Thanatos and the Passion for Transformation

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Abstract

In this paper I shall restrict myself to an exploration of three theoretical accounts of violence that have been offered in relation to religion, with specific reference to the question of how that violence could be transformed. What is the relationship between creativity and violence? How does newness enter the world, the newness that is needed if there is to be transformation of the violence of the present world order? None of the thinkers whose ideas of violence I shall consider has much to say about beauty or creativity. However, I shall argue that although beauty is ignored in their work, just as it has regularly been pushed to the margins in the Bible and in the theology of Christendom, it still offers a place of resistance from which violence can be challenged. In the final section of this paper I shall begin an exploration of what that entails.

Keywords: *Christianity, creation, violence, creativity, desire, thanatos, "Girard, René".*

The Genesis story in the Hebrew Bible, with its account of a beautiful garden forfeited by a descent into sin and violence, is often taken as the paradigmatic narrative of creation for Christendom. It is not the only biblical account of creation. The prophet Isaiah, for example, describes a vision of a new creation, made by God to transform the present world of trouble, destruction and pain. He declares the proclamation of God:

> For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;
> And the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
> But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create;
> For behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy […]

There follows a description of a utopian Jerusalem – so different from that conflict-ridden city in Isaiah's time or in ours – in which people live together in peace and harmony. All flourish together. Violence has no place, for "[t]hey shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord". (Isaiah 65:17–25.)

Similar accounts of a "new heaven and a new earth" also occur elsewhere in the Bible, notably in the book of Revelation, where the writer describes "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2). All God's enemies have been defeated and shut out, and the people of God live with him in unimaginable beauty and splendour. The city has "the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal". Through the city flows a "river of the water of life", beside which grows "the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit […] and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:1–2).

These visions of a heavenly Jerusalem of peace and beauty stand as parallels to the Genesis story of the first paradise. But whereas the Genesis story represents the beginning of all things, this new creation represents the end. It will not be a scene of sin, disaster and expulsion as was the Garden of Eden; nor will God exert his own violence upon it as he did in the flood that followed the sinfulness of early humanity. Rather, the new paradise will go on forever, with no more sin, pain, or violence, whether inflicted by God or by people. The newness of the new Jerusalem is a cancellation or forgetting of what has gone before: the anguish of the past no longer comes to mind, as "God himself […] will wipe away every tear from their eyes […] for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Nevertheless, it is obvious that the writers of each of these accounts have violence very much on their minds as they write. The ambiguity of the Genesis stories is paralleled by the ambiguities of these new accounts of creation, in which peace and beauty prevails only because others have been expelled. Isaiah represents the enemies of God's people as utterly crushed; the writer of the Apocalypse has opponents of true believers cast

into hell with Satan. Just as in the case of the Genesis flood, violence and beauty appear in tension: a tension that becomes unbearable if once we put ourselves into the position of those who are outside rather than those whom God has favoured.

In the larger project of which this is a part, I explore some of the specific forms taken by the tension between violence and beauty, necrophilia and natality, the preoccupation with thanatos and the passion for transformation (Jantzen 2004). In this article, however, I shall restrict myself to an exploration of three theoretical accounts of violence that have been offered in relation to religion, with specific reference to the question of how that violence could be transformed. What is the relationship between creativity and violence? How does newness enter the world, the newness that is needed if there is to be transformation of the violence of the present world order? None of the thinkers whose ideas of violence I shall consider has much to say about beauty or creativity. However, I shall argue that although beauty is ignored in their work, just as it has regularly been pushed to the margins in the Bible and in the theology of christendom, it still offers a place of resistance from which violence can be challenged. In the final section of this paper I shall begin an exploration of what that entails.

The Violence of Creation?

Is creativity itself violent? Could there be creation without violence? At first sight it would seem that creativity is the very opposite of destruction, and therefore contrary to violence; yet as I have already hinted, the ambiguities are already present in the biblical text. It might be thought, therefore, that when influential scholars have defined violence in ways that render creativity itself violent they are in fact faithful to the uncomfortable tensions of the Bible. However, I believe that things are not that simple. I propose to begin, therefore, by examining these definitions. I shall argue, in the first place, that they are incorrect or harmful as definitions; and shall show later how creativity is essential if we are to develop alternatives to violence; and that although no human activity is unambiguous, violence is not inherent in

creativity itself. What I want to get at is how creativity has been displaced or stood in ambiguous tension with violence and the love of death. What are the forms which creativity has taken and perhaps can take again to bring newness into the world?

Everything is Violent

I begin with a definition of violence offered by Hent de Vries (2002); but before I address his account of violence directly, I want to pay tribute to the significance and timeliness of his work on religion and violence. Until relatively recently, religious scholars, like many others, tended to assume that the world was, for good or ill, becoming increasingly secular, at least in its public face, and that such religious belief and experience as there still is belongs in the private sphere. Religion, it was thought, is not (or should not be) involved in scientific experiments or in the stock exchange or in the master discourses and disciplines of modernity. But with the destruction of the Twin Towers in the name of Allah, and the military campaigns against Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of "God Bless America", a new era has erupted in which it has became clear – as it should have been all along – that religion is a potent force in legitimising violence. Many religious scholars were caught napping, with very little in the way of conceptual resources either to understand the eruption of violence in the name of religion or to see how religion could act as a counterforce. De Vries was one of the few scholars who had seriously focused on the relationship of violence and religion, and was therefore in a position to comment intelligently on what is going on.

Nevertheless, when it comes specifically to de Vries' definition of violence, I have a problem. De Vries says,

> [v]iolence, in both the widest possible and the most elementary senses of the word, entails any cause, any justified or illegitimate force, that is exerted – physically or otherwise – by one thing (event or instance, group or person, and, perhaps, word and object) on another. Violence thus defined finds its prime model – its source, force, and counterforce – in key elements of the

tradition called the religious. It can be seen as the very element of religion. (De Vries 2002, 1.)

I do not find this definition helpful. If, as he says, violence is involved in *every* exertion of force, even when it is justified and even when it is non-physical; and if moreover this exertion is not restricted to the intentional exertion of force by persons but includes also events and even words, then nothing is left out. Everything is violent. Creation is violent; so is destruction. Religion is violent; but religion is also the "counterforce" to violence.

Now, it seems to me that it is vitally important to have tools for discrimination between violence and non-violence, between those exertions of force, physical or not, which are destructive and those which are transformative. If we say that *every* exertion of force is violent, then the effect is to evacuate the term "violence" of all specific meaning, and with it all possibility of moral evaluation. The force of persuasion that a dog-owner exerts in training, all her praise and puppy treats, could not be differentiated from the force she would exert if she were to beat up the puppy instead. The force of an argument and the force of a bomb would be the same, in quality if not in quantity.

I suggest that if violence is defined so broadly, then rather than being helpful, the definition becomes useless as a way of understanding the function of violence in the paths that religion is taking in the world today. De Vries draws on the work of Levinas and Derrida, among others, to connect the ideas of violence and religion and to explore how repressed violence can be disguised as friendship, and hidden hostilities can distort the face which should be the face of love. Much of his analysis is highly significant. But the definition of violence with which de Vries begins is, I suggest, so wide as to include everything; and thereby becomes unhelpful as a tool to understand the ways in which religion fosters or colludes in thanatos, the escalating love of death and violence of the world. It also occludes the ways in which religion can make for peace, engendering the passion for transformation. This is not insightful ambiguity; it is rather a matter of tarring everything with the same brush.

Violence as Boundary

An alternative definition of violence, which again I find problematic, is given by Regina Schwartz in her recent book *The Curse of Cain* (Schwartz 1997). Schwartz asserts that "violence is the very construction of the Other", so that "imagining identity as an act of distinguishing and separating from others, of boundary making and line drawing, is the most frequent and fundamental act of violence we commit" (p. 5). In her account, even to define a term is already a violent act because it excludes some things from the meaning of the term while including others. Now, if this were correct, then the only path to non-violence would be by collapsing everything into a Sameness, so that all of reality is a thick soup so fully blended that nothing can be distinguished from anything else.

By contrast, I would suggest that it is not the act of distinguishing and separating into self and others which is violent in and of itself; indeed such separation is essential if we are ever to experience the richness which respectful mutual interaction with others who are genuinely different from ourselves can bring. Violence enters, I would argue, not when difference is *defined* but when difference is perceived as *dangerous,* so that hierarchies are imposed and force is exerted to keep the hierarchies in place. Schwartz's important insights on perceived scarcity and competition for resources rather than mutuality and generosity which she explores in the rest of her book can be preserved, I suggest, without holding to her view that the construction of the other is itself violent. In fact, elsewhere in her book she redefines the concept of violence in a more nuanced way, which specifically repudiates her earlier definition (though she does not acknowledge this). She says:

> Violence is not […] a consequence of defining identity as either particular or universal. Violence stems from any conception of identity forged negatively against the Other, an invention of identity that parasitically depends upon the invention of some Other to be reviled. (Schwartz 1997, 88.)

In spite of this disclaimer, however, her earlier definition of violence as differentiation continues to percolate through her book. This definition has

a direct bearing on questions of creation. If all forms of differentiation or separation were violent, then to create would be the paradigmatic act of violence. Newness can only arise if it is different from what preceded it: if it were not different it would not be new. So if difference itself indicates violence, then creating or transforming anything, making anything new, is a violent act. When we consider the biblical stories of creation, whether the Genesis myth of origins or Isaiah's vision of "new heavens and a new earth", these are stories of the emergence of newness, where things that are made are separated both from their creator and from anything that had gone before: an ordered cosmos replaces chaos; a world of peace and harmony replaces a world of conflict and destruction. Even if one holds (as I do, see Jantzen 1998, 270) to a very strong sense of divine immanence in the world, so that all things in some sense participate in the divine, it is still the case that the stars and flowers and birds and mountains are not an undifferentiated soup, a "night in which all cats are grey"; rather, they are glorious in their vibrant particularity. In their identity, is their beauty; and in their interaction they can flourish.

Now, as I shall argue more fully later, so far from this difference indicating violence, it should be understood as the very opposite. Creativity, and with it the beauty of particularity, is an antidote to destruction, not its enactment. Creativity invites harmony and flourishing, where the flourishing of one is interdependent with the flourishing of all. Although that which has been created can fall all too quickly into death-dealing behaviour, the violence is not in the creative act itself, the act from which newness and beauty arises. Rather, violence arises when the mutuality of creation is denied, when difference is perceived as threatening rather than enriching, and force is exerted to dominate or stifle the potential of others.

I have not yet mentioned gender, but it is easy to see how the same analysis applies. In the original creation story, God creates Eve out of Adam, giving her a separate identity. Now, suppose one were to hold that the difference is itself violent. On such a view, it would follow that violence between the sexes would be built into this creation of male and female. I would argue

the opposite: namely that it is precisely because Eve is a person in her own right, separate from Adam, that the two can enter into mutually fulfilling interaction. It is not in their distinctness that violence lies; on the contrary, their distinctness is what makes their relationship possible. Violence arises, rather, when their distinctness is taken as threatening, and made a pretext for the domination of one by the other. To generalize: I would argue (contrary to the implications of Regina Schwartz's initial definition of violence) that gender difference, like race or class difference, or difference of all other sorts, is not itself violent nor the cause of violence. Violence in gender relations, as in all other relations, arises when difference is treated as a danger rather than as a resource, so that hostility rather than mutuality characterizes the interaction. Creativity is not violent in itself. Indeed I would argue that creativity and the beauty that can emerge from it is precisely what can stand against violence and destruction. Violence is ugly.

Violence and Desire

Implicit in the work of both de Vries and Schwartz is a relationship to psychoanalytic theory, in particular to theories of thanatos, desire, and sacrifice. These issues are made central in the work of René Girard, especially in relation to religion. Highly influential as his work has been, however, in my view, Girard is fundamentally misguided in the account he gives of passion, violence, and the possibility of transformation. I shall first present his position, and then explain why it will not do.

At least since Freud, desire and its repression has been taken by psychoanalytic theory as central to human behaviour, both at an individual level and at the level of society and civilization. Girard accepts the centrality of desire; but whereas Freud had focused chiefly on the sexual aspect of desire – indeed sometimes seeming to reduce all desire to sexuality – Girard takes a broader view. In particular, Girard pays attention to the imitative dimension of desire. We want what someone else has; more precisely, we want what someone else *wants*. We learn to value things because other people – parents, teachers, peers – value them: this is the basis of education,

culture, the development of taste, and much else. All these are founded on imitation, mimetic desire.

But mimetic desire quickly turns to rivalry. Girard gives a simple example: "place a certain number of identical toys in a room with the same number of children; there is every chance that the toys will not be distributed without quarrels" (Girard 1987, 9). Each child can have a toy exactly like the toys the others have; but still they are likely to quarrel, each one wanting not just a toy *like* the others but the very toy that another child has. Girard considers this as characteristic of desire in general. Desire is not just mimetic, it is conflictual and acquisitive.

Moreover, such conflictual mimesis is mutually reinforcing. If I want what you have, value something that you value, then my desire for it causes you to value it even more, in an escalating reciprocity. This feedback process reinforces itself, until the competition becomes rivalry and the frustrated rivalry turns nasty.

> Violence is thus generated. Violence is not originary; it is a by-product of mimetic rivalry. Violence is mimetic rivalry itself becoming violent as the antagonists who desire the same object keep thwarting each other and desiring the object all the more. Violence is supremely mimetic. (Girard 1996, 12–13.)

In fact, the mimetic rivalry can quickly intensify in such a way that the ostensible object of desire – the toy both children want – no longer matters: all that matters is their quarrel.

> As rivalry becomes acute, the rivals are more apt to forget about whatever objects are, in principle, the cause of the rivalry and instead to become more fascinated with one another. In effect, the rivalry is purified of any external stake and becomes a matter of pure rivalry and prestige. […] Only the antagonists remain; we designate them as doubles because from the point of view of the antagonism, nothing distinguishes them. (Girard 1987, 26.)

By this time the rivalry can no longer be called acquisitive: the initial object of desire has dropped out. The mimesis is simply conflictual. It is also

contagious: before long each of the rivals will have allies, and the violence snowballs and polarizes the contestants.

Of course this mimetic violence can take many forms, from overt force to much more subtle strategies. All of it, however, has its roots in desire, in mimetic rivalry. As Hamerton-Kelly puts it in his interpretation of Girard,

> [v]iolence is the whole range of this deformation of desire […] not just the obvious physical coercion. It is the driving energy of the social system. On the level of attitude it is envy and the strategies by which desire attempts to possess itself in the other and the other for itself. […] Thus violence is more inclusive than aggression. […] Violence describes the deep strategies of deformed desire in pursuit of its ends in all the modalities of culture. (Hamerton-Kelly 1992, 21.)

There are obvious resonances here with Hegel's account of the master and the slave, violence between them arising because both desire the recognition of the other. Girard seldom mentions Hegel; and when he does it is usually to dismiss him; but actually both men see desire and the rivalry it generates as the basis of violence and the driving force of history.

Now, animals also display mimetic rivalry. Two puppies will scrap over the same toy even if each is given an identical one, just as children will. But Girard argues that in the case of humans, the contagious effect of mimetic rivalry does not result in two equal groups in conflict with each other, but rather in the formation of one group to which more and more are attracted, and who focus their attention on the other which eventually dwindles to a single victim. Although this victim is the one against whom all the aggression is directed, the very fact that there is such a focus means that all the others unite into a community. Because aggression is focused outward, it becomes possible to develop prohibitions against violence within the community. The other becomes the scapegoat, the sacrifice who must bear the violence of the group. Girard sees this process as the foundation of religion, which develops increasingly formal rituals around the sacrificial victim and increasingly stringent prohibitions on violence within the group itself. Girard sees this whole process as the one that distinguishes humans from

animals (who, unlike humans, seldom carry their mimetic rivalries to an actual fight to the death). He puts it bluntly: "the victimage mechanism is the origin of hominization" (Girard 1987, 97). As he explains:

> We can conceive of hominization as a series of steps that allow for the domestication of progressively increasing and intense mimetic effects, separated from one another by crises that would be catastrophic but also generative in that they would trigger the founding mechanism and at each step provide for more rigorous prohibitions within the group, and for a more effective ritual canalization toward the outside (Girard 1987, 96).

The surrogate victim is thus fundamental to civilization, enabling communities to act out their aggression in increasingly ritualized ways, gradually replacing actual victims with symbols: thus the sacrificial system of ancient Israel gives place to the sacrifice "once for all" of the Lamb of God, and eventually to the sacrifice of the mass.

> All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim, and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from ritual. […] It could hardly be otherwise, for the working basis of human thought, the process of "symbolization", is rooted in the surrogate victim. (Girard 1977, 306.)

It is in the gradual substitution of ritual for actual violence that this whole process leads to peace. Rituals are by definition repetitive: by re-enactment of the ritual the community comes to peace with itself as the ritual victim bears its aggression.

> A trace of very real violence persists in the rite, and there is no doubt that the rite succeeds at least partially because of its grim associations, its lingering fascination; but its essential orientation is peaceful. Even the most violent rites are specifically designed to abolish violence. (Girard 1977, 103.)

In this way ritually enacted violence permits people "to escape their own violence […] and bestows on them all the institutions and beliefs that define their humanity" (p. 306).

According to Girard, therefore, violence and religion are inextricable, not in the sense that religion generates violence but rather in the sense that religion is the structure of beliefs and rituals within which the symbolic victim is sacrificed. In his earlier writings Girard believed that religion would die away as "the rite gradually leads men away from the sacred" and from their own violence (1977, 306). In more recent writings he asserts, rather, that Christianity offers the perfect resolution of violence, because it requires that all mimetic desire shall be channelled into the imitation of Christ, the one who gave himself for others and took violence upon himself (Girard 1996, 63; 1987, 430).

Up to this point I have put aside difficulties that I have with Girard, in an effort to represent him fairly. I wish now to turn to these, because they help to illuminate aspects of the relations between violence and religion, in particular how creativity enters the context. Girard has virtually nothing to say about creativity. In his view, peace, and all the values of civilization, are a result of the victimage mechanism: it is thus ultimately through violence, not through creativity, that newness enters the world. By contrast, I suggest that violence of itself does not bring peace or newness; violence repeats itself in escalating patterns. The newness that allows for human flourishing requires transformation, rooted in what I have elsewhere called natality.

To begin with the obvious: in the twenty-first century the form of violence that is much to the fore is indeed religious, or at least it is violence which relies on religion for its justification, but in a very different way than we might have expected from reading Girard. Girard has focused on violence *within* a group, and the way in which that violence can be resolved and the group become peaceable by means of the victimage mechanism. But the violence of freedom fighters and terrorists, landmines and helicopter gunships, ethnic cleansing and genocide, is violence *between* groups, often groups who assume that God or Allah is on their side and that their violence has divine blessing. While it is certainly true that violence can unite a group, it does so by deepening their division from the other, the victims against the perpetrators (who can quickly exchange roles). And while it is

true that individual nations can develop greater internal unity by making a "scapegoat" of another nation, and perhaps deflect internal disquiet or aggression by doing so, it has not been the case historically that all the nations of the world have united to focus on a single victim or scapegoat. In the World Wars of the twentieth century each side was composed of groups of nations; and in the first decade of this century we find one hyperpowerful nation attacking a sequence of relatively weak nations. A few others join in, but most of the rest (and much of the population within the aggressive states) watch in paralysed disapproval. Girard's victimage mechanism, in which everyone unites against a single scapegoat, is not in evidence. The ancient history of warfare does not show a scapegoat syndrome any more than does the recent past. Very often we find the same pattern of a very strong nation attacking a weaker one while others look on, unable or unwilling to get involved: the spread of the Roman Empire is an obvious example. Sometimes there is rivalry, as in the wars between the European powers over colonial dominance, but in these instances again, there is no obvious scapegoating.

It will not do for Girard to reply that he has concentrated on violence *within* groups and has left violence *between* groups for others to discuss. This is because it is clear that at least some aspects of violence within a community are very closely related to the warfare it conducts against its external enemies: one cannot be understood without the other. One of the key points of connection is gender, in particular the construction of masculinities. In *Foundations of Violence* (2004) I argued that the construction of virile manliness in the Roman Empire was the glue that connected the spectacles of death in the amphitheatres with the ideology and enactment of war (or violent peace) at its frontiers. In *Godly Killing* (forthcoming, 2006) I discuss the close relationship between the cult of animal sacrifice and the holy wars of ancient Israel as represented in the Hebrew Bible: neither are thinkable without the idea of the covenant enacted in circumcision which inscribed a construction of masculinity on the body of every Israelite male. In later volumes of this project I shall show how gender constructions were

again involved in European colonization of the "new world", which was routinely feminized against the masculinity of the conquerors, a mastering masculinity all too often expressed in violence at home as well as abroad. The links between the violence inside a group – not least its gender violence – and its conduct of warfare are easy to demonstrate.

It is therefore not without significance that just as Girard is silent on the subject of war, so he has very little to say about gender. In his discussion of Dionysus in *Violence and the Sacred* he notes the "minor importance" of the "role played by women in the religious and cultural structure of a society", and asserts that:

> Like the animal and the infant but to a lesser degree, the woman qualifies for sacrificial status by reason of her weakness and relatively marginal social status. That is why she can be viewed as a quasi-sacred figure, both desired and disdained, alternately elevated and abused. (Girard 1977, 140–142.)

However, Girard never questions this marginal status, never investigates the violence that keeps women "in their place". Gender violence, actual or threatened, is a major dimension of many societies (including all the societies of western modernity); it is obviously related to the construction of masculinities and thus to ideologies of mastery and warfare; and it is often given religious justification. But none of this falls discernibly into Girard's category of the victimage mechanism. If Girard is attempting to provide an explanation of violence in relation to religion, and yet has nothing to say about war, gender violence, and their religious justifications, then at the very least the gaps in his theory must be of enormous concern.[1]

This brings me to my most fundamental difficulty with Girard. According to his theory, peace, hominization, and all the goods of civilization ultimately have their foundation in the victimage mechanism and thus are a result of violence. In my view, this is to say the least counterintuitive. At an international level the result of violence is a spiralling escalation

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[1] Girard rejects out of hand feminist critics of his theory, suggesting that they simply "want now to join the power games of the males" and thereby lose "their real moral superiority" (Girard 1996, 275; cf 226–227). But this misses the point that violence is always already involved in gender construction, and that Girard's analysis of violence cannot account for it, thereby omitting a huge dimension of what it purports to explain.

of war, conflict and terror; within a group, too, violence reproduces itself – either immediately or in festering hatred. Violence does not bring peace. Of course the weaker party can be bombed or bludgeoned into submission, but that is not peace. Girard argues that escalating reciprocal violence, as in a blood feud, can only be resolved by both sides venting their violence on a surrogate victim and thus coming to peace between themselves. But is this true? If, for example, there is a major violation of one party by another – if a powerful nation appropriates the land or resources of a weaker nation, subordinating or killing much of its population – then it is highly likely that the weaker party would fester in anger until it could retalitate; but it is hardly plausible that the two would together join forces against a third nation (or that anything would be resolved if they did). Or again at an individual level, if two people who are feuding were to deal with their grievances by attacking a third – say, arguing parents venting their violence on a child – this would hardly count as a resolution of the problem but as a wholly inappropriate displacement.

Girard is of course aware that violence breeds violence, and never pretends that the achievement of peace is quick or easy. Nevertheless, he holds that the very escalation of violence pushes the community to a point where the chain reaction has to stop; and at that point the surrogate victim will appear. "The sheer escalation of the crisis, linked to progressively accumulating mimetic effects, will make the designation of such a victim automatic" and thus will lead to the resolution of the conflict (Girard 1987, 25). But what evidence could Girard bring to support this claim? It is hard to see what his justification for it could possibly be. Even in situations of conflict in which both sides realize that the violence has gone on far too long and must stop, peace is only finally achieved through negotiations which both sides feel to be fair and which results in justice that although perhaps imperfect is nonetheless recognized by both sides as a new start. Think for example of the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, or the movement towards peace in Northern Ireland. In both cases there was all too much violence and both sides could see that it had to stop; but in neither case was there a turn to a

surrogate victim. Nor can I imagine anyone involved in conflict resolution ever advocating that there should be such a turn or that anything would be improved if there were. More sadly, the spiralling violence between Israel and the Palestinians seems out of control and in urgent need of change; but here again it is absurd to think that the situation would be helped if only the two sides could unite against a common target. Examples could be multiplied: I can think of none in which the victimage mechanism could possibly be the foundation of peace. All the evidence points the other way: violence begets more violence.[2]

Desire and Newness

And yet sometimes peace does come: slowly and imperfectly, but nevertheless it comes. If it does not come out of violence, if Girard's theory of the victimage mechanism cannot be supported by the evidence, then how *does* transformation come? How does newness enter the world? These questions bring me back to the starting point of this paper, on the relationship between violence and creativity. They also bring me back to Girard's starting point: the centrality of desire. Girard argues, as we have seen, that desire is mimetic, that mimetic desire turns into rivalry, and that rivalry turns into violence. I want to argue, by contrast, that not all desire is mimetic; that even mimetic desire need not turn to rivalry; and that rivalry need not beget violence.

Girard holds that mimetic desire leads to rivalry which degenerates to violence. Even in his later work, where he talks about "good mimesis" as the "imitation of Christ", this "active, positive desire for the other" cannot be part of human nature but can only occur if "there is some kind of divine grace present" "whether or not it is recognized as such" (Girard 1996, 65): it is not true of normal human beings for whom desire is mimetic and rival-

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[2] Sometimes Girard writes as though this victimage mechanism should be read back into pre-history as the origin of religion, not as an account of violence today. If that is how he means to be read, then my objections drawn from contemporary events would not stand. But then Girard faces two questions. First, given the difference between his view of violence in prehistory and what we see today, what evidence could he possibly adduce for his theory that it was the victimage mechanism that brought peace? Secondly, if his theory is not an account of how violence functions today, then is it of any but historical interest? Surely the whole point of his theory is that it claims to give insight into *present* violence?

rous. But need this be the case? Why need desire lead to rivalry rather than to cooperation or sharing? Girard notes that children with equivalent toys still sometimes quarrel; he does not note that sometimes they play together quite happily. But if desire *need* not lead to rivalry and violence, then we require some other explanation or account of how and why violence arises when it does: how is it that sometimes desire – even mimetic desire – can express itself in co-operation and generosity whereas at other times it leads to resentment and hostility? Unless that question can be answered we will be no further forward in understanding the relationship between desire and violence, let alone how violence can be resolved.

I suggest that within Girard's work on rivalry as the inevitable result of mimesis lurk some unacknowledged (but still very common) gender assumptions: first, that the human is normatively male, and second, that masculinity involves mastery and therefore rivalry. Girard's ideas of mimetic rivalry seem plausible if we think about the way in which businessmen operate, or about football, or about all the many ways in which men strive competitively for mastery. But what sense do they make if we think instead, for example, about the relationship between a parent and their child? The child learns by imitation; but if the imitation turns to rivalry and rivalry turns to aggression, this is a sign that something has gone wrong, not that the relationship is progressing appropriately. Similarly, a teacher delights in the learning of a pupil, and recognizes that her chief work is to make herself dispensable, to teach the pupil so well that the pupil can go forward without further assistance, perhaps beyond the skill or knowledge of the teacher herself. An insecure teacher can of course feel resentment when a student surpasses her; but a teacher secure in her own contribution can rejoice and take pleasure in her student's progress. Girard leaves no room for generosity of spirit rather than rivalry and incessant struggle.

This leads to the deeper question of whether desire itself is mimetic. Girard's description is of course true of many desires, which arise out of a wish to have what someone else has, to value what they value. Moreover, Girard is right to say that much of our education and enculturation would be

impossible without imitation. In everything from learning to play a musical instrument to building character, we make progress by trying to copy those whom we admire, as Aristotle said.[3] But I would argue that while much desire is mimetic, there is also an immensely important and undertheorized aspect of desire for which mimesis cannot be an adequate explanation. Mimetic desire is desire that is premised upon a lack: it is desire for what we do not have, or desire that what we have now shall not be taken from us in the future. But what about creative desire: the desire to make something beautiful, something new? The desire to create cannot, I suggest, be reduced to lack. Rather, creativity bespeaks fullness that overflows, that wants to give of its resources, express itself.

The paradigm case is once again the creation of the world. As God is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible and Christian theology, God does not lack. The divine is in need of nothing. Yet God desires to create the world; and desires to make it beautiful. God desires to make a new heaven and a new earth, where peace and beauty will be restored. This creative desire is traditionally represented theologically as springing from infinite divine resources, not out of lack; it is not mimetic. Similarly, it can be argued that there is more to human creativity than mimesis: it, too, comes out of an abundance of resources, not simply out of lack. Of course imitation plays a great part in learning the skills without which human creativity cannot be expressed; but ultimately that which is genuinely creative is original, not imitative. It must arise out of the resources of the creator and their desire to create. I cannot produce good music or paint a picture or write a book solely out of mimetic rivalry: I can do so only if I have something new or fresh in me to express, something that is not reducible to imitation.

I suggest that the same considerations apply to conflict resolution. It is not a surrogate victim who can bring peace; rather it is creative thinking, new ways of looking at old problems, that can find a way forward. Of course creativity does not come out of the blue; of course it requires skills built up by long imitation and practice, but unless there are inner resources, not

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[3] See my discussion of this in Jantzen 2004.

just lack, we could not hope for newness to enter the world. In contrast to Girard, therefore, I suggest that it is not violence and the victimage mechanism but creativity, desire springing from fullness rather than premised upon a lack, which is the root of hominization and the basis of the passion for transformation.

Girard is of course not alone in focusing exclusively on the mimetic aspect of desire, or in defining desire in terms of lack. Ever since Plato's representation of Eros as a child of need, it has been virtually taken for granted in western philosophy and the theology of Christendom that desire is premised upon a lack and that Eros is highly suspect.[4] This, coupled with the emphasis on the word, and on power as the key characteristic of the divine, has meant that even when creation has been pondered it has usually been in terms of the divine word of power. Seldom has there been thought given to the passion for beauty and transformation which would motivate creation – divine passion or ours – or the resources from which such passions could overflow.

Even within the biblical texts, however, ambiguous and riddled with violence as they are, there are resources for thinking otherwise. The glory and beauty of the divine and the consequent creativity of divine passion suggests the possibility of a poetics of beauty that could transform the symbolic of a death-dealing world. It is precisely in the marginalized theme of the divine passion for beauty that we can find resources for the transformation of the ugly violence which takes up such a large part of the Bible itself and which has so profoundly misshaped the world in which we live. Beauty and a passion for creativity stand as alternatives to a symbolic obsessed with destruction and thanatos: a theme of resistance to death-dealing in the name of religion. Through the passion for transformation newness enters the world and makes its creatures sing.

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[4] There have been some notable exceptions: Spinoza among the philosophers; and medieval women mystics like Julian of Norwich.

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