Girard's Mimetic Theory: Towards a Theological Framework for Educational Anthropology[*]

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ABSTRACT

The field of anthropology has long been acknowledged as one of the most secular of the academic disciplines. Accordingly, the theoretical frameworks adopted by anthropologists largely operate under a guise of secularity, seeking to sequester the discipline from the purview of theology. However, recent developments in anthropology have raised afresh the question of the philosophic foundations of the discipline and reintroduced an explicit connection to theology. Building on these developments, this paper proposes that René Girard's mimetic theory provides a helpful framework for Christian scholars working in anthropology. Specifically, the paper explores the implications of Girard's mimetic theory for the sub-field of the anthropology of education by providing an overview of Girard's theory in the context of the field's key concepts. The paper argues that Girard's focus on the Gospel narrative and the Cross as epistemological keys to unveiling the violence of culture could have profound ramifications to the study of education as a process of cultural (re)production. By opening up this lens of analysis, the paper suggests that Girard's mimetic theory may provide an avenue for moving towards a distinctly theological approach to anthropology.

Key Words: Girard, mimesis, anthropology, theology, education

I. Introduction

The fundamental questions of the meaning and definition of human culture remain central in the field of anthropology despite centuries of debate, ever-demanding rearticulation and recapitulation. This paper seeks to contribute to this long-standing discussion by highlighting the benefit of utilizing René Girard's mimetic theory as a concept of culture in anthropology. Girard's mimetic theory is, after all, an anthropological theory of culture. Curiously, however, anthropology as a formal academic discipline appears to be one of the social sciences to have employed Girard's mimetic theory the least. Furthermore, despite the centrality of education to processes of social and cultural change, the sub-field of educational anthropology is yet to engage Girard's mimetic theory at all.

To fill this gap in the literature, this paper aims to put Girard's mimetic theory in conversation with the discipline of anthropology and subfield of the anthropology of education. Accordingly, the paper begins by exploring the long historical connection between the concept of mimesis as central to processes of education. Next, the paper discusses the strained relationship between Girard's mimetic theory and mainstream anthropology. After providing an overview of the core tenets of Girard's theory, the paper then turns to a discussion of the theoretical implications for the field of educational anthropology. To conclude, the paper looks forward towards a distinctly theological, indeed Christian, framework for educational anthropology. Ultimately, the paper poses the questions: why has Girard's mimetic theory been largely ignored in anthropology? How might Girard's work be useful for a moving towards a theological framework in educational anthropology?

II. The Concept of Mimesis in Educational Anthropology

The cultural, and essentially theological, nature of education raises the question of how to approach the nexus of culture and education anthropologically. In the

dominant U.S. strain of the field of educational anthropology, the starting point for an understanding of culture, and hence education, has been the Darwinian theory of evolution. In an influential volume, Schooling the Symbolic Animal, leading educational anthropologist Bradley Levinson explains the rationale: "Clever but physically defenseless, early humans required complex forms of social coordination and tool use to survive (Keesing, 1976 ; Lewin, 1989 ; Wenke, 1980). Language and culture thus emerged as distinctive adaptive traits in early human social cooperation" (Levinson, 2000: 1). In Levinson's conception, cultural (re)production results principally from the process of selective adaptation, with symbolic education forming a defining feature of humanity's strategy for survival. Levinson (2000: 2) explains, "...unlike most other animals, we cannot rely on instinct alone to survive in the world. We must learn or acquire the way of creating and using symbols. That is indeed the heart of education." By providing the means for a group to adapt, Levinson argues that the cultural (re) production of symbols through education composes a unique, central feature of what it means to be human.

Ironically, however, this progressive, evolutionary framework constitutes one of the chief targets of educational anthropologists' critiques of modern schooling (cf. Levinson et al., 1996). In adopting an evolutionary framework, on one hand educational anthropologists critique the linear, progressive paradigm of modern education, while on the other hand continue to reproduce the central tenets of the same modernistic knowledge project. As a step towards resolving this contradiction, this paper highlights the Greek concept of mimesis as an alternative theoretical starting point for educational anthropology. In doing so, I draw inspiration from the work of German educational anthropologist Christoph Wulf, who has utilized a mimetic framework throughout a wide body of ethnographic, analytical, and theoretical literature (Wulf, 2002, 2003, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2017).

Usually rendered as 'imitation', the term mimesis broadly denotes processes of 'becoming similar,' which are central to both educational and cultural processes of human being and becoming. In Greco-Roman antiquity, mimesis was widely understood as a performative process of becoming similar to another that revealed

the phenomenological essence of human being and facilitated knowledge acquisition (Cimitile, 1999). For example, Plato, in his Republic, describes mimesis as a process of 'becoming similar,' in the sense of assimilating the behavior of another person through their gestures or voice (Plato, Republic, III. 393 c ss, cited in Scaramuzzo 2016: 248). Furthermore, Aristotle argues in Poetics that "mimetic activity [mimeisthai] is instinctive to humans from childhood onwards, and they differ from other animals by being so mimetic [mimetikotaton] and by developing their earliest understanding through mimesis [dia mimeseos]" (Aristotle Poetics, 4. 1448 b 5-8, cited in Scaramuzzo 2016: 247). Thus, mimesis was understood as activity of imitation that by its intensity identified the essence of human being and enabled cognitive development or learning (Scaramuzzo, 2016). Szakolczai and Thomassen (2019:63) explain, "Mimesis lies at the root of all learning or education. Imitation is therefore foundational, beyond good or evil—it is a constituting part of what it means to be human." For these reasons, Wulf (2012) has identified the concept's dual definition of humanity and education as the "starting point" of the discipline of educational anthropology, which later developed in the twentieth century as a modern academic field (Wulf, 2012: 29).

  Given its promise as a conceptual framework, mimesis presents theoretical opportunities for educational anthropology to rethink the cultural (re)production paradigm. Rather than pointing to a stable, fixed theory of culture and education, at its core the concept of mimesis invites debate regarding its own definitions, applications, and impacts, as the concept itself has been understood in a plethora of ways throughout its intellectual history (Gebauer & Wulf, 1992). Gebauer and Wulf explain, "Rather than being accepted simply as representation, imitation, or whatever else it might be taken to mean, it has always been understood as a problem⋯It is and has been regarded as an anthropological, epistemological, social, and political problem that demands reflection" (Gebauer & Wulf, 1992: 7). As a reflexive theoretical concept, a mimetic framework is capable of shedding light in multiple directions, ultimately pointing to the power dynamics inherent in processes of education and knowledge production. Thus, educational anthropologists seem particularly well-positioned, as ambivalently placed social actors within the global educational landscape, to contribute new insights to the

mimetic machinations of the modern world.

III. The Relationship between Mimetic Theory and Mainstream Anthropology

In recent decades, anthropologists and social theorists have sought to recover the concept of mimesis as a paradigm in the social sciences and critical theory (Taussig, 1993 ; Potolsky, 2006 ; Mazzarella, 2017 ; Szakolczai & Thomassen, 2019). In what has been called the "mimetic turn" (Lawtoo, 2022), René Girard's mimetic theory has played an important role in this movement, forming a key component of the mimesis concept for scholars across a wide range of scientific disciplines (Garrells, 2011). Curiously, however, despite his immense success as a professional academic, Girard's anthropological theory of culture has ironically remained largely invisible in the actual field of anthropology, the very field in which he was most eager to engage. According to political anthropologist Harald Wydra, the reasons for anthropology's cold-shoulder lie not with Girard's theory, but rather stem from biases embedded within the anthropological community (Wydra, 2008). Wydra explains, "The neglect of Girard's work by professional anthropologists indicates a deeper malaise. The type of enquiry followed by mimetic theory, its problématique, seems to be completely out of tune with the concerns of contemporary cultural anthropology…The real obstacle for comprehending the propositions of mimetic theory, however, is a cognitive failure of the scientific community, which fails to question its own assumptions" (Wydra, 2008: 163-164).

Indeed, the core issue is that Girard's approach to anthropology challenges the theological convictions of anthropodom, anthropology's ideological structure of background assumptions, religious beliefs, and idolatries (Furani, 2019). In his theological critique of anthropology, anthropologist Khaled Furani (2019) has unveiled the discipline's attempt to cordon off theology as a façade of modern, secular reason. He explains, "But studying religion anthropologically has proceeded according to the

underlying premise that religion (including theistic forms of reason) is safe and even sound, but only for other people to have, certainly not anthropologists" (Furani, 2019: 42). Nevertheless, Furani argues that this conceptual move is itself deeply religious and reveals anthropology's a priori ontological commitments. Evoking the ancient Egyptian god of wisdom, Thoth, Furani explains that "anthropologists mobilizing thothic powers to build their disciplinary dome refers to the architectural efforts they have invested in their secular enterprise that aim to make it impervious to theology" (Furani, 2019: 42). This thothic attempt, however, has never been fully successful, as well-known anthropologists have in reality engaged in a complex relationship with theology, including maintaining private beliefs, while attempting to conceal their theology publicly (Furani, 2019: 64-66).

Furthermore, as the epistemological neutrality of an impartial observer has proven to be an impossibility, anthropology has constructed the idol of Culture in order to fill the ontological void (Furani, 2019: 149). Furani explains (2019: 149), "To recognize idolatry in anthropodom, constituted as a particular disciplinary application of secular sovereign reason, means in part to recognize ways in which modern anthropology builds itself upon false worship, misplaced trust, and categorical conflation...' Likening this idolatry to Hubal, an ancient Arabian god of the moon, Furani (2019: 155) continues, "As a god, even if contested, Culture and its huballing apparitions (man, humankind, human diversity, and diversity of any kind) have made the discipline of anthropology an object of devotion, service, and the offering of entire lives." This epistemological idolatry, Furani argues, has unnecessarily limited to scope of anthropological inquiry to the levels of its gods, 'culture' and 'society', while at the same time generating teleological confusion and occlusion over the "ends worthy of life's devotion," including the very purpose of the anthropological enterprise itself (Furani, 2019: 147). In light of this powerful theological critique, Girard offers an alternative framework for anthropology, rooted not in the idolatry and misguided worship of the disciplines' false epistemological gods, but rather grounded in the Truth of the Biblical narrative, revelation of the Cross, and peace and love of God's Kingdom.

IV. The Core Tenets of Girard's Mimetic Theory

Girard's mimetic theory centers on three main ideas, moving progressively from the domain of psychology to anthropology/sociology and culminating in a historical thesis of modernity (Gruenler, 2021). The first step in Girard's theory is the insight that all human desire is inherently mimetic, that is, it is based on the imitation of others (Girard, 1965). Girard argues that at its core, desire is not a process by which a person autonomously aspires to attain an object simply because of its intrinsic qualities (Girard, 1977). Rather, Girard explains, "To say our desires are imitative or mimetic is to root them neither in the objects themselves nor ourselves, but in a third party, the model or mediator, whose desire we imitate in hope of resembling him or her" (Girard, 2010: 246-247). Girard contends that the shape of desire is triangular, produced through a relational dynamic between a person, object, and a mediator or model (Girard, 1986).

Hence, desire is interdividual, rooted not in the attractive qualities of an object, but in a mimetic process whereby a person desires something because it is desired by another (Girard, 1965). Girard (1986: 283) explains, "Desire is undoubtedly a distinctively human phenomenon that can only develop when a certain threshold of mimesis is transcended." In an educational context, Girard's insight is immediately apparent in the form of "educational desire" (Kipnis, 2011). Encompassing aspirational quests for social recognition, class status, and the attainment of prestigious academic degrees, mimetic desire plays a critical role in the production of academic competition, global curricular trends, commodification of education, institutional rankings, and much more. For Girard, the relational, mimetic nature of desire poses a fundamental problem for humanity: the mediator, whose desire for an object a person imitates, can easily become a rival with whom a person competes for the same object (Girard, 1977).

Accordingly, the escalation of mimetic desire into mimetic rivalry forms the basis for the second step of Girard's theory, which Girard argues leads to the "scapegoat mechanism." As mimetic desire gives way to rivalry, individuals and groups will begin to compete for the same exclusive items. The same social mechanism that produces prestige and attainment also produces jealousy and lack. As rivalry compounds into

violence, if it is not held in check, a social group will eventually spiral towards chaos and war, producing a kind of Hobbesian war-of-all-against-all (Girard, 1987). Girard posits this scenario of chaos at the foundation of human civilization. He argues that when faced with this situation, a group will eventually unify around the violent persecution of an innocent victim to resolve the mimetic crisis (Girard, 1986).

As a lever to discharge the chaos, the sacrifice of this singular scapegoat releases a cathartic effect by simultaneously resolving the crisis and establishing a new social order. According to Girard, this "scapegoat mechanism" is the foundation of all rituals of religion and culture, which represent re-enactments of the original sacrifice committed against an innocent victim (Girard, 1987). The new cultural order established by the sacrifice of the scapegoat thus provides the means through which mimetic desire and violence are subsequently contained, in both senses of the word (Dupuy, 2014: 11). In other words, by (re)producing symbolic violence against the least of its members, the group seeks to protect itself as a whole from the social unraveling and violence of future mimetic crises. For Girard, the efficacy of symbolic violence is predicated upon the perceived guilt of the innocent victim. That is, society or culture must believe that its victims are guilty, otherwise the cathartic effect could not be achieved. The assumption of the "naturalness" of a given cultural and social order masks its arbitrary nature and sustains its myths and rituals (Girard, 1987).

However, if symbolic violence is so deeply disguised, how is it that sociologists and anthropologists, themselves social and cultural actors, can recognize and discuss it today? In the third step of his theory, Girard presents the Judeo-Christian Scriptures as underlying the historical and epistemological development of the social sciences through a gradual unveiling of sacrificial violence (Girard, 1987). Unlike myth, Girard argues that the passion and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, crucially told from the perspective of the victim rather than the persecutors, reveals the innocence of the ultimate scapegoat for humanity's violence. For Girard, the innocence of Christ on the cross is the anthropological key that unlocks genuinely scientific understandings of the violent foundations of human culture. And yet, while the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ inaugurates an altogether different order—the non-violent realm of the Kingdom

of God—it simultaneously weakens all existing socio-cultural orders by forever revealing their masked, arbitrary nature (Girard, 1987). With the scapegoat mechanism no longer fully functional, no other sacrifice remains to stem the crises of mimetic desire. As a result, in a modern, globalized world "full of Christian ideas gone berserk" (Georges Bernanos, cited in Dupuy 2002: 202), violence appears to be escalating in an apocalyptic manner as cultural and social barriers are weakened and destroyed (Girard, 2010).

V. Implications of Girard's Mimetic Theory for Educational Anthropology

By rooting his anthropological theory of culture in the Biblical revelation of the innocence of all cultural victims, Girard is able to move beyond the framework of secular anthropologists and onto "Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World" (Girard, 1987). Rather than Culture, Girard argues that the sacrifice of Christ exposes the foundational murder at the root of all cultures and opens up the possibility of peace through the Kingdom of God (Girard, 1987: 196). Unlike Culture, God's Kingdom is founded on "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8 KJV)—the expulsion, rejection, and murder of Jesus—and offers humanity the opportunity to identify with the innocent victim and turn away from the symbolic violence of Culture's myths and rituals. The sole condition of this kingdom is love—the lifestyle of loving of one's enemies, turning the other cheek, and enduring persecution. Girard's interlocutor Jean-Michel Oughourlian explains, "The Kingdom is the substitution of love for prohibitions and rituals—for the whole apparatus of sacrificial religions" (Girard, 1987: 196). In other words, the love of the Cross ushers in the Kingdom of God and conquers all prior forms of Culture.

However, Girard warns that failure to abide by this singular principle has the potential to usher in even greater violence than ever before: "if men turn down the peace Jesus offers them...there is no longer any sacralized victim to stand in the way

of its consequences" (Girard, 1987: 203). For Girard, the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism through the Cross, combined with the failure to heed the teaching of the Kingdom, has resulted in the paradoxical situation of the globalized, modern age. 'Christianity' has been recast in part as Western 'Culture' and spread globally in perverted, partial, and veiled forms, resulting in an ambivalent dynamic whereby the unravelling of Culture produces escalating levels of symbolic and physical violence (Girard, 2010). Girard's mimetic theory culminates in a historical argument regarding the 'Christian' nature of modernity.

To reiterate, Girard sees the gradual outworking of the Christian revelation as central to producing the insights of the modern social science disciplines as they developed in the West. Nevertheless, he understands the history of Western culture not as equivalent with Christian history, but rather that the history of the West reflects a failure to embody the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism through a continual return to sacrificial forms of violence (Girard, 2001). Girard explains, "Historical Christianity covers the texts with a veil of sacrifice⋯By this reading, the Christian text is able to found something that in principle it ought never to have founded: a culture. Obviously this culture is not quite like those that preceded it, since it always contained the germs of the planetary society that has taken its place. But it was sufficiently similar to the others to perpetuate the great legal, mythical and sacrificial principles at the basis of every culture" (Girard, 1987: 249-250). For Girard, the anthropological revelation of the Cross is irreducible to yet another cultural script—rather it provides the means by which all other myths and scripts are read.

From a Girardian perspective, the concept of a 'Christian culture,' therefore, is a misnomer. As such, Western culture does not reflect Christianity, but rather a syncretic mix of Judeo-Christian ethics with Roman law, Greek philosophy, polytheism, paganism, magic, folklore, myths of progress, individuality, rationalism, etc. It is this version of 'secular' Western culture that Girard sees as harnessing certain aspects of Christianity, such as Judeo-Christian concern for victims, in combination with a host of other spiritual forces, in order to spread around the world and form a 'planetary' or world culture (Girard, 2001). Girard's (1987) "fundamental anthropology" has

significant implications for the field of educational anthropology. By showing cultural (re)production to be in essence a religious phenomena, Girard highlights the sacrificial element at the heart of education. Girard explains, "So, for instance, what is education and what are rites of passage?...Initiation rites are primarily an ordeal that comes from the sacrificial crisis, which is a real experience and turns into a means of education" (Girard in Hardin, 2016: 44).

Taking seriously the 'sacrifices' students, parents, and societies make to finance education, Girard's mimetic theory sheds light on the theological nature of all educational practices. From this perspective, education is fundamentally a religious initiation rite based on the sacrificial structure of a given socio-cultural arrangement. A Girardian approach, therefore, holds great potential for shedding light on the ideological nature of the 'faith' in modern education. By providing a framework to unpack the theological nature of modernity, Girard's mimetic theory elevates anthropological perspectives on education beyond the limitations of 'society' and 'culture' as the ultimate ends of analysis. This anthro-theological perspective is critical in the analysis of the intrinsically religious meaning of education and could provide a meaningful framework for future work in educational anthropology by Christian scholars.

VI. Towards a Theological Framework for Educational Anthropology

This paper has argued that Girard's theory, in conversation with notions of mimesis and cultural (re)production, provides a novel framework for moving towards a distinctly Christian approach to the anthropology of education. Accordingly, the religious basis for cultural practices of schooling should become central in anthropological analyses of education, rather than tangential or absent. This points to the necessity of a theological framework, such as Girard's mimetic theory, for addressing the central concept of 'culture' within mainstream anthropology and the sub-discipline of educational anthropology. As a result of disciplinary biases, only one anthropologist, Simon Simonese (2017) in his brilliant study of dualism and centralism in southeastern

Sudan, has taken up Girard's mimetic theory of culture as a framework for conducting empirical fieldwork. Thus, much room remains for the utilization and application of Girard's theory for ethnographic analysis, a key point this paper has attempted to make.

Furthermore, despite the relevance of Girard's theory to the central concepts of educational anthropology, such as cultural (re)production, the character of modernity, and the religious meanings of education, the sub-discipline of educational anthropology has yet to engage Girard's work at all. To fill this gap in the literature, this article has aimed to make a theoretical contribution by putting Girard's mimetic theory into conversation with educational anthropology. The paper has argued that educational anthropology could be enriched by employing a distinctly theological perspective derived from Girard's theory of culture. While admittedly limited in scope, this paper has nevertheless attempted to make the connection between Girard and educational anthropology as a promising framework for future research and consideration among Christian scholars. By recognizing the theological nature of all educational practices, such a framework could provide room for a distinctly Christian perspective to witness to the field.

Hereby I confirm that this paper has not been published or requested for publication in other journals or publications.

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