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The Imitative Self: The Contribution of René Girard

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If there is a scripture passage that can be considered the bedrock of biblical anthropology, it must surely be Gen. 1:27, where we are told that God created human beings in his own image and likeness. What are we to make of this charming piece of folklore? Surely it is one of the biblical passages most suited to demythologization of the Bultmannian variety. What serious biblical scholar, armed with the knowledge of the priestly authorship and sacerdotal biases of this text, would dare to regard it as anthropologically decisive? Even those who retain a deferential attitude toward Scripture, conceding its quaint anthropomorphism, might not think it strong enough to function as the fulcrum of biblical anthropology. How often does it happen, however, that the very texts we treat with smiling condescension turn out to be vastly more significant than those that accommodate themselves more readily to our existing prejudices and worldviews.

On the other hand, the historical nature of biblical revelation is such that the truth embedded in this ancient Scripture can be expected to release itself in response, not to idle curiosity or exegetical manipulation, but to the emergence of legitimate historical or existential situations that throw us back upon it with humility. We who face these new situations call upon biblical resources for facing them, not with Bultmann's exegetically presumptuous but biblically timid approach, but rather with his appreciation for the "continual vitality which, thanks to the force of its original thrust, enables faith to dominate ever new historical situations by embracing them" (noted in Lubac 1986, 249).

THE MIMETIC SELF

What can be said of a creature who is made in the image and likeness of another? Surely this: that this creature can only fulfill its destiny by becom-

ing like someone else. So counterinstinctual and counterintuitive is such a thing, that the likelihood of this creature actually fulfilling such a destiny would be slim, indeed, unless the creature were somehow endowed with a desire to do so, a desire equally counterinstinctual and counterintuitive, a desire to be itself by becoming like someone else. If we really are made in the image and likeness of God, such a desire, dangerously fickle though it might be, could well function, after a kind of Dantean purification of itself, as the key to our sanctification.

But what a strange creature this would be, one endowed with a desire to fulfill its own unique destiny by modeling its life on another. Can any such creature be found? René Girard, the Andrew B. Hammond Professor in French Language, Literature, and Civilization, Emeritus at Stanford University, thinks he has found such a creature. In fact, he thinks he *is* one. Over the course of the last thirty years, Girard has insisted that the decisive feature of human existence is the central role played in human affairs by what he calls *mimetic desire*, the ineradicable impulse to desire what one sees another desiring, to fashion one's own desire on the model of another's desire, in short, to imitate. In books and articles too numerous to catalog, Girard has demonstrated the irreducible centrality of mimetic desire in human affairs, and in the course of demonstrating this he discovered something he never dreamed of discovering at the outset, namely, the anthropological centrality and historical singularity of the Christian revelation. Most of what I have to say is indebted to Girard.

So, let's begin with the hypothesis that Genesis is right, we are made in the image and likeness of God. But which god? For there are, as St. Paul tells us in First Corinthians, "many 'gods' and many 'lords'." (Biblical quotations are taken from the New American Bible.)

During summer 2001, the pop music idol Madonna launched a worldwide tour, which almost instantly sold out. The *New York Times* reported that on the day of the first New York performance the \$125 seats were being scalped for \$700. Susan Saulny (2001), the *Times*' reporter covering the opening night enthusiasm of Madonna's devotees, wrote:

There are, apparently, an infinite number of ways to show love for Madonna.

An unimaginative but nonetheless sincere fan might wear a T-shirt emblazoned with her likeness. A very good fan might slip into a kilt, in tribute to her fondness for things Scottish, or wear a rhinestone necklace and rubber bracelets, à la the original Material Girl. A great fan will dye black hair blond, squeeze a man's foot into a pair of high-heeled boots, and declare Madonna the icon of our age.

But someone who has totally given himself over to Madonna, the pop artist of a thousand incarnations, will do all of these things at once. His name is Bobby Tuttle.

“This is the event of the century,” Mr. Tuttle, who is 24, proclaimed last night to a crowd of believers eagerly waiting to enter Madison Square Garden, where Madonna was set to take the stage at 8 p.m. for the first of five sold-out performances. (6)

The best commentary on the devotion of the most enthusiastic Madonna fans, and especially on those like Mr. Tuttle who have totally given themselves over to Madonna, is a sentence from Girard’s *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*: “There is not one element of this distorted mysticism,” he writes, “which does not have its luminous counterpart in Christian truth” (1965, 61). Which brings me to the central point of this essay, an ancient anticipation of the one just quoted from Girard. It comes from the second century theologian Tertullian. It is this: “The soul is naturally Christian.”

Desire, Girard tells us, is always “the desire to be another.” Whether one is squeezing a man’s foot into a Madonnaesque pair of high-heeled boots or imitating the selflessness of Christ, our deepest and defining impulse is to adopt as our own the attributes of another. “Choice always involves choosing a model,” Girard writes, “and true freedom lies in the basic choice between a human and a divine model” (1965, 58). To which I might add—revealing my own religious sensibilities—that since even our imitation of a divine model will inevitably involve the mediation of intermediary human models, Mr. Tuttle’s ontological prognosis might be greatly improved if he were to fall under the spell of another Madonna. For nothing better encapsulates the spirit of Christian existence than the utterance placed into the mouth of Jesus’ mother by the evangelist Luke: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to Thy word.”

NUPTIAL TRUTH

To claim, however, that true freedom lies in choosing a proper model, is to raise this question: What *is* the nature of truth? Postmodernists are not terribly convincing when they say that they want to know the answer to this question, but that’s because they continue to rely on modern skepticism without treating it, in a truly postmodern fashion, skeptically. The single greatest cultural contribution of postmodernity is that it eliminates the presumption of intellectual neutrality that modernity automatically associated with skeptical rationalism. By calling this presumption of neutrality into question, postmodernity makes a great breakthrough possible.

It shows, not that all truth is socially constructed, but that the uniquely human act of bearing witness to the truth is always a moral as well as an intellectual or empirical or noetic act.

As ludicrous and dangerous as the Nietzschean perspectival understanding of truth is—that there is no truth, only *your* truth and *my* truth and “*Ted Turner’s* truth” and “*Noam Chomsky’s* truth”—as ludicrous and dangerous as this idea is, might it not lead us to a rediscovery of the mystery of Christian truth, a mystery that has tended to be lost on those imbued exclusively with modernist epistemological preconceptions. I’m thinking, for instance, of the *nuptial* understanding of truth, that truth which will set one free, the kind of truth about which the Gospel is concerned and has a great deal to say and which awaits a *yes* on the part of its potential recipient. The etymological origin of the English word *truth* is the Old English word *treowth*, from which comes the word *troth*, suggesting a hidden covenantal understanding of truth. There may be reason to hope that in countering, as we must, the dangerous and cockeyed notions about truth circulating today under the postmodern banner we may discover a lost mystery.

The assumption that all truth is socially constructed is intimately linked to its postmodern corollary: the socially constructed (and deconstructed) self. These issues come together as well in quite different ways in Christian thought, and in responding to the postmodern challenge, Christians may well surprise themselves. For there seems to me a tremendous potential in the postmodern assumption that the self is an artificial social construct. The assumption is naïve and it usually harbors hidden agendas, but if we took it seriously it might help awaken Christians to the fact that something at least as shocking lies at the heart of Christian personhood. In a very real sense, at the burning center of Christianity is a person who emphatically insists that he exists only to bear witness to another person, a person whose life is therefore iconic in the extreme, an icon of the invisible God, the God, moreover, in whose image and likeness Genesis tells us we are made. If postmodernity is setting up questions to which Christianity has answers, then rediscovering those answers may do both postmodernity and Christianity a world of good.

THE INVISIBLE SELF

“As one casts out to sea in the contemporary world,” writes Kenneth J. Gergen (1991), describing the postmodern psychological predicament, “modernist moorings are slowly left behind.”

It becomes increasingly difficult to recall precisely to what core essence one must remain true. The ideal of authenticity frays about the edges; the meaning of sincerity slowly lapses into indeterminacy. And with this sea change, the guilt of self-violation also recedes. As the guilt and sense of superficiality recede from view, one is simultaneously readied for the emergence of a pastiche personality. The pastiche personality is a social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation. (150)

Gergen's observation of the postmodern psychological situation is marvelously perceptive, though his cheerfully naive assumption that "if one avoids looking back to locate a true and enduring self" the situation can be "properly managed" is considerably less useful. Given the growing pharmacological arsenal for anesthetizing "the guilt of self-violation," it would be naïve to suggest that it cannot be done, but it would be even more naïve to overlook the spiritual price to be paid for doing so. Modern psychology emerged, and put its stamp on the twentieth century, precisely because an increasing number of people were unable to manage properly the psychological house of mirrors Gergen so well describes. Symptoms of the psychological distress associated with this problem emerged centuries earlier, at the dawn of the modern age, and the spiritual and cultural shifts that gave rise to these symptoms are older still. The most obvious fact about the postmodern crisis of the self is that it is a historical phenomenon. With Professor Gergen's sketch of what he calls the "pastiche personality" fresh in our minds, we can perhaps detect its early manifestations in a few texts dating from the early seventeenth century.

A passage that bears remarkable likeness to Gergen's appears in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Tellingly, it occurs at the onset of Antony's great crisis in act 4 of the play.

With both his erotic desires and his political ambitions in ruins, Antony asks his attendant, not coincidentally named Eros, whether he, Antony, is still visible. To which Eros answers, "Ay, noble lord." But Antony, his ontological substantiality draining away, cannot be persuaded by such perfunctory reassurances. He proceeds to relate his psychological predicament:

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,
A vapor sometime like a bear or lion,
A towered citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory

With trees upon't that nod unto the world
And mock our eyes with air . . .
That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns and makes it indistinct
As water is in water.
My good knave Eros, now thy captain is
Even such a body. Here I am Antony,
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave. (4.14.2–14)

Shakespeare's Antony is suffering from precisely the sort of self-dissolution about which Gergen remains so sanguine. Chameleon-like, Antony has begun to take on the form of whatever exerts an influence on him, but he is unable to regard the unraveling of his identity with Gergen's serenity. An exploration of the roots of Antony's ontological predicament, its origin in mimetic desire and the passions it awakens, would take us too far afield. Suffice it to say that his psychological disintegration was the reason for, and not the result of, the erotic and political misadventures that preceded it, the final collapse of which coincided with his eventual recognition of his plight. In the image of his curse we can see the portraiture of ours, for the crisis that is now looming was preceded and prepared for by decades of political and sexual hysteria, in the aftermath of which many are, like Antony, "borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available."

MISPLACED MIMETIC DESIRE

Antony and Cleopatra was probably first performed in 1607. Two years earlier in Spain, Cervantes had published part 1 of *Don Quixote*, and, as an actor was declaiming Antony's lines in London, Cervantes was at work on the second part of his novel, which was published in 1615. Cervantes' masterpiece is the story of a man suffering a milder form of the same spiritual and psychological crisis into which Shakespeare's Antony was slipping. The protagonist of Cervantes' novel is a man responding to a deep desire to imitate another. His predicament is less grave than Antony's for the simple reason that he has managed to keep one single model before him throughout his life, the fictional hero of contemporary novels of chivalry, Amadis of Gaul. Yet, like Shakespeare's Antony, the man from La Mancha has a moment of truth at which he awakes, not to a cloud that was dragonish, but to windmills and remorse.

After a life spent emulating his model, on his deathbed Don Quixote belatedly comes to his senses. Like Antony, he mumbles about misty shad-

ows and the loss of his identity. He says to those attending to him in his extremity:

My judgment is now clear and free from the misty shadows of ignorance with which my ill-starred and continuous reading of those detestable books of chivalry had obscured it. Now I know their absurdities and their deceits, and the only thing that grieves me is that this discovery has come too late, and leaves me no time to make amends by reading other books, which might enlighten my soul. . . . Now I am the enemy of Amadis of Gaul and of all the infinite brood of his progeny. Now all profane histories of knight errantry are odious to me. I know my folly now, and the peril I have incurred from reading them. Now, by God's mercy, I have learnt from my own bitter experience and I abominate them. (935–36)

Realizing that his life has been misspent slavishly imitating a model whose escapades were unworthy of such devotion, Don Quixote doesn't renounce imitation, as his modern heirs would, rather he bemoans the fact that his imminent death leaves him so little time to make amends for having read and imitated certain books by reading and imitating certain *other* books, those that might enlighten his soul. Don Quixote, or rather Cervantes, realizes that imitation is an unavoidable fact in human life, the crucial choice being whom one takes as a model. He sees the folly of having modeled his life on novels about chivalrous knights rather than on the lives of the saints, which is surely what Cervantes means by books that enlighten the soul. Don Quixote's deathbed conversion consisted of his realization that he had imitated the wrong model. His response was to want to imitate the right ones.

In this, Cervantes writes in the great tradition of Dante, who, on finding himself lost in the dark wood, turns from jousting at the political and philosophical windmills of fourteenth century Florence to new models that enlighten his soul, Virgil, Beatrice, and Bernard. Like Don Quixote, the pilgrim Dante had fallen into error by imitating the wrong models and his conversion would consist, not in renouncing imitation—the modern move *par excellence*—but in finding the right models.

The paradigmatic conversion stories in the Gospel—Peter hearing the cock crow and Saul hearing Christ call him a persecutor on the Road to Damascus—are analogous in many ways to the moments of illumination which left Shakespeare's Antony and Cervantes' Don Quixote, and the pilgrim Dante reeling. This is no mere coincidence. For the psychological perils from which Antony, Quixote, and Dante suffered are symptomatic of a vast anthropological shift set in motion by the Gospel, and specifically the

revelation of the cross that is at the heart of the Gospel. Those able to share fully in the social solidarity generated by religiously sanctioned collective violence enjoy real psychological benefits—a sense of cultural identity, of moral rectitude, and of intense camaraderie—albeit at the expense of those on whom their unanimous contempt or violence falls. By revealing the innocence of the victim and the madness of the victimizing crowd, however, the Gospel disrupts the procedure upon which humans have depended for both social solidarity and psychological poise since the birth of culture itself. In societies that have fallen under Christian influence, the mechanism for periodically reinforcing psychological and social identity grows weak and attenuated. The social and psychological impulses that give rise to these rituals of cultural rejuvenation—what we today call the scapegoating mechanism—nevertheless retain considerable residual power. So even as the Gospel continues to deprive this mechanism of the religious and moral privileges it enjoyed in the past, the crisis that accompanies its demise paradoxically inclines those caught up in it to resort again to the mechanism.

The truth of the cross is not only, however, an exposé about the role of sacred violence in cultural life; it is also the truth about the origin of the passions that lead inevitably to the violence and endow it with religious meaning. It is the truth about mimetic desire. Few may understand this link between sacred violence and mimetic desire, but the affinity between them is such that a culture's aversion to the truth about the former will always be accompanied by a corresponding aversion to the truth about the latter. Both conventional cultural forces ("the world") and deeply embedded psychological reflexes ("the flesh") will, in a crisis-ridden world, collaborate to ward off or marginalize the Gospel's moral and cultural influence. So, as evidence of the truth of mimetic desire emerges, we can safely predict that cultural forces will be awakened in opposition. It is not surprising, therefore, that at almost the same time that Shakespeare and Cervantes were issuing their literary warnings about the approaching mimetic crisis in the West, a philosophical effort was being launched which would have the effect of thwarting the revelation for which Shakespeare and Cervantes served as heralds. As the role of mimetic desire in human affairs became visible in such literary works, modernity's great philosophical recoiling from that revelation was launched.

DESCARTES' MIMETIC DENIAL

Both Shakespeare and Cervantes died in 1616. During the Dutch winter of 1628, René Descartes ensconced himself in a little garret for the purpose of

clearing *his* head of some “misty shadows of ignorance.” The difference between his response and that of his literary contemporaries may help us understand the modern and postmodern predicament. At the beginning of his *Third Meditation*, Descartes (1968) describes the physical surroundings that most suited his purpose: “The onset of winter held me up in quarters in which, finding no company to distract me, and having, fortunately, no cares or passions to disturb me, I spent the whole day shut up in a room heated by an enclosed stove, where I had complete leisure to meditate on my own thoughts” (35).

This passage may tell us more about the Cartesian revolution than Descartes’ elaborate philosophical justifications for it. It indicates where the problem lies for Descartes. It lies in other people. The ideal setting for Cartesian thought is not just solitude in, say, the time-honored monastic sense—that is to say, being alone with God in prayer and being silently present to others in work and worship. No, Descartes’ solitude was cloistered isolation set up to wall him off from mimetic suggestion. If he is to have reliable thoughts of *his own*, the “cares” and “passions” aroused in him by the presence of others must be extinguished. Sartre’s “hell is other people” is still more than three centuries down the road, but Descartes has taken the first steps on that road, not because he is a misanthrope, but because he realizes how inevitably influenced by each other we humans are and he sees in this not the possibility of a covenant community, the communion of saints, but simply an obstacle to his quest for certitude and autonomy.

For Descartes, the only thing about which he harbored no doubts was that the person harboring the doubts existed, and this was the starting point of his philosophical revolution. For Descartes, the doubting mind *is* the thinking mind; to think is to doubt and to doubt is to exist as an independent being. I am skeptical, therefore I exist. The most important thing about Descartes’ methodological skepticism is that it is radically individualistic. *I* am skeptical, therefore *I* exist. If Christian faith is always covenantal, Cartesian skepticism is always individualistic. Christian faith is intensely personal, but it is emphatically not individualistic. The Christian being is an ecclesial being. Faith grows by exposure to faith. The Cartesian quest for certainty, on the other hand, is the quest for *unmediated* knowledge, knowledge that one acquires by eliminating the mimetic influence of others, avoiding (or trying to) the epistemological corruption such an influence might have. Wariness about mimetic influence is certainly a legitimate concern, but mimetic desire is what makes humanity what it is, a creature made in the image and likeness of an Other and endowed with a deep-seated and irrevocable desire to fulfill itself by falling under the influence of another.

One could as well live without oxygen as eliminate the mediating influence of others, and Descartes' efforts to do so anticipate the desperate self-referentiality of the modern self and its wistful efforts to experience its own ever-elusive authenticity.

Descartes represents himself as ensconced for six days in an isolated Dutch garret where he communes only with his own thoughts, but at length the elimination of the physical presence of others seems not to be sufficient. He must redouble his efforts to insure that it is, in fact, *his own thoughts* on which he is meditating. He writes: "I will now close my eyes, I will plug my ears, I will turn aside all my senses . . . in this way, concerned only with myself, looking only at what is inside me, I will try, little by little, to know myself, and to become more familiar to myself" (quoted in Zweig 1968, 121).

According to Charles Taylor (1989), it is here that we can glimpse most clearly "Descartes' decisive moment of inspiration" (157). William Temple (1940) was more emphatic; he called Descartes' withdrawal into himself "the most disastrous moment in the history of Europe" (57). Concentrating only on *himself*, looking only at what is *inside himself*, straining to know *himself*, Descartes has made the inward turn, and in doing so has set out to systematically eliminate mimetic influence of others.

The psychological crisis faced by Cervantes' Don Quixote is rooted in his susceptibility to the mimetic influence of the model under whose spell he fell. Realizing how foolish he had been, Quixote wanted to amend his ways by imitating better mimetic models. Descartes' solution to this dilemma was to eliminate imitation altogether. This may be the defining gesture of modernity: some move made to eliminate mimetic influence or to try to show how impervious one is to it. Like postmodernists, Descartes was raising the question of truth, of what could be said to be true, of what could not be successfully challenged by naysayers. His answer finally was this: his own thought, *cogito, ergo sum*, a banal and ultimately idolatrous parody of the biblical "I AM who Am," an abandonment of biblical anthropology. It was only a matter of time before Nietzsche, brooding in *his* dark garret, hatched the Cartesian egg, and launched the postmodern era by declaring that the only truth possible is radically individualized truth, *my* truth, ontologically insulated from the gainsaying of others. From Descartes' quest for unmediated certainty to the solipsistic disintegration of truth in Nietzsche, what's at work is the fear of mediation, the fear of mimetic desire with all its messiness and muddle, which is, at bottom, the fear of Christian truth.

Remember, if you will, the post-Easter scene of Jesus appearing for the second time to the disciples, this time with Thomas the Twin (often

called doubting Thomas) present among them, and saying to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen but who believe” (John 20:27). When Jesus says “blessed are those,” he isn’t saying they are blessed because they manage to overcome or stoically accept the handicap of having not seen. Rather he is saying that it is *better* to receive the truth through the testimony of others, to receive it by way of human mediation, than it is to receive it any other way. He is saying that by receiving the truth from the hands of others we enter more fully into the great trinitarian mystery of mutuality that is the mystery of God par excellence, the very purpose of biblical revelation. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe on the testimony and living example of others. A Christian is someone who has met a Christian. Mediation is how it works. Faith begets faith, and in the process persons are ontologically engaged, brought to life, by the grace of God resurrected. In the quest for philosophical certitude, Descartes renounced the mimetic mediation that plays such a pivotal role in the transmission of Christian truth. Whereas what we might call Quixotic disillusionment led to the search for good mimetic models, Cartesian disillusionment led to a flight from imitation, fear of the influence of others, and the dreary autonomy of the modern self.

For all his epochal philosophical significance, and despite its promulgator’s determination to insulate himself from the mimetic influence of others, Descartes’ revolution had a long prehistory. “In his desire to portray his thought as originating *ab ovo*,” writes Michael Allen Gillespie, Descartes “goes to considerable lengths to conceal his sources” (1996, 29). Of course, the task of concealing influences was to become endemic in the modern world, in order to insulate the myth of autonomy against the mimetic facts of life. In going to considerable lengths to conceal his sources, Descartes was simply foreshadowing the plight his spiritual heirs would suffer as the truth of mimetic influence relentlessly undermines the public demonstrations of autonomy designed to keep this truth from intruding.

For Descartes, nevertheless, there were influences aplenty, and arguably the greatest of them is the influence of Augustine. As Paulos Mar Gregorios (1992) reminds us, Descartes begins where Augustine began, with doubt as the only thing that could not be doubted.

In Augustine’s fertile mind arose the idea that only one thing was certain, namely that everything was uncertain. So he latched on to that as his starting point, namely that he was doubting everything, except the fact that he was doubting. That, he thought, was not to be doubted: the indubitable existence of the doubting and the doubter. I, the doubter, exist—that much was self-evident to Au-

gustine. Descartes, who had studied with the Jesuits and knew his Augustine, made a slight change and got to his *cogito, ergo sum*: I think therefore I exist. (90–91)

Descartes' "slight change," like Chesterton's concept of a small mistake in doctrine, was the beginning of a massive repudiation of Christian anthropology. The depth and seriousness of Descartes' doctrinal commitments have been long argued, but it was his anthropological miscalculation, not his creedal eccentricities, that made his revolution so problematic. Whatever the content of Descartes' Christian faith, the point is that creedal orthodoxy, alone, cannot offset the danger posed by faulty anthropological presuppositions. It is in light of this fact that another of Augustine's influences on Descartes looms far larger than the methodological doubt with which they both begin their reflections.

AUGUSTINE'S INWARD SELF

Augustine is widely acknowledged as the father of Western Christianity, and his writings are a treasure trove of Christian faith. Not only, however, does Augustine represent the Cartesian revolution in embryo, but, more importantly, he is the source of the very notion of the "inner self" which was its major presupposition (see Cary 2000 and Taylor 1989). One could argue that, from the moment when he first saw Ambrose reading silently, Augustine did more to encourage authentic Christian interiority than anyone in the early church. But it was not the influence of Ambrose that was to become problematic; rather it was the influence of the Neoplatonists, whom he was reading with great enthusiasm during and for years after his Christian conversion.

"By the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself," Augustine tells us in the *Confessions*" (1991, 123). Throughout his life, the Platonic influence was there, especially that of the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus. What Augustine finds in Plotinus are things like this: "How can one behold this extraordinary beauty which remains in the inner sanctum and will not come outside to be seen by the profane? Let him who can arise and come into the inside, leaving the sight of the eyes outside and not turning back to corporeal beauties" (quoted in Cary 2000, 37). The Cartesian revolution began as though in strict conformance to this admonition, and Augustine almost surely served as its unwitting Christian mediator.

If William Temple thinks Descartes' radical self-referentiality is "the most disastrous moment in the history of Europe," Hans Urs von Balthasar, who in other respects acknowledges Augustine's greatness, is equally un-

equivocal. “At the time of his conversion in Milan,” von Balthasar writes, “Augustine was assiduously practicing Neoplatonic self-absorption” (1986, 261). According to Phillip Cary, however, this Neoplatonic influence remained throughout Augustine’s life. “The story of Augustine’s intellectual development does not begin with Platonism and end with Christianity,” Cary writes, “but rather [it] introduces us to a distinctive brand of Christian Platonism in the making” (2000, 35).

Charles Taylor quotes a line from Augustine which he suggests is paradigmatic of his thought: “Do not go outward; return within yourself,” Augustine writes, “in the inward man dwells truth” (quoted in Taylor 1989, 129). “Augustine,” Taylor insists, “is always calling us within” (1989, 129). Can one imagine Christ calling for such an inward turn? Shut the door and pray, yes, but turn your back on corporeal beauties in favor of an inner sanctum? I don’t think so. How far from Christian orthodoxy Augustine’s quest for truth “within” was, Cary observes, “can be measured by noting that it stands in obvious conflict with the belief that we are brought to blessedness by the death of Christ or the resurrection of the body” (2000, 103).

So commonplace has the notion of turning inward become, however, that Augustine’s descendants—meaning, Western culture in its entirety—would appeal to the metaphor of inwardness without recognizing either its metaphorical limits, its doctrinal peculiarity, or its anthropological dubiousness. If, in responding to the postmodern challenge, we are forced to clarify some of the muddle into which we have fallen in the modern era, we will need to free ourselves, in the words of Karl Rahner, from “the Neoplatonic habits of thought which have held us in bondage for two thousand years” (1962, 28). And in some respects at least, the anthropology of the modern self, now being challenged by the postmodernists, is the fruit of precisely that bondage.

Notwithstanding the need to disentangle Augustine’s theology from the Neoplatonic presuppositions in which it is so often embedded, the *Confessions* show us a man of prayer, a man whose Neoplatonist reflexes inspired him to “turn inward,” but who, nevertheless, understood that turn to be part and parcel of a turn toward a genuinely transcendent God to whom he poured out his heart. Let it be a lesson to us all; an inadvertent doctrinal eccentricity can worm its way into cultural presuppositions, infecting the lived experience of countless lives for centuries.

ROUSSEAU'S AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUAL

When, toward the end of the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote his *Confessions*, it presented to the world, not the God in whom Augustine assured his readers they could find rest, but an immensely restless man desperately trying to appear self-possessed and at peace. The first words of Rousseau's *Confessions* are these:

I have resolved on an enterprise which has *no precedent*, and which, once complete, will have *no imitator*. My purpose is to *display* to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be *myself*. Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that *I am like no one in the whole world*. I may be no better, but at least I am *different*. (1953, 17; emphasis added)

In an observation that fairly sums up the history in the West of the "autonomous individual," of whom Rousseau was the most famous exemplar, René Girard has written: "Imitative desire wants nothing more than to be free from imitation. Complete self-sufficiency is its ultimate idol" (1993, 9). Rousseau was eager to impress others with the fact that he had no need to impress them. He desperately needed the attention of others and just as desperately needed to believe that he had no such need. He was the first to realize how much social adulation could be aroused by a convincing demonstration of one's complete disinterest in it.

If we read the opening lines of Rousseau's *Confessions* against the backdrop of Descartes' *cogito*, we see another effort to avert attention from what Girard calls mimetic desire, the elimination of which is tantamount to the rejection of Christian anthropology. Rousseau begins his *Confessions*, not with a prayer, but with an assertion, and what he asserts is precisely the repudiation of mimesis. His enterprise has no precedent and it will remain inimitable. Rousseau is like no one else in the world. He is different. Of course, the claim that he has no predecessors is odd, even comically odd, in light of the fact he has chosen as the title of his autobiography the title Augustine used for his. Rousseau's claim that he will have no imitator has a comic dimension as well, in light of the fact that in short order he became the most imitated man in Europe, the model of individuality. His genius may well have been in realizing the seductive power of autonomy on public display, something he systematically performed for the benefit of his rapt European audience. The very use of the word display in these opening lines of his *Confessions* must not go unremarked. Unlike Descartes, who

took great pains to isolate himself from the mimetic contagion of others, Rousseau, concerned less with epistemological than with psychological verisimilitude, hit upon another strategy. In fact, it was the direct opposite of Descartes' solution, and for that reason just as dubious. Rousseau would be alone *in public*, a curious but fascinating inversion of monasticism's solidarity in solitude. It all depended, of course, on Rousseau's dramatization of his aloneness and aloofness. If Don Quixote imitated the fictional Amadis of Gaul, Rousseau imitated the fictionalized Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Sartre would later aptly call this self-imitation "bad faith," and Rousseau was its grand propagator. As Leo Braudy puts it: Rousseau's political views "emphasize the primitive freedom of human beings, but in his own autobiography, and in his life, he shows how dependent that freedom is on the observation of others" (1986, 376–77).

The man who would have no imitators had legions of them, each infected with the mimetic dilemma that Rousseau personified: how to get others to notice how disinterested one is in whether they notice or not; how to attract enough social attention to make up for the diminution of what Henri de Lubac (1958) calls "ontological density," the waning of which, de Lubac argues, is the salient feature of our age. Before turning to the Christian tradition for clarification of these matters, let us look at a few of Rousseau's more amusing descendants.

The novel as a literary genre is coterminous with modernity. It catalogs the modern predicament. The first novel was Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and I now want to turn to my personal choice for the hotly disputed distinction of being the last novel, namely, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. (By "last" I don't necessarily mean the last in a strictly chronological sense.)

One of the characters in Virginia Woolf's novel is a man named Bernard who fancies himself a writer, even at times a romantic poet, even though he can rarely put two sentences together. His notebooks are full of scribbles he hopes one day to use in a great literary work, though his actual literary output is miniscule. He waits for the romantic mood to overtake him, for it is that which, he feels, will transform him from the colorless scribe that he is into the dashing romantic poet he imagines himself to be. The essence of Bernard's romantic illusion, of course, is a Rousseauesque notion of unique individuality, a life so sublimely disinterested in what others think that others would surely think of little else. This is the salvation for which Bernard is searching, or rather waiting, for he can only hope to be seized by the passionate impulses that will rise up from *within* him and turn him into that rare and admirable creature, a romantic poet. On one occasion, lightning strikes, or at least seems to, and suddenly he is disposed to pour his passionate heart onto the page.

. . . all is propitious. I am now in the mood. I can write the letter straight off which I have begun ever so many times. I have just come in; I have flung down my hat and my stick; I am writing the first thing that comes into my head without troubling to put the paper straight. It is going to be a brilliant sketch which, she must think, was written without pause, without an erasure. Look how unformed the letters are—there is a careless blot. All must be sacrificed to speed and carelessness. I will write a quick, running, small hand, exaggerating the down stroke of the “y” and crossing the “t” thus—with a dash. . . . I must seem to her (this is very important) to be passing from thing to thing with the greatest ease in the world. . . . It is the speed, the hot, molten effect, the lava flow of sentence into sentence that I need. Who am I thinking of? Byron of course. I am, in some ways, like Byron. Perhaps a sip of Byron will help to put me in the vein. Let me read a page. . . . (Woolf 1959, 78–79)

Spontaneity, carefully exhibited to others, advertises one’s autonomy. It demonstrates that one isn’t imitating anyone. Our world is full of these little autonomy-plays, the contemporary analogue, I suppose, for medieval morality plays. For those who have eyes to see, they demonstrate the lack of what they aim to advertise. Just as the effort to appear sincere is always insincere, and the desire to be humble often rooted in pride, so the effort to demonstrate one’s spontaneity is symptomatic of one’s lack of it. Woolf’s Bernard labored mightily to feign a spontaneity he was never able to actually experience. Here he takes great pains to demonstrate his spontaneity—by not bothering to put the paper straight, scribbling in an almost illegible hand, crossing the “t” thus with a dash—all this meticulous attention to detail in order to convince the letter’s recipient how oblivious to detail he was. Our world is today full of performances easily as entertaining as Bernard’s, and equally symptomatic of today’s spiritual and psychological crisis.

Suddenly withering from the realization of his dependence on a model, Bernard slinks over to the bookshelf and picks up his copy of Byron, drinking in its heady romanticism in hopes of returning to his labored effort to be “spontaneous.” Here is the modern self struggling against the facts of mimetic desire to see itself as pure spontaneity, to think of its desire as essentially autonomous. Bernard suffers his little recurring letdown only to return to the very romantic illusion that was its source. His gesture of getting up and going to the bookshelf was the right gesture; it’s just that when he got there he picked up the wrong book. If only Don Quixote had longer to live, he tells us, his trip to the bookshelf would have been more produc-

tive, for he would have chosen other books, with other models. What Virginia Woolf's account of this scene shows us is nothing less than that, as Tertullian put it in the second century, the soul is naturally Christian.

Meanwhile, Virginia Woolf has more to teach us. Bernard, we soon discover, like so many postmodernists, had already made quite a few trips to the bookshelf, and he has yet to pick up the right book, or even read the ones he has picked up profitably. So desperate is he for mimetic suggestion about who he is and how he is to live that he has gone from one literary idol to the next, and the cumulative effect is beginning to take its toll. He is a late modern on the threshold of the shocking postmodern discovery that he has become a "pastiche personality." "I changed and changed," Bernard writes, "was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky; was for a whole term, incredibly, Napoleon; but was Byron chiefly" (Woolf 1959, 249).

A Christian has a far greater pool of possible models than did Virginia Woolf's Bernard, for the humblest person in a breadline (or a traffic jam) can serve, unwittingly in most cases, as an exemplar of Christian charity, kindness, or selflessness. But the real difference between Bernard's fickle psychological promiscuity and Christian mediation is that what the Christian emulates in his or her model is precisely the model's *Imitatio Christi*. In other words, those for whom Christ is the *ultimate* model will be aided by the mediation of countless *penultimate* ones, both professing Christians and virtuous nonbelievers. With Christ as the transcendent model, however, this plethora of human exemplars will not have the decentering and destabilizing effect it had on Bernard, and that it is having on millions of people today who are being tossed on a sea of mimetic influences without the ballast required to stay on course. The conspicuously modern hope that with arduous enough acts of introspection "the self" could acquire this ballast on its own is precisely the hope the postmodernists have called into question, and that Virginia Woolf parodies in her novel.

Faced with this psychological instability, one can relieve the symptoms, as Rousseau did, by infecting others with the disease. One can perform one's hysteria for onlookers; one can become, in the words of the *New York Times* reporter, a "pop artist of a thousand incarnations." Instead of performing little "autonomy plays" for so limited an audience—the woman Bernard imagined himself to be courting—one can perform an even more histrionic version of the same masquerade for a larger audience, attracting thereby a greater quantum of the social attention that serves, temporarily, as a substitute for genuine ontological density.

FROM PERSON TO SELF

The disappearance of such density is marked by the word *self*, which comes from the Greek term *autos*, as of course does the word *autonomy*. The prevailing Western notion of “individuality” is rooted in precisely the gesture of disidentification with which the individual distinguishes himself from others.

The notion of the person, however, as it took shape in European cultures, involved the confluence of a number of influences—Christian efforts to understand the Second Person of the Trinity paramount among them. But its etymological history begins earlier. Its most remote appearance occurs in connection with ancient Etruscan ritual, as that religious ritual was beginning to evolve into performance drama. Masks worn in quasi-ritual dramatic performances served both to amplify the voice and set aside for the duration of the drama the human identity of the ritual performer. The ritual veneration of the goddess Persephone required a liturgical performer to *speak through a mask* of the goddess, and the name for the mask, *phersu*, was derived from the goddess’s name. The Etruscans influenced Roman theater, and the Romans, in adopting the Etruscan term, fused it with the Latin verb for “speaking through”—the verb: *personare*, the noun form of which is *persona*. So the term for mask came into Roman usage as *persona*, which at first indicated the actor’s mask, but eventually came to refer to any *personage* playing a role, whether on stage or in cultural life.

The Greeks, for their part, used the word *prosopon* for the mask the actor wore on stage, and it was also via this reference to the actor wearing a mask that the Greek idea of the person first appears, suggesting, some have thought, an intriguing affinity between these two concepts: mask and person. The apparent superficiality of the term was one of the issues in contention during the theological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries, the debates that led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Eastern fathers resisted the use of the term *person* precisely because it still carried the superficial connotation of a social “role” without serious ontological status.

A solution was finally found, which according to John Zizioulas amounted to “a philosophical landmark, a revolution in Greek philosophy” (1985, 36). It was to equate the Greek word *hypostasis* and the Latin word *persona*. In other words, to interpret personhood in hypostatic terms. By a kind of etymological adoption, the theologically insignificant word *persona* was thereby infused with the theological riches of the term *hypostasis*. Perhaps the best way to convey the deeper implications of this remarkable concept is with two words: icon and sacrament.

In pondering the mystery of the Christ, the early Council fathers—anticipating the Second Vatican Council’s insistence that “only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light”—were compelled by the mystery of the incarnate Word to discover the hypostatic mystery of personhood itself, a discovery that, in the words of Dennis Edwards, “gave a radically new weight to the idea of person” (1997, 77). “The revolution of the person,” writes Paul Evdokimov, “is the event of Christianity,” and human desire is simply “the inborn nostalgia to become a ‘person’” (1985, 53).

The person, in the original Christian sense of the term, is always iconic, while the self, the secular simulation of the person, is inevitably idolatrous. The person, as Christianity understands the term, is never the one who comes in his own name, even though “this world” would be happy to believe him if he did. Nor is the uniquely Christian form of personhood to be regarded as a concession to a regrettable mimetic propensity in fallen creatures, for Jesus’ own personhood was as defined by his trinitarian consubstantiality with the Father as Christian personhood is defined by the *Imitatio Christi*. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says: “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:10–11). This is God’s incarnate Word, in whose image and likeness humans are made, revealing to us the intersubjective mystery of personhood—the personhood of God no less than the mysterious personhood to which we have access in Christ. Unique as it is, Christ’s intimacy with the Father was “not something to be grasped at,” rather it is something he offers freely to others, so that, as Paul says “we might receive adoption as children,” an adoption that comes about when God sends “the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:5, 6). And so each of the “Persons” of the Trinity plays a “role” in the gift of personhood to humanity. And so it is that the Gospel evokes at the most profound level precisely the “interdividuality” whose anthropological validity René Girard has confirmed.

But what are we to make of the theatrical origin of the concept of the person? asks John Zizioulas. Why were the concepts of the theatrical “mask” and the human person affiliated so readily and felt to be so easily compatible? Was it an etymological accident? Was it pure coincidence? “What connection does the actor’s mask have with the human person?” Zizioulas asks (31). Answering his own question, he says, “It is precisely in the theater that man strives to become a ‘person’” (32). In “speaking through” the mask of another, the actor dispossesses himself of his “own self” in order to be possessed by the other. As a result of his mask, Zizioulas writes that “the

actor, but properly also the spectator—has acquired a certain taste of freedom, a certain specific ‘hypostasis,’ a certain identity, which the rational and moral harmony of the world in which he lives denies him. . . . [A]s a result of the mask he has become a person, albeit for a brief period, and has learned what it is to exist as a free, unique and unrepeatable entity” (33).

Of course, the “hypostasis” the actor is able to briefly experience is the hypostasis that figured so decisively in the development of both the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. The early controversies that led to these doctrines were finally resolved by the recognition on the part of the Church fathers of the hypostatic nature of the person, a recognition that made it possible for the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation to begin their triumphant theological journey through history.

TOWARD CHRISTIAN PERSONHOOD

In light of the etymological and historical affinity between the actor and the person, it is worth noting that the man who served for many—inside and outside the Roman communion—as an icon of Christian faith, morally dominating the world stage for nearly three decades, was an actor, playwright, and director as a young man. John Paul II’s first important book was titled *The Acting Person*. To echo Zizioulas, is this mere coincidence? There is, Gabriel Marcel reminds us, a passage in Scripture that can apply to the actor on the stage, namely, “Ye are not your own.” The actor, Marcel says, “can only find himself if he is prepared to lose himself. Thus, pursuing his vocation, he can provide us, through his unusual life, with a metaphor of human life as it aims toward its supernatural goal” (quoted in von Balthasar 1988, 10).

Even more to the point of the present reflection is Hermann Bahr’s suggestion that the actor “presents us directly with the ultimate mystery of human nature,” and that what the actor represents “is the absolute opposite of all hysteria” (quoted in von Balthasar 1988, 10–11). In contrast to the “individual” and the hysteric (who is an individual whose private rituals of disidentification have become flamboyant enough to attract clinical attention), the actor willingly identifies with the other to whose mimetic influence he actively submits in accord with his professional responsibilities—becoming in this regard like the “little child” in the Gospel, who, humbling himself, accepts his appointed role in the unfolding drama of salvation. Were an actor to submit with the same attentiveness and self-abandonment to the one who said “whoever has seen me has seen the Father”—the one referred to in the Letter to the Hebrews as the “icon of the

living God”—he would enter the company of the Christian mystics. His *Imitatio Christi* would consist of imitating the single animating desire of Jesus, which was simply to do the will of his heavenly Father. Inasmuch as the Father calls us each by name and gives us each a mission, the Father’s will for each of us is utterly unique. So, in sharp contrast to all other forms of mimetic submission, the *Imitatio Christi* leads, not to hackneyed sameness, but to utter uniqueness.

Christian personhood is inseparable from the role a Christian is assigned in the drama of salvation history, a drama of which no Christian is permitted to become a mere spectator, lest he be robbed of his true Christian identity. We are called and sent. Obedience is our freedom. “In His will is our peace,” the souls in paradise told Dante. In following Christ, we do that which we cannot help but do: we imitate; we let Christ speak through us (*personare*); we “put on Christ.” “Vicariousness is not something esoteric,” writes Lucien Richard, “rather, it is the fundamental principle of all personal life” (1997, 176).

As the truth about the mimetic nature of human subjectivity continues to undergo its gradual paraclitic self-disclosure, we will gradually come to realize, as Paul Evdokimov put it, that “man can make of himself an ‘icon of God,’ or he can become a demonical grimace, an ape of God” (1985, 57). Or, as René Girard (1996) has put it: “Both Jesus and Satan are teachers of imitation and imitators themselves, imitators of God the Father. This means that human beings always imitate God, either through Jesus or through Satan. They seek God indirectly through the human models they imitate” (215).

A Christian is someone who has met a Christian. A person, in the fullest Christian sense, is someone who is in the presence of person—in fact, in thought, or in prayer. The mystery of our identity is mediated to us, the question is who is the mediator? Amadis of Gaul or Francis of Assisi, Lord Byron or the Lord of Glory, the pop artist of a thousand incarnations or the incarnate Word.

Kenneth Schmitz reminds us that our task as Christians is “to transmute the metal of self by a kind of spiritual alchemy into the gold of personhood.” But then he wonders, wistfully perhaps, “Can such a call to spiritual personhood be made today in such a way that it might be heard?” (1986, 203–4). If Evdokimov is right about the revolution of the person being *the* event of Christianity, and about desire being an inborn longing to become a person, then there is no more urgent question than the one Schmitz asks. Can the call to personhood be heard today? The answer is yes, if we make it intelligible and anthropologically sound—and spiritually and psychologically gratifying.