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By Wiel Eggen sma

*Where water was, I am.* Baptising narcissistic mimesis.

What kindled in thee this unpity'd love?  
Thy own warm blush within the water glows,  
With thee the colour'd shadow comes and goes,  
Its empty being on thy self relies;  
Step thou aside, and the frail charmer dies.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* III. Translation by John Dryden, Alexander Poe, a.o.

When Jesus urged his disciples to emulate the baptism he had to undergo (Mk 10:39), he spoke of his imminent passion in which water had no role to play. Yet to Nicodemus he stressed the need of rebirth by water and spirit (John 3:5).<sup>i</sup> What kind of rebirth was he preaching? How did it relate to water and what does entering baptismal waters really mean? To discuss these questions I shall reflect on a lively debate that took place at a Dutch chaplaincy for international students. More than was the case during that debate, though, I shall treat its theme by invoking the idea of conversion as it has been developed in the mimetic theory proposed by the French-American literary critic René Girard, who, with intent, confronts the narcissistic trends in postmodern secularism. Girard has by no means been the first to describe Western society as profoundly narcissistic in its focus, despite the 20-centuries of Christian impact. But unlike others, he refuses to call it just a moral weakness.<sup>ii</sup> It is a self-deceptive fallacy with grave consequences, as it argues autonomous self-sufficiency while disregarding the crucial cultural fact of mutual mimesis. Indeed, like Narcissus, people are infatuated by their own image and fail to note that what they admire or desire is in fact their rival. Without discussing the wider cultural implications of that narcissistic trait, the students at the chaplaincy grasped its spiritual impact leading to various flaws and sins. They started to see the baptismal waters in a new light, going beyond the mere symbolism of a cleansing rite.

Many of these students are involved in life sciences and familiar with issues of water management, as water appears prominently in their study of life processes. Even the more

destructive aspects of water, such as inundations and tsunamis feature prominently in their curriculum. But how to refer these ambivalent aspects to the baptismal symbolisms? Some praise water mostly as the driving force of the evolutionary growth, fuelled by the principle of 'survival of the fittest'. But they realise that even this positive imagery contains seeds of its counterpart, for the notions of cleansing and conversion come with negative as well as positive aspects.

These topics were discussed in an inter-cultural and inter-religious student community, at a university that had been erected in colonial times, when the Netherlands ruled the Indonesian archipelago and sent missionaries to all continents. Via the colonial administration and via missionary initiatives, many students had flocked to the Dutch universities, which resulted in a very mixed population. In reality, missionaries that helped their young parishioners apply for the universities in the mother country were concerned about their spiritual welfare and requested the Dutch churches to take care of them, as they came to live far from home in a secularizing environment. To understand the debate that arose among them, it is important to note that the chaplaincy had been an ecumenical set-up from the start. Indeed, ecumenism had become a top priority ever since the Netherlands had facilitated and hosted the 1948 launch of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam, and since the Dutch episcopate had strongly pleaded the work for reunion at the venues of the Vatican Council II. The bishops urged the chaplains to live out Christian unity among the students within that secularist milieu. If anywhere, so they argued, in the Netherlands students from all continents should learn to open up to each other and grasp that the 16<sup>th</sup>-century break-up of the Western Christendom and the deplorable rivalries that had followed, had largely been caused by a dubious mingling of religion and political goals. For, could it not be argued that Holland's merchant class had turned Protestant to a large extent chiefly for social-economic and political reasons during their fight for autonomy? And much of the churches' struggle with the present-day secularism, too, had a similar mix of material interests written all over it. In this particular setting, students from diverse religions should be helped to read international history with new eyes, notably in matters of faith and ethical choices. They were to hear the Gospel message anew via an ecumenical practice of liturgical and diaconal services, showing that Christ's teaching could rise above the remnants of old rivalries and conflicts. They were to learn that mutual respect is the Gospel's core message, rather than any notions of God's election or prevalence for whatever group. In effect, some of them made others value this

message so much so as to make them request baptism. The candidates would usually choose membership of a denomination that was active in their home setting.

The conversation I wish to reflect on took place when students from different continents asked for baptism, having some of their friends join them in their preparation. Two of them wanted to follow the Catholic tradition prevailing in their part of Asia, but still wished to partake in a collective rite with the others. A ceremony was planned for the summer in the nearby river, as many liked the symbolism of emerging, which recalled John's baptism in the Gospels. They requested my Protestant colleague to perform the rite in the river, while I should be present and later administer the confirmation to the Catholic candidates, having obtained the bishop's consent. At that point a lively debate arose, both about the Catholic rite of confirmation and the question how I were to be involved in the riverside ritual. Most students welcomed the idea of the Protestant minister entering the river to perform the baptism, but waved the option of the Catholic priest also descending with the candidates. The debate that followed dealt with issues that fill many an exegetical journal on the biblical idea of baptism. I shall not try here to summarise the course of the debate, but rather extrapolate some points and relate them to Girard's mimetic theory. Certain topics exceeded the scope and theme of this article. What to think, for instance, of one student's remark that my colleague being a woman could suitably perform the ceremony in the river, while a male priest should not? The debate was very lively and more wide-ranging than space allows us here to discuss.<sup>iii</sup> It dealt with Christian initiation and conversion, with the role of water and spirit, but also with the nature of the secularist society, etc.

### Baptism as an eschatological sign

That John the Baptist played down his own baptism with water by pointing to Jesus' baptism by spirit and fire made the group raise questions about the role of baptismal water. But it was soon noted that one was not to oppose those two aspects by relating water to the earthly, the female, or things that were to be superseded by a true world of spiritual, heavenly, and male reality. John's words and the images he used were impressive but also puzzling. How were they to be related to our times? Since rituals have little appeal in a secularist world, so some argued that the idea of a spiritual initiation was crucial, outdoing the role of baptismal water. But others recalled how rich the water's symbolism was: cleansing from sin, death and rebirth with Christ, source of new life in Paschal Spring, and passage ensuring Exodus from

enslaving sin. Could it not stay and inspire a new perspective on conversion in our postmodern times? After all, John's practice itself had been a novelty that could not be explained by a Jewish purifying ritual or by the ceremonies of proselytes' acceptance. The Gospels portray him as acutely aware of being involved in a mission that was essentially self-critical and referred to a coming fulfilment.<sup>iv</sup> What, then, was his prophetic sign? And how to read his use of water that was itself meant to point to the spirit? How to understand that Jesus commands his disciples to baptise, while himself refrains from it?<sup>v</sup> So many questions that blur our sight of what baptism should mean in our times.

These students of life sciences have water as a prime concern. But their focus on the prospects of life on earth clearly was the Baptist's, whose ritual stressed the cleansing power of water. In fact, he followed the ancient prophets claiming that the day was coming for waters from above to be poured out to purify the people and take away their sins.<sup>vi</sup> Whatever the context of John's baptism, this purifying act referring to the end times was what defined his mission. Yet, the Gospels portray him as a prophet who is acutely aware of his transient role as a precursor of what is to come as the true promise. That meant – so someone remarked – that, according to the Jewish traditions, the spirit in the end also counted as a cleansing power, like wind blowing the chaff from the corn into the fire. The destructive dimension of the cleansing water, therefore, was not to be downplayed, but to be associated with that of the fire, and by extension, of the spirit.

While this negative aspect of the baptismal water was mainly understood as retrospective force to remove the ills of the past, students with a Catholic background notably stressed that it was just a first step leading to the second part of the initiation rite: the sending of the spirit in the sacrament of confirmation. Baptism counted as the cleansing of past sins, so as to open the way for a spiritual growth. This view, though, was not without provoking comments. Was the forgiveness of sins just to be seen as wiping off past records? Were the words of the Baptist himself not far more dynamic and future-oriented? Repentance, as the Greek term of *metanoia* indicated, implied a turn of heart toward piety and honesty, as its spiritual fruits. Restricting baptism to the wiping of a slate was not John's idea, even if later developments have tended to oppose the water, as a retrospective cleansing, to the spirit, as the force that empowered a new beginning. Even the Baptist's words leave no doubt that the ritual has a prospective, rather than retrospective focus at its centre. The reports and homilies of patristic ceremonies surrounding baptism unanimously stress that the neophyte is born again to follow the moral ideals in the mind of Jesus.<sup>vii</sup> This means that the rite is future oriented and so is the

symbol of the water also to be understood. No retrospective cleansing but opening up to future with Christ. But then: why use the symbol of water for that purpose?

This debate on the two-tier rite of Christian initiation reminded me of a Dutch theologian, who opined that a student chaplaincy is a powerhouse for the creative renewal in religious matters thanks to so many committed young people. It applied more specifically to the ecumenical and international set-up, where a wide variety of religious insights meet with a youthful commitment to find new ways for Christian living. This debate on the form and meaning of Christ's command to baptise was scintillating in that respect. What did baptism mean to the one that was to be baptised with water and the spirit? This question and the mix of enigmatic related texts proved a real challenge for these students, most of whom were members of churches that merged the two elements of water and spirit into one single rite. The excitement grew notably when the topic of fire was introduced, referring to the apocalyptic role of "spirit and fire" as instruments of judgment. Was the spirit like the wind (*ruah*) that blew the chaff into the punitive fire? Some texts common to the circles of the Baptist, in effect, suggest that the baptismal waters were meant to cleanse the sinner so as to safeguard him for the coming ordeal by the spirit and its consuming fire.

There is little doubt that John baptised people with water to save them from the apocalyptic ordeal. His prophecy that Jesus would baptise with the spirit was no simple promise in terms of an easy reward for obediently taking a bath, like the promises made to a docile child. Rather, he spoke of a two-tier rite that had apocalyptic threats written all over it. The students realised that the scriptures announced more than an initiation in two steps, namely, first the cleansing of past debts, so that the gifts of the spirit could be received. That imagery does not tally with the biblical mix of images. Moreover, it would contradict the tradition of those churches that practice the baptism by water alone claiming that Christ attached his gift of the spirit to this unique rite. Indeed, the semantics of the cleansing water in relation to Christ's core message demanded a further scrutiny. Provisionally we concluded that the baptismal rite was basically future-oriented rather than retrospective, since its focus was on rebirth and on entering into a new existence epitomized by the apostolic admonitions and their moral ideals.

The cup of baptism

Many reports about the early Christians' divisions and different practices were brought up as the debate continued. Following the experts, the students held firm to the two-tier aspect of baptism, but were puzzled about its meaning. In this context, a third image imposed itself, as Jesus related the baptism to his passion, calling it: "the cup he was to drink" (Mk 10:38). This text opened a new dimension. Jesus himself was to face an ordeal, a testing tribulation, that he called his baptism and which he explicitly related to what his disciples also were to undergo.<sup>viii</sup> Noting that the tradition unanimously stresses that Jesus had no sins of his own to repent of and did not need a baptism of cleansing or forgiveness, the group was mystified moreover by the fact that he had been baptised already. The fact that John's baptism could be repeated, solved this quandary only partly. For, clearly, Jesus did not mean a repetition of his Jordan experience and did not speak of his own need of forgiveness; nor did he say that this baptism would bring him spiritual gifts. In fact, the features of a testing ordeal were prominent as he asked his disciples to prepare and follow him. What kind of ordeal was this and why did John's Gospel ignore its striking image, despite being quite outspoken on the link between Jesus and his precursor? Moreover, the fourth Gospel – which originated in what Raymond Brown calls the community of the Beloved Disciple – explicitly states that Jesus did not perform any baptism in the sense of a ritual to wash away past sins.<sup>ix</sup> One student, focusing on the "baptism by the Spirit", noted that this Gospel also has its own view of the descent of the Spirit. For, it not only situates the Spirit's descent on Easter Sunday, when Jesus came among his followers in the locked room, but it formulates it in an enigmatic way. While relating the gift to the removal of sins, it actually changes the entire focus. Indeed, the recipients themselves are not cleansed of their sins, but rather they are invested with the power to free the others of their sins. What might this imply?

The Paschal sending of the Spirit has mostly been understood in terms of the priestly powers of confessional forgiveness, which the Risen Lord gave to his fledgling Church. Whatever its precise meaning for the theology of sacramental grace, though, it is mainly to be understood as part of the Paschal event which Jesus referred to in announcing the baptism he was to undergo and which his followers should prepare for. And the imagery of a test in all Gospel reports names other parameters than the two-tier concept of an initiation that successively offers a cleansing of past sins and infusion of spiritual gifts of various sorts. Nothing in Jesus' call to follow him and drink his cup points to the imagery of a debt relief followed by the gift of privileges. Its setting is unmistakably apocalyptic and the Gospels present it as a baptism with spirit and fire entailing the final test which one has to undergo, but of which Jesus

repeatedly says that it should not frighten believers, since it rather offers relief, as “your deliverance is nigh”.<sup>x</sup>

As an apocalyptic ordeal, the baptism is a test which ‘purifies’ by water, spirit and fire, but which is neither solely destructive nor gracious. The related symbol of the cup also has the semantic link both with tribulation and with bliss.<sup>xi</sup> By viewing this, as Mark clearly implies, in the light of the Paschal event, the group’s focus moved away from the imagery of ritual cleansing of past debts and the reception of exceptional privileges. The two-tier aspect of the initiation ritual now came to be viewed more in the light of Jesus’ own mission and the implications for discipleship. The debate’s goal now focussed on finding a common vision that kept the variants of baptismal images united, so that the ecumenical group could celebrate the rite in unity with people from all continents and very diverse churches. Could a common image be found that pictured true discipleship? For this purpose it was decided to turn to the contemporary Christian view of René Girard, and his attempt to reply to the relativist nihilism that affects the secularising Western scene. His so-called mimetic theory, which had emerged during the renovating times of the Second Vatican Council – albeit independent of it – offers some inspiring new views on the baptismal commitment in present conditions.<sup>xii</sup>

### Mimetic narcissism and its trail of evil

The question to answer was about the ordeal Jesus was facing, and how the divine spirit made him cope with it. The Church’s tradition, notably the baptismal instructions of the early Church Fathers, indicate that we are to think in terms of a challenge that is embedded in humanity’s very make-up and its cultural impact that originated from the onset. This has come to be known as “original sin” – or in Germanic terms: the “hereditary sin” – something engraved in the very nature of human culture and transmitted to any newborn baby by the symbols of human communication.<sup>xiii</sup> Although Girard did not develop any explicit theory on the Christian doctrine of ‘original sin’ nor the redemption from it, some theologians have keenly applied his mimetic theory to reflect precisely on this controversial topic.

René Girard was born on Christmas day 1923 at Avignon as a son of the town’s archivist and an artistic, devoutly Catholic mother. His adolescence was marked by his father’s agnosticism and, like him, he specialised in medieval history. His religious scepticism was doubtlessly deepened by the dubious renown of Avignon. Yet, the cynical relativism that dominated the

post-war Parisian intelligentsia did not appeal to him, and after his degree studies in Paris, he soon moved over to the USA. He was asked to teach French literature and got a second PhD-degree in modern history. He helped organise a conference on post-structuralism with some prominent French authors and started to ponder what characterised Western thought in the wake of Nietzsche's nihilism, with its striking narcissism that was prominently voiced in existentialist wordings.

His readings of the great literature made him discover a remarkable incongruity. Most novels tended to include (hidden) autobiographical aspects, urging the reader to identify with the hero who upholds pronounced ideals of self-determination. But great authors helped him to see through this ideal as a *fata morgana*, because humans are incurably mimetic. In his groundbreaking first study on the romantic lie of self-determination, he showed that these great authors came to a "cultural conversion", which he himself also followed and translated into a religious conversion.<sup>xiv</sup> Although this first major study drew no religious conclusions from his discovery of how huge conflicts arise from the refusal to acknowledge that one is forever imitating others, Girard had now gone through a religious crisis due both to these findings and certain events in his life. A close reading of Dostoyevsky's work, in particular, had led him back to the Catholic faith. But how should we formulate the religious aspect of his discovery? Just what was the 'conversion' in those literary masterworks that made him turn around in religious terms? An analysis of this question helped our debating group of students to articulate what a baptismal ceremony may mean in a society addicted to Darwin's motto of the "survival of the fittest".

The flurry of books that surfaced in Europe for the last five centuries, after printing had made the vulgarisation of text possible, has actually pivoted on a secularised version of the Christian belief in the uniqueness of every person's soul as an object of God's special interest. The idea of a personal calling, linked to a heightened stress on sinfulness and morality, led to the belief that persons are the prime source of their feelings, thoughts, and desires, for which each one is held personally responsible. Penning down one's views of life became a natural variant of the old religious practice of self-examination. But only some great and gifted authors were able to see through the fallacy of the alleged autonomy, which humanist ideals extolled so profusely. Novelists like Cervantes, Stendhal, Proust, and most prominently Dostoyevsky, as well as the playwright Shakespeare, noted that people deceive themselves by dreaming, like Narcissus, about their self and its autonomy, while ignoring the mutual

imitation and rivalry which is the true driving force in life. Girard's discovery of these great authors' conversion away from this romantic self-deception did not come as a total surprise, though, as the Parisian philosophical scene had itself been buzzing with an outspoken critique of this humanistic ideal. But the twist Girard gave to it allowed religion and Christian morality to return on the scene in quite a unique manner. Actually, it is by no means evident that rejecting the fallacy of mental autonomy and its "struggle for survival" should lead to a religious conversion.<sup>xv</sup>

By studying the basic role of imitation, which is so much stronger in humans than in animals – chiefly because of the prolonged pedagogical dependence of children – Girard understood that religion bridges the basic dichotomy between the vital need to imitate models in the process of learning and the urge to be in control of one's being. The tension between facing the other as one's model or as an obstacle calls for a constant mediation in a fundamental and violent manner. Girard realised that, here, his study of modern literature had to be extended and supplemented by data from anthropological research. How has humanity coped with that daily dilemma of matching the opposing logics of the necessary imitation and cherished autonomy? How did people over time and space deal with those desires that seemed personal while being indeed what links us most strongly to one another?

Having studied anthropological reports from various continents, Girard wrote two books that caused a big upheaval. In *Violence and the Sacred*<sup>xvi</sup> he argues that all religion is rooted in violence that seeks to remedy the even more violent potential of the mimetic tensions, chiefly by way of sacrificial rites that – so he argues – originate in humanity's typically manner of conflict solution. Whereas animals habitually solve conflicts by the surrender of the weaker to the stronger, the threshold of hominisation occurs when a new method takes hold and turns into the root of all culture. This occurs when rivalling factions join forces against one victim whom they inculcate with having caused the conflict. This practice – which is commonly dubbed scapegoating – proved a most effective way of bridging the contradictory logics of narcissistic self-centredness and mutual dependence in mimesis. The sacrificial rituals, which subsequently were surrounded by explanatory myths, rules and taboos, and by public sanctions, proved to be essential for this tension-solving mechanism. It allows humans to live in a fallacy of self-sufficiency amidst an all-pervading mutual dependency. However, Girard did not stop at this thesis. After his solidly argued analysis of the violent role sacrificial religion played in the bid to hem in more devastating conflicts, he presented the remarkable

insight that the biblical tradition broke through this sacrificial mechanism, which he proved to be founded on a camouflaged lie, namely the presumed guilt of the scapegoat. The three parts of his next book, *Things hidden since the foundation of the world*<sup>xvii</sup> link the mentioned anthropological data to insights in psychology and compared them to the basic positions of the Bible, to show that the prophets' claim that God wants justice rather than sacrifices underpins all its reworked myths and undermines the religion's basic logics.

These two publications brought Girard great renown as author of a powerful albeit disputed hypothesis that revolutionised research on the workings of religion in cultural matters. The central role he gave to the ritual aspects – notably to the sacrifice and its daily translation into mutual scapegoating – allowed him to analyse numerous religious texts as literary documents without posing as a theologian.<sup>xviii</sup> But it also led many theologians to an in-depth study of the theory's implications in respect of the New Testament presentation of Christ, which is of prime importance to our topic. Girard's own views of Christ remain on the level of the texts as literary documents, centring round the radicalisation of the breakthrough the Bible had set out to achieve by making the sacrificial view subordinate to the call for justice. The God of Israel, according to the undercurrent in the Bible's key texts, is a God who sides with the victim. He is not after condemning (scapegoating) but after saving. Christ appears as God's servant sent to carry out this program of saving people from the sacrificial fallacy. Yet, the insertion of certain texts into this matrix often renders the whole less than straightforward.

Before studying Girard's view of Christ's redemptive action and the insertion of the disciples into this calling via the baptismal rite, we should clarify the notion of a personal inheritance of the original fault, to which much thought is given also by theologians that adopt the mimetic theory. Jesus has explicitly asserted that moral inheritance cannot mean the transmission of debts incurred by forebears (see Jn. 9:2-3). At stake is rather a cultural pattern of sinfulness, to which each child is inevitably exposed and which Girard defines as the mimetic tensions that lead to mutual rivalry and scapegoating, causing individuals constantly to abuse the divine order of rites, myths and laws for their personal benefit. A comparison between this view and the story of the Fall in Gen 3 has often led to a protest that the holy texts clearly imply that sin at the onset was an act of disobedient hubris by which humans tried to get God's status of immortal self-mastery. In other words, if rivalry is the root evil, should we not see it primarily as a rivalry with God's eternal supremacy?

The mimetic theory does not gainsay this doctrine, but draws attention to some essential facts that tend to be overlooked. That human sin, by following the snake's lead, turns God into a rival is clear. But is it truly what was on God's mind, so to say, and not rather the satanic view claiming that God thus forbade the fruit out of jealousy? In fact, God gives a warning that there is a deadly danger in taking that fruit with its specific, enigmatic name: "knowledge of good and evil". The snake's interpretation of the warning wilfully ignores that name and makes us see God as a rival who odiously withholds a vital capability. But to claim that sin came into the world by an act of sheer disobedience is a satanic travesty of what the biblical text tries to convey. It limits the fault to its formal aspect of disobedience and ignores what the divine message contains. In fact, calling God a rival who imposes irrational limits on our existence is already applying the devastating power of judgment, which is contained in the "knowledge of good and evil". The Eden-story rather expresses that there is a fundamental flaw in humans, consisting in a judgmental habit of dividing reality in good and evil. The serpent changes the terms, but the rest of the story shows that the mutual scapegoating and oppression are the real issue at stake. After eating the fruit Adam decides to decorate the sign of his male superiority and to disown his partner that he had welcomed as flesh of his own flesh just a few verses earlier. The story culminates – or should we say: bottoms out – in the disconcerting description of humanity's gender hierarchy and ambiguous desires. Although the theologians who adopt the mimetic theory tend to pay little attention to the gender affects of the Fall, they do propose a valuable, innovative view of how human evil originated and was passed on through the generations. Jesus' redemptive act of neutralising this debilitating historical force also receives a novel description, telling the neophytes what they are to be initiated into by becoming members of a new people of God.

But what about "good and evil" in this context? Are God's rules fake: mere inventions by humans to regulate and justify their mutual incriminations and judgmental rivalries? To say that scapegoating is the tool by which humans save their society from rivalistic chaos and that religious rules and rites serve to keep that mechanism alive is not the same as to claim them to be therefore a mere travesty. Without arguing that God is "nothing" but the will of humans to save their society from chaos, we must admit that society's will to avoid collapse is one of the few statements that rise above the negative implications of the theological premise that God is "totally different", as He indicates: "my thoughts are not your thoughts" (Is 55:8). The so-called "original sin" is what places humans outside the realm of the divine thought, due to the abuse of their acquired skills of judgmental thinking, with self-centred vanity as a counterpart.

This is what they have to be redeemed from. To state that religious rules are merely devices to make scapegoating possible is a cynical relapse into that same trap, as it means ignoring the prime message that God's thoughts are different and that we tend to make a travesty of what seeks to preserve and ensure life's basic preconditions.

From this short survey of the Girardian perspective on evil and the need of redemption emerges the idea of a basic, all-pervading existential flaw affecting all humanity as a transmitted condition due to a "guilty" fault that needs to be redressed by some 'external' intervention. Yet, it is objectionable to phrase this in terms of a debt of disobedience to be repaired by a sacrifice on God's order seeking to rehabilitate His honour. That popular phrasing, with its "bloody perspective", made Girard actually reject the usual reading of the Letter to the Hebrews as a relapse into a sacrificial logic which ignores the prophetic tradition that God wants justice rather than bloody sacrifices of innocent victims.<sup>xix</sup> But later on, he acknowledged the profound meaning of Heb 10: 5-10, which states that Jesus gives his life, till the very end in doing God's will, not as a satisfaction of some wrathful thirst for innocent blood, but rather as an installation of God's realm of mutual love, which society refuses and resists as it exposes its unjust (dis)order. His commitment to God's loving design with the world led Jesus to offering himself totally to the bitter end. God urged him to this radical commitment and this gift of self without backing down. It is in that sense that God actually "exacted" his lifeblood. The wording of this needed a close examination, because some students did read it as a sacrificial appeasement of God's wrath.<sup>xx</sup>

Girard's apparent sea-turn in rescinding his earlier assessment of Hebrews – even to the point of dubbing it a scapegoating of Christ's self-giving – is no shift in his view of the Bible's anti-sacrificial stand. In fact, it strengthens his reading of the redemptive act and the discipleship into which the sacraments are to initiate the believer. His vision of a shift from the archaic sacrificing of others to a Christian self-sacrifice sounded as a juggling with words to some, but they realised that it helps him treat the Hegelian derailment of the biblical tradition with far-reaching implications.<sup>xxi</sup> As a literary critic, he avoids formulating this in theological or even philosophical terms, but comments on one of the greatest stories of world literature, namely the so-called Solomon-judgment, which is commonly read as a tribute to the king's wisdom, but which in fact carries a deeper message. For it portrays a person's most radical choice in the woman's case: "Shall I sacrifice someone so as to stand my own over against my rival or can I swallow my pride and subdue my desires so as to save that life?" In its dramatic

simplicity, this sums up Christ's test and the ordeal of his 'baptism'. It demands the rejection of any scapegoating practice of taking someone else's life as a sacrifice for oneself. It is radical in a double sense, as we should now explore. It not only requires a break with identifying with one's self-image, but also a commitment to free others from their narcissistic self-centredness.

### Shattering the mimetic film

Girard's struggle with the meaning of the Letter to the Hebrews is reminiscent of a process that has marked Christianity for centuries. The on-going query on the addressees, the author, and the true message of this text – the Paulinian origin which had been in dispute right from the beginning – explains why, to Girard, it came to symbolise his dislike of modernity's pretensions. He shamed his own initial dismissal of its message as a relapse into a modern anti-Christian stand. In his latest book, *Battling to the end*, while analysing the totalitarian shift toward unchecked violence which emerged with Napoleon – supported by Hegel, von Clausewitz, von Beethoven, and so many enlightened spirits – he links Christianity's failings to its own derailment. The question is which test the believer is to stand? Which conversion had become ever more urgent through the ages of Christian presence? Why had the choice for Christ become harder instead of easier after two millennia of Christendom?

Among the student group this paradox temporarily dissipated when one of them stressed that Jesus' baptism was indeed radically different from ours. His 'baptismal ordeal' was not for his own but for our sins; nor was it to earn him spiritual gifts, since they had been his from all eternity. In reply to this reading, though, it was observed that Heb10:10 must be combined with Jesus' word on his imminent baptism in Mark 10:39 and read in the light of Heb10:7 which quotes Ps 40 and has Jesus say to his Father: "here I am to do your will". However, if God's will for his servant – which Is 41:8; 43:10 identifies with God's entire people – is this 'ordeal' and if Jesus, in giving himself as food, tells his friends to do the same in memory of him (1 Cor 11:24), the references to a "baptism" he is to undergo cannot mean that the entire people and his followers in particular have to shed their blood as a sacrifice for the others' sin as they undergo the same baptism. So, what is meant is not the bloody death as such, but the action that led up to this death, due to its unsettling effect on a society that refused to accept the "Word that came to his own" (Jn 1:11). In other words, the ordeal consists in doing God's work against world's ruthless ill will.

Can we say that Jesus underwent the same two-tier baptism that has become our sacrament of initiation? And the next question arises in which sense his words to Nicodemus about the need to be reborn by water and the spirit also applied to himself. These questions were puzzling to those who started to realise that much of their catechism classes had had a trace of docetism in it, presenting Jesus' incarnation as a mere appearance and taking his famous "I am"-words to mean that his divine nature made him a different species. For, to accept that he was tested in an ordeal that all humans are to face meant the awareness that his commitment to the life-giving God made him face a cultural-religious predicament that affects all. Girard's analysis of the mimetic fallacy came in here as help in analysing the human wish of self-promotion and the constant urge to judgmentally scapegoat others. It shows the challenge to tackle what dominates all as an "inherited" fallacious inclination. And it also explains the curious sea-turn, to which Girard openly confessed in his assessment of Hebrews. While dubbing his rebuttal of the Letter as a lapse into a Hegelian modernism, his revised reading of Heb 10:10 nonetheless rejects the return to archaic forms of the faith that see Christ's death as a sacrifice ordered by God for settling mankind's debt in the heavenly ledger. That juridical atonement theory, formulated in vengeful terms, may still appeal to many a believer – curiously more so among Protestants, even though their churches originated from the protest against the clerical abuse of that theory – 'democratic' feelings render the image of such a vindictive divine Potentate unbearable. But Girard surpasses the current aversion of a vindictive God who demands his Son's destruction and in the process attacks the totalitarian thinking, that curiously got encrusted precisely since Christianity undermined its own message, and that found its radical wording in Hegel, of which Nietzsche's nihilism is no more than a cynical variant. Despite his own sympathy for the secularist rejection of this vindictive atonement theory, Girard is very critical of these two authors who may seem to oppose each other, but distort the Christian novelty in a comparable manner.

Here a short excursion is in place. Although the rejection of sacrificial demands by vindictive gods seems prevalent in modernity, the effects of this archaic view have hardly subsided. In fact, it was the faith in Christ's action rather than the view of God's nature that mollified the perspectives. A humanist mind read Isaiah's words about the difference of God's and human thoughts even as referring to mankind's enlightened abhorrence of the cruelty God craves! This travesty has emerged a number of times throughout Christian history and was enhanced by a misreading of the Letter to the Hebrews' alleged claim that the absolute order was

restored by the Word's incarnation and its definitive silencing of the divine wrath. Centuries of disputes on the meaning of this doctrine had led to the stark assertion of the humanistic self with totalitarian sides. While Christianity had boosted the value of each person's soul, notably through the monastic traditions, a three-way identification of the creative *logos* in God, in nature, and in human intelligence had taken hold that actually occasioned ambiguous and curious conclusions. It fostered empirical sciences, but also the total equation of God and Nature (in Spinoza's terms), which in turn favoured a new stress on the old Greek (Socratic) conviction that moral evil was nothing else but a lack of insight. Even more critical arguments by thinkers like Kant, that proscribed jumping from the visible to the Transcendent Order, did little to change this due to a deist perspective gaining ground and arguing that if the transcendent God cannot be known, we better ignore Him and focus on the visible (phenomenological and measurable) order and research the mental frame that links all to a "transcendent Self". This implied an absolute aspect that relied on a subdued claim that the Incarnated Word had in fact realised salvation in a purely inner-worldly realm, making humankind truly self-sufficient. Such a conviction culminated in Hegel's autonomous, aesthetic State. The absolute that oozed from Hegelian ruminations, however, was both half-baked (as Nietzsche sneered) and wrong-footed from the start. That this fallacy must be exposed is Girard's basic contention. Only then can the baptismal challenge in Christ be grasped to the full.

In his analysis of the empirical (or phenomenological) order, Hegel highlighted a basic pattern that resembles Girard's mimetic view, but has opposite implications. Girard's explanation why his rebuttal of Hebrews had been dupe to the Hegel's deception helps us understand the baptismal challenge as a demand to shun away from the totalitarian temptation that has plagued Europe for centuries, and which is the basic danger the Gospel tries to free humanity from. Hegel taught that an absolute law ruled all humans, namely the will (or desire) of mutual recognition that motivated the urge to imitate. If this may appear to coincide with Girard's mimetic theory, the difference is huge, illustrating what the baptismal conversion is all about. Indeed, Girard's turning away from the Parisian intellectual circles in the 1950s was mainly directed against the asphyxiating grip of Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel's famous master-slave theory on the very diverse theories that were in vogue. Freudianism, Marxist-existentialism, and Nietzschean structuralism alike paid tribute to this model, presenting humans as dupe of a radical mental order that exercised its influence either via a sub-individual or supra-individual thrust to which each was to bend, precisely because of that

search of recognition. While enslaving in itself, this submission to an absolute (called libido, matter, structure, etc.) paradoxically counted as the height of self-assertion, by which the human self joined what is its very immanent meaning, thereby remedying what had been destroyed by the biblical faith in the Transcendent God, as Nietzsche stressed relentlessly.

In his reply, Girard acknowledges that old metaphysical models may have been alienating. But he questions Hegel's set-up by giving a twist to the self's 'search for recognition'. Hegel understood very well that mimesis or imitation is the basis of cultural existence and that this imitation has a double side, namely the attraction by values the other enjoys and the hope that by adopting them one will earn recognition and applause via symbolic communication. But here, Girard parts company with Hegel's reading of the Christian message. By describing man as a seeker of recognition, Hegel presents this search as radically gratified and sublimated due to the Christ event. But this gives everyone the ambiguous status of a seeker (slave) and master at the same time, which inevitably leads to a political imagery of the absolute State, of which each one is simultaneously owner (master) and yet subject (slave). In his *Battling to the End*, which builds on a comment of the military analyst and Hegel's contemporary, von Clausewitz, Girard blames this view for making the modern States adopt Napoleon's general conscription and for absolutizing national enmities, thus creating hostilities between millions, both in- and outside the State-borders. Meanwhile, being reflected in the leader –master with whom one is to identify – the modern self feels braced up by a self-engendered film of recognition.<sup>xxii</sup>

Thus, a narcissistic trait underpins all modern States and not just the totalitarian regimes. What counts here is that Girard's analysis implies that this is bolstered by a fallacious view of Christian conversion that tends to leave out an essential aspect, namely when baptism is no longer seen as an engagement in doing what Jesus did, but as reaping the benefits which his sacrifice earned for us. Picturing God as pleased by the allegedly sacrificial nature of Christ's death while failing to ask which God-pleasing acts of commitment actually caused his death, created a self-gratifying effect of the *sola fides*-option, in which a feel-good quasi-religion prevailed. The imitation of Christ, with its focus on self-denial, pains, and humiliation, even transmuted into a sense of pride in being worthy to share in his suffering as a scapegoat. However lofty that acknowledged need for conformity with Christ's pains may be, it actually rigidified the narcissistic film of self-gratifying recognition.

There has clearly been serious criticism of the selfish narcissism that caused so much harm in the totalitarian systems. Before formulating a Girardian view of the baptismal conversion, it is therefore imperative to signal this 20<sup>th</sup>-century European criticism of the idealistic focus on the self and the Hegelian philosophy. In fact, the three so-called masters of suspicion that dominated the post-War Parisian scene – Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche – were praised for doing precisely that. Both Sartre’s existentialism and Levi-Strauss’ structuralism lambasted Western arrogance in their defence of colonised peoples, in line with Marxist and Nietzschean critique of the idea of the “self”. Freud’s notion of subconscious drives too, strengthened this growing stress on the “different”, the non-self. But with ‘difference’ becoming a buzzword in the Paris of the 1960’s, Girard noted that behind this self-fustigating façade there was a common denial of the violence which the biblical prophets impugned, and that caused Jesus’ ordeal. Indeed, the usual scapegoating of Christian influences for having made Europe’s mind-set conceited fixed these movements in shared denial of the prime cause and ensnared post-War attempts in a narcissistic deception.<sup>xxiii</sup> Behind the ideological emphasis on pluralism the Hegelian focus on the self lingered on, denying the ancient Christian insight in the violent evil at the heart of this self-centredness.<sup>xxiv</sup>

To break the surface and defend the forlorn

The image of a narcissistic enthrallment with a self in search of recognition has mesmerized poets and thinkers at all times. Ovid commenting on Tiresias’ prophecy about Linope’s son being in love with his own reflection in the water, indeed, is not without reminding us of what the baptismal ritual entails. Various imageries are used in baptismal instructions to describe the role of water in the ritual John the Baptist introduced into the biblical domain. The ancient Lenten liturgy, preparing the candidates for baptism at Easter, refers to the creation story of God raising the world out of the chaotic waters, to the passage through the Sea of Reeds and the Jordan river, to the revival of parch lands, to the quenching of thirst, and even to the liquid oozing from the Crucified’s pierced side – mixed images of danger, death, and resurrection. A basic characteristic of water is, however, ignored, namely its aptitude to confront a person with the “self” or, as Africans often say, with one’s double, one’s shadow or soul.<sup>xxv</sup>

Girard’s mimetic theory focuses on people’s urge not only to imitate others, but also to solve the conflictual and rivalrous claims that ensue from this mimesis via the irrational method of scapegoating and victimisation. This imitation and the conflicts with their violent solution,

however, are rooted in a basic quest and fascination. The mimesis follows from an enthrallment by the other's enjoyment of a vitalising value. The other is a model, but soon turns out to be an obstacle or in other words, the hard surface picturing what the self comes to identify with. The tendency to see our desires as arising from inside whereas they are actually captured from the other, forms the human predicament that leads to a constant conflict and denial by the self of a basic "dependency". The self always sees a mirror image where indeed, is the other; and the shift of the model turning into an obstacle is a projection of an inner strife of the self being graced and yet frustrated by a narcissistic self-image.

On discovering this mechanism and its denial – *méconnaissance* – through literary criticism, Girard discerned its workings as the basis of all culture and religion. But he also argued that the hard surface of this fallacious image could be broken. All religions hold indeed a suppressed insight – *méconnaissance* – that their sacrificial means of controlling all-out societal violence rests on a lie, namely the false incrimination of an innocent culprit. Next, he argues that the biblical tradition has consistently exposed this fallacy by presenting God as the one who opposes the bloodshed and identifies with the incriminated innocent. The biblical breach with that *méconnaissance* culminates in Jesus affronting the religious leaders of his days for being more interested in upholding rules than in a pastoral care of the flock. Although exegetes may question some of the Gospel's claims on this point, it is beyond doubt that the "baptism" Jesus foresees for himself and for his followers refers to confrontations between his prophetic option for justice and the forces that see "man as made for Sabbath rather than the Sabbath for man."<sup>xxvi</sup>

Returning to the question that preoccupied the students, we may describe the two-tier baptism in Girardian terms as follows. The water symbolises the initial dilemma, the barrier that is to be overcome, and the hard surface throwing the self back onto its enclosure. It represents the ambition or desire that derives from the model, but is viewed as a reflexion of one's interior, thus turning the other into an obstacle, as happened in the Eden-story. To enter the baptismal water, thus implies breaking that fallacious surface, allowing the other to change back from a scapegoated obstacle into a true *socius* and flesh-of-my-flesh. This starts a two-tier initiation of joining Christ in his mission, which Luke describes in terms from Isaiah's prophecy. (See Luke 4:4 ff. and 11:11 pars). It actually means siding with those that are written off and ousted in the way Jesus showed at the temple itself, during the winter feast, in challenging the

self-righteous leaders to be the first to throw a stone at the adulteress they had condemned and thus start her execution.<sup>xxvii</sup>

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Breaking the narcissism that keeps the self captured in fallacy is a first and crucial dimension of the baptismal rite, embodying the Paschal event of Christ who – according to the orthodox iconographic image carrying the double title of “descent into hell” and “Resurrection” – pulls humans with him across that divide between falsehood and truth. The imagery of breaking the divide between the hellishly deceptive self-centredness and truthfulness ought to be given a prominent attention. In my title I used the phrase: “Where water was, I am” to indicate that the mirroring screen that keeps us captive of misleading self-centeredness should be shattered so that the “I” may open up to exchange and respond by ‘I’, without feeling urged to defend the own corner. This paraphrases Freud’s, *Where Es was...* and expresses Girard’s conviction that the dark driving force is not, as Freud claims, an inner pool of libidinous desire, but a denied dependence on imitations that are misconceived as internal desires and cause strife and sinful rivalry in a judgmental fashion. Whereas Freud advocates linking up with the true libidinous drives in oneself, Girard sees the salvation in following Christ in breaking the fake self-sufficient mode that sacrifices the other, so that the “I” can freely partake in loving exchanges.

But as was indicated above, this is only the first leg of the two-tier ritual. While breaking through the surface of the narcissistic image allows me to create the space for others to be different and inspirational, the gift of the spirit, as a second leg of the initiation is much more comprehensive. It undoubtedly presupposes the first stage of rejecting any victimisation, such as backbiting, scapegoating, etc. But also needed is the power (and the urge) to remove evil by an active defence of the victim. That is what Jesus means in Jn 20:22-23, when imparting the Spirit, whom he had previously called the Paraclete, and thus enabling his disciples to do the Paraclete’s work, i.e. to be the defender, the advocate of the victims that suffer from the world’s evil. Understood in Girardian terms, taking away sin implies courageously removing all victimary processes through the power of the Spirit, the Paraclete or Advocate. The Spirit here is the exact opposite of Satan, the accuser, the victimiser.<sup>xxviii</sup> Whereas the latter causes animosity and raises rivalry with anyone saying, “I am”, the Spirit not only removes that hostility but takes joy in strengthening the other’s identity. But, clearly, coming out of the pool of fallacy by breaking the flawed image of self-sufficiency is a primary condition for this secondary phase of helping others to get free from that fallacy.

## Mimetic mystagogy

Coming to a conclusion, we take note of the fact that after a long period of administrating mainly infant baptisms, most communities are experiencing a new demand for adult baptisms both in regular parishes and in special chaplaincies. In these events, the two-tier sacrament of initiation tends to be celebrated in one ceremony, raising the issue of how to integrate the two sides. From a pastoral rather than dogmatic perspective, I have tried to reflect on the question with the help of the mimetic theory of Girard, who has never posed as a theologian, but deals with the issue of Christian conversion throughout his work.<sup>xxix</sup> How did baptism mark the route that Jesus went? How did it mark the new start in his Spirit? The breach with the past and the spiritual innovation, which the baptismal rite represents, is consistently depicted by Paul and the Church Fathers as the entry into a life with Christ. For this the term ‘mystagogy’ was in vogue among the Church Fathers, meaning that the neophyte was introduced into Christ’s mystery, not in a Gnostic sense, but as the liturgy puts it: “to share in his divinity”. They enter into God’s reign, to be allowed to serve Him, whose thoughts are not his thoughts. In Girardian terms it means entering with Christ into the realm where the mimetic rule of scapegoating is broken and inverted. Instead of narcissistically focussing on oneself and scapegoating anyone who puts an obstacle, it means entering into the sanctuary where Christ preceded so as to open the temple’s curtain (Mt 27:51 pars; Heb 10:20). Shattering the narcissistic screen recalls, on a symbolical level, Christ’s tearing of the veil. Girard is outspoken on the devastating role of (neo)narcissism in present conditions. The effect of the three “masters of suspicion” and their criticism of Hegel’s self-centred focus on recognition has not weakened but rather strengthened the stalemate, notably through the Freudian influence, pampering the subconscious libido.

We may now describe the newness that the baptism and its ritual symbolism impart by paraphrasing and inverting Freud’s dictum, *Wo Es war...* with the help of Girard’s insight. Both authors have misgivings about the cultural impact on human desiring. But where Freud decries the repression of one’s inner libido, Girard advocates the opening up to a positive form of relating to others in mimesis. Where the water screen reflects the narcissistic self, the I of Christ’s Spirit should come, channelling God’s loving care. As said before, Girard does not pose as a theologian. Despite his interest in religious rituals, he has never commented on liturgical symbolism. But if the baptismal rite is to impart the Christian conversion, which he

discerns in the literary core of the biblical tradition, special attention should be paid to two characteristics and one symbol. The two-tier aspect of the Christian initiation indicates that the pursuit of recognition, which Hegel rightly placed at the heart of human existence, is to be given a double twist. If the narcissistic fascination with one's flattering self-image is to turn (con-vert) into a full acceptance of the mimetic reality that directs the self and its desires right from birth and the cultural upbringing, a genuine mood of imitation should emerge that is keen to resist hateful rivalry and scapegoating by allowing the generous self-remittance to the other as model. This entails a twofold mode of recognition: first, the gratitude (literally "re-cognition") for the gift received, and secondly, the struggle to free the giver not only from harassing rivalry but also from any urge to scapegoat. At baptism, the neophyte allows the narcissistic film to be disturbed and becomes committed to the other's wellbeing, to the point of offering help in resisting the mimetic evils.<sup>xxx</sup>

In the liturgical tradition, the most outspoken symbol referring to the breach of the narcissistic fascination is the impressive rite at the Paschal mass, when the newly lit candle is made to break the surface of the water three times, by which Christ tears open the screen that keeps the human mind constrained to the negative mimetic drive. This ripping of the narcissistic surface is repeated any time the water is disturbed in the actual baptism, symbolising the opening up to a new and spiritual community. Here a positive mimetism prevails, in which the model is valued and defended without rivalry. This receives a specific expression in the baptismal rite by the fact that 'models' are assigned to the neophyte as godparents. They are than additional aids to help the parents or support the newcomer. This ancient tradition deserves a special attention. The neophyte is to realise that the godparent is a God-given model and help in learning the process of positive mimesis in the recognition that all cultural value and all our desires are gifts that need to be honoured as such. The last thing the neophyte is to learn from the ritual is to take the godparent selfishly as a special source of presents or financial help.

The novelty of baptismal water, which John the Baptist brought into the biblical realm, carries a rich symbolism. Besides symbolising devastation, death, cleansing, and enlivening fertility, it recalls the challenge to step beyond the temptation to remain locked up in a narcissistic self-centredness. Jesus insisted to go down in that pool of dark drives, thereby foretelling his true baptism leading to the tomb from which he expected to be raised by God's Spirit, so as to break humanity's urge to reduce the other to one's own image and to scapegoat her/him for anything that disrupts one's own design of reality.

In the process of the discussions on the baptismal rite with the students involved in life sciences it became clear to which extent the baptism, like any sacrament, envisages human life in its entirety and can be called a *fait total* in the anthropological sense, proposed by the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss. Not only does it take account of the constructive and destructive working of water in human life, but also it allows the neophyte to go through all this with the help of God's creative Word, leading eventually to the stage where Christ's own amazing "I am"- phrase can be made one's own without fear of blasphemy.<sup>xxxi</sup> Indeed, God's name can thus be applied to anyone made one with Christ in the baptism, not in the metaphysical Aristotelian meaning, but in the sense of biblical tradition, where solidarity with any oppressed being is the core of God's self-revelation, turning anyone crying out 'I am' into an icon of the Giver-of-life, provided the cry for care is respected.

Among the students participating in these discussions there were two from Western Europe, who objected that this approach of the baptismal rite ignores the common setting of infant baptism and its focus on the inherited sin of disobedience to God's command. But can it not be said that the proposed vision of sin as a mimetic breakdown of the harmony God ordered is tantamount to calling it a revolt against God and should parents not be made aware of how any child is bound to be sucked into this quagmire? The mystagogy described in these pages may, therefore, serve as a catechetical tool for anyone caring for young children.

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<sup>i</sup> Modern translations of John's gospel differ widely on when to capitalize 'spirit' in expressions like spirit and life (6:63), spirit and truth (4: 23), or water and spirit (3:5). I shall not use capitals except when referring to Christ's sending of the Spirit or when quoting a clear reference to the Trinitarian understanding of the Spirit. The argument that the Greek article could help does not hold, because the report on the sending in Acts 2 uses 'spirit' in the crucial vs 4 both with and without the article. In Jn 20:22 *pneuma* has no article, but in chapters 14-16 it generally has.

<sup>ii</sup> Criticism of Western narcissistic trends undergirds Girard's writing from the very beginning in 1961, but it gets most outspoken in his scathing comment on Freud in chapter IV, f in part III of *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford 1987. I refer to the French original *Des Choses caches depuis la fondation du monde, Recherches avec Jean-Marie Oughourlian et Guy Lefort* Paris 1978, p. 391-405.

<sup>iii</sup> These ecumenical discussions also touched on the validity and mutual recognition of the sacrament.

<sup>iv</sup> See Mk 1:8 pars. We are not concerned with John's authentic words and what the followers of Jesus made of them, given their rivalry with John's disciples who remained active long after their master's beheading. What counts is the difference, which all Gospels stress, and the decisive step Jesus took.

<sup>v</sup> See Jn 4:2. Even though this may be an insertion, it clearly fits the general approach in the Fourth Gospel.

<sup>vi</sup> John claims to be baptizing for repentance and the forgiveness of sins, a reminder of Ezek 36:25-28, where God says, "I sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean of all your uncleanness".

<sup>vii</sup> In an instructive communication dating from the mid 1970s, Joseph Ratzinger, with a reference to Basil's *paraklesis*, made the moral contents of the baptismal instructions the basis on which to found the magisterium's task to teach and explain moral rules. Right from the Baptist's instructions, through the gospels and the apostolic

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letters, the future moral behaviour of the neophyte forms the focus of the baptismal message. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Prinzipien Christlicher Moral*, Einsiedeln 1975, p. 56.

<sup>viii</sup> See Mk 10:38-39. In Lk 12:50 we hear an echo of it, but without referring to the notion of the cup. Both emphasise the demands of discipleship.

<sup>ix</sup> See Raymond Brown, *The community of the Beloved Disciple*, London 1979. The Beloved Disciple probably came from the group surrounding the Baptist, but he is very outspoken about the newness that Jesus brought. It has been said that the cup as a reference to a second ritual – namely the Eucharist – would not make much sense in this Gospel, since it lacks the institution of the Eucharist. But the concept of uniting with Jesus in his ordeal is nonetheless the core message of the Fourth Gospel.

<sup>x</sup> See Lk 21:28 pars. Jesus' so-called eschatological discourse is closely linked to his call to follow him into his ordeal, as Mk 13:27 shows.

<sup>xi</sup> The ambiguity of the cup as symbol of judgment is a common theme in Jewish spirituality, see Ps 75:8-9. Jesus, like the Baptist, follows this prophetic line, confronting his audience with the choice from the onset. See Morna D. Hooker, "John's Baptism: A prophetic Sign", in: Graham Stanton, Bruce Longenecker and Stephen Barton, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins. Essays in Honour of James D.G. Dunn*, Cambridge 2004, p. 39.

<sup>xii</sup> Although René Girard started to examine the religious implication of his theory at the time of the Vatican II, he included no direct reference to this major event in the Catholic Church, even though he had converted back to Catholicism shortly before the Council.

<sup>xiii</sup> German, Dutch, Swedish speak of *Erbsünde*, *erfzonde*, *arvsynd*. The Polish *grzech pierworodny* seems to combine the idea of the beginning and the idea of transmission by procreation.

<sup>xiv</sup> René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Paris 1961, translated as *Deceit, Desire & the Novel, Self and Other in Literary structure*, Baltimore 1965.

<sup>xv</sup> In 1950s and 1960s, Paris was the scene of strong Marxist and Freudian influences, both of which stressed the influence of subconscious forces. More importantly even, the structuralists rejected outright the humanist ideal of man as a being who is in control of his own thoughts and productions. After Nietzsche's "death of God", they started to speak of the death of (the humanistic) man. None of these movements had any use for a religious idea of conversion. Sartre's existentialism, while stressing the individual's value, was unable to outdo this trend.

<sup>xvi</sup> René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré*, Paris 1972, translated as *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore 1977.

<sup>xvii</sup> René Girard, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, Paris 1978, translated as *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford 1987.

<sup>xviii</sup> Even Girard's books devoted to biblical themes are primarily products of literary criticism. See, for instance, his *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, Maryknoll 2001.

<sup>xix</sup> See *Des Choses caches depuis la Fondation du Monde*, Paris 1978, p. 251-4.

<sup>xx</sup> His critics, who accuse him of ignoring the notion of sacrifice as self-giving, pay little attention to the fact that he accepted an alternative view of Hebrews, in which, after exchanges with the Austrian theologian Raymund Schwager SJ, he whole-heartedly allowed for the notion of self-giving. Arnold Angenendt, who used to value Girard's theory on scapegoating, has recently complained that Girard does not value the self-sacrifice which the letter to the Hebrews stresses. (See his *Die Revolution des geistigen Opfers Blut – Sündenbock – Eucharistie* Freiburg 2011.) In her Gifford-lectures of 2012, Sarah Coakley clearly distinguishes Girard's earlier views from his later ones. But she argues that most Girardian theologians stick with the former more dismissive reading of Hebrews. (See her *Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God*, The Gifford Lectures, University of Aberdeen, 2012). She stresses that these theologians reduce the mutual self-giving to an anthropological attitude, in which they claim to be faithful to the master.

<sup>xxi</sup> See René Girard, *Battling to the End*, East Lansing 2010, p. 35.

<sup>xxii</sup> See the Girardian analysis of modern politics in Jean-Paul Dumouchel, *Le Sacrifice inutile*, Paris 2011. It ponders notably the enigma of tyrants turning against their own people.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Girard objects that Freudian and existentialist theories remain focused on the self and that Nietzsche's vision of a Dionysian superman in opposition to the Christian slave-morals also openly hails it. While valuing Levi-Strauss' structuralism, he criticises the nihilist view of identifying religion and myths with just practical attempts to keep society ordered. Safeguarding social order clearly is not nothing, moreover, Girard notes a lack of interest for the scapegoats that pay the price for that order. Though these movements stress "difference", they stay focused on the self and ignore that the social chaos results from the self's "denial" of its *mimesis*. An interesting position is defended by the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, who accepts Girard's views on mimesis and sacrifice, but continues to plead for a centred interior, in which acceptance-and-rejection are constantly reworked. Her introductory article in Frederic Sayer, *La Littérature et le divan* (Paris 2011), entitled "Plaidoyer pour l'espace intérieur" (p.5-38) may count partly as a remote response to Girard's claim that all emotions are mimetic.

<sup>xxiv</sup> In a well-researched study on medieval perceptions of the Eucharist as a remedy for mankind's original Fall and the resulting societal chaos, Ann W. Astell has recently highlighted the various spiritualities combating that

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original flaw of the self's conceited and concupiscent mindset. See her *Eating Beauty, The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages*, Ithaca 2006.

<sup>xxv</sup> In many African traditions, one's reflection in the water, like a shadow, is considered to contain the core of the person's self, which is often translated as "soul".

<sup>xxvi</sup> See Mk 2:27. Although this phrase is typical for Mark, who places it very early in his Gospel, it is clear that the conflict about the observance of the Torah looms heavily throughout the NT. Although this may reflect the debates among the early followers rather than the actual cause of his "ordeal", the Gospels place it at the centre of Christ's mission and the Paschal event.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See Jn 8. Much debate has been devoted to this text at the centre of John's Gospel, dismissed by many as an interjection. Some hold that it was inserted to prove that Jesus was no simpleton but knew how to write! Girard gives it much coverage, pointing to the critical moment of the challenge to throw the first stone. The writing in the sand may actually be as important, as it shows Jesus looking away rather than presenting a hostile challenge.

<sup>xxviii</sup> See especially René Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, Maryknoll 2001.

<sup>xxix</sup> Summing up his work, Girard wrote on the workings of culture in *Les Origins de la culture* (Paris 2004), which he agreed to have translated in English with stress on "conversion" in the title: *Evolution and Conversion, Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*, New York 2007. He counterbalances the idea of *evolution* as struggle for survival by his notion of *conversion*.

<sup>xxx</sup> René Girard greatly respects Emmanuel Levinas' call for an infinite care of the other as the First Philosophy, but he stresses that this requires a constant fight against an inborn tendency to do the opposite. Any presumption of a spontaneous or natural altruism is to be avoided. The doctrine of the original Fall cannot be ignored on this level and the baptismal rite remains of religious value.

<sup>xxxi</sup> The remarkable "I am"-sayings of Jesus have been integral part of the Christian belief that through baptism the believer shares in his divine life, which means a self-giving mode of existence. Dunn has shown that the Fourth Gospel's author was convinced to operate within the Jewish faith, but that the rabbinic tradition viewed this as a step too far and a breach of monotheism. See James D.G Dunn, *The partings of the Way*, London 2006, chapter 11, §§ 5-7. The discussions about the Christianity's tritheist tendency died down rather easily when the students – including Muslims – understood it in Girardian sense of conversion to a positive mimesis.