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## ***Proffering Poverty. An Augustinian-Girardian meditation***

### Abstract

Using Girard's mimetic theory and new findings on St. Augustine's monastic ideals, the article argues that the evangelic vow of poverty is not so much abstaining from property while entrusting oneself to God's care, but rather like Jesus, joining God's option for the poor and all victims of the competitive rivalry that causes deprivation in its many forms. Instead of this mimetic competition, the proffering of poverty means presenting a positive model for imitation in the messianic manner in which Jesus brings the hope of God's reign to the *anawim YHWH*. Starting from the beatitudes, a new non-dualistic ideal of being poor in Christ's Spirit is thus spelled out.

Keywords: Beatitudes, poor of YHWH, mimetic desire, messianic hope, dualism, incarnation.

### 1. The poor of YHWH

The beatitudes in the gospels of Matthew and Luke have long since counted as a summary of Jesus' evangelic message and the ideal of biblical faith, as epitomized also by the opening line of the Book of Psalms. But how his notion of poverty fits in that ideal has been the topic of many a fierce debate. Polish preachers on the theme have often taken their lead from the etymology of what reads as a blessing for *ubodzy w duchu*, apparently viewing poverty as man's pathway to a humble submission to God. There is surely no denying that languages contain a source of profound insights, notably when our mother tongue is linked to other groups of a wide linguistic family, as is the case for Polish being part of the large Indo-European cluster. Languages hold rich sources of insight in what our ancestors understood about life. But given this linguistic wealth, one may yet ask if preachers are right in arguing that their language puts the ball on the spot, so to say, by translating the beatitudes as a blessing for *ubodzy w duchu*. Or, rather, should they perhaps be blamed for too simplistically linking *ubodzy* to *Bóg*? Many rightly protest that the etymological link between the Polish *ubogi* (needy) and *Bóg* (God) is misread, if not abused, as a disgraceful preachers' toy. Yet, a novel case may be made for this link by giving full attention to the biblical image of God's protective option for the poor. But only so, if this notion of God's love for the poor is not turned straight into a plea for gifts to Church's charities, while the true conditions of poverty fail to be noted and understood. I wish to ponder this delicate but urgent topic using the pastoral instructions Saint Augustine penned down for his monks, as well as René Girard's

claim that his innovative mimetic theory is deeply rooted in the African Church Fathers' thoughts.

Christian spirituality has an ancient, but ambiguous history with the notion of poverty. The constitutions and practices of many religious congregations have played a pivotal role in this respect. Here, I shall refer more in particular to the Augustinian contribution to Europe's tradition, but not without recalling that its recent rehabilitation had to answer an age-old criticism of its alleged role in spreading dubious forms of resignation, of otherworldly spirituality and disdain of material wellbeing. We shall consider him in relation to an innovative reading of the biblical tradition developed by René Girard, who sees Augustine as a true mentor and intellectual guide. Girard refers to the saint's critical insight in our devastating mimetic habit of imitating idols and envying their positions. In the *Confessiones* Augustine depicts his dandy career and following conversion with an acute awareness of the inner drive to envy and jealousy that had led him and so many others astray. In these uniquely insightful *Confessiones* he expounds the drives that define so much of our present mental space too, fuelled by the media and commercial advertisements. Being up with the Jones, as the English say, puts great pressure on the social dealings that threaten harmony to cause inequalities that deserve acute soul-searching reflections.

No doubt, my article's enigmatic title, *Proffering Poverty*, may seem to follow that (un)pious track. Various Bible texts spring to mind, such as Jesus' praise of the widow offering from her poverty what she could. And the habit of reading *ubogi* as a call to resign and put one's trust in God – *w Bogu* – will also continue to affect our meditations on the biblical notion of the *anawim*, *ptôchoi*, or poor of YHWH. However, while this call must count as part of Jesus' message, the insights of both Augustine and Girard will greatly modify it, showing provocative dimensions of un-resigned resistance.

## 2. Un-resigned

Searching for the central issues in Christ's own apostolate, one wonders what led him to the Galilee of the Heathens, bypassing even Nazareth, as Matthew (4:15) states. Was he in search of a hideout, away from John's place, after the latter had been imprisoned? The gospels let it be understood that this area, while held in deep contempt by Jerusalem's authorities, was Jesus' choice place of action, rather than just a hideout. Mark's post-Easter report states explicitly that Jesus ordered his disciples to return to the area. Both he and the embryonic community formulated the basics of the apostolic message in that setting. After the flawed sermon in his hometown synagogue, where he commented on Isaiah's messianic prophecies

meant for the desolate and the poor, he now spells out his view of God's reign by the beatitudes seeking to redress the life of the *anawim* – the poor of YHWH. He addresses the crowd that follow him, in their dire misery and desperate conditions, using the primal concept of blessedness by which the opening verse of Psalm 1 defines Israel's spirituality. By calling the poor blessed, he raised an issue that has made rivers of ink flow in very different directions. Here is not the place to summarize that abundant, but ambiguous literature, nor to officiate on some controversial details raised. Let us rather ask why to relate the Psalms' basic spirituality to the glorification of 'poverty' as a favourable state and why to direct its message to that despised region. Various exegetical schools, among whom exegetes following the liberation theology, offer detailed accounts of the miserable conditions of the Galilean peasant population in Jesus' time, who apart from being heavily taxed, were also the object of religious contempt by Jerusalem's centre and its Jewish authorities. Their dejected state and misery caused sore wounds, explaining why both the material and religious-cultural connotations of the *anawim* formed a prime focus and integral part of the Gospel's apostolic focus.

In reference to the gospels' prime audience, studies on the notion of *anawim* stress a mix of aspects that may recall the Polish *ubogi*. In Mary's Magnificat we find themes derived from the book of Psalms and prophets that promise upturn of the dismal conditions for the helpless victims of the mighty and their arrogant extortions. Jesus' sermon on Isaiah 61 and the beatitudes also express this theme of concern for the people's misery and dejection. Their struggle against poverty and humiliation gets a special colouring in the concept of *anawim*, as the spiritual dimensions of modesty, humility, and committed service raise its contents above mere negative struggle or reluctant deference. The poor of YHWH (*anawim*) were positively focused on the great day of God's apocalypse, when the true order of God's will was to be restored by the promised one, about to renovate Israel's glory. Humility was their characteristic, not just because of poverty, dejection, and victimization, but for being filled with Israel's hope in a prophetic sense. While being mobilized in various groups, some of which were very combative in their understanding of the apocalyptic promises, they shared, be it ever so weak, in a specific vision that Jesus addressed, and which deserves special attention. His apostolate among the shepherds, peasants, and fishermen awaiting God's kingdom is what we should get clearly in focus, so that we may grasp in which sense his words make the *ubogi* put their hope *u Boga* (to God).

The similarity between the preachers' advice and Jesus' messianic apostolate is not to be scorned, but the etymological word play may obfuscate and even falsify the true

orientation of the pastoral task at hand. In fact, the Indo-European root of the term *ubogi* rather points away from any expectation or confidence in the reign of God. Etymologists point out that *ubogi* derives from an old negative form (*u-*, which is not unlike the *a-privans* in Greek) connected to a root *\*bg*, which stands for property, wealth, wellbeing, and fertility. The Polish word *Bóg* most likely derives from this root as well, and indicates the source and true wellspring of those positive values. This linguistic root also appears in other Indo-European languages – and via them in Polish via other ways as *bagaż* (contents, luggage) or *bagatelka* (little thing, trifle). The *ubogi*, then, would mean someone deprived of value or substance, and in that sense, separate from *Bóg* as source of all wealth. The old form indicating deprivation is a linguistic feature that also appears in other Indo-European languages such as English and German *un-* and the Swedish *o-*. In Polish the examples seem less frequent, but the words *ubyć* or *ubywać* (diminish or dwindle) and *ubytek* (cavity) are convincing examples that are quite close to *ubogo*, both in form and meaning.

This short linguistic excursion tells us that the preacher presenting *ubogi* as a call to submit one's lot to God (*w Bogu*) is going well beyond the etymology of the word in a pious sense. Although this is certainly permissible, it needs a close scrutiny lest it distorts the evangelic task. The Palestinian peasants with their apocalyptic hopes cannot be presented as exemplifying the Western ideal of virtuous submission to God despite poverty. At the start of the third millennium of Christian presence it must be clear that many dubious accents have been accrued to this notion in Western spiritual traditions. Indeed, poverty should not be presented as a providential opportunity for believers to get detached from matter and be directed to the spiritual hereafter, for this is certainly contrary to the most original message of the Bible. Augustine has often been blamed for such a turn in the Christian faith, whereas his anti-Manichean campaign was precisely intended to exclude the world-despising Eastern influences.

Let us try and resume the discussion from the basic contents of the actual words. Similar to the Polish *ubogi*, the English *poverty* is exclusively negative, as it is derived, via the French *pauvreté*, from the Latin *paupertas*, meaning: producing little or being useless. A typical use of the word we find in the term 'poor soils', having no productive contents or baggage. The Germanic term *arm* rather stresses misery and so do the Scandinavian languages. This means that the negative connotation of the term, stressing the odious deprivation, is dominant in the European linguistic area. By urging *ubogi* to look up to God in recognition of their inner poverty one risks to support the dualistic undercurrent, which was absent from the setting in which Jesus preached the Gospel. It is akin to the world-despising

tenet of Manichaeism, which Augustine had at first adopted, but later rejected radically, after his conversion.

Augustine is mainly known as the advocate of total reliance on God's grace, in opposition to the self-reliant attitude he perceived in Pelagian asceticism. But one should not forget his priority, dominating his comments on the creation story of Genesis, which stresses the respect of the earthly values. This deserves examining in relation to the Galilean setting of Jesus' original apostolate. Jesus worked in a time marked by high apocalyptic expectations. After the Jews had returned from exile, they remained tense and strongly hostile to contamination of their faith with surrounding heathen ideas and practices, claiming that the exile itself had been caused by the unfaithfulness of their fathers to the unique faith revealed to Moses. Fighting against the forces from outside had become an integral part of that new spirituality, linked to the hope of a reward in the afterlife at the apocalyptic victory of God's reign, in case one were to die as a martyr. In that fight, the original stress on earthly welfare and prosperity had shifted to an idea of salvation in the hereafter with a disdain of any attachment to the here and now. But this having been said, it must be clear that the original valuation of the earthly blessings, as portrayed in the life of Israel's patriarchs, had not lost its meaning. God was still looked up to as the provider of earthly wellbeing, and it is worth noting that Jesus shows no ascetic leaning in his apostolic dealing with the audience of the beatitudes. On the contrary, their earthly physical wellbeing is prominent in his mind. This can also be gleaned from his miracles and the requests that are addressed to him. If poverty is deemed to be a value of his apostolate among the *anawim*, it has to be understood in terms that reformulate the desire for God, proper to the biblical tradition.

### 3. Desiring for God

Apostolate in conditions of dejection is to be the apostolate of hope and prospect. But two questions arise as we reflect on the message of hope and desire of God. Has desiring for God any meaning? Has desiring a meaning for God? Or say: in the eyes of God? Desire is a central part of any analysis of poverty. For, poverty has no meaning except in relation to desiring; but the same goes for life. Life is inherently future-oriented and striving to perpetuate itself and improve its conditions by growth. This means that desire for God, understood as the core of the messianic call that Jesus cherished, is rooted deeply in this all-pervasive urge. However, even the term desire has many meanings. This basic urge for survival and growth is not to be termed desire in the same sense as when we speak of spiritual desire for enlightenment or redemption. Life's vital urge normally acts unconsciously. But

human desires are subject to the will, which is driven by an awareness that creates a distance to the object in the form of a value judgment.

The Western sense of time, of personal achievement, and of social development has been marked by the biblical hopes of eschatological salvation in ways that cannot be elaborated in this place. Philosophers and anthropologists have spent much time comparing the Western linear view of time to the so-called circular views of other traditions. Even if this is increasingly criticized as oversimplified, there is little doubt that the messianic promise of God's coming reign has molded a development-oriented mentality filled with hopes and desires. The oldest texts of the New Testament, the letters of Paul to the Corinthians as well as Mark, the first of the four canonized Gospels, not to mention the numerous apocryphal documents, strikingly testify to the heightened sphere of hope and expectation for the day of deliverance to come. The *maranatha* – come Lord Jesus – of the Apocalypse's final chapter undoubtedly reflects the overall sense of desire and expectancy the early Church shared with all the *anawim* in the Second Temple period, eagerly listening to the prophetic visions of Amos, Zephaniah, and especially the final chapters of Isaiah. Jesus' message about the imminent arrival of God's reign captured an intense sense of longing, a spirit of desire, in which the apocalyptic threats were words of hope rather than gloomy scares, with the heavenly scenes of Daniel's majestic visions giving hope rather than fear to the poor in the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali (Mt 4:15), to whom Jesus brought his good news.

In short, there is no exaggerating of the sense of desire and excitement that filled the air around the activities of Jesus, but also of the Apostles (according to the book of Acts), and in more restrained way, Paul's apostolate as well, desire of the redeeming interference of God on behalf of his humble and confident people, committing themselves totally to the new dispensation. Most striking is the new liturgical form given to this hope for the poor and pure of heart (Mt 5). God's temple on earth is neither in Jerusalem nor in the synagogues – or on Galilean hills – but in the sharing community that praises God in meals referring typically to the miraculous feeding of the crowds by the compassionate Jesus. The Gospels and Acts give ample evidence of this ambiance. Stating it bluntly, one may call those liturgies exercises in desire for the promised heavenly banquet of the Lamb's nuptial feast. This ambiance of concrete desire, that spilled over from the inter-testamentary spirituality of Second Temple to the new apostolic Church deserves our full attention.

Whereas the sphere of heightened expectation has formally been kept alive in the liturgy of the Orthodox communities, it received a different accent in the Western tradition, where various factors favoured a focus on each individual's personal relation to the saving

grace of God. The legalism of the Roman tradition has been named as a major cause of this development. But in these pages I wish to consider more in particular the profound contribution that Augustine has made in his voluminous oeuvre thanks to his basic insight that the human soul is a desiring device that will find no rest but in God. We shall return to Augustine's psychological insight, describing the soul's longing as the root of all poverty and pointing to a salvation that solely can be found in the rest God offers, because of man's broken nature that is affected by the original fall and can find healing only in the grace earned by the saving act of Christ's cross. But before we ponder the depth of these insights, we first need to study this 'desiring device' called human soul, following the Western tradition that he instigated and which came to invest so heavily in boosting each person's existential choices. Looking at the renewed interest in Augustine's oeuvre, we cannot fail to note that this issue of the personal calling remains pivotal and linked to his psychological discovery of the underlying energy of restless desire. To situate this concept of 'desiring' and its link to the notion of 'poverty', we shall first turn to the work of René Girard, who recognizes his indebtedness to the great Father of the Western Church.

#### 4. Girard and the poor in the Spirit

Rene Girard (\*1923) and the group surrounding him have very outspoken ideas about poverty in relation to desire and what they call the 'hell of things'. They are not writing about matter as a foul reality or the earth as a valley of tears. But they put those old images in a new anthropological setting. Girard poses neither as a theologian nor an exegete. He is a cultural historian and literary critic, reading the Bible and the Christian tradition with the conviction that they hold a crucial insight that came to full fruition in the work and life of Jesus, as the Christ. The pivotal insight concerns the role of desire in human life and following from that, the issues of wellbeing and deprivation. Girard has written extensively on the all-important breakthrough that the Bible has brought and notably on its profound psycho-religious implications, which he has analyzed with the help of the psychologist Oughourlian. Considering their input, I place the notion of desire in a triad of interrelated concepts that are crucial for our apostolic topic: self – desire – poverty. Since the desire and hope of salvation count as basic to Christ's apostolate, the typical development of the Western notion of the self in its social context deserves our full attention in relation to the factual poverty, both as the cause and as the outcome of this process.

Jesus has indeed addressed the poor; but the type of desiring that ensued from the Gospel's diffusion has led to appalling forms of rivalry, competition, and even poverty. The

development of the Western 'self', as Charles Taylor has famously elucidated, was greatly indebted to the biblical hope of the end-times, which made Christian ascetics differ so strikingly from ancient Stoic and Buddhist attitudes of resignation and suspension of all desiring. He quotes a substantial Augustinian input in this process and later links his views also to Girard's theory of mimetic desire. But it is crucial to avoid a misunderstanding that may slip in at this spot and must be clarified, since Girard's appraisal of Western attitudes toward desire is not without ambivalence.

Girard places the notion of desire in a wide context, which he has labeled the mimetic theory. He derived his perspective from an in-depth analysis of insights that were artistically expressed by great novelists and playwrights in European literature, from Cervantes and Shakespeare to Proust and Dostoevsky. Although being trained in medieval archival studies, to which he was exposed by his work of his father as an archivist of Avignon's papal heritage and which could hardly fail to make him a skeptical agnostic in religious matters, he turned to the study of modern novelists when offered a lectureship in French literature in the USA. He gladly accepted this offer, as he felt increasingly ill at ease with post-war Paris' intellectual relativism and nihilism that seemed ever so superficial and oblivious of some basic dilemmas and traditions.

Girard gradually discovered that in the modern literature desire proved to be a central topic. Its convoluted role make that novels usually gravitate around the romantic self-assertion and individual's intent. But, while dominant ideas thus view desires as a personal matter, as welling-up from inside a person's own self, some great authors describe a more profound reality showing that a powerful imitative drive fuels them. In fact, they portray how in the mirroring of a model or competing with a rival the desired object all but evaporates, giving way to interpersonal tensions. Shakespeare stages the convoluted mimetic desires in most masterful plots, while, in most persuasive ways, Dostoevsky urges a radical conversion by recognition of the devastating effects of these rivalries. Indeed, the first great novel of modernity, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, had described as a pursuit of symbolic windmills the disastrous effect of mimetic desires, driving people's lives to compulsive behaviour.

Concerning desires, Augustine is alleged to have advanced the idea that they well up from a restless heart due to the original sin committed by our first ancestors. A vast array of studies has followed from this. But Girard realized that one has to turn to anthropological literature to see how this sits in other cultures. He found that modern Westerners, reflecting on themselves and others traditions are, in fact, curiously self-contradictory. Their dominant conviction is that humans have unlimited potentials to master the world and eradicate poverty,

but that they are restricted mainly by religion. This has become the standard vision, notably since the Enlightenment criticized the European Christendom that had disintegrated in belligerent and rivaling fractions. The biblical story of the Fall in Eden came to be used for showing that God put a silly test to the original couple to prevent them from getting knowledge, which would allow them to become like him. Blaming Augustine for stressing this theme, much effort went into showing why religion served to curtail human ambitions and urge subservience to a clerical class that claimed to be ruling on behalf of a God, to whom the human race had become indebted. But using findings from research among other peoples, from evolution theory and depth psychology, the general public was made to believe that this story was a huge fake and that other religions had better insights.

Girard takes the totality of these theories, including the idea of the manipulative side of religion, to turn the construct on its head. He holds that Darwin's view of a fledgling humanity being close to primates' way of life, and Freud portraying a murder for sexual rivalry as the starting point of religious regulations that make gods come and stop further conflicts, both have a point; yet, this contradicts the idea of an originally bright intelligence that was nipped in the bud by a jealous God. Careful analysis of the rituals and myths in the ethnographic reports allows Girard to break through the curious set of contradictions that mark modernist hostility to the Christian tradition. He holds that it pivots on an over-agitated and romantic idea of the self as the wellspring of its own desires and potential to fight all limitations, which is believed to be undermined by a perversion of religion and a curious impoverishment of the spirit.

##### 5. Desire and man-made poverty

Having noted that, rather than in mythological and histories about creation or history, the core of religion is to be found in rituals and rules of conduct, and that sacrifices are the common centre of those religious rituals, Girard performs an impressive feat by relating Darwin's and Freud's ideas to an old insight of both Aristotle and Augustine about man's overwhelming proclivity to imitation. He stresses that the increasingly violent rivalries must have caused a major problem in fledgling mankind with its growing hunting skills and murderous weaponry. Consequently, he suggests that a dramatic affair must have triggered mankind's new approach of the conflicts that threatened their primitive groups. Accepting Freud's idea, borrowed from Sir Frazer, that a violent event must have caused a turn in consciousness, he links this not to sexuality, but rather to the general tendency of humans to prejudge, envy, and scapegoat one another. If for humans, more than for animals that rely on

instinct, imitation is the dominant mode of learning and if this mimetic habit is bound to lead to escalating rivalries, there must have been a setting where such a mimetic crisis resulted in the death of a member of the group, causing such a shock as to halt the fighting. The murdered individual, then, became both the bringer of peace, but also the arbitrary victim whose death was perceived as due to his role in the violence. This meant that the victim harbored an ambiguity that was to bring together two opposing sides of religion, to wit, worship and judicial rulings.

Ethnographic data confirm that sacrificial rituals are linked to violent settings that are restored to harmony through the confirmation of moral precepts. The victim, so to say, becomes the saving deity, ordering the regular repetition of this event so as to combat rivalries in the group and to re-establish the rules of order and hierarchy. Mythologies and ethical rules are developed to confirm this order and rationalize its base in nature and in the ethnic history, making it the heritage of the ancestors. Rather than being an attempt to nip the individual's desires and ambitions in the bud, religion is the submission to the society's order of survival, which is viewed as a divine order. Although Girard's theory about the sacrificial origin of religion and culture has often been dismissed as mere fantasy, it has an amazing hermeneutic power.

But this elegant explanation, rather than hiding, actually stresses the fact that at the basis of culture there is basic violence that intervened to prevent greater evils in the setting of rival ambitions. In fact, religion and culture are neither about promoting the life of the individual nor about curtailing it, but rather about creating a harmonious community in which persons can thrive. Without posing as a theologian, Girard plainly assumes a transcendent force that makes society guard its survival in the face of the threats posed by the individual mimetic drives and the ensuing rivalries. With this insight, he reflects on two common features that are universally reported, namely the central role of sacrifices in religions and the tendency across all cultures of people to seek culprits (or say: scapegoats) for whatever displeases them in their personal life. Given people's dependence on imitation due to the weakness of their instincts and the need to protect society against the ensuing tensions that became more dangerous with the increase of brain capacity, a tool emerged in the form of sacrificial religion that cared for survival in social coherence, but which was bound to exact the curtailing of individual ambitions and to cause social hardships. Thus, at the heart of the social construct, there is a suppressed awareness that society's survival relies on an injustice done to people's ambitions, due to the ambivalent need to imitate one another, yet to respect each other's realm of identity. This double bind religion seeks to deal with by telling people to

comply, and yet to keep striving for a more desirable fulfillment. A social intervention, which is inevitably oppressive and needs covering up by defending the violence done in the name of deities that demand sacrifices. The myths, taboos, and moral codes explain and enforce this order. But due to this secret questioning, religions constantly adapt their myths and codes. It is here that Girard brings in a basic discovery. Having analyzed the power of mimetic desire via studies of novelists and ethnographic reports, he came to realize that the urge to convert, which he felt in his own life, was in fact what undergirded the Bible's unique message, stressing that the God who urges society to shape a harmonious setting is not one who asks for sacrifices, but for justice. He urges for compassion with the victims of rivalries and of the oppression that the mimetic condition is bound to cause.

So, returning to the theme of apostolate in the face of poverty, we see that some followers of this mimetic theory, elaborating Girard's insights, have worked on the theory's economic implications. They stress that the common presumption of poverty being due to rarity is to be turned upside down. Poverty is not the effect of natural conditions, but of social processes that rarefy things. By shaping the desires and by controlling the supply or availability of the desired items, people manipulate the social order. The law of supply and demand is rooted in the law of mimetic desires, and daily advertisements show how much this condition is manipulated. Without suggesting that natural circumstances and mishaps have no role to play, it ought to be noted that free ranging mimetic desires create a setting, in which impoverishment turns acutely painful. It has been observed that traditional religions with their many taboos may curtail people's ambitions, but they also have the undeniable effect of creating a social and ecological harmony by frowning upon envy and discouraging the hope of an unlimited access to everything by all members.

Here is not the place to examine the numerous theories about poverty and the means of combating it. An amazing variety of utopias filled bookshelves in the different cultural settings. Although they have few things in common beyond their striking impracticality, one other common factor is worth noting, as they tend to advocate cessation of all rivalry and mutual oppression, which they often blame on religious motivated privileges and prejudices. To plead for the utopian ideals and to fight unjust privileges that often had clear racist and sexist aspects get too easily linked up with the prophetic messages and the hope of God's reign as presented by Jesus to the *anawim* in the despised Galilee. It is true that many of them use images close to the hopes expressed by the Bible, and the man who coined the term *utopia*, Thomas Moore, was deeply inspired by the gospel. But the apostolate within the setting of poverty needs caution in using them for reasons that Girard's theory makes clear.

A close survey of the growing literature on the political and economic hopes for globalised humanity is puzzling due to the resemblance of the utopian and what is called dystopian accounts. Futurological visions with technical advances and economic successes cause many authors to despair. The clash between great hopes and deceptions characterizes both novels and analyses such as Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984*, in which the utopia is dashed by a fear of dysfunctional rivalries. The same goes for the stream of scathing comments on the 'realized socialism' in communist countries from Orwell's *Animal Farm* to Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. The conviction that poverty and misery were mainly due to the religious grip on society and that a 'disenchantment of the world' linked to technological advances would bring the secular liberties of an open society with free and healthy competition has become increasingly less plausible and open to questions.

Still, it remains important to grasp the Christian origin of those ideas and see where things might have veered off track. Girard helps us look again at the role of the Bible and the writings of Augustine in this context. Both argue in a manner that is not unlike Weber's famous idea of 'disenchantment', saying that the world lost its status as a domain of God-given rules that pose limits on human liberty; but with a crucial caveat. Girard holds that traditional religions embody means by which the society, driven by a transcendent will to survive, imposes its control via myths, laws, and sacrificial rites so as to curtail the tensions that follow from the all-pervasive urge to imitate and to compete. But also, that the Bible breaks with this sacred method of demanding sacrificial victimization and marginalizing people in society. Jesus' challenges the officials that present disease and misery as due to some sin that needs expiation by sacrifices. Testifying to a God who as a Father sides with such suffering outlaws as the enslaved Israel under Pharaoh, he fosters a form of disenchantment that is to bring relief to the *anawim*, calling them blessed for seeing the new reign of God coming. After he is murdered for sticking to this disenchanted view of God as a caring Father, however, the preaching of that prophetic-messianic vision had a hard time staying on track in the ensuing centuries. In his latest book *Battling to the End*, Girard takes a critical look at the implementation of this Gospel's message and its effect through the ages and notably since the Enlightenment. In the philosophy of Hegel's notion of the liberated spirit steering human history, this culminates in the rejection of any deity that imposes heterogenic laws and sacrificial commands. While this should arguably have led to an open competition, in which people would seek recognition of one another and boost the wellbeing of the collective mankind, this competition has actually brought untold wars and bloodshed,

as well as bank collapses and stock-exchange crashes amidst equity markets, with totalitarian responses and unspeakable atrocities both on the right and the left.

Christ's prophetic breakthrough did actually bring the disenchantment of the sacrificial order of deities demanding submission. But was his radical call for justice heeded or did the expelled demon return with seven others worth than he himself? If the latter seems to be the case, it urges us to reexamine the biblical message and the culmination of the prophets' anti-sacrificial call for justice in the beatitudes Jesus addressed to the *anawim* of YHWH. Here, Saint Augustine may be of help, provided we read him not just in the customary way but in a Girardian perspective as well.

#### 6. Augustine and the prosperity gospel

Augustine's gigantic output has been presented mainly in the light of his brilliant rhetoric against the major theories that threatened the Christian faith in his days. In his famous *Confessiones* he describes the inner fight to free himself from the world-despising dualism in the mightily influential movement of Manichaeism, started by Mani, who had cleverly combined Christian views with the asceticism from Eastern religions that urged the soul's liberation from earthly incarceration, and which Augustine had linked to Neo-Platonic theories. In his powerful study on Genesis' creation story, though, he left no doubt that Christians were to see the material world as God's precious gift to mankind. Around that same time, though, he also wrote a complete commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians which has gone largely unnoticed and has been overshadowed by his presumed option for what came to be known as the 'atonement theory'. His fight against the heresies of Donatus and Pelagius, linked to his comments on the first Adam's Fall and the second Adam's redemption have too often been taken as the core of his theology, reducing such majestic works as the *Civitas Dei* and *Doctrina Christiana* to a rather plain doctrine pivoting in a curious view of predestination.

Having rejected Manichaeism, Augustine strongly rescinded any idea of matter itself being a force for evil that opposes God's spiritual realm. On the contrary, he saw evil primarily as man's sinful rebellion against God's love. Yet, he equally opposed Pelagius' idea that by following of Christ's ascetic recommendations one could achieve deliverance. Only a total reliance on the grace that Jesus won on the cross by his self-sacrifice to God's love could bring this about. This grace was even more powerful than our relapse in sin, if only we repented and returned to him. Whereas relying on one's own efforts was futile, as they were always tainted with mankind's original fall, the believer could trust in God's predestinating

love. This conviction was basic in his fight against the heresies notably in his role as the bishop of Hippo, and it clearly corresponded with the apostolic teaching, in particular with St. Paul's letters. Even the notion of predestination had firm roots in the Biblical tradition. Yet, over the centuries, his brilliant vision came loose at the seams to the point of turning eventually into a travesty of the evangelic message, causing hardships to many amidst unbridled search of wealth and competitive power by an elite. The so-called 'prosperity gospel' may indeed count as its bizarre outcome, which we may summarize in the – admittedly oversimplified – way, starting from the story of Adam's Fall.

In line with Irenaeus, Augustine discusses Satan causing evil through his grip on Adam and the saving grace of Jesus' Cross redressing this fault and given to the Church for sacramental distribution. This soon became the pivotal point of the faith and led to a complex sacerdotal system constructed around majestic cathedrals all over Europe to ensure that all baptized believers could have access to this wellspring of salvation. But as is shown by the crusades that were fought in Islamized countries and in not-yet converted areas of Europe – such as the Baltic – to make sure that no one would remain under Satan's sway, this was prone to abuse. When this clerical set-up became oppressive and burdensome, it was Augustine that inspired the two main Reformers, Luther and Calvin, to work out two key notions of his huge output by stressing a total reliance on faith in the Jesus' grace and in that enigmatic idea of predestination, both of them defining salvation exclusively in terms of a blessed afterlife. However, their rejection of clerical mediation had an opposing effect from the one intended. While Luther stayed within the tradition that urged people to accept the hardships of life in an ascetic act of faith, a combination with Calvin's reading of the predestination made this surrender to God's grace lead to its opposite effect. In Augustine's manner the reformed tradition took the material world seriously and tended to consider the success in material affairs as a sign that their piety was acceptable to God. It proved their status as saved. Using ancient biblical texts about God's blessing for his beloved also in material sense, they developed an outspoken appreciation of prosperity as a sign of being saved and twice born. The obligation of gratitude and generosity to church and charity were strongly emphasized, but the distance between the religious commitment and the pursuit of secular wealth and success became minimal. At this specific point, it is to be noted that a free range was given to the competitive urge and that a disdain of the less fortunate and even the less privileged nations got a religious tinge, calling into question Christ's chief message that poverty, mishap, or disease are not a punishment, nor a sacrifice demanded by God to expiate one's sins. Strangely this meant coming full circle within biblical semantics: praising a God

who sides with the miserable according to the book of Psalms allows the believer to see good luck as a blessing and bad luck as a punishment.

Although the preaching of such a prosperity gospel in an apostolic dealing with poverty is often scorned, its inner link with an ancient Christian tradition cannot be ignored. In a famous, albeit controverted study on the link between Calvinism and capitalism the sociologist Max Weber has argued that a belief in prosperity as a sign of God's approval stimulated the work ethics and that the two enhanced each other, when sublimated by a call for generous charity. It has even been argued that the exorbitant deals in the equity markets, at the end of the 20th century, were 'boosted' rather than 'booed' in many a Christian circle that had been urged to welcome the signs of the time and follow a radical *aggiornamento*. Could not Jesus' words, so it was asked, about bringing fire rather than peace be read as follows? Not only conflicts over God's intents were caused by his gospel, but also a competitive drive to wrangle wealth from the earth with the blessing from on high, and consequently the message to the *ubogi* to put all trust in God while struggling hard and direct one's efforts wisely.

Whether the message that Augustine derived from the gospel was read correctly in this way is obviously debatable. He undoubtedly discarded any contempt of the material world as he glorified the Word's Incarnation. And he also stressed each person's direct link to the divine grace, as he highlighted the love of Christ shedding his blood for each one and he recommends a trust in God's choice in selecting believers for their salvation, even before any merit of their own. But in respect of misery and poverty his message differs widely from the vision that was described above. Recalling his own delivery from the compulsive mimetic drive that had made him so miserable as to lose the meaning of life, he defines the call to follow Christ in a way that Girard's mimetic theory helps clarify as the exact opposite of the prosperity gospel described above.

#### 7. Augustine and Girard on proffering poverty

Interpreting Augustine's theology in yet another way seems odd, as throughout the ages and notably in recent years there has been an avalanche of new editions and comments. But it appears that his sole full comment on a biblical book to wit Paul's letter to the Galatians has largely been ignored. This is remarkable, as his alleged emphasis on redemption by faith alone has been linked by the Reformers to both Paul's letters: Romans and Galatians. Indeed, his commentary on the latter could hardly have served their purpose, but it has recently been recognized as a source of valuable new insight in his apostolic priorities. The commentary is

not focused on his well-known struggle with the various heresies, but rather appears to be written for apostolic purposes as an instruction for the spiritual formation of his order of monks. Even if some hints to those dogmatic controversies can be traced, the work stays aloof from the rhetoric debates that suffuse his *City of God*, *Christian Doctrine*, *Confessions*, and many of his *Sermons*. Here we find no lambasting of philosophers for pursuing the void and failing the wisdom of the Christ crucified, but rather an impassive meditation on the inspiring effects of faith. The lengthy commentary is serene and focuses on the monastic humility as a prime apostolic value.

Whereas orators and philosophers seek to outdo each other, showing mimetic rivalry to be the prime drive of their exploits, his fellow monks are to follow him and imbibe what he discovered as his own saving grace. He chooses Paul's letter to the Galatians as a guide, not because of its doctrinal theory on redemption by Christ's sacrifice, but because of the detailed accounts of what humility means as the way in which God reveals Himself. Paul's reference to his confrontation with Peter serves as a key directive, but not because of Peter's mistake to allow newly baptized believers to rely on the fulfillment of the law and accept circumcision. Instead, following just Christ's way of embodying God's wisdom constitutes the main topic. Not Paul's doctrinal argument against relying on the works forms the pivotal issue, but Peter's exemplary humility, as he admits his mistake and thus gives a truly apostolic message of faith.

The grace of faith that works in Peter through love (Gal 5:6) is to be our guide. After giving in to the pressure by 'the Jews' to do like them (by imitation, *simulatio* Gal 2:13), he turned and admitted his hypocrisy of preaching Jesus' solidarity with the victims of the law, while actually following those that sought prestige from the law. By rescinding his mistake Peter proved the true nature of Christ's faith, which embodies the humility of God Himself. Where commentaries tend to expound how Christ achieves a victory over Satan and allows us to profit of it by an act of faith, the focus of Augustine's meditation is different. The reason being that this was written as an excursus to the rule of his community, to whom Augustine wanted to portray the faith that, in Paul's terms, was in Jesus. To go and lecture people on their life style and sins is easy enough, but to become poor with the poor, sick with the sick, tempted like the sinners, yet avoid sinning, is an entirely new experience, which Augustine wanted his fellow monks to welcome, starting from the basic revelation of God's humility. Faith means being like Christ in proffering rather than hiding one's own weakness, poverty, and dependence.

One of the central themes in Augustine's commentary and in the monastic rule is what the beatitudes commend as humility and poverty in the spirit, which is to help one another in reaching the faith that was in Jesus by mutual correction. Applying his insight in the perversion of the human spirit by rivaling pride and self-assertion, due to the original Fall, Augustine makes the mutual correction the core theme of his monastic rule. It aims at neutralizing the competitive drive that seeks recognition and praise by others, and that is unwilling to acknowledge being *ubogi*, poor and without baggage or substance. The faith of Christ that works through love (Gal 5:6) as the gift of the Spirit must show specifically through the mutual correction, which allows true joy to arise. In remarks that return repeatedly both in his monastic rule and in the commentary on the Galatians, Augustine thus recalls what he valued in the Manichaean way. He agrees that the practice may be as harsh and unpleasant as a surgeon's work, but ever so indispensable, demanding an extreme humility and poverty of the spirit on the part of the monk serving his fellow believers.

## 8. Conclusion

The apostolate in respect of poverty needs to recognize that the urge to assert oneself in a mimetic and rivaling ambiance is not only spiritual hubris, but also a main cause of actual poverty. It is a constant temptation of the pastor himself and of any believer. It may even be understood as the type of hatred of which John's first letter says that it is murderous (1 Jn 3:15), because it forces the other into a competitive setting that leads to losses both in spiritual and in material sense. To heal and further prevent this condition the believer needs to accept the faith that was in Jesus (1 Tim 1:14), to follow his divine self-emptying way (*kenosis*), and to become *ubogi* (without baggage), so that one can support victims of the rivalistic games and be an advocate of the losers. When the risen Lord via the women told his disciples to return to Galilee, he must have meant to send them again, as he did before, as a poor among the poor, to live through the faith.

The directives that Augustine, before being asked to become a bishop, elaborated for his fellow monks help us redress any top-down attitude toward the issue of poverty and remedy any master-slave type of competition. The latter emerged largely due to a mistaken definition of the relation between God and the human soul that counted as Augustine's Platonic heritage and was criticized for over two centuries, culminating in Nietzsche's scathing attacks on Christian metaphysics. The latter's critique of sermons on accepting misery for the gain of eternal bliss was not groundless. It can be retorted only by returning to Augustine's most intimate vision on faith in an earthly vocation.

Augustine's theory on time is pivotal to his faith, as he presents a person's life as stretched out between past and future – between guilt and salvation, between a separation from God and the reunion. Karl Barth, elaborating on Augustine some 75 years ago, showed that Christ's Resurrection implied a turn-around changing our time into God's time through an enduring presence in his resurrected body. This perspective, however, that subsumes the deepest thoughts of Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, can easily be misread again, unless the Galatians commentary is brought in and read in the light of Girard's mimetic theory, which is rightly presented as the core of the conversion's story. When Jesus told Mary of Magdala not to seize him (Jn 20:17 *haptou*, appropriate) and invited Thomas to touch his wounds for true faith, he indicated that fighting the pains of time and its limits is possible only by a humble sharing in the struggle against any rivaling and possessive urge. The Christian tradition does not tell us to acquiesce in poverty and hope *w Bogu* in an expectation of future reward, but rather to humbly proffer being destitute – *ubogi* – in a shared longing for the City of God to be established, in which the beatitudes are realized, because we are like Him and work with Him. Proffering poverty is the positive mimesis that not only respects the human value of the poor, but also believes that refraining from any urge to override the other is the start of a city of God where no rivalry will ever drive others into poverty again. The *ubogi*, who became 'valueless' due to the mechanism of mimetic rivalry and competition in which they were 'losers', becomes the favourite of *Bóg* once believers adopt the spirit of Christ and proffer poverty in a positive and appreciative mimesis. *Bóg* then appears as the I am speaking in the *ubogi*, undoing their social de-valuation.