Contemplative Practice and the Therapy of Mimetic Desire

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I would like to begin this essay by sharing an intuition. It is an intuition requiring much fuller development, but I see myself making a modest contribution to it here—and that is the prospect of integrating mimetic theory with Christian contemplative practice. Such integration would, I imagine, be the beginning of something very ancient and very new.

I am aware of some promising developments in this direction,[1] but my conviction is that its potential is barely tapped. It would probably be too much to suggest that such integration could result in a distinctive "school" of spirituality, though that is not inconceivable. Perhaps a better analogy for what I envision can be found in the emerging field of Contemplative Studies, with which some readers may be familiar. A highly interdisciplinary field that is just now reaching a critical mass in terms of publications, institutes, curricular initiatives, and workshops, Contemplative Studies brings together a host of disciplines, including cognitive neuroscience, psychology, pedagogy, medicine, philosophy, and religious studies, in order to investigate the possibilities of human transformation through the cultivation of mindfulness, empathy, and compassion.[2] One striking feature about this movement is the effort to

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combine third- and first-person perspectives. While drawing upon the natural and social sciences for understanding human cognition and behavior, explicit value is given to the experiential insights gained by practitioners of the ascetico-contemplative life. The image of a Buddhist monk meditating with EEG electrodes on his scalp, or a Catholic nun praying while having her brain scanned by fMRI technology might be overly simple representations of what goes on in Contemplative Studies these days, but they convey something essential about it, which is the effort to marshal a broad range of disciplines, both scientific and humanistic, in order to understand and appropriate ancient contemplative practices for our contemporary age.

Those familiar with the work of René Girard (and the cottage industry that has grown up around it the past three and a half decades) know what I mean by describing mimetic theory as a "one-stop shop" for interdisciplinary work. It may be somewhat hyperbolic to claim that Girard is the "new Darwin of the human sciences"[3], as does Michel Serres, but the sentiment captures the scientific bent of his engagement with literature, cultural anthropology, and religion, as Girard himself is keen to highlight.[4] It also highlights the remarkable explanatory power of mimetic theory, whose range proves as trenchant for reading the Gospels, Shakespeare, and Nietzsche as it does for engaging political theory, social psychology, and the sciences of human cognition and imitation.

Regarding the latter, one of the more promising developments in recent years has been the engagement between mimetic theory and experimental research in human imitation. No doubt this engagement has received a considerable boost by the discovery of so-called "mirror neurons" in the brain, which neuroscientists have linked to human capacities for learning, empathy, and social cognition. Such a discovery lends strong support for Girard's insistence that human imitation is largely pre-cognitive, and that what we call "the self" is in fact received from the other. The self is "we-centric," as Vittorio Gallese puts it.[5] But it is advisable not to make too much of mirror neurons, as if their discovery legitimates mimetic theory by identifying the neurological bases for human imitation, or that it can explain the full range of human imitation. What is more urgent, I believe, is to bring the bounty of experimental research in imitation across a variety of fields into interaction with the perspectives afforded by mimetic theory. Scott Garrels is right when he points out that, while much of the research on human imitation has greatly enhanced our understanding of social bonding, identification, and cognition, it has not sufficiently accounted for the conflict, misunderstanding, and violence it makes possible, even likely; and, of course, it is the central contribution of Girard's work to illuminate those darker dynamics.[6]

If I could identify a much-needed intervention in the emerging field of Contemplative Studies, it would be the introduction of mimetic theory to it. For in just the same way a Girardian perspective can bring a critical edge to the sciences of human cognition and imitation by unearthing the dynamics of human conflict that mimetic desire generates, so do I think that this same perspective can significantly enhance our understanding of contemplative practice. This is one major point I shall advance in what follows. I should add to this the significance that a Christian anthropology can make to the discussion. As Girard regularly emphasizes, his own insights into the dynamics of human desire are deeply informed by biblical texts, especially the Gospels, as well as the literary and theological traditions influenced by them. This is key because much of the work being done under the banner of Contemplative Studies is largely focused on secular appropriations of Buddhism. There are a number of reasons for this particular shape of the discussion, but in my view it represents a limitation. This is to say nothing negative about Buddhist contemplative traditions. On the contrary, there is an immense richness in these (and other) traditions from which to learn. Girard himself has occasionally made this point.[7] But Christianity is also rich with contemplative wisdom, despite the fact that many Christians themselves imagine they must consult other traditions for insights into such practices. It also stands to reason that such wisdom will take on a distinctive character on account of its Judeo-Christian roots.

With that said, it is also my conviction that an underdeveloped element in the bourgeoning field of mimetic theory is its application in the area of Christian spirituality in general and contemplative spirituality in particular. There is no question concerning Girard's influence in Christian theology, especially biblical hermeneutics, soteriology, and Christology, and there are many fine examples showing how mimetic theory can contribute to the lived wisdom of Christian faith. But it strikes me that mimetic theory's intense focus on interpretation—interpreting biblical texts, interpreting historical events, interpreting political dynamics, etc.—possesses an enormous strength that also points to one of its current limits. It remains a highly discursive and theoretical affair that stands in need of practical inhabitation through the cultivation of embodied skills. Granted that the theory itself is borne out of conversion, and even calls for conversion, its powerful insights are susceptible to remaining at an intellectual level unless actively incorporated into the practice of everyday life. And so I ask, how might Girard's work become partner in the *therapy* of mimetic desire, and how might we draw upon the "spiritual exercises"[8] within the Christian tradition, especially those of a more contemplative bent, in the conversion of desire?

I will offer some broad suggestions in response to this question, and I do so by engaging Christian contemplative practice for the way it draws our attention to the *non-discursive* dimensions of human awareness. My central argument is that the conversion mimetic theory calls for is greatly enriched by the discovery process that *is* contemplative practice, both in its more formal moments (the "practice of stillness") and in its cultivation in everyday life (the "practice of watchfulness").[9] Because contemplative practice helps open up human awareness to the pacific reality of God through a profound "letting go," it allows those who venture upon it to increasingly notice the interpersonal and social antagonisms that ordinarily structure our lives and to which we reactively cling in the assertion of identity. Contemplative practice would assist in purging us (*kenosis*) from acquisitive desire so that God's utterly creative desire may come to fuller expression in our lives through our wakeful participation in it (*theosis*). Though by no means a mechanical, manipulable, or inevitable process, contemplative practice may be thought of as a way to participate in a divine initiative that is always present to us as the very ground of our being, but to which we assent with the shape and texture of our lives, and ever in relationship with the host of others who co-constitute our "we-centric" selves.

WAYS OF INQUIRY: THEORETICAL AND CONTEMPLATIVE

With the field of Contemplative Studies as a reference point, the kind of integration between mimetic theory and Christian contemplative spirituality I envision involves the mutual influence of each. This means something more than the effort to *interpret* classic spiritual texts in light of mimetic theory, however helpful this may be. Rather, it means integration at a more fundamental level: by way of interdependent modes of inquiry.

Regarding mimetic theory, Girard's seminal insights have proven massively productive in setting forth a research program. Its status as a theory means precisely this: that its creative insights guide our looking.[10] It opens perspectives upon interpersonal, social, and cultural phenomena we might otherwise miss, or interpretively distort, and which are testable and revisable according to the theory's explanatory range and elegance. As Robert Hamerton-Kelly observes, its power as a theory lies in "its ability to guide our attention to the important phenomena in the field, to enable us to ask the right questions, formulate fruitful hypotheses, stimulate and guide research, and provoke countertheories. The elegance of a theory is the ratio between its complexity and its range of explanation. An elegant theory is a simple one with a wide range."[11] Girard's oeuvre

testifies to a "theory by which to work,"[12] one that constantly extends to this or that phenomenon, oftentimes with extraordinary perspicacity, sometimes with more ambiguous results, but in ways that bear comparison with evolutionary theory for its anchoring flexibility. This is the point of Serres's bold statement, and its aptness has only grown with more recent interdisciplinary ventures into evolutionary biology, ethnography, and the sciences of human imitation.[13]

There is a critical realism to Girard's work, and its explanatory interests can strike some readers as reductive for that reason. But it is important to stress both the interpretive flexibility of his work as well as its deeply intuitive character, which for many readers generates "aha" moments of understanding, i.e., moments of unexpected and enduring insight that allow for otherwise mystifying or heterogeneous phenomena to gain a new coherence and intelligibility. For those who persist with its insights, a surprising range of personal, social, and cultural dynamics becomes appreciably more tractable, such that it makes sense to speak of a "Girardian lens" or a "Girardian hermeneutic" through which to see. This "seeing" can become habitual, and undoubtedly many who adopt it notice their self-understanding shifting as a result. One reason for this is that the dynamics of desire it illuminates are not only discernible "out there" (historical events, social patterns, political movements, etc.) but "in here" (my own patterns of behavior, my own impulses and states of mind, my own way belonging to and reacting against others, etc.). There is a self-involving aspect to appropriating Girard's work that readily traverses third- and first-person perspectives.

Something of this self-involvement is captured in James Alison's remembrance of reading Girard for the first time. "I found myself being read like an open book," he writes, and "I have struggled ever since to put into words the fecundity of what continues to be a completely unexpected and extraordinary access to Christ that is absolutely concentric with, and illuminating of, the central tenets of the Catholic faith."[14] Girard himself has indicated how his work sprung from strong intuitions in the late 1950s, a time of deep intellectual conversion that touched off many years of work. "Everything came to me at once in 1959. I felt that there was a sort of mass that I've penetrated into little by little. . . . There's no 'Girardian system.' I'm teasing out a single, extremely dense insight."[15] Girard adds that his close reading of Cervantes, Shakespeare, Flaubert, Proust, Stendhal, and Dostoevsky during that time, which culminated in the publication of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (1961), prompted an intellectual conversion that only gradually seeped into his everyday life. It also coincided with returning to the Catholic faith of his youth.[16] It therefore strikes me as appropriate when Wolfgang Palaver describes Girard's

work as "deeply rooted in a mystic experience that opened his eyes to . . . [a] God who brings together renunciation and creative love."[17] Whether or not Girard would embrace the appellation of "mystic"—in some ways it is an unlikely association, and in any case he prefers being called "a sort of exegete"[18]—the point is that mimetic theory springs from deeply generative insights that can shift one's perception of God, self, and others. Reading Girard can be like an extended *consciousness examen* whereby the reader discovers his or her implication in conflictual mimesis and the expulsion of others in securing personal or group identity. This "unmasking" of desire is not only purgative, for by its light the reader might also notice habitual patterns of thinking and relating that require dramatic refashioning, i.e., conversion. There is a practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, that can spring from interiorizing the theory, and that lends itself toward a "way of life" rather than simply an interpretive stance from afar. This should not be surprising, given that mimetic theory grows out of the rich soil of the biblical traditions, and is one way of interpreting the reversal they would effect, which is a conversion from conflictual to pacific desire.

The amenability of mimetic theory to a "way of life" already implies that its integration with contemplative practice is not an alien imposition, for conversion is at the heart of contemplative practice as well. "Contemplation is," as Martin Laird puts it, "the soul's Copernican revolution."[19] It is a process of discovering the most fundamental fact of our lives, which is the creator God who indwells all things as their animating source and ground. This fact, which is "closer to us than we are to ourselves" (Saint Augustine), is one we are constantly in the habit of not noticing, or just as likely, misconstruing. In a way comparable to Girard's insistence that we frequently misrecognize (*méconnaissance*) the borrowed character of our desires, so does contemplative practice call attention to the chronic misapprehensions we have regarding the divine milieu we inhabit, as well as the dynamics of distorted desire that lead us to overlook the creative reality of God who is inmost to our desires. If Girard is correct that "peaceful identity lies at the heart of violent identity as its most secret possibility," then contemplation can be understood as a discovery process that allows this peaceful identity to reveal itself.[20]

Two preliminary points about this discovery process should be highlighted here. The first is that peaceful identity is not a matter of acquisition or conjuration. It is not the end result of any striving whatsoever, but is a free gift whose reception is made possible by God's indwelling Spirit. "Our discovery of God is," as Thomas Merton puts it, "God's discovery of us."[21] This implies a reversal of intentionality, or what in phenomenological terms might be called a "counter-experience."[22] It is not primarily my seeking after some sacred "object" through

the deployment of various spiritual techniques, much less the mustering of "soul force" in order to surmount a myriad of obstacles, for such effectively presumes God to be one among any number of other objects I might obtain. God would then come under the domain of "willfulness," when in fact a deep and abiding "willingness" most characterizes the reception of this gift.[23] Contemplative discovery is far more like *being approached*, of recognizing oneself (and indeed all of creation) as summoned into being out of a boundless generosity and love. The ultimate ground of my existence is not myself, nor the social other that in part constitutes me, but the sheer gratuity of God. Of course, this attitudinal willingness may seem like passivity, which would make the very notion of contemplative *practice* a contradiction in terms. But as will hopefully become clear, contemplative practice is a free response to, and participation in, God's self-giving initiative. It is the profoundest expression of our creaturely agency, not its abeyance.

The second point is that contemplative practice also involves a process of discerning the dynamics of human desire, i.e., its subterranean motions, its attachments and entanglements, its transcendental aspirations, etc. The manner of attention this entails bears all the marks of an affective intelligence fully engaged. It is a way of being wakeful, of opening one's attentional capacities in order to become skillful witnesses to the stirring of affections, the flow of inner chatter, and the patterns of mimetic reciprocity that bind us in conflict with others. It does this from a discerning "distance," or what the desert monastic traditions called *apatheia*. This term is subject to considerable misunderstanding, but there is nothing impassive or depersonalizing about it, though there is a nongrasping and nonpossessing quality of attention that is essential to it. As we shall see, there is a striking correlation between what Girard calls "creative renunciation" and the kind of contemplative practice that releases oneself and others from the mimetic comparisons and appropriative urges that lead to conflict. This is one reason why the contemplative life should not be imagined as the opposite of the active life but of the *reactive* life.[24] It is a practical wisdom whose manner of inquiry concerns everyday life.

INTO UNKNOWING: APPROACHING CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

In providing a few more preliminary remarks on contemplative practice, I will outline some of its basic features as nurtured within the desert monastic traditions of Christian antiquity and developed through the centuries in both the Christian East and West. I also have in mind several recent voices that have

made contemplative spirituality broadly available to laypersons today, and with whom such practices as "centering prayer" or variations of "the Jesus prayer" have become more familiar. Evelyn Underhill, Thomas Merton, John Chapman, Kallistos Ware, Basil Pennington, Thomas Keating, Maggie Ross, Belden Lane, and Martin Laird are among of them. Notwithstanding some of the important differences between these figures, what they share in common is an understanding of prayer as a venture into the unknown, and the conviction that growth in the life of prayer invites us to abandon the familiar ways and means to God in order to love what cannot be grasped.

I begin with a summary from Belden Lane, who captures something of the fierce desert landscapes within which the earliest experiments in Christian monasticism emerged:

> In the practice of contemplation, one comes eventually to embrace an apophatic anthropology, letting go of everything one might have imagined as constituting the self—one's thoughts, one's desire, all one's compulsive needs. Joined in the silence of prayer to a God beyond knowing, I no longer have to scramble to sustain a fragile ego, but discern instead the source and ground of my being in the fierce landscape of God. One's self is ever a tenuous thing, discovered only in relinquishment. I recognize it finally as a vast, empty expanse opening out onto the incomparable desert of God.[25]

As this quote indicates, contemplative practice takes with absolute seriousness what many of us might theoretically take to be the case, but that can only really be lived into, namely, the incomprehensibility of God. We may readily acknowledge that no *idea* of God coincides with the *reality* of God, and we may even be willing to have our images and concepts of God destabilized through the play of paradox, metaphor, and narrative subversion; but such strategies, as helpful and necessary as they are, will likely remain at the conceptual level and so with a presumption of comprehension, unless they are released through the practice of unknowing. Such unknowing is not a lack of awareness. It is not a matter blanking out one's affective and cognitive capacities or choking back edifying images and thoughts as they arise. It is, rather, the slow discovery of an awareness that is immeasurably deeper and far more capacious than the discursive activities that ordinarily preoccupy our attention and seem sufficient in representing reality to us. We are perpetually seduced into believing that our affective registrations and conceptual representations of phenomena capture their reality, whether ourselves, other persons, or God. Without being anti-intellectual, contemplative practice unsettles our tenacious grip on things by opening us up

to a more fundamental awareness, an abyss of awareness that is always there but we scarcely notice. We do not cling to this or that content *of* awareness when we pray thusly, but we abide within the very ground of awareness with simplicity of attention. "Preserve a loving attentiveness to God with no desire to feel or understand any particular thing concerning him," writes Saint John of the Cross, in simple summary of a practice that, when cultivated over time, slowly takes root.[26]

Lane's quote also highlights an important corollary to the incomprehensibility of God, namely, the incomprehensibility of the human person. The suggestive phrase "apophatic anthropology" underscores that contemplative practice entails a radical conversion in which we progressively let go of all the usual placeholders and mimetic comparisons that compose our makeshift identities. It calls for a painful but ultimately liberating *kenosis*, a purgation of the million and one ways our identities are constructed within the warp and woof mimetic reciprocity, and to which we cleave with deep-seated anxieties. One's thoughts, one's desires, one's needs: through contemplative prayer one learns to "free fall" into the vastness of God and slowly surrender the compulsion to form identity in rivalrous relationship with others, including God.

While such self-emptying can be terrifying for the ego—as terrifying as death, which in fact it is—nothing could be more freeing for the person. The reason is because of all our vulnerabilities as creatures, none runs deeper than our ontological dependence upon God, with whom there is no vying for being at all. God is not some power against which we must strive for existence. God is not a rival to the creature in any way, is not some "Big Other" with whom identity becomes a matter of contention or negotiation. Because my identity is not something I must attain apart from God, but rather is a gift arising from God's unfathomable depths, I can learn to accept my creaturely poverty and "sink" into my "nothingness" without restraint, resentment, or fear.[27] Indeed, with God—and God alone—I may receive my creaturely contingency as "the gift of being" and "relax into spaciousness and being held by a power greater and more trustable than our own, which we call the gift of faith."[28] Rowan Williams beautifully delineates the relationship between this faith-filled acceptance of our creatureliness—the sheer *fact* that we exist on account of God's free initiative—and the discovery process that is contemplative prayer:

> To say, "I exist (along with the whole of my environment) at God's will, I am unconditionally dependent upon God" means [that] . . . my existence in the world, including my need to imagine this as personal, active and giving, is "of God"; my search for an identity is something rooted in God's freedom, which grounds the sheer

> thereness of the shared world I stand in. . . . Before the literally inconceivable fact of the divine difference and the divine liberty we have no words except thanksgiving that, because God's life is what it is, we are. . . . The contemplation of God, which is among other things the struggle to become the kind of person who can without fear be open to the divine activity, would not be possible if God were seen as an agent exercising power over others, bending them to the divine will. Contemplative prayer classically finds its focus in the awareness of God at the centre of the praying person's being—and, simultaneously, God at the centre of the whole world's being: a solidarity in creatureliness.[29]

Note here that contemplation is not a flight from creatureliness, as some may suppose, but its acceptance. To be creaturely at all is to participate in God's gratuitous creativity, and to venture upon contemplative practice is to become wakeful to that inexhaustible fact. Theologically speaking, contemplative practice concerns the loving mystery of God and our participation in that mystery. It implies nothing other than the process of *mystagogy* to which all Christians are called by virtue of their baptism. It is a way of living into the mystery of salvation that has been granted to us in Christ. By this practice, one learns how to say "yes" through the very pores of his or her being, out of the depths of consciousness and will, depths that are as unsearchable as God's own wisdom (Rom. 11:33). In one respect, it is quite accurate to say that this "yes" of prayer is the most fundamental act a human person can make. It is, as Karl Rahner puts it, the "fundamental option" of our lives, this profound allowance of God's creative and reconciling activity within and among us.[30] But in another respect, which is in no sense contrary to the first, this "yes" to God is God saying "yes" *in* us—through us and for us. As the psalmist says, "deep calls upon deep" (Psalm 42:7). Or as Saint Paul puts it, "the Spirit of God searches all things, even the depths of God" (1 Cor. 2:10). The Spirit intercedes for us in our weakness with "groans too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Contemplative prayer is thus "in the Spirit," for it is a response made possible by an initiative that is not our own but made prior to us, and which pours itself in us as the possibility of our free assent. It is not so much "I" who autonomously prays, writes Sarah Coakley, but "God (the Holy Spirit) who prays in me, and so answers the eternal call of the 'Father', drawing me by various painful degrees into the newly expanded life of 'Sonship.' There is, then, an inherent reflexivity in the divine, a ceaseless outgoing and return of the desiring God."[31]

What this brief theological sketch hopefully highlights is that while contemplative prayer leads us beyond images and words in order to plunge us into the silence of God, this silence is not an inert or abstract absence, and neither

is it opposed to words or images. Rather, it is a discovery of the creative ground of the human person, and indeed the generous wellspring of all that is. It is a dynamic and self-communicating silence to which we respond with our very lives.

THE BINDING AND UNBINDING OF DESIRE

In discussing contemplative practice more concretely, I wish to integrate some of the core insights of mimetic theory for the sake of mutual illumination. As will become clear, I find Girard's work to be indispensible for understanding contemplative practice as a way of conversion. It is a "school of desire" that invites human persons into new ways of knowing, desiring, and relating. Contemplation might be described as follows: as *the reception of and wakeful participation in God's "pacific desire," prepared for through the radical emptying of "acquisitive desire," and expressed in human life as wisdom and compassion*. Readers of Girard's work will recognize some of this terminology,[32] but I should emphasize again that contemplative practice offers something indispensable to mimetic theory as well, namely, a resource for the therapy of desire that mimetic theory calls for, but that is not sufficiently elaborated in terms of transformative practices, i.e., "spiritual exercises."

The promise of this connection can be made clearer by referring to Jean-Michel Oughourlian's work, *The Genesis of Desire*. A long-time collaborator with Girard, Oughourlian observes that the volatility of mimetic desire "requires self-control and a careful, ubiquitous, never ending asceticism. And it is often difficult in daily life to maintain this sort of constantly watchful attentiveness."[33] Later he writes that mimetic rivalry between human beings can only be avoided through a "watchfulness [that] must be constant and carried out with full consciousness. It is a form of ascesis, and it calls for a real conversion. It is this that is perhaps the greatest difficulty."[34] The reference to *ascesis*, or "training," is quite suggestive, and one cannot help but think in this context of spiritual disciplines that might be guided and informed by mimetic theory, and vice versa. Even more suggestive for my purposes, Oughourlian writes that while mimetic desire is universal, I can choose to "resist being swept along by my desire, to let it flow through me without my submitting myself to its motion."[35] This language of allowing desire to "flow through me" is quite close to the practical insight at the heart of contemplative practice, though Oughourlian does not elaborate upon this specific connection. What might such an elaboration look like?

To begin, it will be useful to summarize a core insight of mimetic theory.[36] A basic thesis Girard develops is that human desire is intrinsically mimetic: it is mediated to us by the desires of others, whom we imitate. We "desire according to the desire of the other," as the Girardian refrain goes, and with a decisive counterstatement to the "romantic lie" of the autonomous self. Objects that elicit interest from us, and that command our attention as to pursue, gain the aura desirability because others desire them. The desiring gaze cast by others toward an object alerts us to its now "transfigured" existence. Desirability lies not in the object, per se, or what we take as its inherent properties, even if it seems this way to us, but in the value others confer upon it. Objects "light up" within a perceptual field and gain the definition they have for us on account of the social other. As the sciences of human imitation have roundly demonstrated, my very sense of self from infancy on arises from a densely interwoven nexus of interpersonal, social, and cultural others who precede and constitute me, and who come to expression through my behavioral and discursive patterns. Even my inner discourse is populated by a host of others, whether I recognize this or not (usually not). Girard's insistence on the anteriority of the social other does not deny human freedom, or reduce human persons to mere automata, though it does emphasize the highly interdependent and contextual way we becomes "selves" at all. We are "interdividuals," as it were[37]: emergent from a vast realm of alterity and inhabited by innumerable others (familial, peer, social, cultural, etc.) whose desires and comportments we tacitly mirror, appropriate, negotiate, and creatively refashion in the tentative project of becoming.

This "we-centricity" of the self is a structurally ambiguous affair. On the one hand, mimesis allows for the remarkably social and cooperative character of our species. We are creatures whose shared intentionality makes our need for belonging especially pronounced. Among other things, shared intentionality allows for the accrual and transmission of embodied and cognitive skills over time, which is another way of describing the "ratchet effect" of culture.[38] In this sense, mimesis is a fundamental good. It is how we become human. On the other hand, the mimetic character of desire is what makes us susceptible to conflict and violence—more than any other species we know. The reason for this volatility can be schematized as follows: when two or more subjects seek to appropriate a common object of desire, whether that object occupies a physical space (toy, car, land, oil, etc.) or is a non-physical good (power, prestige, distinction in taste, etc.), each subject models desire for the other and together are drawn into a "bind" of conflictual proximity. The more I claim the object as my own, the more it becomes desirable to the other, and vice versa. The more I reach for a shared object of desire, the more this sets off an "appropriative urge"

in the other, with whom I am in now caught in a feedback loop of reciprocal imitation.[39] Mimetic desire can thus shift into an "acquisitive" mode and become a matter of competitive struggle with others, as each subject works to displace the other in the object's attainment. The other who models my desire becomes my obstacle. We are model-obstacles to one another.

The economy and force with which mimetic theory is able to illuminate such "passions" as envy, anger, resentment, shame, despair, and snobbery is breathtaking. Its power to explain a broad range of human conflict, based upon the model-obstacle dynamic just schematized, constitutes an indispensible diagnostic tool that is just as applicable to classic treatises on spiritual discernment, such as one might find in *The Praktikos* of Evagrius Ponticus or the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, as it is to understanding the dynamics of consumerism, political rivalries, and the escalation of war. The other who models my desire becomes the obstacle in its attainment: with this simple formula, which in fact is a hard-won "novelistic truth," Girard has identified the potential bind of all mimetic desire, and with it has elaborated a crucial insight that is readily confirmed when looking through its optic.

Importantly, this optic can be internalized in such a way as to help us notice, and potentially guard against, its near-inexorable working in our everyday lives. This is the central purpose of Oughourlian's appeal to *ascesis*. Through training, he suggests, and with an ever-watchful eye attuned to desire's shared provenance, we can learn to observe, anticipate, release, and creatively refashion the conflictual patterns that arise between self and other virtually unawares. We can become increasingly discerning witnesses to the way appropriative urges manifest themselves in us, or how we become the occasion of scandal (e.g., envy, jealously, and hatred) for others. Of course, this skillful reworking of desire is not something we can simply do on our own, by dint of cleverness or force of will. Oughourlian's suggestion has far more to do with willingness than with willfulness. By saying that I can resist being swept along by my desire, and let it flow without succumbing to its motion, he is extending Girard's account of "creative renunciation" (*renoncement créateur*).[40] This is not the renunciation of desire as such, but only of acquisitive and conflictual desire. It is, in fact, a form of positive mimesis, of nonviolent imitation. It is precisely this form of imitation that, according to Girard, is at the heart of the Gospels.

> In the Gospels, everything is imitation, since Christ himself seeks to imitate and be imitated. . . . Christ says: "Imitate me as I imitate the Father." The rules of the Kingdom of God are not at all utopian: *if you want to put an end to mimetic rivalry,*

> *give way completely to your rival*. You nip rivalry in the bud. We're not talking about a political program, this is a lot simpler and more fundamental. If someone is making excessive demands on you, he's already involved in mimetic rivalry, he expects you to participate in the escalation. So, to put a stop to it, the only means is to do the opposite of what escalation calls for: meet the excessive demand twice over. If you've been told to walk a mile, walk two; if you've been hit on the left check, offer up the right. The Kingdom of God is nothing but this, but that doesn't mean it's easily accessible.[41]

Understood thusly, the Kingdom of God, and the Sermon on the Mount that is so central to it, is not really a set of commands comprising a moralistic doctrine. Rather, it is the elaboration of a way of desiring—an anthropology, and indeed a "way of life"—that is alternative to the patterns of reciprocity that keep human beings agonistically bound to one another. When Jesus says, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," he is, as Alison puts it, "offering a contrast between this way of being, this pattern of desire which runs us, and how God desires. . . . Jesus is making a point about a pattern of desire which is *not in any way at all* run by what the other is doing to it; which is not in reaction in any way at all, but is purely creative, dynamic, outward going, and able to bring things into being and flourishing."[42] This is why renunciation is *creative*. It allows for new things to happen. It allows the other "to be." Its "indifference" to mimetic reciprocity is not a listless disregard of the other; on the contrary, it is the freeing of the other, a "letting loose" of the other precisely for his or her well-being. I renounce being a rival to my neighbor in order that I may truly *love* my neighbor. As Alison further points out, this is made possible through our participation in God's own love, which involves no reciprocity whatsoever. Because God is capable of being for *all* of us without being a rival to any *one* of us—this is precisely what God's unconditional love means—we too might be inducted into God's pacific desire so as to relate to our neighbor with genuine freedom and compassion:

> If the "social other" tends to teach us a pattern of desire such that what is normal is reciprocity, which of course includes retaliation, then Jesus presents God as what I call "the Other other," one who is entirely outside any being moved, pushed, offended or any retaliation of any sort at all. On the contrary, God is able to be *towards* each one of us with ever being *over against* any one of us. God is in no sort of rivalry at all with any one of us; he is not part of the same order of being as us, which is how God can create and move us without displacing us.[43]

With Alison's reference to "the Other other," it is perhaps possible now to better ascertain the significance of *apatheia* (or "detachment") in the contemplative traditions of both East and West. Again, while this term is subject to considerable misunderstanding, especially when it is assumed that Christian contemplative traditions simply adopted Platonic and Stoic ideals wholesale, a far more helpful reading—one inspired by the focus that mimetic theory can bring to the discussion—is to underscore the importance of non-reciprocity to it. It is not, as some suppose, withdrawing into an unshakeable, interior citadel that buffers the self from life's mutability. Much less is it the effort to shore up identity in contrast to one's embodied relationship with others. Rather, it is the "emptying" of the need to seize upon and cling to markers of distinction that are formed in the constant push and pull of mimetic reciprocity, as if our creaturely contingency could finally be secured through our identification with, or displacement of, the social other. It is learning how to become creatively "indifferent" (or "non-reactive") to the riot of mimetic comparisons that deceive us into treating them as bearers of absolute substance. It is becoming attentive to, while learning to "let go" of, the mimetic binds that our shared intentionality with others is liable to produce. And importantly, *apatheia* has nothing at all to do with isolating oneself from others through a spurious solitude, or imagining that one could renounce mimetic desire as such. (Such would amount to a negative form of imitation anyway.) It is, in fact, a way of participating in God's own pacific desire, which, because it is not structured by rivalry, can help us love our neighbor more truly—precisely *as* our neighbor. As Evagrius puts it, "*agape* is the progeny of *apatheia*."[44]

THE PRACTICE OF STILLNESS

Earlier I quoted Martin Laird to the effect that the opposite of the contemplative life is not the active life but the *reactive* life. We can now unpack this enormously important statement in light of two kinds of contemplative practice.

The first is what Laird calls the "practice of stillness," or the practice of non-discursive meditation. While many forms of Christian prayer and meditation are discursive, in that they involve the active use of the imagination, the practice of stillness is a non-discursive form of meditation that immerses the one who prays in deep interior silence. It is not at all contrary to discursive forms of prayer and meditation, and in fact is one of their culminating fruits. There are a variety of means by which to ease the mind into this stillness, including what today is called "centering prayer," which coordinates attention and breath

with the rhythmic utterance of a simple word or phrase. Such is a version of the "Jesus prayer," whose long history within Orthodox Christianity goes back to the ancient monastic traditions of the desert. The basic principle of the prayer is that the repeated word or phrase gathers attention by occupying the mind's tendency to wander. The word or phrase is not meant to generate reflection or meaning, but instead serves as a point of focus for sustained attention. By returning over and over again to the word or phrase, gently, and with no need to analyze or react to any thoughts as they arise, the mind's tendency to generate commentary can be loosened so that what remains is a deep, yet wakeful repose. Over time, the word or phrase gradually disappears and, like the frame of an open door, allows the heart and mind to enter a vast, luminous expanse.

To the extent that contemplative practice of this sort involves some degree of skill and habit-formation, it is appropriately understood as an *ascesis* of heart and mind. But—and this is vitally important—contemplative practice is less a "doing" than it is a profound "allowing." It does not so much strive after a goal or outcome as it learns to release the striving and acquisitiveness that ordinarily structure attention. As Williams puts it, it lets God *happen*, and for this reason should not be considered a matter of technique.[45] Within the welcoming depths of silent awareness there is nothing "to do" at all, no struggle "to be." There is no need to grasp at the swirl of self-images, and no need to project upon others my deficiencies or vulnerabilities. There is nothing at all upon which I may prop myself, and so I simply relinquish everything in the simplicity of faith:

> Contemplative practice doesn't acquire anything. In that sense, and an important sense, it is not a technique but a surrendering of deeply imbedded resistances that allows [God's Spirit] within gradually to reveal itself as a simple, fundamental fact. . . . We discover in the process that there is more depth within us than we ever dreamt. There is not only chaos, confusion, emotional attachment, anxiety and anger's nettled memory; not just the marvel of discursive reason, imaginative insight, and unconscious insight, but also an abyss of awareness that is always flowing with bright obscurity, grounding all these mental processes, one with all and one with God.[46]

It must be added that this immersion into silence does not occur all at once. It entails seasons of practice. It is a slow process of discovery. It does not promise to turn us into saints overnight, as though by some alchemical process, and neither should it be approached as a method to generate a special class of experiences some call "mystical," even if many of the saints and mystics of the Christian tradition were well acquainted with this form of prayer. More importantly, and

modestly, it can gradually awaken us to a depth of awareness that we usually do not notice, almost as though we were bent upon not noticing, and that might give us access to a new reserve in becoming "dispassionate" (i.e., non-reactive) witnesses to our thoughts and desires as they arise.

And this is one of the most fundamental (and initially disconcerting) revelations of this practice: it shows us that our attention is almost always absorbed by the prattle that courses through it. It reveals to us just how suggestible our minds really are. We are constantly riveted by mental loops, lured by impulses and half-formed thoughts, crowded with voices—whether our own or someone else's, we can hardly say—and in general swept along by the surface torrent of ideational debris as to leave us estranged from the pacific depths of awareness. With just a few moments of sitting still in this practice, we will discover that our minds are like a wild cocktail party of which we are the slightly embarrassed hosts, as Laird colorfully puts it.[47] If ever there were a way to directly observe the "novelistic truth" of which Girard speaks—i.e., the truth that our desires are borrowed from others and operate in us at a pre-reflexive level—the simple practice of paying attention to the rush of one's inner discourse is surely it. Just who or what is ventriloquizing me? This is one of the questions contemplative practice will inevitably raise.

But more important is abiding with the contents *of* awareness with simplicity of attention. With patience and persistence, the practice of stillness can allow us to "recollect" our dispersed attention; and as this happens, we can become dispassionate witness to the thoughts and desires streaming through us, as though watching particles swirling in a snow globe. We come to notice the mental chatter that mimetic comparisons produce within us—resentments, hurts, jealousies, shame, fears, anger, self-justifications, etc.—and that are expressed in our lives without considered consent. The key to the practice is that we simply *notice* these thoughts and desires, without judging, without grasping, and without fighting. We do not generate commentary on them, labeling them "good" or "bad," or analyzing their contents. There is no need to manipulate them or drive them away. Though there may be good reason for analysis at some point, especially when noticing patterns in them, all that this practice invites us to do is simply acknowledge them and release them into silence. They will settle on their own. When one's attention becomes snagged by this or that image, impression, or thought, the practice of stillness asks only that we return to the prayer word or phrase and release, over and over again, gently, and with no self-haranguing over whether one is praying "rightly" or "successfully." As *The Cloud of Unknowing* wisely puts it, we simply "look over the shoulders" of our

distractions so that they no longer hook our attention or stir our affections.[48] It is a subtle art, perhaps the subtlest of them all, but it turns out to be transformative if we persist with it.

THE PRACTICE OF WATCHFULNESS

The second kind of contemplative practice that can help us become free from the reactive life is what Laird calls the "practice of watchfulness." This practice is complementary to the more formal practice of stillness, and in fact should be seen as its extension into everyday life. It is historically related to practices of "watchfulness" (or "vigilance") developed in the proto-monastic traditions of antiquity, and it bears some comparison to practices of "mindfulness" found in a variety of traditions, both religious and secular. Perhaps what most makes the desert monastic practice of watchfulness distinctive, however, is its emphasis upon love of neighbor and its sensitivity to the self-deceptive mechanisms of judgment that foil such love. This sensitivity is no doubt related to its rootedness in the biblical traditions, especially the Gospels, where great emphasis is given to unmasking the mechanisms of rivalry and social expulsion.

One of the ways Laird characterizes the "reactive life" is as follows: "highly habituated emotional styles that keep us constantly reacting to life like victimizing victims, ever more convinced that the [internal] videos that dominate and shape our awareness are in fact true."[49] Though not referring to mimetic theory, Laird's account similarly highlights the vicious reciprocity that our constant comparisons with others create, and upon which our hearts constantly feed, often despite our best efforts to escape them. Our awareness is filled with "internal videos" that perpetually play in the raucous theatres of our minds. Clusters of impressions and chains of thoughts phenomenalize themselves one after another, vividly and with a semi-autonomous aspect, as though they have a life of their own. And to a great extent they do, which is why much of the desert monastic literature refers to "thoughts" as "demons." Without so much as our conscious assent, shapeshifting thoughts grind away at social scripts we have interiorized, microdramas in which we play out scenarios of comparison and rivalrous exchanges with others, often in ways that produce an array of afflictive emotions, e.g., fear, anger, resentment, craving, etc. It is this afflictive aspect that makes us especially prone to reactivity: we find ourselves reacting to their emotive force, swept along by volatile energies that leave us more like alienated spectators to our lives rather than wakeful participants.

The practice of watchfulness, as Laird adapts it from the monastic literature of Christian antiquity, especially Evagrius and Hesychios, has little to do with mustering some kind of "soul force" in order to overpower afflictive emotions, as though all one needs to do is impose rational control over one's affective life. Such "mind over matter" approaches have almost nothing to commend them, and in the end only prolong an exhausting reliance upon a regime of willfulness. Instead, the practice of watchfulness would have us become *witnesses* to our internal videos and the afflictive emotions they produce. "The fruit of this practice," Laird writes, "is that we disentangle ourselves from the afflictive emotion without denying it, without repressing it, without acting out."[50] This way of putting it connects precisely with Oughourlian's suggestion that we cultivate "watchful attentiveness" over our desires, noticing their movements with an abiding calm, and letting conflictual desire "flow through me without submitting myself to its motion." This is not easy to do, but it becomes easier through practice, through the regular cultivation of an attention that simultaneously notices and releases. It is similar to the basic practice of contemplative prayer itself, but in this case we are talking about a habit of attention, or an everyday mindfulness, that is importable to virtually any life scenario.

Laird explores the practice of watchfulness in light of a number of afflictive emotions, including anger, envy, boredom, shame, depression, chronic pain, and fear. In each case, the skill of observation and discernment he recommends is similar. "First, turn around and meet the afflictive emotion with stillness. Without a dedicated practice this won't be possible. Second, allow [the afflictive emotion] to be present. Third, let go of the commentary on the [the afflictive emotion]. This third element is the most challenging."[51] Notice here that this approach does not deny the afflictive emotion or wrestle with it, as this only gives it greater power. Instead one looks directly at it, but with an attention that allows it to be present without commentary. This way of noticing does not indulge the afflictive emotion, does not give it the opportunity to spiral out and extend its hooks. It directly acknowledges the afflictive emotion while submitting it to deeper reserve of attention, which is to say, a silent witness. And it is this capacity for *witnessing* that opens up a new freedom with respect to it:

> This watchfulness is not our superego's monitor, ever ready to shame us into conformity to an internalized idea of what holiness is supposed to look like. Watchfulness is a contemplative practice that awakens and refines the silent witness within each of us. It is free of all ego strategies that hold onto what we like or push away what we don't like. It is a grounding, vigilant receptivity. This witness, that which is *aware* of

> the afflictive emotion, that which is *aware* of clinging to it or fleeing from it, is itself free of the affliction, free of the clinging, free of the fleeing.[52]

THE FIRST STONE: CATCHING OURSELVES IN THE ACT

With this overview of two kinds of contemplative practice in place, I intend now to make one final connection with mimetic theory as it concerns the love of neighbor. This connection is most germane to the early monastic traditions within Christianity, as is evidenced by the significance they give to not judging one's neighbor. Indeed, it is remarkable to note just how many of the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers are dedicated to the temptation of judging others, which shows their sensitivity to the tendency to scapegoat others by projecting one's conflicts and contradictions onto them. With keenest insight into the wily ways of this all-too-human mechanism, such sayings take Christ's commandment that we not judge others as the basis for a desert anthropology that turns mimetic rivalry on its head. By calling attention to the way our judgments of others mask our own hearts of darkness, our tendency to condemn others is subverted through "repentance," or what the Gospels call *metanoia*. The point of this dramatic reversal is to take an unvarnished look at myself in order to perceive the sin that locks me into conflict with others and gets masked by judging others of *their* sin.

One of the most memorable exegetical exercises in all of Girard's work is his brilliant reading of Jesus's advocacy for the woman accused of adultery. "Whoever is without sin among you, let him cast at her the first stone" (John 8:7). The scene depicts the scapegoat mechanism in its pure form: a crowd has gathered around a woman accused of adultery, and through its hypnotic polarization around her is poised to expel a "contaminant" from its midst. This all-against-one dynamic has served to generate social cohesion from time immemorial, and its work of projecting upon some expelled "other" is about to play out once again in stereotypical fashion. Jesus's intervention into the mob scene is in fact invited by some of its members who have asked Jesus to say something about what is to take place. "Master, this woman was surprised in the act of adultery. Moses commanded us in the Law to stone such women. Now what do you say about it?" Jesus's response is at first quite unusual: he bends down and starts writing in the dirt with his finger, twice—the first time before inviting anyone without sin to cast the first stone, and the second time immediately following, as one by one the crowd slowly begins to disperse.

"Jesus remained, alone with the woman, who was still there. Then, standing up again, he said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, Lord,' she answered. 'Neither do I condemn you,' Jesus said. 'Go and sin no more'" (vv. 6–11).

There are several masterful strokes in Girard's exegesis, not least his emphasis upon *the first stone*. Who will throw it? The point is not merely rhetorical on Jesus's part, for it turns out that the first stone is the most difficult to throw. Why? "Because it is the only one without a *model*."[53] Once the first stone is thrown, it is inevitable that others will follow. Once that critical threshold has been reached, the pent-up energies of the others come rushing through. It is nothing less than violent contagion, and its self-organizing momentum carries out its grim task by deflecting any self-critical attention away from its righteous executioners. Jesus's response is therefore quietly subversive, for rather than hurling condemnations at the crowd, which would only enervate it all the more, he insinuates himself precisely at the most sensitive point in the drama, which is the ambiguous inertia just prior to the first stone's casting. By calling to attention the self-implication of guilt on the part of the mob's members, which in itself is an enlightenment of the highest order, Jesus subtly reverses the direction of the mob's accusatory momentum and diffuses its dangerous animus.

While many commentators have wondered what Jesus was writing in the dirt as the drama unfolded, Girard suggests that he wasn't writing gnomic messages, or quoting a favorite passage of scripture, but was bent down and shrewdly occupied so as to not look his challengers in the eye. He did not want to provoke them into a duel, which would only accelerate mimetic reciprocity. Instead, he diverted his gaze in order to allow his words of self-examination to echo in their minds and give the accusers a chance to snap out of their collective hallucination. He created an interval of sobriety so that they might truly consider that *first stone*.

> He gives the best among those in the crowd the time to hear what he's saying and to examine themselves. If their self-examination is real it cannot fail to uncover the circular relationship between victim and executioner. The scandal that the woman represents in their eyes is already present in those men, and they're projecting it on her in order to rid themselves of it, which is all the easier in that she is truly guilty. To stone a victim willingly, you have to believe that you are different from that victim, and I note that mimetic convergence is accompanied by an illusion of divergence. It's this real convergence combined with the divergence that triggers what Jesus is seeking to prevent, the scapegoat mechanism.[54]

What I wish to suggest in light of this passage—both the Gospel passage and Girard's commentary upon it—is that the contemplative practices of stillness and watchfulness are crucial for creating intervals of sobriety within the push and pull of mimetic reciprocity. Even if we might not find ourselves with physical stones in hand, the way we accusatorily project upon others our fears and insecurities, or the way we define ourselves individually or in groups by polarizing ourselves over and against others, always with righteous indignation, or the way we make snap judgments of our neighbors in order to mask our own contradictions and implication in guilt: all of these dynamics are "better hidden" but "structurally identical" to the very scapegoat process to which Jesus calls attention.[55] And notice the way he calls attention to it: not with a retaliatory accusation, which would only be tit-for-tat, but with a summons to self-awareness. We are to catch ourselves in the act of projection, slow it down, question its infallibility, and, if possible, suspend its vicious automaticity.

To reverse the mechanism of projection is an act of repentance, which is very different from manufacturing a guilt complex or generating toxic shame that deceives us into believing we are not worth loving. Such would only mirror the cycle of mimetic comparisons, without undoing them. Self-condemnation is not repentance in any way, for the kind of repentance Christ calls us to "unbinds" us or "sets us loose" from all condemnation and mutual recrimination. We are to recognize that no one's failings are just his or her own, but that we share them together, and in fact must bear with one another our weaknesses and the sufferings they cause.

Laird helpfully points out that contemplative practice is one way to gain skill in "letting go" of our condemnations of self and other, and therefore a way of learning how to love. This is so because contemplative practice allows us to witness our thoughts and desires, discerningly and dispassionately, while releasing them into the depths of silence without judgment and commentary. When cultivated over time, the habit of heart and mind it fosters better enables us to notice judgmental thoughts as they arise—in "real time," not just in retrospect. And that is the first crucial step: it is not willfully deciding to avoid judging others, but more simply trying to "catch ourselves in the act."[56] Like Jesus bending down to write in the dirt in order to extend the interval between the crowd's judgmental thoughts and its action upon them, the practice of watchfulness disentangles us from the temptation to judge others and our identification with it. We do this without denying the temptation's presence, without driving it away, and without generating commentary upon it. When catching yourself judging another, Laird suggests, simply let the judgment become a reminder to

return to silence, to an awareness that is far deeper than any particular thought or emotional reaction you may be having. Let it flow through you.

"This is easier said than done," Laird readily admits, "but with practice the tables begin to turn."[57] In the spirit of desert monastic literature, Laird maintains that when worked into one's practice, the temptation to judge our neighbor can be a source of "resistance training" whereby its accusatory momentum is redirected as compassion for our neighbor.[58] We resist seeking to differentiate ourselves *from* our neighbor through our judgments, which is just how Girard defines the essence of deceit—i.e., the false distinction of myself from the other, with whom I remain in mimetic proximity—and instead we find in our tendency to judge the occasion for discovering our shared frailties and sufferings with others. Judgments become a potential source of communication and identification *with* my neighbor, a source of empathy and compassion. They allow us to recall, over and over again, that the therapy of mimetic desire is "essentially corporate" in nature. As Williams puts it: "Our life is with the neighbor. And if everybody else were indeed taken away, we would not actually have a clue about who we 'really' were."[59]

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have outlined ways in which mimetic theory and contemplative practice might become mutually informative and enriching in the therapy (or conversion) of mimetic desire. With reference to the emerging field of Contemplative Studies by way of analogy, I argued that integration at the level of inquiry allows for first- and third-person perspectives to work together in illuminating the conflictual binds of human desire while envisioning the way these conflictual patterns may be released and transformed through participation in God's own creative and pacific desire. To this extent, such integration can be thought of as a "school of desire" that draws upon the insights of the natural and social sciences, along with those of a more philosophical and theological orientation, in order to assist in the transformation of the human person in view of our true vocation. The bold interdisciplinarity of mimetic theory has much to do with this creative possibility, although, as I have also stressed, mimetic theory stands in need of development and deepening through the kinds of skills and practices that are characteristic of the Christian contemplative tradition.

I have focused on the non-discursive variety in this essay, but a host of other practices that make up the diverse landscape of Christian spirituality are no less deserving of attention. Indeed, it bears emphasizing that non-discursive forms

of Christian prayer, as they have developed over many centuries, are contextualized within a broader Christian tradition that includes ritual practice, narrative imagination, ethical growth, and communal formation. The discussion of the practices of stillness watchfulness is by no means to suggest that Christian spirituality is an individual-first, community-second affair. The exact opposite is true. For the Christian, the spiritual life can never be a Plotinian "flight of the alone to the Alone," for the God it encounters is a self-communicating reality who, through Word and Spirit, is revealed as loving communion. To participate in the triune life of God is, as Coakley was previously quoted as saying, to participate in a reflexive movement that is ceaselessly outgoing and returning, one whose creative motion precedes and makes possible our assent. In this way, the "we-centrity" of the self may be understood as bearing the *image* of God, just as our growth in welcoming one another out of hospitality and compassion indicates our *likeness* to God. Participation in the self-communicating life of God means being ever open to my neighbor who co-constitutes me, of discovering *in* my neighbor the very ground and source that graciously gives all things their being.

NOTES

1. James Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence," *On Being Liked* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2003), 1–16; James Alison, "Worship in a Violent World," *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-in* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 33–49; John P. Edwards, "Being Freed from the Illusion of the Enemy: James Alison on Contemplative Prayer and Eucharistic Liturgy," in *Proceedings of the Theology Institute* (2009): 1–16; Jim Grote, "The Imitation of Christ as Double-Bind: Toward a Girardian Spirituality," *Cistercian Studies* 29, no. 4 (1994): 485–98; Andrew Marr, *Tools for Peace: The Spiritual Craft of St. Benedict and René Girard* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2007); Kevin Mongrain, "Theologians of Spiritual Transformation: A Proposal for Reading René Girard through the Lenses of Hans Urs von Balthasar and John Cassian," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 1 (2012): 81–111; Brian D. Robinette, "Deceit, Desire, and the Desert: René Girard's Mimetic Theory in Conversation with Early Christian Monastic Practice," in *Violence, Transformation, and the Sacred*, ed. Margaret R. Pfeil and Tobias L. Winright (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012): 130–43.

2. The published material related to Contemplative Studies is quite extensive. The following are only a few representative works: James H. Austin, *Zen and the Brain* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); Richard Davidson and Anne Harrington, eds., *Visions of Compassion: Western Scientists and Tibetan Buddhists Examine Human Nature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman, eds., *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality,*

Mysticism, Religious Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009); Anne Harrington and Arthur Zajonc, eds., *The Dalai Lama at MIT* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy, Theo C. Meyering, and Michael A. Arbib, eds., *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Berkeley/Vatican City: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences/Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999); Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); Alan B. Wallace, *Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

3. Michel Serres, "Receiving René Girard into the Académie Française," in *For René Girard: Essays in Friendship and in Truth*, ed. Sandor Goodhart, Jørgen Jørgensen, Tom Ryba, and James G. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 4.

4. See the extended comparison Girard makes between mimetic theory and Darwin's theory of natural selection in his *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*, with Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cesar de Castro Rocha (New York: Continuum, 2007), 96–135.

5. Vittorio Gallese, "The Two Sides of Mimesis: Mimetic Theory, Embodied Simulation, and Social Identification," in *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*, ed. Scott R. Garrels (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 87–108.

6. Scott R. Garrels, "Human Imitation: Historical, Philosophical, and Scientific Perspectives," in *Mimesis and Science*, 1–38.

7. For a helpful orientation to the possibilities of such dialogue, see Leo D. Lefebure, "Mimesis, Violence, and Socially Engaged Buddhism: Overture to a Dialogue," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 3 (1996): 121–40.

8. I have in mind here Pierre Hadot's important contribution to recovering the tradition of "spiritual exercises" within ancient philosophy, and the influence of such exercises in the Christian tradition. See his *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase, ed. Arnold Davidson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).

9. For the distinction between these two forms of contemplative practice, see Martin Laird, O.S.A., *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

10. Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 29.

11. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992), 2.

12. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 56–95.

13. In addition to the Garrels volume on human imitation previously referenced, see especially *Can We Survive Our Origins? Readings in René Girard's Theory of Violence and the Sacred*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015) as well as *How We Became Human: Mimetic Theory and the Science of Evolutionary Origins*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015).

14. James Alison, "Girard's Breakthrough," *The Tablet* (1996).
15. René Girard, *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 131.
16. Not unlike Saint Augustine, whose Books 7 and 8 of his *Confessions* mark an intellectual and moral conversion, respectively, Girard writes: "Intellectually I was converted, but I remained incapable of making my life agree with what I thought" (*When These Things Begin*, 131). Girard describes in this passage how his encounter with music ("*The Marriage of Figaro* is, for me, the most mystical of all music. That, and Gregorian chant"), his meditative experience of commuting by train ("my mental state transfigured everything, and . . . the slightest ray from the setting sun produced veritable ecstasies in me"), a brief health scare with skin cancer ("my dark night of the soul"), and his intensified Lenten practice leading up to the reception of his family into the Catholic faith: all of these proved significant in filling out his ongoing conversion ("I've never known a holiday to compare to that day of deliverance. I thought I was dead, and, all at once, I was resurrected"). Little wonder that Girard confesses: "Three quarters of what I say is in Saint Augustine" (133).
17. Wolfgang Palaver, "From Closed Societies to the Open Society: Parochial Altruism and Christian Universalism," in *Can We Survive Our Origins?*, 112.
18. Girard, *When These Things Begin*, 132.
19. Martin Laird, O.S.A., *A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness, and Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.
20. René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 46.
21. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 39.
22. I borrow this phrase from Jean-Luc Marion, whose contemplative style of phenomenological inquiry emphasizes the transposition of the subject's intentionality from an acquisitive to a receptive mode. For a good introduction, see his *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2004).
23. This distinction between willfulness and willingness depends upon Gerald G. May's important work, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982).
24. Laird, *A Sunlit Absence*, 42.
25. Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12–13.
26. Saint John of the Cross, "Sayings of Light and Love," from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kevin Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 88, 91.
27. The characterization of creaturely poverty as "sinking" into divine "nothingness" hearkens to Meister Eckhart, who was fond of desert imagery in accounting for contemplative practice. See *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defenses*, ed. and trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981), esp. sermons 83, 207, and 208.

28. Alison, *Undergoing God*, 113.
29. Rowan Williams, "On Being Creatures," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 74–76.
30. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 93–106; "Theology of Freedom," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 190–93.
31. Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 55–56.
32. The phrase "pacific desire" is borrowed from James Alison and is used here synonymously with "creative desire" and "nonrivalristic desire," which are more idiomatically typical of Girard (*The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* [New York: Crossroad, 1991], 13).
33. Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire*, trans. Eugene Webb (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 21.
34. Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire*, 146.
35. Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire*, 27.
36. Because readers of this journal are likely familiar with the elements and nuances of mimetic theory, I will keep my summary remarks here to a minimum.
37. René Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 283ff.
38. Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 5–6.
39. René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 9.
40. Girard first developed this idea in the conclusion to his *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 307. The phrase originally comes from Simone Weil, as Wolfgang Palaver notes in his discussion of its development in Girard's work (*René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, trans. Gabriel Borrud [East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013], 219–21; "From Closed Societies to the Open Society," 111–12).
41. Girard, *When These Things Begin*, 47.
42. James Alison, *Broken Hearts and New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 165.
43. Alison, *Broken Hearts and New Creations*, 166.
44. Evagrius Ponticus, "Chapters on Prayer," in *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger, O.C.S.O. (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 81, 36.
45. Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another* (New York: New Seeds, 2007).
46. Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 8, 70.
47. Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 4.

48. Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. A. C. Spearing (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 55. Quoted in Laird, *A Sunlit Absence*, 125.
49. Laird, *A Sunlit Absence*, 42.
50. Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 99.
51. Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 104.
52. Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 100.
53. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightening*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 56.
54. Girard, *When These Things Begin*, 123.
55. Girard, *When These Things Begin*, 125.
56. Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 124.
57. Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 125.
58. Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 126.
59. Williams, *Where God Happens*, 44.