Mimetic theory, taking such principles as a given, analyzes *mimesis* as humanity's outsized feature and a critical factor in the transition from proto-human to human.[50] "Mimesis" refers to the pre-rational or pre-conscious imitation of others. It refers to how we do not merely desire things, but we imitate others' desire for things. The classic example is how poorly children mask their mimetic desires, grasping at a toy that their sibling just picked up—only because the others' desire sparked their own.

While we will soon discuss the dangers of mimesis, we must first appreciate its great good: mimesis involves the fundamental opening of a creature to the other.[51] It obviously benefits the creature by making them interested in and sensitive to the outside world, psycho-somatically permeable, and not a dense rock. Humanity's elevated levels of mimetic desire is, for Girard,

> what makes us human, what makes possible for us the breakout from routinely animalistic appetites, and construct our own, albeit inevitably unstable, identities. It is this very mobility of desire, its mimetic nature, and this very instability of our identities, that makes us capable of *adaptation*, that gives the possibility to learn and to *evolve*.[52]

Because of this opening and permeable character, mimesis refers to how our minds and bodies do not originate our thoughts and desires as subsistent "selves" but are always-already *interdividual*. We are selves-from-others.

Mimesis is evident in lesser ways among many species, in the joint attention of birds or mammals, present due to its fitness advantages in other-observation, group-movement, and learning. I imagine scenarios as simple as wolves running to a downed deer: even if some wolf does not see what the others are running to, it must be of some value to the other wolves; and so the wolves more mimetically sensitive to the others run anyway and benefit from the carrion feast. Wherever such fitness is enjoyed, one can surmise that it might over time be naturally selected and thereby increase in time, even if in minimal ways comparable to human imitation. (While Girard offers novel

[50] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 97.

[51] See Cameron M. Thomson, "Mimetic Desire, Aphetic Mimesis, and Reconciliation as the Nexus of 'Letting God' and 'Turning Around': Conceptual Roots in Tomasello's 'Joint Attention," in *René Girard and Creative Reconciliation*, eds Thomas Ryba et al (Lanham, MD: Thomas Lexington Books, 2014).

[52] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 58, 76, 222.

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layers of theoretical analysis of mimesis, he is by no means the first to identify it as an outstanding feature in human behavior.[53])

But how did humans become the elaborately mimetic creatures that we are? One can begin to imagine how mimesis may have played a crucial role in the transition from proto-human to human by observing the studies of mimesis and violence in our hominid cousins, chimpanzees.[54] In *Mimesis and Science*, for example, research from several studies shows how, when a group of chimpanzees reaches a certain number of males, these groups will tend to periodically act very differently. They leave the community in single-file lines, not get distracted, and find a chimp from another community to collectively beat it to death.[55] What seems to be happening here is that the chimps enjoy a certain level of mimesis, owing to the noted fitness advantages. But, their mimetic capacities are also becoming dangerous to the group's cohesion; they are imitating each other too much and thereby escalating conflicts. Their usual pecking orders or "dominance patterns" can solve this to some extent, but the groups with more males are stressing to a breaking point the group's order. If the mimetic faculty continues to grow over time, the concomitant increasing danger could result in the group dying off (and maybe some of them have or will). Or, as we observe, some are habitualizing what was originally a random group killing, channeling their mimetic excesses outward from the group.

To go out as a group and kill in this manner is like a safety valve. Instead of the group dangerously simmering with mimetic attention upon others in the group, potentially boiling over into destructive mobbing, the mimetic attention is instead collectively exteriorized and made safe (with the exception of the one killed). How these semi-ritualized killings came into practice could have been a matter of sheer, random "luck"; and when the group happened to repeat this act or was somehow impelled to (without "thinking" or "planning," of course), it safeguarded the group's internal cohesion.[56] Such

[53] Aristotle categorized humanity not only as the "rational animal," but as the creature whose *imitation* greatly exceeded that of the other species (*Poetics* 5). Wolfgang Palaver catalogued many other historic writers attentive to mimesis: Aescylus, Plato, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant, Adam Smith, Georg Simmel, Max Scheler, von Hayek, Benjamin, Auerbach (Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory* [East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013] 66, 89, 93, 96, 101, 102, 107, 109, 42. See also Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 139-140).

[54] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 105.

[55] Melvin Konner, "Mimetic Rivalry and War," in Scott Garrels (ed), *Mimesis and Science* (Michigan State University Press, 2011), 159. Ann Gibbons, "Chimpanzee Gang Warfare," *Science* 304 (2004) 818-19. Jane Goodall, "Infant Killing and Cannibalism in Free-Living Chimpanzees," *Folia Primatologica* 28 (1977) 259-82; Jane Goodall, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior*; Manson and Wrangham, "Intergroup Aggression in Chimpanzees and Humans, *Current Anthropology* 32.4 (1991) 369-90.

[56] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 83, 169.

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"cultural" mutations must have coincided with the random genetic mutations that favored the mimetic faculty; and when genetic and cultural mutations coincide long enough, there grow habits and instincts.

Risking oversimplification of Girard's mimetic theory, it argues that if you gave these chimps a few more million years, and if they happened to continue channelizing their mimesis, exercising it, and likewise safeguarding its excesses by such habits, you might end up with creatures endowed with extravagantly outsized mimesis and thus something more akin to humans. While Girard did not theorize chimps at length, that example is shorthand for describing his concept of the mimetic "single victim mechanism" and its *generative* capacities in ushering proto-humans over the threshold into humanity. He describes this as a generative feedback loop because the mimetic problem is also its mimetic solution.[57] This doubly useful feature suggests that proto-humans enjoyed increases in mimetic desire (stemming largely from its benefits in fitness), which in turn abetted mimetic conflict, which also—if the group stumbled upon such a pattern—made possible the increased mimetic attention upon a single victim. The latter of which can bring a relatively pacific end to mimetic violence in a way that the old dominance patterns never could. That is, the mimetic solution grows along with the mimetic problem: the very mimesis that abets violent chaos is precisely the mimesis that can cohere collective scapegoating, bringing peace to the rescue. As such, the scapegoat mechanism is a group fitness machine, abetting progressive increases in mimesis in the proto-human.[58] The chaos of group violence and the apparent breakdowns of group order are thus ultimately not mere exceptions; they are precisely part of humanity's generative principles. There is no antinomy in human evolution between order and chaos, regularity and upheaval, cooperation and conflict, ritual and violence; the two are both aspects of humanity's adaptive mechanisms. If this mechanism is like a safety valve, the flow aperture of mimetic capacity *grows* the more it is practiced. In sum, "the scapegoat mechanism can be thought of as a source of 'good' biological and cultural mutations . . . Sacrificial resolution, which separates mankind from the other animals, was a

[57] "Feedback loop" here refers to violent group events which are "catastrophic but also generative in that they would trigger the foundation mechanism and at each step provide for more rigorous prohibitions within the group, and for a more effective ritual canalization toward the outside" (René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987] 96; 84, 88. The higher the level of crisis, the higher the intellectual level of human groups—and vice versa (*Evolution and Conversion* 111).

[58] Girard, *Things Hidden*, 96; *Evolution and Conversion* 99.

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crucial response to errors and gaps in the transcription and expansion of dominance patterns."[59]

Girard's hypothesis is that this unconscious, serendipitous, evolving, and order-producing mechanism, over perhaps hundreds of thousands of years, helped channel, protect, and thus catapult human mimetic-intelligence and brain size into its current extreme disproportion compared with other species.[60] This was a catalyst in ballooning our craniums to three times beyond what a normal evolutionary pattern would have predicted.[61] Our extravagant capacity for mimetic joint-attention, inseparable from our capacity for cooperative scapegoating and the apparent ubiquity of sacrifice in human culture, is humanity's version of a peacock's plumage. The overall hypothesis is summarized here:

> From the moment when the pre-human creature, the human-to-be, passed over a certain threshold of mimetic contagion and the animal instinct of protection against violence collapsed (the *dominance patterns*), mimetic conflicts must have raged among humankind, but the raging of mimetic conflict quickly produced its own antidote by giving birth to the single victim mechanism, gods, and sacrificial rituals.[62]

We can get at understanding how this hypothesis relates to the evolution of "the human soul" by describing some basic anthropological phenomena here.

"Taboos" or prohibitions in this theory are the most basic building blocks in human culture and are antecedent to "rationality." Taboos are whatever safeguarded proto-human groups from excessive imitation, restraining anything that resembles the disorder, crisis, and violence. Taboos are mimetic in that they involve careful other-attention; but they also suppress acquisitive mimesis, stopping actions which otherwise lead to the contagious dangers of escalation. Taboos also involve differentiation and stratification, damming up any propensity toward mimetic undifferentiation—the ways in which rivals become mirrors of one another. Many "primitive" taboos which appear to us today as irrational—whether in the violence toward outsiders one finds in uncontacted tribes like the Sentinelese or in the killing of twins—aren't mere "superstition" in origin. That is too cognitive. Rather, they suppress danger. Only in time do taboos get dressed up with "rational" trappings, like that certain acts/objects are

[59] René Girard, *The One By Whom Scandal Comes* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014) 86f, 90; *Violence and the Sacred* 221.

[60] Girard, *Evolution and* Conversion 97, 105.

[61] Girard, *Things Hidden* 84 88, 100; *Evolution and Conversion* 105.

[62] Girard, *I See Satan* 94; *Evolution and Conversion* 65; *Things Hidden* 94.

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"contaminating" or "polluting."[63] Though seemingly superstitious, taboos stem from a fitness value.

"Rituals"—and most conspicuously sacrificial ones—are attempts to repeat the cathartic effect of an originally spontaneous murder through reenacting a mini-crisis and resolution. Ritual's "function is to perpetuate or renew the effects of this mechanism; that is, to keep violence *outside* the community."[64] "Sacrifice" is the repetition of the original group-attention and violence on a replacement. If archaic religious institutions contain violence, it is because they not only entail but also *restrain* the violence of disorder.[65] Taboos and rituals are basically what one must do and not do to protect the community. This protection is even more basic to human evolution than verbalized words, myths, and gods.[66] In this sense, religion in its originary forms was not so much an expression of the intellect, nor is it the early attempts at explaining first causes; rather, it preceded and helped domesticate human intellection.[67]

"Myths" in this theory are the distorted remembering of the group's relationship to its violence, imputing guilt to the killed victim and innocence to the lynching group. Less about intentional, rational construction, myths at their foundation are about the experience of danger, accusation, and unanimity surrounding a group's expulsion. Myths in this sense would have begun even *before* language: they are how the group relates to itself and its violence.[68] "Myth is primarily the accusation of the victim presented as guilty."[69] Myths, then, are both about forgetting and remembering: they attach to the dangerous memory of violence and salvation through misremembering that history.

The shared components that Girard often finds at the basis of archaic myths are: "(1) a crisis of undifferentiation (which corresponds to the orgiastic elements in rituals); (2) a victimary sign that singles out a villain; (3) an expulsion/killing of this villain (which is also represented as a hero because he/she eventually saves the community),"

[63] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 13, 16, 19-21; *Things Hidden* 10, 13, 17.

[64] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 169; *Things Hidden* 19f; *Violence and the Sacred* 92.

[65] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 32; *Evolution and Conversion* 247.

[66] René Girard, "The Bloody Skin of the Victim," in *The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics*, eds Graham Ward and Michael Hoetzel (London, Continuum, 2008) 60; *Evolution and Conversion* 28, 103.

[67] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 125.

[68] This is a position shared in Merlin Donald, *Origin of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). He treats the "mythic" and narrative layer of cognition as the first to emerge after "episodic" forms of thought. Only later does there emerge a theoretic layer in cognition.

[69] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 146, 159, 196, 68, 85.

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followed by the imposition of taboos and the offering of sacrifices.[70] The logical inconsistencies apparent in so many myths, in spite of their diversity across cultures, Girard writes, "points to the presence of a common cause of logical distortion at the threshold of human culture. I believe this cause is the original founding murder, and myths do their best—unconsciously at first, and then more consciously—to erase the traces of scapegoating."[71] Some myths have existed for so long and been cleaned up for so many generations, that the original violence may be entirely washed out—expressing a story almost unrecognizable to the original event. For example, a Tikarau myth that evidently involved a person being driven off a cliff by a mob was refracted as the man turning into a flying god—like an eagle. One can easily imagine how, thereafter, the eagle myth could take on infinite variations of mythic expressions, devoid of any explicit reference to the man thrown from the cliff.[72]

When we can today see the obviously irrational scapegoating in an old story and see it as false—like in witch hunts or Jews poisoning medieval wells—we are encountering a disruption of the originary "fitness" of mythic unanimity. The group's violence would normally be taboo in group life; but applied in exceptions and misconstrued in memory, myth abets unanimous attention to the group's "necessary" violence. The mythologization of unanimous violence became baked into human culture as a survival adaptation. "Archaic religions were based on a complete absence of criticism regarding this unanimity."[73] For Girard, mythical unity that obscures the group's relation to victims is the survival value of "mythology"—*muthos* from the root *mu*, "to close" or "to keep secret."[74] In sum, misapprehension, as mediated by myths regarding victimage, safeguarded the sacrificial mechanism and human evolution.

French psychologist Jean-Michel Oughourlian describes this miscognition in psychological terms, referring to how our mimetic desire entails something of a perpetual bent-ness toward forgetfulness. Instead of recognizing the others' role in the genesis of my desire, we self-deceive and see ourselves as "original. We insist we are self-subsisting. In effect, "we try to expel the 'other' who is our rival. Our 'I' is in fact built on that expulsion."[75] This self-mythologizing

[70] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 162; *Things Hidden* 142.

[71] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 163.

[72] Girard, *Things Hidden* 107.

[73] Girard, *Battling* 23.

[74] "*Muo* means to close one's eyes or mouth, to mute the voice, or to remain mute . . . The literal meaning of Greek word for truth, *alethia*, is 'to stop forgetting" (Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* [New York: Crossroad, 1996] 33). "Myth is thus the lie that hides the founding lynching, which speaks to us about the gods, but never about the victims that the gods used to be" (Girard, *Battling* 22).

[75] Alison, *Joy* 33.

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of our mimetic brain, Oughourlian writes, is at the root of human psychoses and neuroses. But, even more, insofar as misapprehension abetted our hominization through the scapegoating mechanism, mimetic theory suggests that this blind spot to our "expulsions" is *constitutive* of common human consciousness. James Alison writes that the "unknowingness" of our mimetic desire "is what permits consciousness. It is not a mysterious, subjective inner reality, but an unknowing of the real state of affairs that have constituted the consciousness."[76]

By "gods" Girard means the transcendentalized victim of group murder.[77] As mysterious creatures who are cause and solution to a group's crisis, the victim represents "a sacred force that is believed to be outside the community and is powerful enough to punish as well as to protect it . . . the victim is always seen as the god or replaces it, since this victim brings back peace with his or her death."[78] As is often the case with group killings, a victim of the violence is often demonized—a projection of a group's problems, chaos, or social crisis.[79] But the victim is also retrospectively worshipped, divinized for how their death "solved" the crisis.[80] The "instinctual bond" forged in group violence and its resolution involves an intense, novel experience for proto-humanity: group chaos suddenly stilled, with the victim as somehow related to this event. This bequeaths to us the *mysterium tremendum et fascinas*, the sense of blessing and curse that surrounds "the sacred," homologous with the intensely contrastive experience between violence and peace. "The divinization of this victim is possibly tied to this emotion and cognitive event."[81]

Such intense experiences and their referent in a victim, Girard argues, slowly birthed in the early human mind the capacity for a sort of transcendence, a perceived "externality"[82]: "even though the mechanism is totally endogenous, it is perceived as something *external*."[83]

[76] Alison, *Joy* 32.

[77] Girard, *Things Hidden* 81, 99; *Evolution and Conversion* 119; 66; *The One By Whom* 35.

[78] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 119.

[79] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 226.

[80] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 66.

[81] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 106.

[82] Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2000) 19. Or, the "sacred" is violence as an "independent being," or "violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as a part of all the other outside forces that threaten mankind" (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 31).

[83] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 37, 81, 105-106; *Things Hidden* 28. The participants in the killing experiencing restored peace: "This complex system of instinctual patterns and emotional effects produces a form of 'short circuit' in their perception, which has to be elaborated on a higher level."

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Even though it was the group's mimetic violence that brought about its cohesion, the participants do not think themselves as "responsible for their reconciliation, and they attribute it to its only possible cause in the context of their total experience, the scapegoat."[84] These victims become "transcendent" in that they somehow continue to protect and save the group even in their absence, insofar as the group imitates their own memory: repeat the originary murder in ritual and prohibit that which portends danger.[85] This is why the gods demand sacrifice: nature selected out those who failed to do so: the group really will perish under the weight of mimesis if they do not sacrifice. Ritual sacrifice is "redoing what the gods have done to save us."[86]

Numerous creation myths—not only *Enuma Elish*—entail gods who were killed and dismembered, perhaps cannibalized, to create the world through their body parts. Girard suggests reading these as distorted memories of actual events. The victims' bodies are divinized as the source of their tribe, nation, land, and culture because, in a sense, their lynching truly did found and cohere the group order. That is, religion at this originary threshold ultimately worships the victim. "All gods begin first of all by dying."[87]

Michael Serres resonates with Girard in theorizing that, as early human groups enacted and became shaped by its prohibitions and rituals, this shaped our unique "subjectivity," or the consciousness of the individual subject. This is evident in the numerous rites of passage that force the neophyte into the group's social consciousness. The inductee is put into the position of the victim, brought into a near death crisis, or even sometimes killed:

> She is a *sub-jectum* not only in terms of being submissive to, or dependent on a specific force or power, but also by the fact that she is singled out, she finds herself in the liminal position between the undifferentiated sameness of the collective and the singularity of the surrogate victim.[88]

In all, we have here a theory of "religion," which ushers humanity over a threshold into a new form of social consciousness—what we might call a new stage of the human "soul." Of the varieties of

[84] Gianni Vattimo and René Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010) 99.

[85] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 81.

[86] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 119.

[87] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 220, 211.

[88] Pierpaolo Antonello, "The Emergence of Human Consciousness in a Religious Context," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion* 27; Michel Serres, "Réception à l'Académie française de René Girard. Réponse de M. Michel Serres au discours de M. René Girard," in *René Girard. Cahiers de L'Herne*, ed. M.R. Anspach (Paris: L'Herne, 2008) 14.

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rituals, taboos, myths, and gods, Girard synthesizes their protective role in containing human violence in our evolution.

> Violent unanimity will, I believe, reveal itself as the fundamental phenomenon of primitive religion . . . the original act of violence is the matrix of all ritual and mythological significations . . . Religion humanizes violence; it protects man from his own violence by taking it out of his hands, transforming it into a transcendent and ever-present danger to be kept in check by the appropriate rites.[89]

On the Prerational Character of This Dynamic

From our perspective today, this primitive transcendence seems "distorted," or superstitious consciousness.[90] But, to be clear, this is not "distorted" in the order of evolution; for it is not as if we are comparing it to some previously clear consciousness. Rather, this process *births* humanity's unique form of consciousness. In this theory "the sacred" or divinity is not "applied" to the victim at the threshold of hominization, as if it already existed as a concept of transcendence in the mind. Rather, the sacred is *born* through this mimetic process. The sacred is not some pure, pre-existing concept imputed from some exogenous deity. Rather, it is "the sum of human assumptions resulting from collective transferences focused on a reconciliatory victim at the conclusion of a mimetic crisis."[91] This is not an "anti-religious" idea so much as it is simply a hypothesis, devoid of any appeals to pre-conceived divine forces, on how human consciousness could have emerged through a particular mechanism.

In other words, "religion" and the experience of the sacred, in this theory, is originally not so much about the rational mind—somehow already formed—reaching out in the quest for meaning, and then creating rituals to answer that rational thought. This wrongly inserts cogitation *before* religion, as some *source* of religion.[92] Rather, the mimetic victimage-mechanism *constructs* humanity into its current cognitive form, not the other way around. Victimage didn't distort previously lucid human cognition but helped create it. Put simply, mimetic theory puts religion before cognition. It places the mimetic forge of religion "upstream" from our rationality and language, thereby shaping everything downstream from it.[93] Or, as Alison

[89] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 81, 113, 134, 151.

[90] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 198; Vattimo and Girard, *Weakening Faith* 99.

[91] Girard, *Things Hidden* 42.

[92] Scott Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2013) 59; Girard, *Things Hidden* 13, 32.

[93] Or, as Alison writes, "desire is shown to be anterior to language (and thus reason), to will (and thus to freedom), and to memory (and thus history). In the first place, language

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writes: "human language is the result of the meaning which develops around the victim."[94] Prior to being shaped through this victimage-mechanism, proto-humans surely had some mimetic rituals for conduct, as apes do with greetings. But the threshold into our unique form of cognition in this theory, happens *through* this intense violence/peace contrast experienced in reference to the group's victim.[95]

Cultural anthropologist Eric Gans was a critic of Girard on this point. While agreeing with elements of his mimetic theory, he prefers to locate cognition and language as *prior* to the victimage-mechanism. Gans writes,

> My scene of homogenesis begins not with the *sparagmos* [the group tearing apart] of the unconsciously chosen scapegoat/victim but with its intentional designation by a *sign,* which functions to defer violence not out of mere physical exhaustion but through the creation of a new, spiritual center around which this sign is reciprocally exchanged. The sign . . . is the principle of human creativity . . . the originary scene in which the rivalry of the participants is diverted to participation in the *sparagmos* only once the shared significance of the central victim has been established.[96]

This bears some semblance to the soul-theory of Austriaco, who suggests that language and abstract thinking are the crucial threshold dynamic in hominization. For him, language is treated as an unambiguously "good" faculty, a seedbed for abstract thought, designated as present in some supposed first soul—and for which violence would be its corruption, I presume. While focusing on a specific phenomenon like language is preferable to the imputed "soul" of Kemp, Austriaco does not ask *how* or *why* this language emerged—or in reference to what index. What are the mechanics behind language emergence?

Girard retorts that the prerational "religion" of the victim-mechanism precedes and facilitates language emergence. There could be no linguistic "diversion" upon the significance of a victim *without any prior experience of it*—i.e. actual experience of crisis, danger, and resolution. Girard writes, "Gans presupposes a higher form of rationality that can only follow *after* a crucial event . . . there must

is shown to be part of a distorted construction of a worldview. The key binary opposites (good/evil, life/death) are shown to flow from the lynchers' perspective on the victim. Thus the whole human system of signification, rather than being in any sense independent of the sense world and not deceived by it, is already utterly shot through with a certain betrayal of truth" (Alison, *Joy* 40).

[94] Alison, *Joy* 16.

[95] Alison, *Joy* 29.

[96] Eric Gans, "René et moi" in *For René Girard*, eds Sandoor Goodhart, Jørgen Jørgensen, Tom Ryba, and James Williams (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2009) 24.

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already be a non-linguistic solution to the problem of violence, which inevitably is a religious solution."[97] By "religion" he again means a prerational social mechanism in human evolution, wherein genetic and cultural mutations are naturally selected in their coevolving around a mimetic-victimage dynamic. Simply, the sacred showed up in proto-humanity *before* language and rationality, intimately related to the survival fitness and dangers of these groups. Mimetic theory can be thus largely cataloged—amidst a variety of competing accounts of hominization—among those for whom religion was fundamental to human evolution in its earliest stages, indeed part of the threshold into the human.[98] Contrast this with the old Neolithic and Marxian view (or "cognitive theories of religion"), that religion is an invention of a certain rationality, after humans settled and had the leisure to ponder nature's causes—wherein religion is a superstitious "explanation" for the world, a proto-failed-science.[99] To the contrary, Merlin Donald coheres with Girard's approach when he writes, "the possibility must be entertained that the primary human adaptation wasn't language qua language, but rather integrative, *initially mythical thought*. Modern humans developed language in response to pressure to improve their conceptual apparatus, not vice versa."[100]

Homo sapiens may have made huge language strides within the last 50kya; but Girard pans out to see such advances within a much larger formative context, dating back to at least *homo habilis* 1.8mya: of protecting and directing the group in relation to its mimetic excesses and violence. By that time, the violence-and-mimesis mechanism would have had to be at least in some very rough form, long before the *homo sapiens* emergence 200kya. The fact that proto-humans' incisors had already begun receding very long ago corresponds with the fact that at least around 2mya hominins had taken a big leap in terms of being a danger to themselves, no longer hunting with dentition but with rocks. This must have opened up a phase of both opportunity and danger that could gave extinguished large parts of the species if not safely channeled. And maybe many of them did die off, if they did not serendipitously stumble into this mimetic-victimage cycle with sufficient effect.[101] In any case,

[97] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 122f.

[98] For a brief review of anthropological literature, including Iron, Sosis, Alcorta, et al, see: Chris Haw, "Human Evolution and the Single Victim Mechanism: Locating Girard's Hypothesis Through Literature Survey," *Contagion* 27 (2017) 191-216.

[99] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 117, 121, 124, 141. This branch of his theory enjoys considerable archaeological corroboration at Çatalhöyük: Ian Hodder, ed, *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization: Çatalhöyük as a Case Study* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012). See also Joseph Watts, et al, "Ritual Human Sacrifice Promoted and Sustained the Evolution of Stratified Societies," *Nature* 532, no. 228 (2016) 228-31.

[100] Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind* 215, italics mine.

[101] Girard, *Battling* 19.

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such formative religious elements as described in this hypothesis are placed long before speech or analytic rationality.

To clarify this theory's location within some methodological discourses, mimetic theory avoids some of the excesses of "essentialism" in that it admits that the distinguishing feature of humans, its mimesis, is not solely unique to humans. Mimesis is indeed a feature that is naturalistically explainable within both *homo sapiens* and other creatures; and yet it also theorizes *why* and *how* it is so extremely pronounced in the human species. Mimetic theory likewise doesn't fall into the trap of an evasive "anti-essentialism" that refuses to see any unique, distinguishing properties in humans—lest theory betray superstitious theological bias. No, it detects a rapid accelerant, a leap in human evolution. But it does not simplistically attribute this to some mysterious, univocally good, exogenous miracle, cut off other evolutionary creatures. As we will note below, it takes seriously how humanity's generative principles may be quite "fallen." In all, by avoiding some excesses in essentialism and anti-essentialism, mimetic theory positions itself in what appears to me as excellent scientific company. I refer not only to "Girardian" scientists,[102] but conventional, leading anthropologists with the growing appreciation of humanity's unique "other-centeredness." One such testament comes from the journal *Evolutionary Anthropology*'s compilation of responses from numerous anthropologists who were asked, "what makes us human?" Calcagno and Fuentes, editors of this compilation, synthesize its many authors with their conclusion that,

> Our language abilities, social interaction, symbolic behavior, and cultural variation all seem tied to our desire to understand the minds of others, for both cooperative and selfish reasons. No other species are so intensely motivated, both cooperatively and competitively, to reconstruct their entire environment and their lives based on their concerns with the mind of others.[103]

In other words, a scientific consensus is emerging that other-attention—which birthed all our other cultural features—is indeed a distinguishing feature of humanity. There are many aspects of mimetic theory which should remain as critically sifted hypotheses, or rough heuristic suggestions for interpreting data. And the idea need not be treated as exclusivist—as if it were somehow incompatible with other ideas, like that global cooling three million years ago

[102] For Girardian inspired anthropology and psychology, see resources in footnote 10 above.

[103] James Calcagno and Agustín Fuentes, "What Makes Us Human? Answers from Evolutionary Anthropology," *Evolutionary Anthropology* 21.5 (2012) 182-94.

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helped catalyze major changes in the *Homo* genus.[104] But, scientific caution should not restrain us from appreciating one of its overarching accomplishments. It radically reconceives our relationship to religion: it has placed religion before human consciousness. And it offers a coherent dynamic for understanding such a relationship.

The Sacred and Our First Dim, Stammering Thou

How can we relate this theory more explicitly to the question of the immediate creation of the soul and the theological preferences for more clear thresholds and "firsts"? Girard's theory certainly thinks in gradations and slow progressions, conceding no "*absolute beginning*" in human evolution.[105] Contrasted with overly strict notions of an immediately created soul, the first theorized signs of human "consciousness" and "the human soul" in this theory are dilated to a very wide time frame. This is empirically warranted, in light of how absolutely diffused our paleoanthropological record has become in only the last 20 or so years—with strong evidence of interbreeding between Neanderthals, Denisovans, so on. And yet, mimetic theory still roughly conceives of "firsts," or "jumps" in hominization. Wherever the first theorized events of mimetic victimage and its repetition struck, these can be viewed as some "beginning, signifying the passage from nonhuman to human, as well as the relative beginning for the societies in question."[106]

As for what might be regarded as a "first human symbol," something that distinguishes us from the animals, a first "index" to which all other things can be referenced[107]—Girard hypothesized the body of a "first" replacement victim, beaten or killed by the group. Such a victim "is no longer presumed responsible for the crisis, but it is both a *real* new victim that has to be killed and a *symbol* of the proto-event; it is the *first symbolic sign* ever invented by these hominids. It is the first moment in which something *stands for something else*."[108] Girard and Alison deem such a victim-symbol, the cadaver, as a first

[104] E.g. Yves Coppens, "The Bunch of Prehumans and the Emergence of the Genus *Homo*" in *Scientific Insights into the Evolution of the Universe and of Life*, eds Arbor and Sorondo 370.

[105] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 97.

[106] René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed James G. Williams (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1996) 20.

[107] Girard, *Evolution and* Conversion 104; Alison, *Joy* 16.

[108] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 107; *Things Hidden* 99. "Imitation has broken free from any instinctual constraint and become mediated by a dead co-member. The way 'I' am part of the sociality has to be defined as how 'I' am driven not by instinctive drives or purely cerebral imitational patterns, but by a group which has found a principle of order in the victim" (Alison, *Joy* 255).

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object of noninstinctual attention. Continued relation to this new sign over numerous generations helped "produce properly human consciousness, but the constitution of that consciousness is linked to the victim and to the creation of the sacred that is strictly simultaneous with the development of human culture."[109]

Similarly, to imagine a "first" human cultural gesture, Girard again draws us to theorize the scene of a group-killing. Having slain the victim and attained resolution, one member begins to grab toward the victim, violating what is becoming a mimetic group habit: the first "gesture" is someone else *holding back* such an acquisitive grasp, defending the ritual and the peace just won.[110] This is the birth of cultural taboo as contrasted with instinctual dominance patterns, in that it now has a new, potent symbolic referent. Similarly, a first symbolic monument of human culture would be something like the tomb, or a cairn of stones upon a stoned victim. "The idea of the tomb does not come *from* the sacred; it may well be the first and essential *manifestation* of the sacred."[111]

While such "firsts" have a theoretical place in proto-humanity's escalating mimetic capacity, we need not in any way think about this pattern immediately establishing itself as deeply ingrained instinct. A mimetic killing may have happened in some group, making a curious but ephemeral impression, and was not thereafter repeated; or, the violence/peace contrast could have been experienced only moderately in another skirmish (perhaps not resulting in a completed killing), and such a branch may have then extinguished itself under its own weight of mimesis.[112] At the same time, this transition indeed involves concrete moments of genetic mutation—like a DNA copy at some point must have involved an actual mutation that clicked up the mimetic faculty by a bit. Likewise, there must have been *real, first cultural mutations*, like a spontaneous group murder that, because of contingent factors like the group configuration, or the topography and fauna near the event, leaving a special impression on the group that increased the chances of the experience "sticking" and the group repeating that event. Whatever the case, what is at stake here is not

[109] Alison, *Joy* 16. "That which has functioned as transcendental signifier in the formation of the human race is the victim" (*Joy* 35). Or, "This is the origin and basis of the disjunction between actual events and their cognitive understanding and representation in collective memory—something that, eventually, helped in producing symbolicity, since the symbolic imagination works between terms that are incoercibly associated, but whose relation is logically obscure and of a metonymic or allusive order" (Antonello and Gifford, *How We Became Human* xxxiii).

[110] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 123.

[111] René Girard, "The Evangelical Subversion of Myth," in *Politics and Apocalypse*, ed. Robert Hammerton-Kelly (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2007) 40, italics mine.

[112] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 67.

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the extraneous imputation of a fully intact and rational "soul" but a pre-cognitive impulse that misrecognizes its relation to others, itself, and the divine Thou. And it is not unreasonable to think that, at some point, this "started."

In Ratzinger's theological terms, if there is a first "Thou" uttered at this threshold of hominization, it is indeed very "*dim*," to be modest: its "Thou" is the victim, symbolizing group's projected, exteriorized violence. This notion of the originary divine seems more like a *shadow-opposite*, a photographic negative, of a God who is Love. The dim view of the Thou is even satanic, insofar as the archaic sacred was unstable and divided against itself, "sacrificing" the one for the many.[113] It involved humanity concealing "from himself the human origin of his own violence, by attributing it to the gods."[114] The soul's emergence is, simply, less pleasing here. The "divine" Thou here is ambivalent, fascinating, partly feared, partly evil, often to be repelled and kept outside the community.[115]

If one is compelled to hold to the idea that the human soul emerges with the first dim utterance of a "Thou," it would seem that one must also hold that such an utterance is not so much an expression of rational freedom and "moral reason," but the mimetic containment of violence and its misrecognition of the victim. This suggests our usual connotations of what our soul is—our social consciousness—is mistaken: its birth, as James Alison writes, "is simultaneous not with the *revelation* of something, but with its occultation."[116] This is a radicalization of the idea of original sin and an intervention on the idea of humans as most distinct from the animals in our elevated "freedom" and self-determination. Rather, this asserts that the birth of humanity's unique consciousness, deeply linked with our earliest religion-cultures, coincides with distortive mis-remembering of our violence and relation to victims.[117] Culture was not merely an enlightenment but also a darkening. Alison elaborates:

> The consciousness which was engendered by the progressive working of the victimage mechanism involves a failure to recognize what really happened: it is a mis-remembering. The human memory is distorted from the outset in its representation of what happened and why, thus covering up the transference of which the victim was the object. The failure to recognize and thus the distorted perspective of the lynchers is connatural to, consubstantial with, the development of human consciousness. Human thought, as well as human memory, were

[113] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 199.
[114] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 161.
[115] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 178.
[116] Alison, *Joy* 67.
[117] Alison, *Joy* 35; 133, 224, 225.

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> born of the founding murder, of which they are always a distorted interpretation.[118]

Psychologically, this firmly rejects Enlightenment forms of the autonomous self, the "I think therefore I am." It suggests instead that the construction of our consciousness stems from "mechanisms of desire long anterior to it, of which it is not itself aware." What grounds and makes possible our particular form of awareness has been, for most of our human history, not rationally perceivable to ourselves. Insofar as such early consciousness could have involved any vision of our divine origin, our first "Thou" is a dim vision of the transcendent victim—as many ancient myths suggest—through whom the world was made.

Concluding Theological Remarks

While some theologians may regard this theory as having too naturalistic a view of the soul, I see it as paving the way for a profound appreciation for the meaning of Christianity's core symbol: the divine, innocent, and forgiving victim, who illuminates from within the blind spot of our consciousness. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." The more deeply we penetrate to the originary blind spots of our odd souls, the more deeply we see the divine grace revealing our radical myopia, the penetrating corruption of sin in both our body and consciousness. Theology, in this key, thus becomes party not to pre-fabricated idealist anthropologies but to the work of uncovering our soul's contingent, evolutionary composition. Perfectly complementary with a contextualized reading of Genesis' *imago dei*, this approach involves a healthy demystification of the soul, just as Genesis demystified the cosmos. With a deepened appreciation of our sin and contingency comes an even greater appreciation of grace for the error we have been lodged in (Rom 5:21).

While the victimage mechanism can be seen as an originary distortion of the human species, in its positive aspect it aided and abetted our growth in consciousness. Our cognitive transcendence emerged along with a protective misapprehension. To recognize this error, Girard added, *is* the nature of Christian conversion and repentance. Mimetic theory highlights how the Bible's reorientation toward victimage—and every representation of a crucifix, if we do not sanitize its ugliness—invites us back to our origins to "look once again at constitutive acts of transference so as to discredit and annul them—so as to contradict and demystify the myths."[119] This is

[118] Alison, *Joy* 35.
[119] Girard, *Things Hidden* 153; *Evolution and Conversion* 141.

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part of our maturation from the corrupt, human-generated sacred to "the Divine, the Holy."[120] This new face of God is not "sacred," for it contains no bivalence, no trace of curse and violence mixed with its blessing. It is "holy" in that it is entirely unlike anything we can imagine, entirely un-graspable by our current form of consciousness.[121] This God is "light in whom there is no darkness." To suggest that the emergence of the sacred is connatural with the emergence of our distorted consciousness involves a deepened appreciation for the apophatic negation of the very idea of "God" in Christian orthodoxy. As James Alison writes, citing the Fourth Lateran council's apophasis, the divine Thou revealed in Christ speaks only by analogy through the word "God." Compared with the originary distortions of divinity, the revealed God "is much more unlike a 'god' than it is like it. Or if you like, the word 'god' is a deeply misleading starting place for us with which to begin to talk about God, but the one we have which is least inadequate."[122]

From the view of Christian dogmatic symbols, this preconscious distortion of the divine and its occlusion of truth of the victim is not entirely "wrong." For our primitive ancestors, the lie was partly "true" in an odd way: victim-gods indeed "created" early humanity in a sense. And it is not as if Christianity escapes entirely from this pattern, with some new neutral foundation that is *alien* to violence and sacrifice. No, it too utters its "Thou" to the divine victim upon whom it is founded. With John's Logos revealing God's Son having been unwittingly slain, we see a continuity and discontinuity with the ancient creation-gods who found a new world through their lynching. The Church proclaims the coming into being of a new order and creation through Christ's body and death, much like archaic religions brought forth the world through a god's body and death.[123] Origen and Chrysostum, for example, among others, saw as much when commenting on the Church and its sacraments flowing from the side of Christ.[124] Christ as the divine victim—through whom all things were made—is both totally like, and yet entirely opposite of, the world flowing from the body of the murdered Tiamat.

As for a brief word on "original sin", Girard regarded it as "the bad use of mimesis, and the mimetic mechanism is the actual

[120] Girard, *Battling* 199.

[121] Girard, *Battling* 122; *Evolution and Conversion* 198, 218.

[122] James Alison, "Worship in a Violent World," accessed Jan 16, 2019, http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng13.html.

[123] Colossians 1:16: "In him all things were made." John 1:3: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."

[124] E.g. from Origen, "Christ has flooded the universe with divine and sanctifying waves. For the thirsty he sends a spring of living water from the wound which the spear opened in His Side. From the wound in Christ's side has come forth the Church, and He has made her His Bride" (*Commentary on Psalm* 77:31; *Commentary on Proverbs* 31:16).

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consequence of this use at the collective level."[125] Insofar as mimetic theory is an analysis of human reproduction and transmission of culture, it offers sound reasons to not minimize the doctrine of original sin, as being somehow superstitious or outdated. Rather, it seems perfectly reasonable, even liberating, to theorize human consciousness as emerging, and continuing to emerge, through a pattern we have only later come to see as erroneous. Our species has grown amidst an always-preceding-us pattern that is fundamentally distorted and that continues to distort us as we pass this on biologically and culturally. This reframes the doctrine, as Alison writes, from an accusatory genre to a descriptive and forgiving one. As such, original sin is not "an exercise in culpabilization, not a seeking to attribute some foundational guilt, but a parting glance at the drastic nature and the futility of a condition out of which we are being empowered to move."[126] That is, "original sin was discovered as it became possible to leave it."[127]

Thus, there is little to be decried as pessimistic or "outdated," for example, in Aquinas' teaching that humanity lives in a state of "suffering from difficulty in distinguishing right from wrong, disposition to injustice, weakness in the face of difficult goods, and concupiscence."[128] Or that, "first a person infected nature, and thereafter nature infected the person."[129] Or, it is entirely reasonable to say, as Rahner put it, we have evolved amidst a ruined situation that always "precedes the personal decision of those that come afterward."[130] Thomas Merton even saw the doctrine quite positively:

> Note of course that the doctrine of original sin, properly understood, is optimistic. It does not teach that man is by nature evil, but that evil in him is unnatural, a disorder, a sin. If evil, lying, and hatred were natural to man, all men would be perfectly at home, perfectly happy in evil. Perhaps a few seem to find contentment in an unnatural state of falsity, hatred, and greed. They are not happy. Or if they are, they are unnatural.[131]

Compared with the idea of a human born as a pristine *tabula rasa*, the mimetic scapegoating theory and its implications for the doctrine of original sin appear to me as more biologically subtle, more attuned

[125] Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 198.
[126] Alison, *Joy* 171.
[127] Alison, *Joy* 221.
[128] *Summa Theologica* Ia-Iae, qu. 85, art 3.
[129] *Summa Theologica* III. Q. 69, a.3 ad 6. St. Felix III at the Council of Orange II (Denzinger, *Enchiridion* 174-5) names such corruption as affecting both body and soul together.
[130] O'Sullivan, "Catholics Re-Examining" 662.
[131] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) 85ff.

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to ecological interconnectedness and the messiness of epigenetics. Mimetic theory even resonates with the Catholic doctrinal standard that original sin should be seen as a disease that is not merely transmitted by external cultural imitation, but also biological inheritance. Mimetic theory—with the principles of socio-biology on its side—clearly argues both.[132] The human born as *tabula rasa*, born as pure without reference to family genetic history, deep cultural patterns, parental diet, environment, stress, histories of addiction, broken relationships, random genetic mutations, without particular taboos and rituals engraved on every artifact of body and culture, born as entirely without some instincts that are contingently constructed: *this* is a rosy, mythological view of humanity, against which original sin appears realist and anticipating the evolutionary view.

Note that this is *not* at all a theory centered on "aggression" or "selfishness." It is a theory about the good but dangerous byproducts of being radically *other-centered*. This is precisely a theory centered not on selfishness or aggression but *mimesis* taking on a certain form through the victimage mechanism, in a particular feedback pattern, in human evolution. The theory centers on an otherwise "good" quality like mimesis and its ambivalent effects, and not simply victimage. As such, it does not reduce hominization to univocally "bad" and sinful structures.[133] Original sin here does not simply mean, as John Haught defined it, "the culturally and environmentally inherited deposit of humanity's violence and injustice that burdens and threatens to corrupt each of us born into this world."[134] Mimetic theory—centered on a *good* which became channeled through a bad pattern—is more complex. The "bad" injustices in the "sins" of scapegoating, along with our mythological lies about them, generated extreme benefits in human evolution while holding back violence.

Just as mimetic theory is not centered on aggression, so too original sin need not mean "original selfishness." Rather, this theory suggests a radically ambivalent notion of attention and consciousness—not the simplistic choice between Hobbesian selfishness and Rousseauian cooperation.[135] Mimesis has ambivalently endowed humans with our

[132] Alison, *Joy* 29. We need not make the false choice of O'Sullivan: "transmission [of original sin] can and should be explained not through problematic ideas of biological and physical inheritance, but precisely because humans are always situated in sin" (O'Sullivan, "Catholics Re-Examining" 660). Rather, that we are always-already shaped by the sins of others *is* biological and physical.

[133] O'Sullivan, "Catholics Re-Examining" 665; Daryl Domning and Monica Hellwig, *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil.in the Light of Evolution* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006) ix.

[134] O'Sullivan, "Catholics Re-Examining" 665; John Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000) 141.

[135] This simplification is evident in Sarah Coakley's *Gifford Lectures*, in her antinomy between violence and "cooperation" (*Sacrifice Regained* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Uni-

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current modicum of consciousness and our deeply inter-related selves, while making us adept gossipers, lynchers, and Auschwitz-ers, with a conspicuous blind spot for seeing this in ourselves. The solution to such darkness is not to counter-narrate our origins with optimistic emphases on innate kindness, reciprocity, and "cooperation." For scapegoating is a supremely cooperative endeavor. Mimetic theory involves the more challenging thought, that our strength is also our weakness.

At the same time, it is hard to make mimetic theory fit with some theological versions of a *temporal* priority of "original justice" in proto-humanity or a "Fall" from purity.[136] Or, if there is any sense of a Fall here, it is more like a falling-into-humanity. At whatever distant time proto-humans were not ensnared in such "original sin," I suppose one can say they were indeed innocent, but just as a cow is innocent: they weren't human. Just as Ratzinger did not force a vision of a perfect early humanity—seeing in Genesis a narrative of "humans who are not yet themselves"—Schoonenberg, Rahner, and Fitzmeyer agree we need not posit "a higher form of humanity at the wrong end of man's evolution."[137] There is no reason we cannot hold to the idea, as Alison does, that "That which was chronologically original (and seemed to us to be simply natural) is *discovered* to be logically secondary to an anterior self-giving and creative desire . . . Our chronologically original state is a distortion of our ontologically original state."[138] In our acquisitive grasping (to call Philippians 2 to mind) we have failed to receive, since the foundation of humanity, the gift of our interdividual mode of being, the divine Thou's primordial gratuity.[139]

In sum, the theory I've outlined argues our consciousness, and more broadly the human "soul," emerged through the mimetic victimage mechanism. As our original sin, it is also the *felix culpa* that generated us. Mimetic theory offers a cogent paradigm by which to move beyond the theological reservations about humanity as generated randomly or through error; it supplies a massive opportunity for a theological renovation sensitive to the evolutionary idiom. Though it

versity Press, 2012]. The error is paralleled in Grace Jantzen's misreading of Girard's theory as somehow prescriptively violent (Grace Jantzen, "New Creations," in *Toward a Theology of Eros*, eds Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham, 2007).

[136] I.e. Anselm and Aquinas held to the notion of an original justice and historic "paradise," from which Adam and Eve "fell." O'Sullivan, "Catholic Re-examining" 656.

[137] Piet Schoonenberg, "Original Sin and Man's Situation," in *The Mystery of Sin and Forgiveness*, ed. Michael J. Taylor (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1971) 251; O'Sullivan, "Catholics Re-examining" 662, 668. Fitzmeyer even writes that Genesis 3 does not contain "a hint of a 'fall' from grace or original justice, as patristic and later scholastics eventually formulated it."

[138] Alison, *Joy* 44, 61.

[139] Alison, *Joy* 44, 61, 102, 174, 203, 300.

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suggests that the "error" of the serendipitous-turned-ritualzed scapegoat mechanism served human fitness, it also paves a way for imagining how it didn't have to be that way. It begins to see how, in the forges of a distorted vision of the sacred, our consciousness took on its particular form and brought us to a place to where, from the perspective of radical forgiveness of the divine victim, we can look back on our hominization as riddled with error and yet the chain of faults that generated us. Even more, it is the path by which the image of God was revealed anew to us: "the image of God is the human victim . . . Access to God is available not only within the particular racial or cultural group that made the discovery possible, but is universally true wherever the human 'self' is formed by victimization, at individual and group level. That means everywhere."[140] If so, the doctrines of our souls and original sin symbolize a deep mine of anthropological truth. And from deep in this mine, where we glimpse at our origins, I think we will hear others digging in from another direction—from anthropological science—arriving at a shared conviction.

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[140] Alison, *Joy* 58.

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