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Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture, Issue 14, 2007,
pp. 27-38 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctn.2008.0001>



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Summarizing “Imitating the Divine Relations: A Theological Contribution to Mimetic Theory”

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THE RELATIONS AND THEIR IMITATIONS

I would like to explore with you briefly the possible contribution that might be made to mimetic theory by a theological hypothesis proposed by Bernard Lonergan.¹ The hypothesis begins: “there are four real divine relations, really identical with the divine substance, and therefore there are four very special modes that ground the external imitation (outside of God, on the part of creatures) of the divine substance.”² I wish to speak to the issue of imitations of the triune God through graced participations in the divine relations, and I wish to do so in the context of the mimetic theory of René Girard, arguing (1) that Lonergan’s theological notion of imitating the divine relations makes a contribution to mimetic theory, but also (2) that Girard contributes to the diagnostic that will help us distinguish between genuine and inauthentic mimesis of God.

The four divine relations to which Lonergan refers have traditionally been called paternity, filiation, active spiration, and passive spiration. The three divine persons *are* relations, and so the Father is paternity, the Son is filiation, and the Holy Spirit is passive spiration. In trinitarian theologies

based on Thomas Aquinas's spiritual or psychological analogy (as Lonergan's is), the Father and the Son together are the active spiration from which the Holy Spirit, passive spiration, proceeds, precisely as the proceeding Love of the Father and the Son.

The four created imitations of divine being participating in the four divine relations are the following.

First, what is called the "secondary act of existence" of the incarnate Word, because of which Jesus, whose person is the divine Word himself, is also truly a complete human being, is a created participation in and imitation of divine paternity, of the Father; thus it has a special relation to the Son. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). The divine Word as such does not speak; it is spoken. The incarnate Word speaks, as does the divine Father. But the Word speaks only what he has heard from the Father.

Second, what traditionally has been called sanctifying grace (a category that Lonergan transposes into the dynamic state of being in love in an unqualified fashion, giving rise to the horizon that is born of such love) is a created participation in and imitation of the active spiration by the Father and the Son of the Holy Spirit, and so it bears a special relation to the Holy Spirit. The dynamic state of being in love in an unqualified way is what theology has traditionally called sanctifying grace, and in Lonergan's theology, sanctifying grace is a created participation in and imitation of the active spiration of Father and Word lovingly breathing the Holy Spirit, while the habit of charity that flows from sanctifying grace is a created participation in and imitation of the passive spiration, the divine Proceeding Love, that is the Holy Spirit. More concretely for Christians, I think, sanctifying grace is a created participation in and imitation of the incarnate Word, whose humanity is a participation in and imitation of the one he called "Abba, Father." And what is this "Father"? What would it be to participate in the incarnate Son, who himself is an imitation of "Abba"? "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be children of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest alike" (Matt. 5:44–45; translation based on the Jerusalem Bible). As the Holy Spirit proceeds from the *agapé* that is the Father and the Word that the Father utters in saying "Yes" to God's own goodness, so the habit of charity—a love that extends to enemies and that gives sunshine and rain to all alike—flows from our created participation in and imitation of that active spiration, that is, from the entitative change that is the grace that makes us not only pleasing to God, *gratia gratum faciens*, but somehow imitative of the divine goodness. "You must therefore be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

In this participation and imitation, this mimesis, if you will, we are moved beyond the otherwise endless cycle of violence, recrimination, judgment, blame, accusation, murder, hate, and false religion. So this habit of grace sets up a state of grace, even as it is set up by the state of grace, where the state of grace is a social situation, an intersubjective set of relationships, where the founding subjects, as it were, are the three divine subjects, and where grace prevails because they have come to dwell in us and with us.

Third, then, the habit of charity that progressively emanates from this dynamic state through the repeated performance of loving acts is a created participation in and imitation of the passive spiration that is the Holy Spirit, and it bears a special relation to the Father and the Son from whom the Spirit proceeds in God.

And fourth, the light of glory as created condition of the blessed's vision of God is a created participation in and imitation of divine filiation, leading the children of adoption perfectly back to the eternal Father, and so it bears a special relation to the Father.

AUTONOMOUS SPIRITUAL PROCESSIONS

Theological understanding of the divine relations is grounded in an understanding of the divine processions, and for Lonergan as for Aquinas, the key to reaching an obscure and analogical understanding of the divine processions lies in what Aquinas calls *emanatio intelligibilis*, intelligible emanation. Thus, the intelligible emanation of a judgment of value, "Yes," from a reflective grasp of evidence regarding what is good provides the analogy for the procession of the Son from the Father, and the intelligible emanation of a loving decision from this grasp and judgment of value provides the analogy for the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son.

In my own work I have chosen to render *emanatio intelligibilis* as "autonomous spiritual procession."³ And it is precisely in the notion of autonomy that we will find the contribution to mimetic theory that I wish to suggest. Girard, of course, speaks of the illusion we entertain regarding the autonomy of our desires, and so, if I am going to find in the word "autonomy" a contribution to mimetic theory, I must be using the word with a meaning distinct from Girard's. For autonomous spiritual processions *are* a function of human desire, but when those processions entail authentic spiritual operations, that desire is quite different from acquisitive mimetic desire. My thesis is that it is best understood as a participation in divine love, a participation that always

is conscious but frequently is not known. The participation itself is a function of nature, but its consistent exercise is a function of grace.

Let me discuss first, however, the meaning of the word “spiritual.” In *Insight*,⁴ Lonergan draws a distinction between the intelligible and the intelligent. Empirical objects are potentially intelligible. The unities and laws of things are formally intelligible. The existence of these unities and the occurrence of events in accord with the laws are actually intelligible. But the disinterested, detached, unrestricted desire to know is potentially intelligent. The insights that grasp unities and laws and that ground conceptions of the unities and laws are formally intelligible. The further insights that grasp the unconditioned, and the judgments that posit being as known, are actually intelligent. Thus, as known to ourselves, we are intelligible, as every other known is, but that intelligibility is also intelligence and knowing.

Now for Lonergan, intelligibility that is also intelligent is spiritual, and that is the sense in which I am using the word “spiritual” here. Thomas’s *emanatio intelligibilis* refers to what Lonergan calls spiritual intelligibility, the intelligibility of intelligence, reasonableness, and moral responsibility in act.

We proceed now to the meaning of “autonomous.” In his discussion of *emanatio intelligibilis*, Lonergan shows how the judgment of value proceeds *because of* and *in proportion to* the evidence grasped, and how the loving decision proceeds *because of* and *in proportion to* both the evidence grasped and the judgment of value. A sound judgment is sound because it proceeds from a grasp of sufficient evidence known to be sufficient, and in accord with or in proportion to the evidence that has been grasped precisely as sufficient. A good decision is good because it proceeds from the grasp of evidence and sound judgment, in accord with or in proportion to both of these sources together grounding the decision.

Now the relation conveyed by the phrases “because of” and “in accord with,” or “in proportion to,” precisely as this relation is known to the acting subject, is what constitutes what I mean by “autonomy” and by speaking of autonomous spiritual processions. In the expression “autonomous spiritual procession,” the word “autonomous” refers precisely to the “because of” and “in accord with” or “in proportion to” aspect of the procession, precisely as that aspect is known by the subject to constitute the relation between what grounds the procession and what proceeds from that ground.

I distinguish, then, and perhaps in a manner in which Girard does not, between “autonomous” and “spontaneous,” and I find a genuine meaning for both terms, even while acknowledging that Girard has exposed illusions in regard to that meaning. There are in human consciousness processions, even

spiritual processions, that are not autonomous but spontaneous. One example of a spontaneous as contrasted with an autonomous spiritual procession is the emergence of an act of understanding from data organized by imagination under the dynamism of inquiry. This procession is distinct from the subsequent autonomous spiritual procession that is the emergence of an objectification or conceptualization from the act of understanding. What is the difference between these two processions? By reflecting on our own experience, we can, I believe, verify that the emergence of insight from data organized by imagination under the dynamism of inquiry is an instance of what anyone influenced by Aristotle would call the emergence of act from potency, whereas the emergence of hypothetical conceptualizations from the insight itself is an emergence of one act from another act. Since there is no movement from potency to act in God, who is pure act, what I am calling spontaneous processions will not provide a fitting or suitable analogy for understanding divine processions. The processions in human consciousness that will provide such an analogy must be processions of act from act. Even then, of course, the analogy is deficient. God is one act in which the three divine persons participate in distinct ways, whereas insight and subsequent conceptualizations or objectifications in human consciousness are distinct acts.

The dimension of spiritual autonomy that provides Lonergan with the appropriate realm in which to locate an analogy for trinitarian processions lies in existential self-constitution, that is, in the emergence of a good decision from an authentic judgment of value based on a reflective grasp of evidence, precisely with regard to the question, "What am I to make of myself?" The evidence grasped by the person in the dynamic state of being in love is first and foremost evidence regarding identity, one's own existential self-constitution: What would it be good for me to be? The consequent judgment of value is an assent to that grasped ideal. The proceeding love flows from the grasped evidence and consequent judgment. In analogous manner, the divine Word is a judgment of value resting on *agapé*, Loving Intelligence in act, originatively constituting divine being. Divine Proceeding Love, the Holy Spirit, is spirated from such a dual origin: from Loving Grasp and the divine "Yes, this is very good!"

To this point we have been presenting an analogy from human nature to ground an understanding of what we profess in faith regarding divine procession. But the four-point theological hypothesis adds the notion of created analogues in the supernatural order, analogues that are also imitations of, participations in, the relations that are identical with the divine persons. The secondary act of existence of the Incarnate Word participates in divine

paternity. The dynamic state of unqualified being in love participates in divine active spiration. The habit of charity participates in divine passive spiration. The light of glory participates in divine filiation. All four of these created supernatural realities are more than analogues. They are imitations-by-participation. In some ways the analogy remains the same, but in one way it is quite different. It remains the same in that we find the procession of assent from grasp, and the procession of acts of love from grasp-and-assent considered as the one principle of love. It is quite different in that love is both the principle and the end in the supernatural analogy, whereas in the natural analogy the movement is from knowledge to love. In the supernatural analogy, the grasp of evidence is explicitly the grasp of a lover, and the assent is loving assent. The dynamic state of being in love in an unqualified fashion governs the entire movement from beginning to end.

THE DUALITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Here I wish to cite an important passage from Lonergan's book, *The Triune God: Systematics*, to which I will return in a conversation with René Girard: "We are conscious in two ways: in one way, through our sensibility, we undergo rather passively what we sense and imagine, our desires and fears, our delights and sorrows, our joys and sadness; in another way, through our intellectuality, we are more active when we consciously inquire in order to understand, understand in order to utter a word, weigh evidence in order to judge, deliberate in order to choose, and exercise our will in order to act."⁵ In addition, let me emphasize that within both sensitive and spiritual process, a distinction is to be drawn between the emergence of act from potency and the emergence of act from act. At the level of the spiritual, this becomes a distinction of spontaneous and autonomous processions.

THE DIALECTIC OF DESIRE

The integrity of spiritual process, whether natural or supernatural and whether spontaneous or autonomous, is a function of fidelity to a transcendental orientation of human spiritual desire to the intelligible, the true, the real, and the good. This transcendental orientation is a participation in uncreated light.

Now, Lonergan consistently emphasizes that there are other desires that would interfere with the unfolding of the transcendental, spiritual, sometimes

autonomous, active desire for being and value, the pure, unrestricted, detached, disinterested desire for what is and for what is good. We can approach an understanding of this problem from what Lonergan says about the two ways of being conscious. Discriminating between these is extraordinarily sensitive and delicate, for the first way of being conscious permeates the second, either in support of the transcendental orientation to the intelligible, the true, the real, and the good, or in conflict with that orientation. Again, and more precisely, the first way of being conscious precedes, accompanies, and overarches the intentional operations that constitute the second way of being conscious.

Thus, distinguishing and negotiating the two ways of being conscious calls for what Christian spiritual tradition has called discernment. What we undergo rather passively in what we sense and imagine, in our desires and fears, our delights and sorrows, our joy and sadness, affects the entire range of our spiritual orientation as it actually unfolds. Under optimal circumstances, this first way of being conscious bolsters and supports the second way, where we consciously inquire in order to understand, understand in order to utter a word, weigh evidence in order to judge, deliberate in order to choose, and will in order to act.⁶ But those optimal circumstances are rare indeed, and to the extent that they do not obtain, we can speak of a statistical near-inevitability of distortion precisely in the spiritual dimensions of human operation. Integrity in those dimensions, and especially in autonomous processions of act from act in human spirituality, is ever precarious, and is always reached by withdrawing from unauthenticity.

René Girard in particular has called attention to the extremely precarious nature of human claims to autonomous subjectivity. These precautions are salutary for anyone hoping to resurrect the psychological analogy in trinitarian theology. Lonergan has called attention to authenticity and unauthenticity in the realms of understanding, truth, moral development, and religion—the areas that are positively treated when he speaks of intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. In my own writings, I have called attention to a distinct dimension of authenticity and conversion that affects primarily the first way of being conscious. I have spoken of psychic conversion. Girard gives us a better purchase on this psychic dimension of desire than do other current or recent explorations, and being very clear with him about the character of false mimesis and deviated transcendence precisely as they affect and distort intellectual, moral, and religious operations will help us isolate much more clearly just where in consciousness the genuine *imago Dei* really lies.

Thus, I propose (1) that what Girard has written about desire directly concerns the first way of being conscious, that is, the sensitive, psychic

dimension of consciousness, but also (2) that this dimension penetrates our spiritual orientation to the intelligible, the true, the real, and the good, and that it does so for better or for worse.

I presume that we are all aware of Girard's explication of mimetic or triangular desire, and of his distinction between acquisitive or appropriative mimetic desire and a possible desire, even a form of mimetic desire, that functions in other ways. I would suggest

- that what Lonergan calls the first way of being conscious is precisely interdividual, in Girard's sense;
- that psychic development entails the negotiation of this interdividual field;
- that this negotiation calls upon the operations of the second way of being conscious;
- that inadequate negotiations of the interdividual field can and will distort the second way of being conscious;
- and that authentic negotiation of the same field will allow the second way to flourish in the development of the person.

It seems important to stress that Girard's complex conceptions of mimetic desire presuppose a radical insufficiency in the very being of the desiring individual. There is a radical ontological sickness at the core of internal appropriative mimetic desire. The individual is at some level painfully aware of his or her own emptiness, and it is this that leads the individual to crave so desperately the fullness of being that supposedly lies in others. The figures onto whom such desire is projected mediate being itself for us. It is via them that we seek to become real, and it is through wanting their very being that we come to imitate them. The wish to absorb, or to be absorbed by or into, the substance of the other implies an insuperable revulsion for one's own substance. Such metaphysical desire is masochism or pseudomasochism, a will to self-destruction in becoming something or someone other than what one is. The self-sufficiency attributed to the model is, of course, illusory, and so the project to attain it is doomed from the outset. But even if one vaguely perceives the fruitlessness of the quest, one does not give it up, because to do so would mean admitting that the salvation one craves is impossible to achieve. One may even become the tormentor, torturing others as one was oneself tortured, and so masochism is transformed into sadism.

I find a threefold benefit to be gained by Lonergan students from a serious study of Girard. First, Girard's position shows that there is a much greater complexity than might be obvious to the two ways of being conscious to

which Lonergan refers; in particular, much more enters into the first way of being conscious than might be obvious from Lonergan's description. The passive reception of what we sense and imagine, or our desires and our fears, our delights and sorrows, our joy and sadness, is not some simple, unidimensional thing. It is extraordinarily complex, and the mimetic model of desire throws more light on that complexity than does any other position of which I am aware.

Second, Girard also shows the interrelations of the two ways of being conscious. For one thing, it is ultimately a spiritual emptiness that leads to the derailments of mimetic desire, an emptiness that recalls Augustine's "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." But also, the only resolution of mimetic violence is the complete renunciation of the rivalry to which triangular acquisitive desire leads us, and that renunciation is an intensely spiritual act flowing from a decision that itself proceeds from a recognition of the facts. In other words, the resolution of the problems to which acquisitive mimetic desire gives rise takes place through a series of autonomous spiritual processions that are precisely the sort of emanations that Lonergan regards as appropriate for the psychological trinitarian analogy.

Finally, I regard the vagaries of mimetic desire to which Girard gives us entrance as the principal instances of what Lonergan calls dramatic bias and also of the psychological components of the other forms of bias that Lonergan exposes.

My questions would be the following. First, Girard's work raises for me the question of a radical ontological desire that itself is not mimetic but that is involved in all mimetic desire. Is imitative desire brought on by a sense of spiritual inadequacy that is endemic to the human condition? Is the story of imitative desire a story of the successes and failures of mutual self-mediation in the attempt, itself completely legitimate, to find the completion of one's being? Is Girard's mimetic violence, which springs from imitative desire, the fate of mutual self-mediation gone wrong? Is there healthy mutual self-mediation? Do we all suffer from such a radical ontological insufficiency that these double binds are inevitable for all of us? Or is there a mediation that can quiet the sense of spiritual inadequacy and enable human relations to be something other than the violent mimesis that Girard depicts? What is it that enables one to renounce mimetic rivalry completely without using this renunciation as a feigned indifference that is just another way to get what one wants? Is the tendency to compare oneself to others not rooted in an ontological emptiness that only God can fill? Is there a way of negotiating this emptiness that transcends victimization by the triangular situation that

necessarily will be involved in the negotiation? What is the source of our fascination with the saints? Think of Ignatius Loyola asking, "What would it mean if I were to do in my situation what Francis and Dominic did in theirs?" Or again, think of Bernard Lonergan asking, as he must have asked, "What would it mean if I were to do in my situation what Thomas Aquinas did in his?" The mimetic quality of the questions is obvious. But in both cases it led to something quite other than the tortured quality of internally mediated relations. It led to autonomous spiritual processions of word and love that were in fact created participations in triune life.

Related to these questions is the issue of the transcendental desires of the human spirit, Lonergan's second way of being conscious. "All people by nature *desire* to know," Aristotle says at the very beginning of the *Metaphysics*. This becomes Lonergan's *leitmotif* throughout *Insight*, where he unpacks the dynamics of the desire to know in mathematics, science, common sense, and philosophy, as well as the devices that we employ to flee understanding when we do not want to face the truth. In his later work, Lonergan extends this transcendental desire to the notion of the good. Girard insists correctly that almost all learning is based on imitation, and so satisfying the desire to know involves mimetic behavior. But the present question is, are the desire to know and the transcendental intention of value functions of acquisitive mimesis? Are they acquisitive desires? Or is acquisitiveness a perversion of these desires? Is there such a thing as a detached, disinterested desire to know? Girard himself speaks of a true vocation of thought that lies in integrating isolated discoveries into a rational framework and transforming them into real knowledge. Is not that an indication of what Lonergan calls the desire to know? How does it differ from acquisitive mimesis? How can it be infected and derailed by acquisitive mimesis? These questions are worth pursuing. And in a further extension of the same set of questions, can we not see how Girard has clarified in an astounding fashion the influence that distorted mimesis has on the realm of the sacred, which in its authenticity pertains primarily to the second way of being conscious, an influence that Girard calls "deviated transcendence"? Will not these clarifications help us get straight just where the genuine *imago Dei*, and so the genuine *imitatio Dei*, resides?

IMAGO DEI

Where is the *imago* that is also an *imitatio*? Foundationally, it lies in the created participation in active and passive spiration that is the share in divine life

given to us here and now. That participation is (1) the gift of being in love in an unqualified fashion, which (2) alters the horizon in which evidence regarding one's existential self-constitution is grasped to ground a radical assent or fundamental option for the good, from which (3) there flows that radical "yes" to existence that (4) grounds the habitual performance of loving acts.

But this supernatural *imitatio* is understood by analogy with an imitation of God in the very order of nature, an imitation that lies within actively intelligent, actively reasonable, actively deliberative consciousness. In fact, it has been in the context of the autonomy of the operations performed in the natural unfolding of the transcendental orientation that we have found a fruitful encounter with Girard's mimetic theory. Girard has introduced a necessary hermeneutics of suspicion into the project of self-appropriation initiated by Lonergan, a hermeneutics that is probably the best categorial articulation to date of what my own work anticipated heuristically by speaking of psychic conversion. Girard has captured with ruthless precision the interference of acquisitively mimetic desire with the unfolding of the transcendental orientation. But there is an *imago Dei*, and an *imitatio Dei*—*imago* and *imitatio* are from the same root—that is natural, that resides in our spiritual nature, where "nature" is understood in the Aristotelian sense of an immanent principle of movement and of rest. The *imago* or *imitatio Dei* is not the whole of that spiritual nature, for that nature is "the human spirit as raising and answering questions" and so is potency in the realm of spiritual things. But there are moments in which that nature precisely as nature imitates pure act, however remotely: when from understanding as act there proceeds an inner word of conceptualization in act, when from the grasp of evidence as sufficient there proceeds a judgment, and when from the judgment of value there proceeds a good decision. That natural image can be used as an analogy from which we may understand the more radical image or imitation that lies in a created participation in the divine relations of active and passive spiration.

Lonergan writes, "The psychological analogy . . . has its starting point in that higher synthesis of intellectual, rational, and moral consciousness that is the dynamic state of being in love. Such love manifests itself in its judgments of value. And the judgments are carried out in decisions that are acts of loving. Such is the analogy found in the creature."⁷ The quotation is applicable equally, of course, to natural and graced states of being. But the dynamic state of being in love without any reservations or qualifications is precisely the gift that the four-point hypothesis construes as a created participation in divine active spiration. From that love there flows evidence perceived by such a lover, from which one's judgments of value proceed as act from act. What proceeds from this created participation in active spiration is the decisions

that are acts of loving, and as such created participations in passive spiration. The supernatural analogy found in the creature imitates by participation the entire life of the triune God, and it is only by the grace of this created imitation that the natural transcendental unfolding of our spiritual aspirations remains authentic.

NOTES

All scriptural quotations are from the Jerusalem Bible.

1. I have been privileged to participate in the last two meetings of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, precisely in the context of an attempt to promote dialogue between the students of René Girard and those of Bernard Lonergan. In Koblenz, I was part of a panel that was organized by Sonja Bardelang and included Gilles Mongeau of Regis College, Toronto, and Mark Miller of Boston College. In Ottawa, I was scheduled again to participate in a panel, but at the last minute the other participants were unable to come. I had already written a lengthy paper entitled "Imitating the Divine Relations: A Theological Contribution to Mimetic Theory," which had been submitted to *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*. I offered to present a half-hour summary of this paper in Ottawa, and Kenneth Melchin of St. Paul's University, Ottawa, graciously consented to respond to the paper. Bill Johnsen kindly asked me if he might publish the paper in *Contagion*. The longer paper has been accepted for publication in *Method*, but the editors of that journal are happy to allow me to publish in *Contagion* the summary delivered in Ottawa. The longer paper is replete with footnotes, and includes a lengthy primer on the basics of Girard's thought, for Lonergan students. My hope is that those who want the footnotes will seek out *Method*, and that Girard students do not need the primer. I am grateful for the invitation to publish the summary here.
2. Bernard Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics*, trans. Michael G. Shields, ed. Robert M. Doran and H. Daniel Monsour (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 471.
3. The notion of "autonomous spiritual procession" is explained in greater detail in the article in *Method* that is being summarized here.
4. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, vol. 3, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (latest printing, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 539–43.
5. Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics*, 139.
6. Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics*, 139.
7. Bernard Lonergan, "Christology Today: Methodological Considerations," in *A Third Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 93.