

“Me too, I am memetic horror”. On mimetic kenosis.

By Wiel Eggen

1. Introduction

Generative Anthropology (GA), as a part and cultural applications of René Girard's mimetic theory, can arguably be seen as partaking in the post-war soul-searching, faced with the horrifying demise of the West's shred-bare humanism. The multifarious attempts to find an response to that demonic horror, carrying proverbial names like Verdun and Auschwitz, remains a hotly debated saga, with the voices of acknowledged or alleged victims keep still growing in strength.¹ From the Sartrean communist inspired support of anti-colonial liberation movements to the Catholic Vatican Council's search of an inculturation of the faith, efforts multiplied to reshape a world that was horrified by the ruins of the humanist beliefs in the *ego's* autonomy.² It threw philosophy as well as the human sciences in disarray, with various arts feeling the urge to redefine themselves, from music and visual arts, to the literary forms of poetry and novels. Speaking of the ambiguous end of culture, Eric Gans soon saw the paradoxical implications of Girard's mimetic theory amidst the cold war threats of total annihilation, while pleading for a specific ethics, which also resonated with the latter's much debated final work *Battling to the End*.³ But building on my own anthropological dealings with the mimetic theory, I wish to focus the gender aspect that appears deliberately neglected in these discussions, but may yet open up to recent calls in various disciplines. This introduction thereto briefly sketches my personal trajectory.

When in 1957 Ghana rose to independence as the first black African nation to do so, the missionary religious group I had just joined started an information center to boost Dutch interest in African life. I opted to help in its museum of African art, describing the objects and gathering documentation. It struck me by the aesthetics that differed remarkably from one ethnic group to the other. Masks and statues correspond to standardized model that differ per group, but have some features in common.

¹ What sometimes is dubbed 'victim mystique', often to do with juridical and sexual injustices, are often justifiably linked to the abhorrence of what totalitarian regimes and their wars have caused. See on this point Eric Gans, *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, notably p. 586 and 588. The #MeToo-movement clearly ranks among this, but should also be considered in a wider context.

² While Sartre started his critique of the idealist ego already in 1934 (*La Transcendance de d l'ego*), it was after WWII that both existentialism and structuralism focused on the issue, which gets a radically new approach in the mimetic theory and the notion of interdividuality. The soul searching of the Church in the Vatican Council II has had great effects in allowing both remorse over links with the totalitarian past and opening up to a world-wide expanse in pluriform religious identity. Let us note that Girard found an affinity for his mimetic theory within the Council's theological renewal, and that the future Pope John Paul II was outspoken at the Council in stressing the religious meaning of gender differentiation, following his book on *Love and Responsibility* (Lublin 1960).

³ See Eric Gans: 'Le logos de René Girard', in *René Girard et le problème du 'mal'. Textes rassemblés par M. Deguy et J-P Dupuy*, (Paris 1982, Grasset). Girard's thesis that culture is a ritualized minor violence to ward off an all-out crisis of mimetic violence and that the Bible unraveled the sacrificial logic at its base might suggest that Christianity has robbed humanity of its cultural defenses and thus favored totalitarian disasters. In his final book *Battling to the End* (East Lansing 2010), Girard has dealt with this paradox, as also Eric Gans has in many of his books and articles.

Heads and sexual characteristics are usually far beyond realistic proportions. Without pressing any sensuality, let alone pornography, the male and female sexual identity protrudes in ways that had no parallels in Western art. Reflecting on this, I noticed by the time of starting my ethnological studies and fieldwork in Ghana and the Central African Republic (RCA) that a good many colleagues had left our missionary group as they felt uneasy over the chasm between their message and the local society's views both on cultural life and on the transcendent.

Even before returning to analyze my data in Paris, I had been gripped by Girard's mimetic theory and its disturbing impact on the structuralism, in which I had been formed. The role of sacrificial religions, the symbols of authority, the initiations and notably the gender differentiations drew my special attention. I wondered what to make of the Banda language (RCA) that designates ownership or superiority by a term that means 'mother' or 'feminine', and that sees the supreme deity as the maternal principle, thereby contradicting the actual gender roles of their patrilineal order. Christians addressed God by a masculine pronoun which local tongues ignored, while they used some flawed etymology for the Ewe (Ghana) divine name *Mawu*, called the *Unsurpassible*, assuming a linguistic passive that was nonexistent.⁴

Whereas Girard's mimetic theory was very helpful in many anthropological questions, I regularly wondered why the basic gender issue was ignored. Amidst the Parisian critics of his theory I found some young researchers who basically sympathized with it, but were also puzzled by his take on the gender issue. There was, first of all, the Bulgarian, Julia Kristeva, rising fast with her linguistic and psychological studies, who adored Girard's theory of sacrificial rivalry. Having heard her perform, René even tried to entice her to a post in the US, which she claims to have declined for political reasons. But personal reasons prevailed, as she was eager to deepen her insight in women's position in the Western crisis via her studies on sacrificial violence in linguistics and on Freud's theories of the subconscious. She analyzed the abhorrence of both the phallogentric order and the maternal attraction. She saw that due to the birth trauma, any creative act by an infant is tainted with horror and resentment of both the maternal and paternal worlds. For girls this is particularly abstruse as femininity is marked by a basic ambiguity for being both desirable and also abject, creating a setting that the current discussions on the mode of production cannot ignore.⁵

⁴ I worked on these themes in W. Eggen, *Peuple d'Autrui. Une approche anthropologique de l'oeuvre pastorale en milieu centrafricain* (Brussels 1976) and in numerous articles published, among others, in *Exchange. Journal of missiological and ecumenical research*. (Utrecht, The Netherlands). In 'Mawu does not kill' (*Exchange* Vol. 31, 2002, p. 359n) I explained that the European style translation of *Mawu* as the *Unsurpassible* took it as a passive negative of *wu* (to kill, surpass), but that such a passive is unknown to the Ewe and many other African languages.

⁵ Julia Kristeva fled from oppressive Bulgaria, in 1965, to continue her linguistic studies in Paris, with Lucien Goldman who was working on Girard's theory of the novel. The affinity of Girard's and Kristeva's thoughts has been analyzed by Martha Reineke in *Intimate Domain. Desire, Trauma, and Mimetic Theory*. (East Lansing 2014). In Kristeva's 1973-4 *séminaire*, in Paris VII, published as *La traversée des signes* (Paris 1975), the lead text 'Pratique signifiante et mode de production' holds insights that are basic in rapport to the Generative Anthropology. It differentiates between the pulse driving people's speech and the structured code of signs thereby activated. There is the oscillation between two pulling

This gender ambiguity was studied in a strictly mimetic context by Lucien Scubla, who noted that Girard's vision of sacrificial religion ignored the fact that women worldwide are kept aloof of rituals for curious reasons, allegedly to do with menstrual impurity. Sacrificial and sexual blood is called incompatible, and numerous interdicts pivoting on this central taboo color the polarization of the genders. His study appeared in the mentioned volume devoted to Girard's idea of the enigma of evil, but it contradicted my findings in a curious point.⁶ Considering the anthropological insight that no acts can be separated from speech and significations, this placed me before a difficult quandary. While adhering to Girard's thesis on the mimetic nature of human life and that this applies equally to both genders, I yet saw that the rapport between the sexes played a pivotal role in shaping human signification on a daily base and, therefore presumably, also at the very start in the originary scene. From the elementary conditions, as Kristeva explains, to the most intricate ideologies according to Scubla, the sexual divide permeates production and communication.⁷ The question why the two main versions of the mimetic theory both avoided this issue intrigued me, and I wondered if incorporating it might harmonize Girard and Gans.

2. Whence the other?

Although imitation may occur without awareness of the other, rivalry and scapegoating cannot. In his above-mentioned 1982 article Eric Gans launched a debate on this that has not yet died down. At the 2017 COV&R-conference meeting in Madrid, Girard's old-time friend Bandera again tackled a humanist leaning in his theory that ignores the divinely revealed origin of that awareness.⁸ But by contrast, Gans rather argued that Girard inadvertently assumes some supernatural source of that

instances, which Freud tells us to see as maternal and paternal, but which are both abhorred in the actual speech, as she worked out in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris 1980). She is close to Girard's formulations, but stresses that speech acts are imbedded in the various modes of production, in which the position of women is crucial. Kristeva has written copiously on the double resentment directed against both the maternal and paternal, on the basic pull and the structures. In later works such as *New Maladies of the Soul* (New York 1997) she again comes close to Girard's mimetic theory, sharing his concern about what Gabor has quoted as 'the exhausted subject' (In his doctoral dissertation on Kristeva *The Semiotic Passion* at Heythrop College London 2013 see: <http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/sites/default/files/docs/publications/theses/Gabor%20J%20Final%20Thesis.compressed.pdf> (Accessed 28.07.2018))

⁶ Lucien Scubla, 'Contribution à la théorie du sacrifice', in M. Déguay and J-P. Dupuis (see note 3) notes an all but universal exclusion of women from blood-shedding in sacrificial acts and starts his study with an inventory of gender related binary oppositions, where female signs are commonly negative. As this contradicts my findings among the Banda who call anything fruitful and superior *eyi* (mother, feminine), it poses an enigma. While the polarity remains, the signs are inverted, which asks for explanations later in this paper. Scubla has recently summed up much of finding on these matters in *Donner la vie, donner la mort* (Paris 2014).

⁷ The Latin word *sexus* (from the verb *seco*, to cut) is part of a huge Indo-European semantic field of words with *se(k)* indicating segregation. This makes a word like homosexual a contradiction in terms. The union expressed by the Greek *homo* denies that *secant*. The Germanic *Geschlecht* relates to cutting (*Schlag*) as well, but also points to separation in clans or *Sippe*. This exceeds the gender opposition and points to the solution that will emerge from our study.

⁸ The critique that Girard reduces religion to a Durkheimian type of society's concern of its own survival has been voiced by many theologians raging from Hans Urs von Balthasar to John Milbank and his Radical Orthodoxy. See John Milbank, "Stories of sacrifice" in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 1995, p.15-46. His critique was further elaborated by the theologian Catherine Pickstock.

awareness and of sign communication in the originary scene. In reply, he set out to explain it rather via his notion of the initial deferral of the appropriative gesture to avoid a fatal clash, which meant the birth of the sign as distinct from the object. I shall not try and rehearse his extensive replies to the criticism that he only revamped the old social-contract theory by linking the birth of language and social awareness to this first deferral, where the group stands back from a fatal rivalry by representing the desired object in an ostentative sign. Rather, I wish to bring the two mimeticists closer by including the concerns of Scubla and Kristeva, and elaborate a way to do this without running into the mentioned theological quandary.

The mimeticists' reading of culture's origin differs mainly in that Girard takes the real death of a group's member as the event that triggers the stand-back, whereas Gans makes the fear of such a fatality in a hunters' troupe surrounding their prey the motive of the deferral. Unless one presumes a generalized cannibalism, the two seem irreconcilable if one makes a group member the object of desire desisted from by a representational gesture. The desired object cannot have been the victim of internecine killing and the feminist complaint about predating males, now culminating in the #MeToo movement, surely cannot pretend the first victim to have been one of the group's females. But, if there is no evidence for this, yet this suggestion is not entirely groundless.

Both versions of the mimetic theory assume a sense of intraspecies otherness and Gans' question stands if this awareness of the other as other stemmed from a supernatural source. By linking Girard's vision to a lucid analysis of philosophy's history he argues that metaphorical language superseded mammalian metonymic participation in the crucial moment of a scenic event, where hominids learned to contain escalating mimetic crisis, when a horrific fear of all-out violence made them step back. They designated the desired object by a sign causing all to keep at bay and thus starting a semantic system that eventually allowed a *logos* of conversion to hold sway over the hidden lie. A *Sparagmos* of the hunted prey was both the common desire and the basic scare that sparked off discouraging signs and made the object sacred. Girard, by contrast, assumes that they stood back in awe for the blood spilled, which created a distance that gave the victim the numinous value of both cause and solution of the crisis.⁹ Both, though, presume an intraspecies awareness of the other in the communication about that central object. Its ambiguity, as being both adored (venerated) and abhorred (guilty), is of great import and demands a closer look.

The awareness of the intraspecies other is at the core of the transition from animal metonymy to human metaphors that GA seeks to explain. We note that it does not ignore, let alone deny, that the root of this new openness lies far back in life's evolution, of which homeostasis and the self-perpetuation are the key characteristics. The consumption of external matter to sustain internal

⁹ This ambivalence of the sacred had constituted a key element in R. Otto's phenomenology in *The Idea of the Holy* (1950, originally published in 1917), which Girard quotes in his two main works.

consistency is typical of all life; and so is procreation. But the eating of one's own kind and intra-species rivalry over food is rather rare, although increasing with complexity of the organisms. The intraspecies other as other, however, emerges and rises slowly into perception, when reproduction ceases to be a matter of splitting into identical selves, when individuals cease to be identical, and when defense is no longer just a collective act. Intraspecies differentiation emerges due to sexual polarisation, when individuals start to need a truly different co-member of the species for their reproductive self-perpetuation.¹⁰ However, even if sexual reproduction creates the condition, it is clearly not sufficient for the awareness of the other as other to arise. There are myriads of sexual patterns, many still largely unknown, but among mammals we note a pattern of male aggression that tends toward fierce rivalries, while the females make a choice from the suitors. It is commonly agreed that sexual-mating fights are by far the more violent forms of rivalry. On the other hand it has been observed that female primates elicit male participation in raising the offspring, which tends to result in a certain bonding with unmistakable emotional sides.¹¹

While this is not the place to discuss the varieties or their affinity with human patterns, Kristeva's and Scubla's observations urge us to examine Girard's and Gans' views of the scenic events that halts the mimetic crisis and try to harmonize them by the hypothesis of a sign stopping the violence by deferral, as both agree, but that originated in female's abhorrence at the brutality of the male fights and the eventual killing of a suitor or the progenitor of her offspring. This scenario differs from Freud's originary scene, which leaves all action and reflection with the males, as it speaks of their deliberate murder and eventual remorse. The present hypothesis may help explain an enigma of gender relations that mimetic theory has noted, but left largely unexplained.

The mimetic theory is known for giving a competitive twist to the common evolutionary vista of cultural and linguistic habits arising and spreading by a more irenic transfer of skills and cognition that get engrained in memes. Rather than assuming that life strives for the forms and perfections Westerners have in their minds (or in dreams), it identifies rivalry and resentment as driving forces, and admits that emotion laden speech acts and gestures of deferral are characteristics of human ways of communications. The above-described variant of its hypothesis supports this twist and additionally admits the gender bifurcation that Kristeva and Scubla bring to our attention as rooting in multiple resentment. The birth drama leaves an ambiguous form of resentment as the baby feels both a maternal and paternal attraction, but also abhorrence. The memes of skills transmitted by

¹⁰ The evolutionary benefit of sexual reproduction is still much debated in several terms. Its role in fostering communication deserves stressing, even if it must be clear this is slow in developing and that the production of gametes occurs largely without awareness of the sexual partner. Meanwhile the actual rivalries may play out within the gender-identical groups that often rally exclusively.

¹¹ Frans de Waal has convincingly proved the similarity of human and primate behavior, making it all the more urgent to get clear about the decisive difference and the originary event causing it. See a.o. F. de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton 2015). The desire to define the difference should not blur these similarities.

what is mainly a male-dominated order actually harbour the resentment of a reproductive fault, or a foetus' envy that has deep evolutionary roots. The originary deferral, by opposing sign and object, is itself heir to a double resentment that will now explain the bifurcation between what the mimetic theory distinguishes as the abject culprit of the murderous feud and its divinized redeemer. While the victim-object transforms into a divinized bringer of peace, the originator of the saving sign who pointed at the dramatic center, herself, is rather degraded into the abject cause of feud itself. Before further refining this hypothesis with the help of religious (biblical) insights, it must be recalled that it agrees with various parts of the Freudian analysis, but rejects the pivotal role of the libido, which is replaced by a quite refined notion of mimesis to emphasize the effects of substitutions and most importantly, Girard's pivotal idea of *méconnaissance*.¹²

In the cultural analyzes of both Freud and Girard, and a great many contemporary thinkers, religion contains a violent or oppressive trait that cannot be ignored, notably since it has been particularly harsh and detrimental for women's position in society. Honoring mimetic theory's habit of rehabilitating the biblical tradition, I shall now build on its insight in the originary event, while considering the gender issue it tends to overlook. Moreover, the deferral that made the sign arise in the originary event, effectively led to a bifurcation that tallies with recent findings in phenomenology, precisely in respect of its gender implications. When the female uttered her ostentatious sign of horror at the death of her suitor or the progenitor of her offspring, she was not a Girardian form of the actual victim that embodies both the feud's guilt and salvation, viewed as its culprit and pacifier as well. Rather, the male community shifted the guilt onto the crying female and made the messenger the culprit, while turning the victimary image into the divine redemption, thereby unwittingly turning the old fetus-envy into an alleged penis-envy. An age-old polarity and differentiation became politicized, incorporating the quest among female primates for support in raising the offspring, which tallies with the practical side that Gans discerned beyond the noetic aspect of the sign.

3. The falsified Fall rectified

In the following, I will examine two biblical texts from Genesis and Exodus that figure largely in the debates in mimetic theory. First, the controversy on the original sin of Gen 2-3. On Adam's Fall, Girard follows the common view that it concerns man's rivalry with God, even though this actually is the Satanic reading of the scene. In truth, the name of the forbidden fruit rather urges a different

¹² The Girardian notion of *méconnaissance* is akin to Freud's idea of repression. They both speak of cultural forms suppressing an insight in the basic violent event. While Freud speaks mainly of the oppression of libidinal objectives, Girard, followed by Gans (GA), rather points at the violent nature of cultural, legal and religious forms that are erected to forestall all-out mimetic crises, but are still subconsciously resented as a basic lie that is suppressed as a sacrificial forfeit.

reading. The knowledge of good and evil, as the text soon points out, is no other than the tool of discrimination, which God wants humans to avoid, as it disrupts unity and leads to scapegoating. No sooner the fruit is eaten or Adam covers his genitals and inculpates Eve, thereby pointing a finger that inverts the original deferral. While the original sign points at the fatal danger so as to stop violence, the accusing finger of Adam is rather the root of endless incriminations, that the New Adam is sent to halt by accepting all discrimination in his naked death on the cross.¹³ The sinful act punishes itself in the form of a fierce gender disruption, upsetting the harmonious union God intended for humanity as noted by the final verse of Gen 2.

Before spelling out the implications of this alternative vision, we first turn to the classic text on the notion of God, so as to see which bearing the observed bifurcation has on that notion, while we just recall that Satan's suggestion of a clash with a rivaling God actually gainsays Girard's theory. So the question is which is the biblical God of Gen 2-3, if it is not the rival of the power-thirsty Adam who uses the view of the Supreme Lord to subordinate his mate. At this point we turn to Ex 3:14, the basic text on God's identity that has played a key role in Western controversial ontotheology and also in anthropoetic circles.¹⁴

Ex 3:14 counts as God's alleged self-definition, which has received varying translations and myriads of comments. Both Byzantine iconography and medieval realism speak of the Absolute Being, *ho oon* written large in the Pantocrator's golden aura, and they take the second *I am* as a confirmation of the first. Transferred into Africa, this approach caused the Ghanaian *Mawu* to be translated as the Unsurpassable, even though recent theology was keen to stress the aspect of God's caring nearness. The question that imposes itself is: "why this doubling of 'I am' and what to make of the relative pronoun *asjer*?" Taking the unpronounceable tetragrammaton YHWH as expression of the core linguistic sign and fruit of the deferral in the originary event, Eric Gans comes close to several phenomenologists, who reflected on Master Eckhart's commenting this text, and on other medieval mystics, who sought to counter nominalism via the method of negative theology. We shall to pursue this line of thought to sound its openness to the bifurcation and notably the second dimension we perceived in the originary setting.

This is not the place to present an exegetical analysis of this divine name. We rather consider how

¹³ Much of the debate on Christ's expiating sacrifice, also in Girardian circles, could be resolved if Adam's sin is no longer seen as a rivalry with God's power. Adam surely upset God's will, but that concerned the harmony without discrimination meant for human society. On this see W. Eggen, 'The Gender of the crucified in *Verbum SVD* vol 38,1997 p.267ff and W. Eggen, 'Adam's (ir)religious Finger' in *Exchange, Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, vol. 26, 1997, p.141ff.

¹⁴ Ontotheology is the catchphrase to summarize the age-old metaphysics that called the biblical God the Being par excellence. The idea that reality could be grasp starting from this identification has been questioned ever since the late Middle-Ages and modern soul-searching has accused it of fostering the West's cultural hubris and its demise. While most contemporary philosophers, headed by Heidegger, are eager to tackle this ontotheology, others, among whom Gans, return to the Ex 3:14 text to find a base for an alternative view. See a.o. his recent digital text 'Language, God & Metaphysics' in *Chronicles of Love & Resentment* no 384, 2018.

the mystic Master Eckhart read Exodus and presented the phrase 'I am who I am' according to several phenomenologists, which offers a way to redress not only the Western ontotheological hubris, but also of its implications for the views on the Fall in Gen 2-3. It will eventually help us grasp the positive mimesis as a moral option that Girard has found in the Augustinian spirituality, which Eckhart also recommended.¹⁵

4. A triadic speech-act

The comment by Master Eckhart on this holiest of the biblical text is important for several reasons, not least because it was written at a time, when the Church was affected by a deep division both in organisation and doctrine. Pope John XXII, from Avignon in 1329, condemned 28 articles of the Dominican mystic, mainly targeting the vision on the relation between God's transcendence and His work in the human soul, in which Eckhart elaborated Augustine, claiming that this relation was intimate, but beyond human grasp. This was the time when burgeoning nominalism argued that words cannot catch anything of essence, let alone the divine, opposing the dominant realism's excessive statements on the divine reality. But despite this condemnation, his approach has inspired many in subsequent centuries, and notably the phenomenological tradition in the 20th century, with thinkers like Heidegger, Derrida and Henry.¹⁶ In his recent study of Eckhart's Exodus comment, Gire distinguishes a triadic approach, which he names variously, but that can be summarised as dealing with metaphysics, theology and ethical spirituality, and which runs remarkably parallel to the triple analysis by Y. Meeson of Heidegger's, Derrida's and Henry's comment on the mediaeval master. It urges us to look closer at that tripartite phrase of the divine self-presentation to Moses in the Sinai dessert near the burning bush: *ehyeh asjer ehyeh*.

Eckhart's Exodus comment and many of his sermons state that God reveals Himself as the core of

¹⁵ Extensive studies of various Semitic languages surrounding biblical Hebrew seems to confer that there was an old divine name (rather in the form of a trigrammaton) which Moses adopted and which can best be understood as a verbal form of the idea 'being' or 'becoming' in an ostentative usage as an expression of awe and admiration: truly, really, him. Although the Semitic world was well acquainted with female deities, Freud holds the view that Israel's God had a dominant paternal side. Here, I draw on the Dominican Master Eckhart, who clearly misses modern exegetical tools of the linguistic approach when he studies the spiritual implications of this classic text in his *Commentary on the Book of Exodus* using scholastic methods as well as much of Aquinas and Augustine. The Bulla of 1329, *In agro domini*, condemned him, referring to many of his ideas in this Commentary, which pivot on his basically Augustinian creed: "God is nearer to me I than I am to myself. My being hangs from it, that God is near and present to me." in *Meister Eckharts Mystische Schriften*, Berlin 1920.

¹⁶ I shall resort mainly to Pierre Gire, *Maître Eckhart et la métaphysique de l'Exode* (Paris 2006), and to Yves Meessen's dissertation, *Percée de l'ego : Maître Eckhart en phénoménologie* (Poitiers 2006, <http://nuxeo.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/nuxeo/site/esupversions/df8bb942-e448-4996-b0b5-1c0fb7348c01> , accessed 19.07.2018). The holiness of the Exodus-text is discussed by Kees Waaijman's 'Holiness in spirituality' <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/3463/9133> (2016, accessed 18-7-2018) and his monograph *Betekenis van de naam YHWH*. (Kampen 1984). The schism that has run through Europe on man's metaphysical access to the divine, both in theoretical and practical matters, and that led to the mentioned soul-searching, got a special meaning for Girard who started medieval studies at the instigation of his father, the archivist of the papal palace at Avignon.

human persons in their striving for full being. This holds a clear reference to Augustine's spirituality, to which Girard also repeatedly resorts. As this refers primarily to people's dealing with the world and one another, it can be argued that it indirectly translates the triple accents of Ex 3:14 as meta-physical, theo-logical and mystical ethics. With Heidegger we may argue that Eckhart's idea of God's in-habitation means that all metaphysics is to be reduced to the active being of physics. But Derrida, in his dialogue with Levinas, agrees that the physical act tends to keep a hold on the other without recognizing the violence done, which blocks the logic proper to the other. Each act of the self makes victims, and God's logic while enabling the act still sides with the other-logic of the victim. This deconstruction is to be taken seriously yet to be reconciled with the self in the ethical and spiritual self-manifestation analysed by Michel Henry, and caught by the pronoun *asjer*. This may be summarized by saying that the self is bound to face the non-self to whom it is both a rebuke and yet a source of being, with the spiritual perfection consisting in the reunion of the heightened self and its ousted other. Ex 3:14 is then best translated as: *I am of whom applies I am. Or: I identify with whomsoever says I am.*

The relative pronoun *asjer* is decidedly more than a punctuation mark, a colon. It raises the second I am to a shared locus. The Hebrew pronoun is actually akin to the adjective *asjer* 'blessed', that in union with the concept of holiness stands at the spiritual center, opening the book of Psalms and Christ's beatitudes, while comforting the suffering and the one ousted in horror. The relative is the place of blessedness because it unites in harmony the mighty self and the infinite call to respect the ousted other.¹⁷ In phenomenological terms can be worded as deferral and its overcoming, a double move of distancing and connecting that affects every creative act of defining and the ousting of otherness. In any creative move the divine within me also reaches out to the victim of my acts by incarnating in absolute solidarity with the ousted other. If Heidegger stresses the subject's Dasein in identity with the divine described by Eckhart (after Augustine), the loathing of this existentialist self in post-war soul-searching critique is recognized in the same Eckhart's negative theology by Derrida in his reply to Levinas' opposing stress on the primary appeal by 'the other'. In his phenomenology of manifestation, moreover, Michel Henry draws on Eckhart's insight in how these two godly dimensions and polar opposites meet in the mystical ethics of the Rhinean master and his vision of the self-revelation of Ex 3:14.¹⁸

¹⁷ The two words are etymologically related by the notion of location, a security of place. As Levinas explains in his article 'Dieu et la philosophie' (in *De Dieu qui vient à l'esprit*, Paris 1982), 'I am' is the 'here', where the self admits to be touched by the other and where creation becomes spiritual to transcend violence. It is remarkable that Eckhart's *Commentary on Exodus* values particularly Maimonides' apophatic method in his *Guide of the Perplexed* that teaches us to counter any positive statement on the divine with the biblical interdict of portraying or defining, and the need to admit 'the other'. Eckhart's use of Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon 1135-1204) was not unusual, as this great Jewish scholar was well known in medieval theology, since he worked on the various senses of biblical text and lay the basis for what became negative or apophatic theology.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida's main study of Eckhart is part of his 'Violence et Métaphysique. Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel

Following these phenomenologists we retain that the so-called Eckhartian negative theology has at the center of its cognitive scheme a *kenosis* that combines the affirmation of insights with a systematic deconstruction. Here we recognize Girard's idea of *méconnaissance*, related with the various elements of horror and resentment that pervade all human existence.

5. The originary bifurcation rehearsed or reversed?

The pope's condemnation of Eckhart's mystical vision on the union between the human soul and the divine concerned only one side, and it proved to which extent the crucial Ex 3:14 text was taken to refer to a transcendent Absolute, prioritizing the first of the three dimensions with a strong emphasis on the male type of dominion, with its demands of awe and submission. In reference to the birth of the sign in the originary event it means that only the victim as redeeming object is valued, while the self-effacing deferral and designating gesture of grief is left unnamed. The rise of the 'sign', which Gans tells us to see spelled out in the revelation of God's name in Ex 3:14, was a complex event, of which only one aspect was envisaged, not just by the Avignon papacy, but indeed by all dominant forces that wrestled for power in the breakdown of the medieval unity. The craving for absolute knowledge to assure power obscured the origin of speech acts. The emotional utterances that were shot through with resentments became forgetful of the basic bifurcation that affects all cognitive contents. The pope's action sought to thwart the human hubris pretending equality to divine creative powers, but like many religious interventions it rather had the adverse effect.¹⁹

As to the understanding of the divine aspect of the originary sign, which Gans justifiably relates to the Ex 3:14 revelation, the developments in Western Christianity are crucial. While Eckhart joins Augustine's basic insight on God's inhabitation, creating a harmonious unity of sender and receiver, the social setting reveals ever more clearly the mimetic truth that human words and acts harbor a rude discrepancy. Mimetic analyses show us to rank the object above the signifying model, turning the messenger into a rival, an obstacle, or scapegoat. The desiring subject rebukes its source and pretends to be the wellspring of its own love of the redeeming ideal, as Girard explicates as a process of *méconnaissance*. In this process multiple falsifications occur due to resentments that stem from deep-seated causes such as the birth trauma and gender rivalry studied by Kristeva and Scubla. Indeed, the text that names a harmonizing '*I am blessed I am*', where the creator embraces

Levinas' in *Revue de Métaphysique et la Morale* (1964) and reprinted in *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris 1967. In response to Levinas' challenge in 'La signification et le sens' (reprinted in *Humanisme et l'autre homme*) Derrida's reply was a critical sign of 'ingratitude', as requested. Michel Henry's reflection on Eckhart is to be found in no. 39 and 40 of his *L'Essence de la manifestation* (Paris 1963).

¹⁹ Sociology that claims religion to be the mirror image of society has come to discover that the opposite is rather the case, What I have called a schismanalytic approach shows myriads of cases where religious rules produce their adverse effect, as in the famous Weberian case, where the Protestant ethic of sober inner-worldly asceticism favors a capitalist accumulation of wealth and luxury. The question to which extent this was intended can be discussed neither in that case nor in the effect of the papal condemnation of Eckhart.

the ousted victim of its own act and makes man to partake in that gesture, tends to turn rather into '*I am! Blasted I am!*', pushing the marginalized aside and fueling a male-dominated ontotheology, a process that is bound to end up in a Hegelian type of hubris demoting races and dubbing women an eternal irony of the community. The post-war malaise has eagerly welcomed Nietzschean sarcasm, but forgotten his insistence that the 'I am' should be spoken in the crucified's diction.²⁰

The question arises if the burgeoning Renaissance humanism were destined to revolve around the male self and its idealist projects? And the path to post-war anti-humanist, gloomy soul-searching was it inevitable? Or was there yet an opening to what Emmanuel Levinas has called the humanism of 'the other'?²¹ Was the papal rejection of Eckhart's application of the Augustinian spirituality to that most holy of biblical texts bound to turn into an endless rehearsal of the bifurcation that had arisen at the originary scene and hardened during the Fall in Gen 3? Was it to mean that no rapprochement would ever be possible to African peoples who call superior or greater things feminine (*eyi*, mother) and see God as the opposite of a dominating and hostile rival?

As said before, the mimetic theory aligns with the post-war critique of the male-focused humanism, along with various forms of feminist revolt, even though it refuses to differentiate between the genders in mimetic terms. We shall see that its correspondence with Augustinian ideals and their specification in Eckhart's triadic vision of Ex 3:14 offers a fruitful response to this apparent contradiction. When Eckhart adopts the notion God's inhabitation, he focuses not only the creative power, but also the compassion with anything marginalized by its impact. This means giving voice to what is forced to view itself as an abject horror in either of both genders, but most prominently in women due to the primordial events. Comparing this to Christ's action and calling it a 'positive mimesis' in the sense of *Imitatio Christi*, we note that it was Eckhart's inspiration that brought about the *Devotio Moderna* and the profound renovation advocated by Cusanus in the 15th century. If this initiative soon turned into the quietism that marked Christianity in the days of the radical atheism's onslaught, this cannot be defined as these mystics' intention nor Girard's reading of the Gospel. His idea of positive mimesis, following Augustine's lead, is the very opposite and can readily be termed a reversal of the originary bifurcation, rather than its rehearsal.²²

²⁰ Hegel's remark on women's ironic role (in *The Phenomenon of Spirit*. Engl. transl. Oxford U.P. 1977 p. 288) has been read differently in feminist circles, cf. A. Stafford, 'The Feminist Critique of Hegel on Women and the Family' in *Animus*, 1997 (www.swgc.mun.ca/animus). Even if negative vibes prevail, Kristeva appreciates the aspect of revolt it implies. Nietzsche's misogynistic insults, too, and his scathing words about Christianity are increasingly recognized as sarcasm on bourgeois forms to be redressed by imitation of Christ. It bears remarking that women's concern for vulnerable life and its hardships have constantly counted as an imaginary of Christ's own practice, put up as a calling for all men (not just wo-men).

²¹ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Paris 1972). Although Derrida has accused Levinas of largely ignoring the position of women, some feminists have blamed him for identifying the Feminine as 'the other'.

²² In *Mimetic Theory and World Religions* (ed. W. Palaver and R. Schenk, East Lansing 2018) Martha Reineke defines Kristeva's reading of the mimetic insights as less quietist and dualist than Girard's because of his disregard of sensory experience. See her 'Girard and the Feminist Critique of Religion' (pp.163-178). But as Christ's opposition to

Let us first note a paradox to which Girard alerts us with his refusal to make mimetism a gender issue, although most of his literary studies deal with rivalries of erotic origin. As we saw, his goal was to oppose the Freudian idea of all-pervading libido. Freud's studies, as we know, were largely determined by Viennese bourgeois conditions in which the nuclear family order and its male-female polarity was dominant. With this in mind we look back at Eckhart's era and notice that his medieval society saw a profound cultural change that revolutionized the society's basic mechanism due to the legal codification of a marital order, in which women were no longer the object of family exchange strategies, but statutory equals with their male partners as God's children, asked to autonomously give their nuptial assent. This new and unique construct followed the Gospel's application of the Genesis order via a codified law of personal autonomy and equality. Although there are myriads of marital arrangements, mostly exogamous in principle, the medieval form of sacramental union, paralleled by the ideals of courtly love, constituted a truly unique innovation, which, however, led to a curious paradox. The new legal construct tallied with a heightened interest in the individual and each person's eternal destiny. The nuclear family that arose from this Christian revolution was to create a sanctuary for each one's salvation, but paradoxically it caused male reactionary forces to stress the role of the master to follow his rule. It thus aggravated the oppression that Adam once established by pointing his accusatory finger, and brute misogynistic conditions increased. Yet, a legal basis for a reversal was installed. Despite the legal uplifting of women's status – and arguably due to this construct - the stage was set for a male backlash that continued even when the wedding's sacramental status had been abandoned by Protestantism and by the civil State. Still, a revolt had been launched once the individual's commitment had become a codified legal factor.²³

6. Positive mimesis and its icon

Our question is how mimetic theory can prove a generative force in respect of gender equality by following the Augustinian option worked out by Eckhart. We first return to the two main versions of the mimetic theory. Girard's account of the originary scene views the victim as the saving figure to halt the feud, resulting in the generalized habit of persons to scapegoat others by referring to a divinized ideal that lets *ego* judge others. Gans was right to point out that this scheme could not have worked in the absence of linguistic signs and communication between equals. In his version it is the first sign, and consequently the sign-emitting person, rather than the victim, that stops the

scapegoating and discrimination was anything but quietist, Girard cannot mean the positive mimesis of Christ to be quietist, even if it cannot be denied that his books lack concrete prospects and tends toward gloomy apocalyptic.

²³ Studies of witchcraft and misogynist prejudice abound, and not only by feminist authors. It deserves noting that witchcraft in Africa is not gender bound, with the Banda often claiming that the *amakonji* (chiefs) are the heads of the witch's troupes. On the courtly love, see the classic study by Denis de Rougemont *L'Amour dans l'Occident* (Paris, 1939 /1972).

violence. But he cannot claim the other as other to be born from this event without acknowledging the roots that lie far back in an evolution full of conflicts, with gender differentiation playing a pivotal role. If there clearly must have been a bifurcation between guilt and the saving factor, it is most important that there was an overall value feared to be threatened and needing salving. But if, by hypothesis, we hold the female distress at the horror of an actual death to be the cause of the saving stand-back, we need a closer look at the history of misogynist prejudices and the workings of *méconnaissance*.²⁴ Though knowing better, for the sake of human survival, the women chose to let the victim's brothers play the savior's role and endure inculcation themselves, meanwhile soliciting the help and protection of the males, who – also in bad faith – assumed their theatrical role of masters of the marital exchanges. However, in Girard's reading of the biblical revolution, the page is turned by the Gospel-inspired novelty of sacramental matrimony. And the Augustine-inspired Eckhartian vision of a divine inhabitation, working its tripartite combination of creative might, kenotic compassion and spiritual integration will carry on despite the papal rebuke, because Christ's anti-sacrificial siding with the ousted had been recognized as integral to the divine Name, *I am*. If this irenic vision of the developments is, no doubt rightly, jeered by feminist protests at the male-chauvinist habits in the nuclear family tradition, the convoluted trajectory must be clear. Indeed, human culture and language, far from being highways for cognitive insight and political ordering, are rather rife with mimetic resentment, while *méconnaissance* causes endless horrors. Girard's gloomy prospects in his last book *Battling to the End* leaves little doubt about the backlash by forces opposing the Bible's anti-sacrificial turn. Still, the Augustinian model elaborated by Eckhart can fruitfully be applied even in the domain of gender relations, when his option for a positive mimesis is taken seriously, notwithstanding the misogynist remarks. For, from his *Confessiones* we know that he disowned his previous sexual habits, as he recognized them to be fueled by a male drive to perform in rivalrous terms and prove his social clout. After his conversion, he reflected on this mimetic habit of self-assertion. His many sermons and comments on the Bible show his gratitude for God's grace that made him rise above that negative force by letting him realize what it means to love thanks to God's inhabitation. Before being called to the bishopric, he started a community of monks, wrote a rule of monastic life, and commented on Paul's letter to the Galatians. The latter is his sole integral comment on a biblical book. It deals with what is known as Paul's view of Christ's victor over the first Adam's Fall.²⁵ But rather than speaking of disobedience or even sexual derailments, he focuses on the inter-personal relation of Peter and Paul, and in his monastic rule he applies this in what we might call a truly alternative for negative mimesis. Based on Paul's

²⁴ The argument that difference in skill or power exhibited by the alpha male or shrewd individual could be the true root of recognizing the other as other is a circular argument, because not a relative difference, but only an radical one, affecting a vital function such as reproduction can explain the breach.

²⁵ See Eric Plumer, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians*. Oxford U.P. 2003.

idea of the *kenosis* of the divine Son, who aligned with the suffering feeble down to the lowest degree of a shameful and naked death on the Cross, he does not advise the monks auto-torturing in medieval style, but rather positive acts, whereby they may inspire the other without causing envy or rivalry.

This bipolar model of a God-inspired power in solidarity with the ousted other is what Eckhart finds in Moses' experience at the burning bush (in Ex 3). But, as Derrida remarks, it implies recognition of the sundry horrors of irrational non-sense, and notably the atrocities in gender relations, which he feels Levinas ignores. Still, considering Levinas' phenomenology of the *kenotic* appeal to spare the other, we must note his surprising, yet revealing option to define the other as the Feminine.²⁶ He, who along with Girard, has been praised by other phenomenologists like Jean-Luc Marion, for the only true responses to the idealist self-centered humanism, has been blamed for sticking to a male perspective by thus identifying the other as the feminine. But in response, he explains that he is not referring to any particular woman or to the male's erotic counterpart, nor to some anti-institutional semeiotic force, but to that which both men and women are basically striving for, the ongoing life, which feminine fertility symbolizes.

Here I want to consider first the Banda linguistic curiosity in Central-Africa, and next an orthodox iconographic specialty. The Banda use of the term 'mother' to indicate dominance and ownership, in spite of the society's patrilineal structure, which does not strike them as contradictory. I discovered it, when I asked why small high-pitched drums were named male drums, whereas the big heavy-pitched masterdrum counted as the mother, *eyi*. Did I not feel, they asked, the vibrating life in my belly when listening to that big drum? It agrees with Levinas' claim that generating life is any person's core value. Fertility was the characteristic also of ownership, as in the case of a smith or a priest, who are the *eyi* or operator of the smithery (fire house) and of the medicine.²⁷ While men dominate the rituals and rule, transmuting the memes of their skills and knowledge, their control of these vital realities are called feminine (*eyi*) with a scarcely hidden hint at the male fetus envy. It tells eloquently of the *méconnaissance* and the bifurcation that occurred at the primal deferral, when the victim was divinized and the female sender of the sign was blamed for the bloodshed, even though she was the one who shaped the pacifying tools of language and cookery to replace the raw by the cooked food.²⁸

²⁶ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité en Infini*. (La Haye, 1965 p.127-8) Levinas speaks of the other as the absence in us that permits us to be hospitable and calls it the woman in us that is the condition of 'recueillement', reflection.

²⁷ The Banda word *eyi* (mother, feminine, master), therefore, has no gender connotation and does not upset patrilineal rules. It conveys each person's role in promoting the life principle. A priest is primarily a herbalist, handling the herbal powers and consequently serving the deity that gives these to mankind. In Banda language the same word is used for tree, herb, and deity.

²⁸ In his 4-volume *Mythologiques*, right from the first one *Le cru et le cuit*, Claude Lévi-Strauss recognized that the position and activities of women were pivotal in the mental constructs, but with the caveat that it is still the men making the constructs. The title of the 4th volume is not without symbolism: *L'homme nu*. If this expresses a malaise, he himself

Returning to the study of Ex 3:14, we note that the Orthodox tradition, far from perceiving the *I am* as the voice of the *Unsurpassable*, presents the child Jesus in the Virgin Mary's womb as the symbol and summary of the Bible's prophetic message. It appears at the top left corner of the famous icon of the burning bush.²⁹ While Western piety stresses Mary's obeisance to Gabriel's message as an inversion of Eve's disobedience, Orthodox iconography has Moses venerate Mary's motherhood as a critique of the age-old male resentment. Thereby it follows the *kenotic* insight that Eckhart inherited from Augustine, who credited God's grace for turning his life of mimetic rivalry round, helping him convert the hubris of his one-upmanship into a new life-motto *Volo ut sis*, 'I will so that you are'. This is the motto he imparted to his monastic family, telling them to live their full potential and be a model offered to the other to imitate, with a common purpose of serving the life of God's kingdom. In the aftermath of Eckhart's condemnation, the emphasis on the individual's potentials has failed to keep the right balance, as it ignored the call of the ousted voice, of the vulnerable other, and most importantly: of the 'life to come'. The 'offer' of positive mimesis must share Christ's readiness to 'descent into hell' and identify with the ever burning sense of being 'mere horror', thereby giving to the word 'offer' its double meaning of a sacrificial self-exposure and an investment in the works (*opera, oeuvre*) that build the community's survival.³⁰

7. Conclusion

Gans' claim that the awareness of the other in the originary setting need not be explained by some supernatural intervention can be accepted, provided the evolutionary roots are recognized and the enigma of bifurcation between male seizure of the saviour's role and the females' acceptance of the subordinate position is understood as a theatrical strategy built on what Girard called the basic *méconnaissance* and its scapegoat mechanism. The biblical accounts of the Fall and the Burning

as well as authors like Julia Kristeva emphasize that the reference to 'an exhausted subject' applies to both men and women.

²⁹ The icon 'Our Lady of the Burning Bush' (*Neopalimaya Kupina*), often called 'Mary, the eternal rose', appeared at least as early as the 11th century. The burning bush in the top left corner, admired by Moses for not being consumed, is believed to symbolize mother Mary's enduring virginity. The image of the burning bush has figured in several Protestant denominations ever since it was adopted by the French Huguenots in its National Synod of 1583, but only with a focus on the church's own heroic perseverance during persecutions; without any reference to either Mary or the Child.

³⁰ Girard has often been criticized for pinning his whole cultural theory on the notion of sacrifice (from *sacrum*, sacred, *facere*, making) derived from one unique murderous event that was translated into scapegoating habits. In a conference in 1983 Girard corrected Burkert's allusion to that unique collective murder saying: "The collective murder I am talking about must be regarded as a 'normal' occurrence in pre-human and human groups during the whole prehistory of our species and some of its history as well. My idea is that violent forms of so-called scapegoating must put an end to a kind of intraspecific fighting that is normal, too, during the same stages of human development, but so intense and deadly that it would make human culture impossible if there were nothing to interrupt it" (*Violent Origins*, Walter Burkert, René Girard & Jonathan Smith, ed. By Robert, Hamilton Kelly, Stanford 1987, p. 121). But this also implies that the ritual intervention carries a constructive aspect of an 'offer', which is the basis for positive mimesis.

Bush help us see through this strategy and honour the universal calling of both genders to serve the prime value of life and, in the process, admit one's own horrific limits and prejudices. The arts of all humanity show the way of combining creativity and the semeiotic sensitivity to a basic value that can be identified as feminine, in the sense of productivity of new life (the Banda *eyi*) that is open to both genders, in the option of 'positive mimesis', following the motto *Volo ut sis*.