

Swaffle: divine prehension offering truth?

Musings on mimetic conceptualisation, or mimoptic studies

By Wiel Eggen

I want to carry on from my paper at the 2007-conference on the fate of the Dutch MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who had been forced out of her office in a curious political wrangling over her efforts to liberate Muslim women (in conjunction with the murdered film producer Van Gogh). There I analysed the touchy relationship with the Islam, and argued that the age-old Muslim-Christian rivalry had driven both sides into doctrinal derailments, causing them to ignore valid points of criticism in each other's stance. This affected severely the role of women and was linked, so I argued, to the issues of original sin and redemption. Starting from a curious Dutch neologism, I shall revisit this in the epistemological domain by studying how concepts come into being in mimetic terms. That will lead me to a proposal for further research developments in COV&R (and Imitatio).

A. On the origin of concepts

Girard's account of culture's origin, felicitously translated as 'Evolution and Conversion', is theological in the best sense, seeing the Christ as the New Adam to reshape reality divinely. My title refers to this. But it originated as a subtitle of the paper I read at a conference on the link between Whitehead's process philosophy and Tillich's christocentric theology, in which I treated some thorny issues raised by my African experiences. Without repeating myself, I take one of those issues as a key quandary to introduce the link between the primordial Fall and the apocalyptic Conversion in relation to mimetic epistemology. In an anthropological rather than theological line, I shall argue that the sexual divide is at the heart of the Eden story and of all epistemology, causing a polarity between Islam and Christianity as well. Allow me to propose that you keep in mind the symbol of a pointing finger. Is my index. a tool for indicating facts and define them, or is it a divisive weapon by which Adam inculpated Eve? How, in both cases, to redress the male dominance exuding from this symbol and find a deeper sense? In respect of the dialogue with Islam, the main point the Dutch MP Geert Wilders raises against the Koran is that it is constantly pointing its incriminating finger at unbelievers, in what he calls a Fascist manner. How in this context to understand the gospel calling Jesus the *Logos*? Is it divisively defining or divinely truthful in an erotic bonding?

From a girardian perspective the last four words in my title are clearly ambiguous. How is the *divine* a defining entity? Is *prehending* not a violent grabbing? Has *offering* not a Germanic root meaning both giving and sacrificing? And the term *truth* is an age-old issue of debate in both linguistic and philosophical terms. When Girard presents Jesus as a *logos* of conversion

to undo the violent side of religion and pacify culture, he affronts an old tradition. How can Jesus be the Word, if the defining role of a word is always decisive, cutting and sacrificially victimising? If he is the Lord who defines notions on behalf of the divine Source of being by aligning our mind to reality (*mens ad rem*), can he then avoid swaying a judging index? On the other hand, can he be revolutionary neologism, a total novelty? This was at issue, when an African young man asked me if Jesus was indeed identical to the trickster hero Tere of their stories, who ascended to heaven in the form of the constellation of Orion. The question baffled me, at the time, since the trickster Tere is a Tyl Uylenspiegel, a salacious scoundrel, rather than a *logos* establishing metaphysical truth. Could Tere's code-busting be identical to Christian views on the Greek *logos*? The mimetic theory leads us to believe so, at least if we follow Vattimo, reading it in radical hermeneutic ways that rejects any idea of a divine Word pointing to eternal truths.

To tackle this issue we consider the birth of a shocking Dutch neologism *Swaffelen* and link it to a critical reading of the enigmatic prayer in Jn 17:19 where Jesus defines his life in kenotic terms: Father, I consecrated myself so that they may be consecrated in truth. This may seem a scandalous tactic, but it may help our understanding of an interindividual *episteme*, as we apply a mimetic perspective to the source of concepts in relation to the evolutionary male/female divide and link this to the dogma of original sin and its cultural effects. If a new notion like the Dutch prize-winning, outrageous neologism *Swaffelen* is actually read in terms of a divine prehension offering truth, these four terms prove truly ambiguous. Can the *logos* have any meaning at all in the face of this neologism's conceptual content?

Let me summarise the quandary in three points:

1. Girard's view of the Christian *logos* undermines culture's *logos*, as it unmasks victimising processes by which rituals, laws and concepts are defined and transmitted. And Vattimo to ask Girard to be consistent and abandon any religious structure!
2. Girard's revolutionary view of the *logos* reminds me of Wademi, a Centralafrican village where, after an evening of story-telling, the chief's son asked me if Jesus was indeed Tere, the hero of their trickster stories, as his name indicated: Jesus Christ reads in Banda *jesu terə*, and Christ Jesus: *terə sə tə jesu*. Is Jesus Tere a counter-culture hero, who constantly contravenes and inverts any conceivable cultural set-up, notably in sexual matters?
3. In the enigmatically kenotic text of Jn 17:19, this revolutionary *logos* defines the goal of his very existence as consecrating himself so that we too be consecrated in truth. This crucial text

uses the transitive form of *hagiazō* (sanctify) with the reflexive pronoun *emantem*, as if he is performing a ritual upon himself. This contains the core of the bible's inroads into human mimetics as it replaces ritual holiness (*hieros*,) by the little known term *hagios* to translate the Hebrew *qadosh*, itself a loanword. As we are about to look at an erotic neologism, we note that this biblical loanword stems from marriage arrangements. Jesus thus declares that he sets himself apart from all attachments (in Hebrew: *hiqdashthi* derived from *qadosh*) so as to free also his followers for the marital self-giving in unconcealedness (*a-letheia*). Reading truth as the setting-apart for marital exchange in fidelity. John's theology thereby refers to the marital disorder of primordial Eden and its redress in the apocalyptic Wedding of the Lamb..

With these crucial issues about the Word and Vattimo's hermeneutics in mind we now turn to the price-winning Dutch neologism of *swaffelen* to ask if it is just an outlandish folly or in fact reminds us of a key mimetic side of conceptualisations? Onomatopoeic in phonological sense, the word seems hardly to contain any eternal idea in Platonic sense. It is a recent fabrication, and so is the act itself, a salacious macho exhibitionism of a youth swinging his male organ against a cultural object so as to induce erection, much like our trickster Tere might do. No need to stress that this provocative unconcealedness is not the revolutionary type the Christ *logos* pursues. Yet, the neologism is a concept in its own right, actually showing the core of any conceptuality, a composition of aspects coagulated for social reasons. Without being the sanctification of the self that brings others to holy unconcealedness, it leads us to consider Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of certifying oneself in erotic terms. Indeed, the boy who *swaffled* at the Taj Mahal during a school trip to India and got disciplined for it, causing the term to skyrocket in popularity, sought self-assertion and peer-recognition in an erotic and mimetic setting of sacrificial nature.

This recalls the enigma of culture's origin: are words and symbols cerebral devises or does the sacrificial logic play a role, and if so what to say of its interdividuality? To examine this point we look at two aspects of this neologism in their evolutionary significance, namely the sexual divide and the hierarchical rivalry. Anthropologists now accept that the sense of identity (and therefore of mimetic tension) had its beginning in the co-arising of sexual reproduction and death in cellular biology. Reproduction by mere cell-division did not lead to a sense of self, since neither otherness nor death played a role yet. With sexual division the sense of identity took off and it deepened over billions of years to reach a stage of patrifilial and monomorph socially-hunting primates. The mirror-neuron system then caused mimetic tensions so severe

that sacrificial rituals originated that got closely linked with two other social tools: speech and exchange of women. Girard's stand off with both structuralism and anthropoetics might, in fact, be solvable if this primordial growth of the sense of identity is taken into account.

In primatology, after the rise of male patrilineal residence and male/female monomorphism, we find three distinct strategies for males to solve the tensions which are almost invariably in the sexual domain. The mainly vegetarian chimpanzees hunt collectively for meat, sharing it with fertile females, while they hunt down intruders, The Bonobo use erotic promiscuity as a pacifying strategy. Human males combine collective hunting with the two typical rituals of a sacrificial elimination of trouble shooters and exogamous exchange of women. So, if sexual procreation and death ultimately gave rise to the sense of identity, one needs to hypothesize that all conceptualisation roots in a religious ambit marked by rivalry of sexual ilk, in which signifiers tend to block what J-L. Marion advocates as the erotic reduction. Within the group, fertile females then appear as 'trouble shooters' to be driven out in an exogamous ritual. Both the index-swaying Adam disowning Eve, and the Africans view of circumcision as a removal of the 'part of the opposite sex' to enable one's social role, point in that direction.

Returning to concepts - which Cartesian rationalists see as products of solitary intellectual exploration - we ask if one should not heed Girard and point out that social rivalry is crucial in this process. Concepts are social-linguistic tools between rivals whose sense of identity at first took shape with the emergence of sexuality and death. Here we fathom a hypothesis that may already suggests some lines of mimetic research in the anthropological, theological and philosophical domain

-- Girard's point is well taken, when he opposes Lévi-Strauss to make violent rituals, rather than peaceful exchanges, the origin of culture. But considering the marital rituals and at the feminist criticisms of structuralism, we may examine the marital bride exchanges themselves as sacrificial rites. The huge body of structural analysis of culture, myth, art and language can thus be made to suit the mimetic theory. The birth of any concept might then be located in the victimising ambit of sexually charged rivalry (including a neologism like *swaffelen*). Looking at how Bourdieu analysed the practices of the *Homo academicus*, this proposal appears more plausible than the rationalist ideals as such.

-- Christ's unmasking of the sacrificial system affects the entire cultural system, including the gender divide. As a New Adam he redresses Adam's fall. The latter, after having received his new partner called her an integral part of his own being (*ishah*). But after eating the forbidden

fruit of discriminatory knowledge, he disowned her as his deadly rival, Eve, thus initiating a litany of incriminations. Biblical theology is well advised to stop seeing the event of Eden as a revolt against God rather than a victimising rejection of Eve. This at least is suggested by the Lamb's inverting the signs in his apocalyptic wedding to the sinful bride, and also by our reading of Jn 17:19, starting from the matrimonial meaning of the word *qadosh*. Considering the crucial role John gives to scenes in which Jesus deals with women in the chs. 4, 8, 12 and 20, we may also offer a key component of his theology.

-- On our epistemological quandary, we note that in Western thought doubt and faith have a curious role in conceptualisation. *Credo ut intelligam* was the famous Canterbury tale. By returning to Augustine of Hippo, Girard places emotional, mimetic factors at the centre. The neologism of *swaffelen* - having no intellectual credentials beyond being a mere tool of macho self-assertion – forces us to look at what Jean-Luc Marion calls the erotic reduction. If the Cartesian type of craving for certitude is indeed a vanity seeking to root being in one's own desire, only the *Amo ut intelligam* can lead out of that cave. But in what sense?

How to view this episteme and relate it to intercultural strife? Are we to buy countercultural options and follow the trickster, displaying a nudity that is neither veracity nor concealment? If the search of Cartesian certitude is in vain - as it ignores mimetic conditions - must radical nihilism then be our road ahead? Or does this *swaffelen*, that baffles all attempt at translation, rather suggest a Bataille type of surrealism that takes the senseless effusion of erotic energy as the origin of culture in sacrificial manner (including even human sacrifice)? If a rational ideal of Platonic ilk seeks social certitude that is not to be, is solipsism then the only alternative? These two ideals of social control and libertarian – exemplifying the Muslim and Western extremes – are not the only options. Girard's own anti-sacrificial program may indeed risk to remain within this dilemma unless the erotic side of cultural genesis is taken into account. By linking structuralist insights to his anti-sacrificial paradigm a remedy may begin to appear.

In ch IX of VS Girard notes that Western-Christian insistence on the partners' marital consent is a border case of the kinship languages built on exchange. Later (in ch V of EC) he admits the opposition of these two to be less basic than suggested. This can be read in two ways. That victimisation marks Western marital patterns too, has been a feminist complaint for long. But it must also be noted that the anti-sacrificial pattern exemplified in the apocalyptic wedding is not unknown to other traditions. This has profound implications. That a woman's marriage is basically an avatar of murder in any culture is expressed by Mary in Blake's poem Jerusalem,

telling Joseph that a divorce will murder her. The apocalyptic sublimation of the marital sacrificial order (in which the sacrificial Lamb weds his murderous spouse) is somehow what Joseph does in marrying Mary (thereby destroying his social standing). It avoids relativism by allowing another epistemology. J.L. Marion points out that the vanity of a Cartesian search can be curbed only if the victimising part is neutralised. Jesus leads followers on the road to the impossible, but not as a nihilist Trickster. As all conceptualisation starts out from an erotic polarity, Jesus' gesture is fundamental, but must not be restricted to the Cross. The crucified marrying the crucifier is the core of the message. Or in the symbolism of the index, Jesus has first neutralised it by writing in the sand (Jn 8), and then annuls its murderous role in Jn 21 by bending Adam's finger and putting it into his own wounds. The Lamb that makes himself *qadosh*, by setting himself apart as the bridegroom of a murderous bride, so as to sanctify her in unconcealed openness, turns the self-seeking Platonic certitude into the erotic embrace of prehension and offer. In Girard's pragmatic epistemology, concepts are social tools of comprehending the world so as to allow a truthful self-offering to overcome rivalry by commonly imitating the internal other: an erotic grip of where the other is (thus taking Heisenberg's uncertainty seriously, as quantum thought advocates).

B. *Moving toward an interdividual or mimoptic episteme*

1. The above already holds some suggestions for further steps in mimetic studies. To highlight the role of both the feminist and non-western input I now reflect on the specific topography of mimetic studies. Girard often stresses that he received his *eureka* from studying the novelist literature after having been exposed to the Medieval realm, in which his father had specialised at Avignon. The social setting of these novels was a society of growing individualistic rivalry, thriving on the upsurge of nominalist thought, emptying words of any base in the real. Persons too became 'void', and free to enter into any contract. Through the marital sacrament between individuals facing God alone, the medieval church, for ambivalent reasons, had developed a novel model and shaped an individualising society, which caused violent spasms as from the 15th century. Though mimetic theory applies to any culture, we must realise that it showed up in novelistic replies to the rivalries going wild in Europe's proto-colonial self-confidence.

2. Two sides of this Europe struck me at London COV&R-2009, looking at the Christian idea of redemption. The 5th centenary of Calvin evoked some rumination on how his vision of the saving Cross has dominated modern times, driving many liberal persons out of the faith (, most of all Nietzsche). Also at St. Mary's, a Muslim scholar pointed out to me that the denial

of Christ's saving death on the Cross was of the essence to Islam. Indeed, while 16th century Christians fought over the precise reading of that salvation, they collectively sought a way to get round and destroy the Muslim commercial hegemony. These two facts were clearly not unrelated, and must be linked to innumerable forms of violence and to the growing libertarian ideologies that place the individual at the centre (often auto-dubbed as 'victim'). Meanwhile they depicted all violence as a remnant of a primitive, still alive in us.

3 While mimetic theory seriously tackles the source of violence, it may yet share too much of its baggage. Two of its main achievements are the unmasking of the romantic notion of the self and of the sacrificial view of Christ's atoning crucifixion. Those two were closely linked, since the rise of the individual (often as a victim) thrived via the Reformers' idea of salvation by an individualised faith, which in itself sprang from Ockham's arguments against the papal whims (keeping him prisoner in Avignon). Behind it all was the dogma of an Original Sin, which Jesus' atonement was to annul. Modern Europe, including its religious disenchantment, is the product of that doctrine. Girard and Schwager in a judicious attack on that ideological bulwark which Islam so strongly rejects. But have they done enough? They mainly inverted the signs and focused on the question how guilt was transmitted (*Erbsünde* in German speaks of hereditary sin). If Jesus is no longer the victim whose blood cleanses us from an inherited blot (as the medieval church, the reformers and the evangelicals hold), but rather the one who helps us fight our victimising inklings, this is a substantial gain. But does it use all its potential to rise above Foucault's discourse on power? Although that discourse is certainly common to all societies (including Islam), its contexts often differ widely from the West's debates on the individual's liberties, proper to the epoch of modern novels which was a period marked by extreme violence and hubris (of which even economic spasms are a result). Future mimetic studies therefore need to analyse again the theory's own origins and effects.

4. Let me return to my suggestion that the original sin of Gen 2-3 is not to be read in a vertical terms, as man disobeying God's arbitrary decrees - with some ugly earthy effects to follow. Rather the earthly distortion itself is the focus of the Eden story, which appears not just with Kain murdering Abel, but already with Adam slashing his partner (*isha*) and turning her into a creepy Eve. But there is still more. When I recently explained in girardian way Christ's cross by stressing how all of us shared in his executors' guilt, some evangelical students from Africa and Asia protested that the bible teaches how God sent his son to be crucified and wash away our sins. When I pointed out that they risked to make God a crucifying murderer, I was

ousted. The event seemed a clear case of victimising to me and for a while, I relished my 'victimhood', having been found worthy But soon I perceived a new topic of research. No doubt, I could read my lot as the scapegoating by youths we tend to consider as half-baked pagan-christians. But what if they actually refused to be made the losers (victims) of history once again by having the story of divine redemption stolen from them? Is mimetic theory sufficiently attuned to what in theological terms is called: the universality of the revelatory presence? Are so-called mythical traditions not too easily dubbed sacrificial scapegoating from which the Word redeems us? If Girard accuses structuralist mythologies of ignoring the sacrificial elements, he has a point.. But the analysis should not stop there. If the theory is to thrive, it has to turn the judging index round and see if its own contents may carry birth marks that reflect its epoch of originating.

5. To close, I advocate a profound change in epistemology springing from Girard's discovery, which might be called a mimoptic *episteme*. In 1990, John Milbank accused Girard of being part of a trend that started with the nominalist Duns Scotus and Ockham seeing any concept, notably of the 'Transcendent', as a mere human product without base in reality. That led to a scientific practice ready to debunk any revelatory word with mutual rivalry as its prime ethos. Although Girard rightly rejects this, his case seems weakened if notions like God and sacrifice in effect spring from human efforts to control violence, with relativism as its apparent logical outcome. When Vattimo points this out, Girard professes to be a realist who upholds the idea of truth. But uphold this, truth can be neither an objectivity the intellect has to submit to, nor the individual's existential *pour-soi*. It must be to do with a commitment to be 'wedded' to the real that is interindividual and can be found only through each other's eyes. Between the Greek (and Muslim) essentialist and the Jewish more existentialist *episteme* -both with their mythic and victimising modes - there is room for the apocalyptic approach of fully accepting that we know through each other's eyes. Neither the fight against obscure traditions nor the following of a codex of established truths can eradicate victimising habits, but only a truthful wedding of one's own search to that of the other. Truth is in the unconcealed mimoptics, of which the logical laws need to be worked out urgently, aiming less at correspondence with facts or with an authentic *pour-soi* than with truthful veracity (cf. the (German *treue*); less stuff for a Nobel price than a noble fidelity to ousted parts of oneself, offering an erotic bonding prehension. Heisenberg's uncertainty law and quantum logics now become assets, rather than obstacles, as they help us see truth as the interindividual, divinely saving affair which the Book of Revelation proclaims as the Lamb's Wedding, repairing the erotic breach of Genesis 2-3.

