

The Satanic and the Theomimetic: Distinguishing and Reconciling “Sacrifice” in René Girard and Gregory the Great

Jordan Joseph WALES

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Hillsdale College, Hillsdale MI, USA

Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture 27 (2020):177–214

<https://doi.org/10.14321/contagion.27.2020.0177>

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/contagion.27.2020.0177>

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/757320>

[Abstract: Compelling voices charge that the theological notion of “sacrifice” valorizes suffering and fosters a culture of violence by the claim that Christ’s death on the Cross paid for human sins. Beneath the ‘sacred’ violence of sacrifice, René Girard discerns a concealed scapegoat-murder driven by a distortion of human desire that itself must lead to human self-annihilation. I here ask: can one speak safely of sacrifice; and can human beings somehow cease to practice the sacrifice that must otherwise destroy them? Drawing on Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604), I propose an understanding of sacrifice that both distinguishes Christian sacrifice from sacred violence and accounts for how to overcome the roots of the sacred violence identified by Girard. I make four claims: First, Girard recognizes two kinds of sacrifice—one, the scapegoat murder, overcomes community rivalries by unanimous imitation of an accuser, shifting blame onto a third party who is collectively murdered; the other sort of sacrifice practices renunciation and forgiveness in imitation of God. These I respectively designate the “Satanic” (Girard’s term) and the “theomimetic” (mine). Second, I analyze the intrinsic instability that keeps the Satanic from sustaining the societal order and unity that it promises. Third, by a constructive reading of Gregory the Great, I posit that satanic sacrifice overlooks and indeed exacerbates the root of human covetousness—a failure to love. Fourth, Gregory’s teaching on the imitation of Christ enables us to expand on Girard’s account of the theo-mimetic sacrifice of renunciation, to clarify how this latter might not only oppose but also systematically subvert the Satanic by healing the disorder out of which mimetic rivalry and scapegoating first take their rise.]

In recent decades,¹ compelling voices have charged that the theological category of “sacrifice” has too long valorized suffering and has fostered a culture of violence, particularly through the notion that Christ’s excruciating death on the Cross was a payment demanded by God for human sins. Such an attribution of violence to the godhead itself silences victims while eroding our resistance to victimizers, and a sacrificial understanding of the ideal human relationship to God encourages

¹ Portions of this paper were first delivered as a paper at the annual meeting of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion in 2010 (University of Notre Dame). Since that time, several persons have been essential in the further development of its ideas: Fr. Michael Darcy, C.O.; Fr. Robert J. Daly, S.J.; William A. Johnsen; Ann Astell; John C. Cavadini; Fr. Brian Dunkle, S.J.; and Kathryn Wales. All deficiencies that may remain are my own.

a pursuit of self-extinction that ends in mere dissipation.² Of great influence in this wide-ranging discussion is the work of René Girard. Beneath the “sacred” violence of sacrifice, Girard discerns a concealed scapegoat-murder driven by a distortion of human desire that itself must lead to human self-annihilation. My concern here is thus rhetorical and theological—can one speak safely of sacrifice; and can human beings somehow cease to practice the sacrifice that must otherwise destroy them?

Drawing on the writings of Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604),³ this paper proposes an understanding of sacrifice that both distinguishes Christian sacrifice from the victim-silencing connotations and renders a possible account of how to overcome the roots of the sacred violence identified by Girard. While attending to the former, I shall focus on the latter, developing Girard’s argument that there are two sorts of sacrifice: one that destroys and one that heals; one that is founded on rivalry and one that is founded on love; and that true peace is secured for human beings only by mimetic participation in Christ’s own sacrifice of love.

Four claims structure this argument: First, Girard recognizes two kinds of sacrifice—one, the scapegoat murder, overcomes community rivalries by unanimous imitation of an accuser, who shifts blame onto some third party who is then collectively murdered; the other sacrifice practices renunciation and forgiveness in imitation of God. According to their exemplars, I respectively designate these sacrifices and the cultures they form as the “Satanic” (Girard’s term) and the “theomimetic” (mine). Violence is intrinsic and essential to the Satanic, while only incidental upon and nonessential to the theomimetic. Second, I analyze the intrinsic instability that keeps the Satanic from sustaining the societal order and unity that it promises. Third, by a constructive reading of Gregory the Great, I posit that Satanic sacrifice overlooks and indeed exacerbates the root of human covetousness—a failure to love. Fourth, Gregory’s teaching on the imitation of Christ enables us to expand on Girard’s account of the theomimetic sacrifice of renunciation, to clarify how this latter might not only oppose but also systematically subvert the Satanic by healing the disorder out of which mimetic rivalry and scapegoating first take their rise.

² Such critiques are indebted to the influential article by Valerie Saiving Goldstein, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (April 1960): 100–12. On sacrifice in particular see, for one example, Kelly Denton-Borhaug, “War-Culture and Sacrifice,” *Feminist Theology* 18, no. 2 (January 2010): 175–91. For theological critiques, see (again, just for example) Louis-Marie Chauvet, “Le ‘sacrifice’ en christianisme: une notion ambiguë,” in *Le Sacrifice dans les religions*, ed. Marcel Neusch and Institut catholique de Paris. Institut de science et de théologie des religions, Sciences théologiques & religieuses 3 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994), 139–56; “‘Sacrifice’: An Ambiguous Concept in Christianity,” *Concilium*, no. 4 (October 2013): 13–24; S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2006); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Execution of Jesus and the Theology of the Cross,” in *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 97–128; J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2011).

³ Critical editions are cited as necessary. The following English translations are used, although in quotations I have modified the translation for accuracy, usually without notice: Gregory I, *Moralia in Job: Morals on the Book of Job*, trans. James Bliss, 3 vols. (Ex Fontibus, 2012); Gregory I, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, trans. George E. Demacopoulos, Popular Patristics Series 34 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007); Gregory I, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. David Hurst, Cistercian Studies 123 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990); Gregory I, *Dialogues*, trans. Odo John Zimmerman, FC 39 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959); Gregory I, *Homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson, 2nd ed. (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2008). Note: David Hurst’s *Forty Gospel Homilies* renumbers the homilies; I follow the numbers in the critical edition.

Two Kinds of Sacrifice

Mimetic Desire and the Satanic Sacrifice of the Scapegoat

An exposition of the Satanic, this paper's first point, must precede any presentation of the theomimetic. All human desire, Girard maintains, is "mimetic"; we desire what we see others desiring and do so with an intensity that mirrors theirs. This imitation is an "intrinsic good"⁴ that frees us from animal instinct and binds us into communities of desire. Yet too easily it is perverted, such that one desires not only the same sort of thing as one's neighbor may desire or possess, but the numerically identical thing. One's neighbor becomes one's rival as one becomes what Girard calls a "puppet" of mimetic desire. The neighbor, too, is drawn into this mimetic thralldom, as his love for his possession defensively increases to match that of his new adversary. Mimetic impasse becomes "scandal" when a rival transfers his attention from the desired object onto his mimetic rival, now seen as the stumbling block that impedes his happiness. All that distinguishes the rivals is subjectively effaced until each sees the other's very existence as the cause of all distress. For mimetic puppets, the only escape from scandal is violence—whence covetousness, the Decalogue's last prohibition concerning one's neighbor, begets murder, its first.

By a self-perpetuating and accelerating *mimétisme*,⁵ a whole society is riven by rivalries and their ensuing cycles of vengeance, until the catastrophic "mimetic crisis," when all human differences are effaced and every person becomes "scandal" to every other, a cataclysmic "war of all against all." Such calamitous destruction is averted by the "single victim mechanism," which unites all rivals against a scapegoat in a "war of all against one." Scandal begets murder by a twofold lie: first, that the victim is in fact guilty of one's distress; and second, that to slay him is a righteous act that will bring peace. In the grip of mimetic crisis, then, a whole society will unanimously and falsely attribute to a single victim the upheaval that has originated in a thousand rivalries, and, indeed believing him guilty, will extinguish those conflicts by murdering him. This mechanism Girard calls "Satan," from Christ's statement that the devil has been a "liar and a murderer" "from the beginning" (John 8:42–44). In the scapegoat murder, "Satan casts out Satan."⁶

⁴ Except where noted, this exposition draws heavily upon René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 13–44, 65–67, 72–86, 100–127.

⁵ Girard's own term, which James G. Williams vividly renders as "mimetic snowballing."

⁶ It is important to differentiate between Girard's and Gregory the Great's use of the name "Satan." Girard prefers to work in a wholly anthropological milieu, one that is open to but not founded upon the theological. His description of "Satan" conflates three concepts that Gregory's age preferred to keep distinct: First, there is evil, which has no being in itself but is only the loss or distortion of some existing good; see Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones*, ed. James Joseph O'Donnell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 7.5.7. Second, there is Girard's mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry, to which Gregory comes closest with his account of the warped tumult of fleshly passion and spiritual desire that Augustine calls "concupiscence"; thus Gregory I, *Moralia in Iob; Commento Morale a Giobbe 1 (I–VIII)*, ed. Paolo Siniscalco, trans. Emilio Gandolfo, Opere di Gregorio Magno 1 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1992), 6.16.25; 5.45.78. Third, there is the devil, i.e., the fallen angel himself; Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, ed. Eligius Dekkers and J. Fraipont, CCSL 38, 39, 40 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956), 94.6; Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 4.3.8. He is not a substantial principle of evil but a rational created intelligence; Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV*, ed. Radbodus Willems, CCSL 36 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), 42.10. By his rebellion against God, the devil seeks the impossibility of nonexistence; Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 4.18–24, 713D–728A. And by his suggestions, he strives to rouse in others a distorted desire that will bring them along his path as imitators; Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 2.67.74; 4.16.30; 8.32.52; *Moralia in Iob; Commento Morale a Giobbe 2 (IX–XVIII)*, ed. Paolo Siniscalco, trans. Emilio Gandolfo, Opere di Gregorio Magno 1 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1994), 15.26.31. Girard himself—conflating the traditional position on evil (that it has no being in itself) with the tradition on the devil—seems at times to deny the devil's existence; e.g., René Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, trans. Malcolm B. DeBevoise (East Lansing:

Its anger discharged, the murderous crowd is swept by a catharsis that it experiences as a religious epiphany, completing what Girard calls the “double transference:” First, the Satanic shifted scandal from multitudinous rivals onto the putatively guilty victim; second, the united community now attributes its posthomicidal euphoria also to the victim, so that from being deemed a demonic source of conflict, he or she is seen now as a divine source of healing peace. In this way, a crisis of sufficient intensity deifies its victim. The god-victim, believed to be alive still, is gratefully worshipped for having delivered the community and is believed now to have willed or even commanded his or her own death.

Satanic sacrifice shapes a culture that will seek henceforth to preserve this unity by ritually repeating the founding murder as a divinely commanded sacrifice. Every human society, Girard contends, began thus; Satanic murder is the “foundation of the world,” the true origin of all those false mythologies wherein the death of a “guilty” or “willing” victim heals or begets a culture.⁷ The repeated sacrificial ritual, which is the foundation of all cultural institutions, cloaks the single victim mechanism in its own Satanic lie.⁸

Mimetic Desire and the Theomimetic Sacrifice of Renunciation

Yet, separated from the Satanic by an “unfathomable gulf,”⁹ Girard recognizes another sort of sacrifice when he states:

I would like . . . to make a distinction between sacrifice as murder and sacrifice as renunciation. The latter is a movement toward freedom from mimesis as potentially rivalrous acquisition and rivalry.¹⁰

For Girard, this “sacrifice as renunciation” is revealed only in the life and Cross of Christ, whom the Gospels—declaring him as innocent of every charge—acknowledge to have been murdered.¹¹ Unveiling the lie of every Satanic sacrifice, they rob it of its efficacy while exonerating every scapegoat of the particular charge leveled against him or her. This disclosure sets the Gospels apart from all mythologies. The divinized heroes of myth are products of the double transference that hid their victimhood and justified their murderers, but the Christ of the Gospels is both innocent and a victim; moreover, his divinity precedes his victimization; and his resurrection vindicates him, rather than the murderous crowds.

Michigan State University Press, 2014), 53. Even so, Girard’s mimetic theory does not require this denial if we take it as but describing those anthropological dimensions of Christian moral realities that can [[JJW: This should be “which” since it pairs with “those” for a “that which” construction]] be depicted without recourse to the supernatural. A discussion of Augustine on the devil is available in Allan Fitzgerald and John C. Cavadini, eds., *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 266–69. For Gregory, see Carole Ellen Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 14 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 61–65.

⁷ Girard, *I See Satan*, 143–48.

⁸ René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 75, 82–83.

⁹ Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, 43.

¹⁰ René Girard and James Williams, “Interview with René Girard: Comments on Christianity, Scapegoating, and Sacrifice,” *Religion* 27, no. 3 (1997): 251.

¹¹ René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*, reprint (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 150. “The Bible . . . fully represents the mimetic mechanism, and thus it can reveal its nature, by the sheer fact that it always sees the essential point: the innocence of the scapegoat victim.”

The Gospels proclaim a choice between models: Satan, the false god that accuses and destroys the victim; or Christ, who desires only the Father, identifies with the innocent victim, and reveals himself to be the arch-scapegoat whom the Satanic has sought to murder since the beginning.¹² By forgiving his assailants and renouncing even his bodily life, the crucified Christ refuses to become scandal. Forgiveness and renunciation, which defeat the Satanic single victim mechanism, are the fruit of the theomimetic sacrifice modeled by the God-man Christ. The Gospels show us the “difference between a world where arbitrary violence triumphs without being recognized and a world where this same violence is identified, denounced, and finally forgiven.”¹³ Retracting his earlier wholesale rejection of the word “sacrifice,” Girard says:

What the biblical account says is that one can renounce sacrifice in one sense—sacrifice of another, violence against another—only by assuming the risk of sacrifice in another sense—the sacrifice of Christ, who died for all who were dear to him. . . . [There is a] structural similarity between the two kinds of sacrifice, which, at one extreme [i.e. the Satanic], exhibit odd mirror effects in relation to violence, and, at the other, a love that surpasses our understanding and our powers of expression.¹⁴

Yet it is not enough to expose the single victim mechanism, nor enough to counsel renunciation and forgiveness. How can the theomimetic cast out the Satanic, rather than simply expose and oppose it for what it is? If, as Girard suggests elsewhere, the Satanic is as if an instinct parasitical upon the very mechanism of imitation by which we are freed from merely animal instinct,¹⁵ how can the violence-prone human community be healed of its enslavement to desire and find true peace in the theomimetic imitation of Christ?

The Intrinsic Instability of the Satanic Sacrifice

To arrive at a preliminary account of such healing, I extend Girard’s analysis to describe how—even before Christ’s revelation of the victim’s innocence—the Satanic sacrifice must fail to secure the peace that it promises. The Satanic is doomed by the intrinsic instability of its sacrificial culture. Its apparent order masks a more fundamental disorder—the covetousness that drives mimetic desire into rivalry. The Satanic sacrifice, while resolving the crisis precipitated by rivalry, cannot finally end all rivalry because it leaves untouched each stage of that rivalry’s development: It does not eliminate covetous mimetic desire but only distracts rivals from claims that are never renounced. Nor has the Satanic any alternative model to mimetic rivalry as a response to mimetic desire; therefore, it offers us no path other than to become scandals to one another. Nor can unanimous Satanic accusation and violence ever support any sort of forgiveness by which to break the link between scandal and violence. Finally, unanimous murder is no positive principle of unity; the Satanic community remains always susceptible to a recurrence of the crisis.

The Satanic offers only a negative unity of unanimous accusation and violence; with the scapegoat removed, the only basis of unity is the fading memory of unanimous action—whence the need for ritual repetition. However, this repetition cannot itself secure the community because

¹² Girard, *I See Satan*, 117. These models are “modes of divinity” in *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, 44.

¹³ Girard, *I See Satan*, 114.

¹⁴ Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, 43–44.

¹⁵ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 41–45.

it has its most powerful effect only when that community is nearly broken by mimetic crisis. Nor is the Satanic culture even a true community, for it unites by effacing particularity to forge a faceless and false mass of humanity. As differences reassert themselves after the crisis and its murder have passed, scandals will proliferate until a new crisis triggers the single victim mechanism. The operations of the Satanic cannot eliminate mimetic rivalry because mimetic rivalry is its basis.

In sum, the Satanic culture must fail because it rests on a disorder of desire and on two lies that cover that disorder with murder: First, it lies that the innocent victim is guilty and the sole source of disorder. Second, it causes each individual to falsely identify himself or herself with the supposedly righteous accusers (and former rivals) in the crowd. Its moment of unity is a shared vision of self and victim; on both points it is false. Over time, the efficacy of this sacrifice will wane, while simultaneously it will reinforce the disordered mimetic rivalry and the single victim mechanism as the entrenched responses to mimetic desire.¹⁶ There is here no true healing; violence but pretends to cast out violence, while it secretly sows with cockle the field that it feigns to have cleansed. Final destruction must come when, its power exhausted but its principles engrained, Satanic sacrifice can no longer hold back the rivalrous war of all against all.

The Diagnosis of the Satanic

The Failure to Love

Before introducing the theomimetic sacrifice, we must situate both Satanic and theomimetic sacrifice within the broader and theological domain toward which Girard necessarily gestures but which, writing anthropologically, he declines to enter fully. Immediately, we are confronted with a difficulty. The sacrificial model that Christ offers for imitation involves especially the Cross. Yet what are we here to imitate? What is the inner core of the “renunciation” that Girard has in mind? Some charge the Cross with portraying suffering, or at least death, as a payment—an equal exchange for sin—or, worse, a palliative for an enraged overlord. In his book *Saved from Sacrifice*, S. Mark Heim writes pointedly:

Some say [that] the teaching that Christ died in our place to bear the punishment for our sins and satisfy the wrath of God’s justice, so that God can love and accept us in all eternity, *is* Christianity, and without it there would be nothing left. . . . Is this God’s plan, to become a human being and die, so that God won’t have to destroy us instead? Is it God’s prescription to have Jesus suffer for sins he did not commit so God can forgive the sins we do commit?¹⁷

Gregory the Great himself uses language that—decontextualized—is susceptible of such an interpretation: Christ, who “alone appeared righteous among human beings,” was “brought to the penalty of sin” and so “moderated the wrath of the judge by dying.”¹⁸

Girard will have none of this. For him, violence cannot be intrinsic to the sacrifice of renunciation, because violence—especially the violence of sacrifice—is always Satanic. For violence is always personal or collective vengeance for some previous violence or rivalry. We

¹⁶ Girard, *I See Satan*, 80–81.

¹⁷ Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, x–xi.

¹⁸ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 9.38.61 (OGM 1/2:82).

cannot even speak of violence in terms of “justice.” Even state executions, in Girard’s view, are single acts of vengeance that halt the cycle not because justice has been done but because the state is not an individual upon whom one of its members can be revenged on behalf of the executed. All such penalties become Satanic vengeance, determined by the Satanic culture that inspires them.¹⁹ The executioners can make no appeal to an order of justice because they would do so as already tainted by and complicit in the mechanism of the Satanic.²⁰ Building on Girard, we might say that the Satanic cannot really allow a “debt to society” to signify anything other than revenge because the Satanic can understand a crime or an immoral act only as an assault that must be greeted with vengeance, then countervengeance, and so on. All human acts are viewed already from within the Satanic mechanism that knows only rivalry and murder.

But if the sacrifice of the Cross is not Satanic but something else, then what is it? According to Girard, on the Cross, God the Son humanly imitates God the Father in a spirit of “childlike and innocent obedience.” However, “since there is no acquisitive desire in God, this imitation cannot cause mimetic rivalry,”²¹ so Christ’s death is not vengeance imposed but renunciation and forgiveness offered. From the early medieval perspective represented by Gregory the Great, Girard is right to dismiss any notion that some debt of punishment, some pain or suffering, is offered to God in exchange for the forgiveness of human sins. True, Gregory insists that something is offered on the Cross; it is not merely a matter of refusing rivalry. Even so, we misread his language of penalty if we remove it from its place in his overarching theology of sacrifice. To understand, from a Girardian perspective, the potential positive dimension of theomimetic sacrifice, we must first diagnose the core of the Satanic. I suggest that we may do so by considering the connection between penalty and vengeance that Girard has already indicated. What makes a Satanic discourse of sin, justice, and debt all collapse into vengeance is this: the lie that evil has being in itself, and the corollary that one positive evil must be counterbalanced by a like evil in the opposite scale. Thus, crime or sin must be counterbalanced by execution. To step outside this limited view, we must take further Girard’s rather Augustinian observation that, in fact, evil has no being. That is, we must recognize that evil actions are evil insofar as they distort or fail to actualize the good. The designation “evil” signifies no positive reality but rather that something is missing from an act, something whose absence the Satanic must conceal in order to pass itself off as the only possible account of human reality. What has this to do with the distinction between good imitation of Christ’s desire and rivalrous imitation of acquisitive desire? That which is missing from the Satanic, the absence of which reduces penalty to vengeance and perverts desire of the good into acquisitive desire, is love: Satanic presentations of Christ’s death, according to Girard, “disregard the texts that show it involves, *of necessity*, the love of one’s neighbor, demonstrating that only death can bring this love to its fullest expression.” For, he adds, “not to love one’s brother and to kill him are the same thing,” and to die for one’s brother is to express utter love for him. He alone is not a killer who knows the fullness of love.²²

The Satanic is essentially violent and its violence is essentially murderous. I contend further that, in his remark concerning the necessity of love, Girard has indicated that the essentially murderous nature of the Satanic originates in its failure to love. With this in mind, this paper argues

¹⁹ Girard, *Reader*, 83–85.

²⁰ Girard, 184.

²¹ Girard, 215. Not that God is without desire, but that the divine desire—and in consequence the human desire enacted upon the Cross—has in it nothing of the covetousness that would seize for one’s own the very object possessed by one’s neighbor.

²² Girard, 187.

that covetousness—which, as Girard points out, leads to murder—arises, as Gregory explains, from a distortion of human desire according to which the human person refuses to love. Therefore, Satanic mimesis is by its lack of love distinguished from theomimesis, which has in it nothing of rivalrous acquisitive desire; and love sets the Christ-like theomimetic sacrifice essentially and irreducibly apart from the Satanic and its false and murderous sacrifice. Most importantly, love imbues theomimetic sacrifice with the unique capacity to overturn the Satanic by healing the human distortion from which the Satanic draws its power.

Gregory's Diagnosis of the Fallen Human Condition

If the refusal to love is the definition of the Satanic, and if self-offering²³ love is the definition of the theomimetic sacrifice of renunciation, then distorted human desire must be reformed from the Satanic to the theomimetic. Yet how are the “puppets” of mimetic desire to undertake the good mimesis of imitating Christ’s love? Such a reformation of desire, Gregory teaches, is empowered by divine grace and actualized by theomimetic sacrifice. This actualization is a journey that we can best understand in light of Gregory’s teaching on creation and the fall.

For Gregory, humanity was created to live in God’s likeness, which is a participation in the divine life by knowledge and love. The human person must imitate God to be like him; her love of God evokes her imitation of him by conforming her desire to God’s, for love likens the lover to the beloved. Reciprocally, by her mimesis of God’s desire, she is taught to know and to love God and to know and love her neighbor as God does us.²⁴ Mimesis conforms her to God’s knowledge and God’s desire. The essence of this mimetic love is self-offering to God and to all things in light of God. Gregory calls the mimetic relationship “stability” (*stabilitas*).²⁵ The first humans knew and loved God as their model through a contemplative vision of him; and in light of God they knew and loved all created things, perceiving in their order the manifestation of God’s own harmony.²⁶ The soul loved the body by conducting harmoniously its passions and physical movements; and she loved the world by infusing with God’s order her relations with her neighbor and even with inanimate material things, by acts of love conformed to God’s own. In accord with its spiritual vision, the human being’s love thus set in order both the inner and the outer worlds, for, imitating God, she saw the world through God’s eyes²⁷; possessed by God, she had possession of herself.²⁸

²³ When I delivered an earlier version of this argument at the annual meeting of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (University of Notre Dame, 2010), Robert Daly helpfully cautioned that the word “offering” can be misconstrued in a modern context. He suggested the term “communication.” I have retained the word “offering” but would like it to be understood in the sense of a self-communicative donation. “Offering,” I feel, helps to illustrate the compatibility between Girard’s thinking and the ascetical context of Gregory the Great, wherein one attempts to cast off a false autonomy by a certain kind of self-dispossession that ends in a more profound self-possession as a child of God in the embrace of the Father.

²⁴ Gregory I, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam; Omelie Su Ezechiele 1*, ed. Vincenzo Recchia, trans. Emilio Gandolfo, Opere Di Gregorio Magno 3 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1992), 1.6.19 (Tomkinson 111).

²⁵ Jordan Joseph Wales, “The Narrated Theology of *Stabilitas* in Gregory the Great’s Life of Benedict,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2014): 163–98. Also Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection*, 75. On the interpenetration of the monastic (locative) and the spiritual dimensions of “stability” in the early and medieval traditions, see Jean Leclercq, “In Praise of Stability,” *Monastic Studies*, no. 13 (Autumn 1982): 89–98.

²⁶ Gregory I, *Moralia in Iob; Commento Morale a Giobbe 3 (XIX–XXVII)*, ed. Paolo Siniscalco, trans. Emilio Gandolfo, Opere di Gregorio Magno 1 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1997), 26.12.17.

²⁷ Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection*, 28–89.

²⁸ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 8.6.8.

Gregory describes the life of this stability as divine worship, not first a ritual obeisance but a response to God's own creative love. Worship is simply to make one's own life a harmonious song to God, the imitation not of a rival but of a lover. "The human being was made to contemplate his Creator, that he might ever be seeking after his likeness, and dwell in the solemn festival of his love."²⁹ Following Augustine,³⁰ Gregory describes this contemplative communion in sacrificial terms, writing:

It is well said to Moses, "The fire on the altar shall always burn, which the priest shall feed, putting wood on it every day in the morning." [Lev. 6:12] For the altar of God is our heart, in which the fire is ordered always to burn: because it is necessary that the flame of love should constantly ascend therefrom to God.³¹

Gregory consistently identifies this offering as "sacrifice" (*sacrificium*, also *holocaustum*, *oblatio*, *immolatio*, and *mactatio*).³²

It is important to establish what Gregory does not mean by "sacrifice" when he uses it to designate a general arena of Christian living. In contemporary parlance, "sacrifice" usually refers to one's resignedly giving something up in order to obtain something better, either for oneself or for others.³³ In a religious context, we might think of a cultic act wherein an animal is slaughtered; or we might think of a voluntary privation, offered to God to declare his supremacy or to seek his good favor. In either case, the "sacrifice" that we have in mind is the destruction or removal of some object.³⁴

But privation and destruction are emphatically not the essence of Gregory's "sacrifice." When he writes about "sacrifice" he refers not to one's relinquishing of some valuable thing, but to an interior act of self-offering in love. This love may be exteriorly accompanied by a cultic act, but such outward displays derive their meaning from the interior act that they represent or facilitate. Nor is sacrifice essentially propitiatory or penitential. These are effects of reengaging sacrifice after sin, but sacrifice is not first a response to sin; it is a response to God.

The true worship that is true sacrifice—this is simply the love of God and neighbor. That act alone is sacrifice which is done for "devotion to the things which are of God,"³⁵ and he alone

²⁹ Gregory I, 8.19.34.

³⁰ See especially Augustine of Hippo, *De Civitate Dei*, ed. Bernhard Dombart and Alfons Kalb, CCSL 47, 48 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955), bk. 10. Amidst the massive literature on sacrifice in Augustine, an older but enduringly valuable text is Arthur F. Krueger, *Synthesis of Sacrifice According to Saint Augustine; A Study of the Sacramentality of Sacrifice* (Mundelein, IL: Apud Aedes Seminarii Sanctae Mariae ad Lacum, 1950).

³¹ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 25.7.15.

³² Gregory's most extensive and systematic teaching on the sacrificial journey of Christian life is given in *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam; Omelie Su Ezechiele 2*, ed. Vincenzo Recchia, trans. Emilio Gandolfo, *Opere Di Gregorio Magno 3* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1993), 2.10.

³³ This, what Robert Daly calls the "secular meaning" of sacrifice, is "constituted by some kind of personal separation from the object of the sacrifice;" it is "by somebody, of something, and for something, but never to anybody." Robert Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 3. I find Daly's initial distinctions helpful. The profusion of views and theories and controversies on sacrifice and its meaning as a religio-historical reality is well represented in Jeffrey Carter, ed., *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader, Controversies in the Study of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2003).

³⁴ Daly calls this the "general religious meaning" of sacrifice, which intends to acknowledge God's "dominion," to effect reconciliation with God, "to render thanks for blessings received," and "to petition for further blessings"; *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 3.

³⁵ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.19.30 (Tomkinson 252).

becomes a perfect sacrifice, a true “whole-burnt offering” (*holocaustum*),³⁶ who “kindle[s] the whole mind with spiritual love.”³⁷ The human being who thus imitates God’s love becomes God’s adopted son or daughter while heeding and caring for the manifestation of his likeness throughout the created order.³⁸

But humanity has interrupted this sacrifice, falling away from God by inverting the order of love, coming to treat God as a rival³⁹: Imitating the pride of the devil whom he met in the garden,⁴⁰ Adam sought independence from God by turning first toward lower material things. Then, having lost his contemplation and inner harmony, he was dispersed among them without any transcendent model of love. Having turned,

he immediately fell away from the love of his Creator [and] into himself. Yet, in forsaking the love of God, that true citadel of his standing, he could not stand fast in himself either; in that by the impulse of a slippery mutability, tumbling down beneath himself through corruption, he came also to be at strife with himself.⁴¹

This disorder infects all humanity.⁴² Tossed from without by the storms of demonic suggestions, natural disasters, and the irresistible attraction of material things; and from within by the tempest of passion, desire, and the darkness of a vision beclouded by sin; humankind erratically chases finite created goods⁴³ in the perpetual panic of a “fit of alternating desire.”⁴⁴ “Nothing it receives suffices the mind, in that it has lost him who might have truly sufficed to it.”⁴⁵ Without sacrifice, God is lost; without God there is only endless acquisition.

This is not a predicament from which a fallen human being can extricate herself by mere decision, for, ignorant of the divine model and distorted within herself, she has no taste for the heavenly life of union with God.⁴⁶ She labors in a spiritual blindness and a living death that, with the bodily suffering of this life, anticipate hell just as contemplation and love would have anticipated heaven.⁴⁷ She who seeks happiness apart from God soon finds that, in Girardian terms, the world itself is become “scandal,” yet she knows no other way. Girard calls mimetic rivalry “a permanent occasion of sin,” from which humans fall into envy, jealousy, pride, anger, and despair.⁴⁸ As Gregory explains, humanity seeks not the love of neighbor and the common pursuit of God, but is propelled by continual dissatisfaction to seek constantly the good not yet possessed. This is

³⁶ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.8.16 (Tomkinson 410).

³⁷ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.19.30 (Tomkinson 252).

³⁸ Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection*, 28–65.

³⁹ Gregory I, *Moralia in Iob; Commento Morale a Giobbe 4 (XXVIII–XXXV; Indici)*, ed. Paolo Siniscalco, trans. Emilio Gandolfo, *Opere di Gregorio Magno 1* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2001), 32.15.26.

⁴⁰ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 3.31.60.

⁴¹ Gregory I, 8.10.19. Cf. Augustine of Hippo, *Ciu.*, 14.

⁴² Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 9.5.5.

⁴³ Gregory I, 9.33.50.

⁴⁴ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 8.10.19.

⁴⁵ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 9.5.5.

⁴⁶ Gregory I, *Dialogi; Dialoghi: I–IV*, ed. Attilio Stendardi, *Opere di Gregorio Magno 4* (Rome: Città nuova, 2000), 4.1 (Zimmerman 189–90); *XL homiliarum in Evangelia libri duo; Homélie sur l’évangile, Livre II*, ed. R. Étaix, trans. Bruno Judic, SC 522 (Paris: Cerf, 2008), 2.31.7 (Hurst 254).

⁴⁷ Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2008, 2.22.6 (Hurst 168–69); *Dial.*, 4.47 (Zimmerman 258); *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.9.34 (Tomkinson 180–81). On this contrast, see also Joseph P. McClain, *The Doctrine of Heaven in the Writings of Saint Gregory the Great*, *Studies in Sacred Theology*; 2nd series 95 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1956).

⁴⁸ Girard, *Reader*, 215.

the origin of covetous acquisitive desire, a competitive questing after limited created goods that provokes increasingly rivalrous conflicts and, finally, violence.⁴⁹

Gregory utilizes his theological analysis to critique Rome herself. The great empire was reared upon the covetous and frantic quest for unattainable satisfaction. Her princes were ever “running to and fro through the diverse provinces of the world, snatching their prey with raging and killing.”⁵⁰ Yet in Gregory’s age the great empire lies prostrate and self-slain: Those who ignorantly “boiled with the activities of the world” are, like boiled flesh, “dissolved in their own fervor.”⁵¹ Self-destruction, the Girardian war of all against all, is the necessary *telos* of every community founded upon the sinking sands of the covetous will. As Gregory saw all about him during the Lombard invasion of Italy,⁵² a desire not anchored in God is mercurial, grasping, and finally murderous. The failure to love God and neighbor is the origin of mimetic rivalry and—from a Gregorian point of view—is the essence of the Girardian Satanic.

We have thus found in Gregory’s account what I earlier identified as the four failures exacerbated by Satanic sacrifice: first, the missing model for good mimetic desire; second, mimetic rivalry from covetous desire; third, violence from the scandal of frustrated desire; and fourth, in Rome, the merely negative unity secured by unanimous accusation and murder.⁵³

Like Girard, Gregory believes that only the theomimesis of self-offering love can free humankind from destructive rivalry. Now we come to the fourth and final point of this paper: Gregory’s theomimetic sacrifice, which participates in Christ’s self-offering, subverts and destroys the Satanic at each of its four stages of development: (1) the model of desire, (2) the advent of rivalry, (3) the sacrificial response to scandal, and (4) the sacrificial unification of a community.

Christ as the Model for Human Desire

To dispel Satanic mimesis at its first stage, God must again become the model for human desire.⁵⁴ Therefore, as Gregory explains, God the Son stooped to the level of his creatures, living a human life to make himself a way accessible to humanity’s material-addicted senses,⁵⁵ and offered himself in sacrifice so that humankind might travel the way that he exemplified.⁵⁶ To those oppressed by blindness in sin, internal disorder, and a lack of love for God, his sacrifice offers salvation. How?

Girard insists that Christ did not purchase human salvation through a death pact with a child-abusing father-god; rather, Christ’s refusal to compromise with the Satanic led him to accept the innocent death inevitably forced on him by the single victim mechanism.⁵⁷ For Christ’s steadfastness, Girard says, the Father forgives all who are complicit in the Satanic mechanism.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 5.45.78ff; 6.16.25; *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.10.10 (Tomkinson 187–88); *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.7.18–19 (Tomkinson 390–91).

⁵⁰ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.6.23 (Tomkinson 371).

⁵¹ Gregory I, 2.6.22 (Tomkinson 371).

⁵² Gregory I, 2.10.24 (Tomkinson 458).

⁵³ To be sure, for Gregory it is not mimesis first but desire of the good which is humankind’s primary motive force; nonetheless, the Augustinian tradition that Gregory inherits and develops sees desire as imitative of its object and fallen desire as seeking its own nothingness by imitating the absurdity of the devil, who is the first and highest exemplar of the Satanic. On the devil, see note 6.

⁵⁴ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 2.24.43; *Mor.*, 1997, 21.6.11; *Mor.*, 1992, 1.13.17.

⁵⁵ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 7.2.2; *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.3.14 (Tomkinson 68); *Dial.*, 4.1 (Zimmerman 190).

⁵⁶ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.1.16 (Tomkinson 275–76).

⁵⁷ Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, 41.

⁵⁸ Girard and Williams, “Interview with René Girard,” 252–53.

Christ must be the model. Gregory agrees that Christ came as an example, refusing to imitate fallen ways,⁵⁹ yet he wishes also to say that Christ's life, ministry, and—yes indeed—his suffering and death do together pay some sort of price for human salvation: Christ, who “alone appeared righteous among humankind,” was “brought to the penalty of sin.”⁶⁰ Has Gregory stumbled back into the violent “sacred” by absorbing Satanic vengeance into a purported theology of divine justice? Perhaps not.

For Gregory, Christ's sacrifice, his Girardian refusal to compromise, is precisely a perseverance in the stability of theomimetic love. Recall: The Satanic falsely reduces penalty to vengeance, an equal positive evil returned for evil given. But if sin is in fact a failure to love, then to accept sin's consequences (e.g., the death that bodily ratifies Adam and Eve's self-separation from God; and the suffering and cruelty present in the world that result from human acts)⁶¹ can be not the undergoing of vengeance but a positive act of love, a preferring of God and neighbor above all the things that fallen humans fight over in place of God. This love restores love lost, so that, as Gregory writes, “when we burn with holy charity, the heat of love will free us from the guilt of numbness and cold.”⁶² The penitential sacrifice of renunciation that Girard hinted at is, then, for Gregory, a liberating act of love that makes atonement by relinquishing “for love of him” that to which humanity has clung as a substitute for God.⁶³ Girard gestures in this direction when he writes of the true mother revealed through Solomon's gambit:

In giving up the child to the other woman, the good prostitute . . . relinquishes her claim to the object of the rivalry. She does therefore what Christ would have urged her to do: she takes renunciation to its furthest possible extreme, for she renounces that which is dearest to a mother, her own child. Just as Christ died so that humanity might abandon the habit of violent [satanic] sacrifice, the good prostitute sacrifices [by renunciation] her own motherhood so that the child may live.⁶⁴

For Gregory, all sacrifice atones not by its suffering but by its re-actualization of love for God and for all things in light of God. This is a love that condemns and, by relinquishing these things, forsakes the riot of fallen desire to seek the repose of theomimetic desire.

Whoever kindles within himself this fire of love . . . burns out every fault that lived wickedly within him. For when he . . . sacrifices his wicked life by the sword of conversion, he has placed himself on the altar of his own heart, and has kindled himself with the fire of love. . . . [This] new love . . . [makes] peace between ourselves and God.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 2.24.43.

⁶⁰ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 9.38.61.

⁶¹ On which see Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr, Popular Patristics Series 44B (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012), chaps. 3–5.

⁶² Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.7 (Tomkinson 445); *Regula Pastoralis; Regola Pastorale*, ed. Floribert Rommel, trans. Giuseppe Cremascoli, Opere Di Gregorio Magno 7 (Rome: Città nuova, 2008), 3.29 (Demacopoulos 179–80).

⁶³ Gregory I, *XL homiliarum in Evangelia libri duo; Homélie sur l'évangile, Livre I*, ed. R. Étaix, trans. Charles Morel, SC 485 (Paris: Cerf, 2005), 1.16 (Hurst 105); *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.9.22 (Tomkinson 438); *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.7.22 (Tomkinson 130).

⁶⁴ Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, 42.

⁶⁵ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 25.7.16.

Sacrifice, in this life, aims at nothing less than restoring Adam's lost self-offering of love; for sin has altered the circumstances but not the essence of sacrifice. For Gregory, to atone by sacrifice is not to pacify God or to return some needed item that had been taken from him, but to make up and to reestablish in perpetuity the love that humanity had rejected.⁶⁶

Yet human beings after Adam remained incapable of making such a sacrifice because they neither knew nor loved God. All had sinned and therefore none could, by his or her individual love, rid all humanity of "the woes of the death to come."⁶⁷ Moved by compassion, God the Son came himself as Mediator, being by his Incarnation now human as well as divine. He works human salvation by intercession, by example, and by grace. As intercessor, he "speak[s] in our behalf to the Father." Being "like unto humankind" by his humanity and "so righteous a human" as to be utterly loving and without sins, he, by offering his loving and righteous life as human, can make up for the evils wrought and the love lost by all humankind and so "merit forgiveness for others."⁶⁸ Furthermore, as an example, he furnishes a model of desire whereby to love God while atoning for past failings and healing against future falls. Finally, his grace (i.e. his gift by the Holy Spirit) transforms those who are baptized into his Body so that their sacrifices, beginning with the first moments of faith, hope, and love, may be efficacious as participation in his eternal offering of the sacrificial love that he actualized once and for all upon the Cross.⁶⁹

Gregory decisively distinguishes his own account of the Cross from the Satanic misreading condemned by Girard, by locating the value of Christ's intercession not in the fact of his death but in the human compassion by which he took on the "penalty" that was all humankind's but his own. Although Christ's innocent physical death stood in place of the physical and spiritual death that were the consequence of Adam's disobedience, Gregory reminds us that neither Christ's death nor his suffering were compulsory upon Father or Son⁷⁰—but "in the hour of death the Mediator between God and humanity knew that the Father was working together with himself"⁷¹ when "in his flesh, he bore to the end that purpose which, from his divinity, he had ordained with the Father."⁷² That is, Christ chose to suffer and die not because human beings had not yet suffered a sufficient amount of pain; rather, he chose voluntarily to share human suffering as an act of human compassion, the intensity and purity of which surpassed all human sin. He both actualized and manifested the fullness of a human love for God and neighbor—the human fullness of God's own love for God and neighbor—all the while knowing and accepting that, for this fallen world, such a love would be manifest amid great pain. Girard has written that "only death can bring this love [of one's neighbor] to its fullest expression."⁷³ Gregory writes:

He could have succored us . . . without dying, but he decided to aid [us] . . . by dying, because . . . he would have loved us too little, . . . if he did not take our

⁶⁶ Gregory I, 26.12.17.

⁶⁷ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 9.38.61.

⁶⁸ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 24.2.4. -

⁶⁹ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 1.24.32.

⁷⁰ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 20.35.69; *Mor.*, 1994, 9.38.61.

⁷¹ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 13.24.27.

⁷² Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.8.22 (Tomkinson 148; OGM 3/1:252). *Redemptor noster eam quam cum Patre disposuit ex divinitate sententiam pertulit in carne.* I use the word "purpose" rather than "ruling" or "sentence" because *sententia* in Gregory refers to God's intentions, usually as these are expressed by sacred Scripture—they are decisive but they are not narrowly juridical.

⁷³ Girard, *Reader*, 187.

wounds on himself; nor would he exhibit to us the force of his love, unless he himself underwent . . . that which he was to take away from us.⁷⁴

The force of this love, it must be emphasized again, is not in his pain, but in the compassion that chooses utmost fellowship in fallen humanity's life, even its pain and death. Not by pain but by compassion is actualized the greatest love for one's neighbor:

True compassion is from generosity to join with the suffering of one's neighbor . . . [H]e gives perfectly who, together with what he offers [externally] to the afflicted, also takes into himself the mind [*animum*] of the afflicted; that he should first transfer the suffering of the person sorrowing into himself, and [only] then . . . meet the sorrow of that person by an [outward] act of service. . . . And then the compassion of our heart is to the full, when we are not afraid to take upon ourselves the evil of want in behalf of a fellow creature, in order that we may set him free from suffering. This model of loving-kindness the Mediator between God and humanity gave to us in very deed.⁷⁵

Therefore, especially on the Cross, Christ actualized and manifested the compassion that contained the totality of his love for God and for humanity. Lacking sinful attachments, Christ could without pain of heart love God above all; but the Cross consummated his voluntary renunciation of all lower things that humans worship in place of God. His torturous relinquishing of every human comfort and every neighborly kindness unto death itself, persevering in love alone, was a love greater than the love lost in human history. But most of all, the Cross actualizes his supreme love for the neighbor in his sympathy with the suffering that attends the fallen person's journey from covetousness to highest love.

Why is compassion in particular so great a love? For Gregory, it is the ultimate theomimesis, the closest human imitation of the single mind and life possessed in unity by the three persons of God.⁷⁶ Gregory writes of this mimesis: Just as, in the unity of the divine life, the Father is the Son's "associate" or "co-knower" (*consci*us), so too, in the very suffering of the Cross, the Son is *consci*us of humanity. Of the Father and the Son, Gregory writes:

With one will, and with one counsel, the Father acts always in union with the Son. Whose witness [*testis*] too he is, in that "no one knows the Son but the Father" [Matt. 11:27]. Thus [Christ] had then "a witness in heaven" and his "co-knower [*consci*us] on high" [Job 16:19], [even] when they, who saw him dying in the flesh, had their eyes closed against seeing the power of his divinity.⁷⁷

Of the Son's relationship to all humanity by his human compassion, Gregory writes:

[He] is also rightly called "co-knower" [*consci*us], in that he has been acquainted with our nature, not only by creating, but also by taking it up. For his knowing is

⁷⁴ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 20.36.69.

⁷⁵ Gregory I, 20.36.68–69.

⁷⁶ See, at greater length, Jordan Joseph Wales, "Contemplative Compassion: Gregory the Great's Development of Augustine's Views on Love of Neighbor and Likeness to God," *Augustinian Studies* 49, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 199–219, <https://doi.org/10.5840/augstudies201861144>.

⁷⁷ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 13.24.27.

his having taken up what is ours. Whence too it is said by the Psalmist, “For he knows our frame” [Ps. 102:14 Vg.]. For what wonder is it if he is said specifically to “know our frame,” when it is certain that there is nothing that he does not know? But his knowing [*scire*] our frame is his having taken it upon himself from loving-kindness.⁷⁸

This is the divine model that Christ revealed, this is the mimesis that he accomplished on the Cross, the supreme human translation of the simple intimacy of God’s triune life—not suffering but utmost unity and love. In a world afflicted by sin, the divine fullness of love appeared as the torture of the Cross, not so that some debt of suffering might be fulfilled but so that a long lack of love might be filled up by compassion. Of this compassion Gregory writes:

Nothing can be offered to God more precious than [this] good will . . . What is richer and more substantial than this whole burnt offering, when what the soul is offering to God on the altar of its heart is a sacrifice of itself?⁷⁹

Christ is “Mediator” because he makes this historically actualized love his eternal human offering to God on behalf of all. By its sinlessness his offering is supremely righteous, by its compassion supremely loving, and by his incarnate divinity supremely powerful. Christ’s sacrifice stands in for the love withheld by fallen humanity. The love that we could not offer, Christ as human offered for us; of the flesh to which we were addicted, he was for our sake divested; the material goods that we coveted, he renounced to show us the way to the Father. And he did so through compassion and forgiveness. He who “endured the pain of the Cross for our redemption,” “alone above all others ‘made pure prayers to God,’” which were themselves pure in the very fact that “even in the very anguish of his Passion,” he did not seek vengeance but “prayed in behalf of his persecutors.”⁸⁰

Gregory thus provides a theological exposition of the renunciation and forgiveness to which Girard alludes. Compassionate love, by which Christ renounced substitutes, forgave enemies, and united himself to his neighbor, is itself and remains Christ’s intercession with the Father on humanity’s behalf, efficacious because this compassion is the wholly free act by which this innocent human, with the righteousness of the God-man, offers his love of God and neighbor, on behalf of humankind who could not so offer a righteous love.⁸¹ This is the love that can overcome the immensity of absence entailed by the human race’s choice for murderous rivalry in place of divine love. The Cross reestablishes for each human being the once-forsaken possibility of an eternally fruitful love of God and neighbor. To disguise this sacrifice as a divine tit-for-tat, as evil returned for evil given, would be a last desperate deception perpetrated by the Satanic in order to distort the truth about humanity: that theomimetic self-offering love is the human person’s only possible fulfillment.

In this Girardian–Gregorian reading, Christ discloses the theomimetic sacrifice that is the proper human response to God and to neighbor—even to one’s enemy. Whether or not a sacrifice may atone by a greater renunciation, it is always first a self-offering of love,⁸² the true approach to and worship of God. When Christ took on human sufferings, therefore, he not only supplied for a

⁷⁸ Gregory I, 13.24.27.

⁷⁹ Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2005, 1.5.3 (Hurst 12).

⁸⁰ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 13.22.25.

⁸¹ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 24.3.5.

⁸² Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 9.51.64.

love that was missing; he also took upon himself the path by which humankind, in him, must return to God. Every act of this love furnished both atonement and example⁸³: Fasting in the desert, healing in the town, praying on the mountain, teaching in the temple, and suffering on the Cross, Christ shows humanly the desire and offers the same endless sacrifice that all who would be sons and daughters of God must imitate and offer on the altars of their hearts.⁸⁴ God does not want some thing; he simply wants humanity.

Sacrificial Renunciation Heals the Covetous Desire That Grounds Mimetic Rivalry

Temporal Sacrifice as Imitation of Christ

The first stage of Satanic sacrifice, the lack of a model that transcends rivalrous imitation of one's neighbor's desire, will not be enough without some solution to the second stage, which is mimetic rivalry born of covetousness. Girard laments the world's blindness to Christ's example, for mimetic puppets neither heed nor follow him. "Once in our history the truth about the identity of all humans was spoken, and no one wanted to hear it."⁸⁵ Instead, humanity flees into an escalation toward extremes.⁸⁶ The bare revelation of the scapegoat mechanism is not enough to forestall the final sacrificial crisis. Some transformation is required—but what? Gregory answers: Human beings are not free simply to follow Christ's path when it is declared to them, in great part because the competitive desire for lower goods remains as an illness of the fall:

[Compassion's] sacrifice of good will is never fully accomplished unless the cravings of this world have been abandoned completely. Whatever we crave in the world we undoubtedly envy our neighbors for having: it appears that we lack what someone else has gained! Envy is always so much opposed to good will that, as soon as it seizes our hearts, good will disappears.⁸⁷

What is needed is divine grace, the healing activity of God in the Christian. As Girard writes, "Whenever you have . . . that really active, positive desire for the other, there is some kind of divine grace present."⁸⁸ Gregory, too, teaches that it is by grace that humankind can be healed, sharing in Christ's sacrifice to atone by love while unlearning the Satanic. This grace is part of Christ's heavenly activity; the divine activity mediated by Christ's humanity members the fallen human within the stream of Christ's compassionate human self-offering, to which she is joined when she lives by the love poured forth in her heart by the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁸⁹

Grace is thus the key to the second stage of Gregory's refutation of the Satanic: Sacrificial renunciation, moved by a divinely given love, heals the covetous desire that provokes mimetic rivalry and blinds one to Christ's theomimetic example. She who loves God above all else need feel no compulsion to possess lower things; neither does she take joy in seizing what another has or in acquiring what another has not. For love habituates one to fix on God, the true, inexhaustible,

⁸³ Gregory I, 9.38.61–63; *Mor.*, 2001, 28.13.33; *Mor.*, 1992, 6.37.56.

⁸⁴ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.19 (Tomkinson 455); 2.10.4 (Tomkinson 442); *Mor.*, 1997, 21.6.11.

⁸⁵ René Girard and Benoît Chantre, *Battling To the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009), x.

⁸⁶ Girard and Chantre, 103.

⁸⁷ Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2005, 1.5.4 (Hurst 12).

⁸⁸ Girard, *Reader*, 65.

⁸⁹ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 9.38.63–64.

and common good that can satisfy all in a common joy without rivalry.⁹⁰ And although she may not receive the vision of God in this life, the graced human being tenders a worthy sacrifice of love because, as Gregory famously writes, grace-infused love is itself already a kind of knowledge that presages spiritual vision by impressing upon the heart the echo of the celestial sacrifice of praise.⁹¹

However, the earthly sacrifice begins almost violently because those being healed must renounce the created things to which the fallen will cannot help but cling. The sacrifice of renunciation therefore imitates Christ especially in his passion.⁹²

God does not enjoy our torments. Instead, he heals the diseases of our sins with medicinal antidotes so that we who have departed from him through the pleasures of sin might return to him by the tears of bitterness, . . . controlling in ourselves even that which is lawful. For . . . the wounds caused by pride can only be cured by the subjugation of the humble life . . . For what is it to shed tears for sin if not to show the humility of one's devotion before God?⁹³

In such a repentance is the Christian trained to love properly his God, his own body, and his neighbor, all as he dies to blind carnality in order to inherit the clear-sighted beatitude that is presaged in this life by love and by contemplation.⁹⁴ And in this training, he is healed.

Compunction of Fear and Compunction of Love

Love's journey from distorted desire to clarified vision is a sacrificial movement from the fear of God to a perfected love that casts out fear.⁹⁵ Fear alone is unfruitful,⁹⁶ but in sacrifice it fruitfully conditions the first of two modes of the Christian's graced desire for God, each pricking the heart with "compunction" (*compunctio cordis*). Compunction is an affective response to knowing one's true estate as one looks upon oneself, one's neighbor, and God with ever more Christ-like eyes.

If love is the "engine" (*machina*)⁹⁷ of the journey, compunction is its goad. The compunction of fear, which atones and heals, looks in mourning to one's past spiritual death, in fear to one's wavering present, and in dread to a future of death eternal. After this purification, the compunction of love broadens the soul toward her neighbors and raises her up to God, gazing patiently on the present tumult and turning with expectant longing toward the future beatific vision. In the present, she oscillates between an active and a contemplative nonrivalrous service of God and neighbor.⁹⁸ The sacrifice offered by compunction, therefore, begins in desirous fear of the Lord and moves, by imitative love of Christ, to the perfect love that casts out fear by uniting the saint fully to Christ and his Body the Church.⁹⁹ How different the Satanic sacrifice, which begins in the fearful rivalry and is driven by scandal's imitative fear to a hatred that casts out fear by the unanimous condemnation of a victim—unity by hatred in a lie.

⁹⁰ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.7.17 (Tomkinson 389–90).

⁹¹ Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2008, 2.27.4 (Hurst 215).

⁹² Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 21.6.11 ff.

⁹³ Gregory I, *Past.*, 3.30 (Demacopoulos 186).

⁹⁴ Gregory I, *Dial.*, 3.26–28 (Zimmerman 160–63); Robert A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 59–62.

⁹⁵ Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection*, 223, 225; Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 11.41.55.

⁹⁶ Gregory I, *Past.*, 3.13 (Demacopoulos 118–21).

⁹⁷ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 6.37.58.

⁹⁸ Gregory I, *Dial.*, 3.34 (Zimmerman 173–75); *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.20–21 (Tomkinson 455–57).

⁹⁹ Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection*, 222, 230–35.

The Sacrifices Prompted by Compunction of Fear and Compunction of Love

Theomimetic sacrifice, arising from compunction, neutralizes covetous desire by cultivating a loving renunciation that reaches toward God and neighbor. The fear that characterizes compunction's initial sacrifice is not scandal's base fear of loss. Gregory's "compunction of fear" is the sorrow of the person who, seeing herself in contrast to the goodness of God, recognizes her imprisonment in sins born of covetous desire. As Girard states, mimetic puppets who are "in the process of being educated, who are not yet fully human, can become so only by measuring themselves against the divine."¹⁰⁰ Thus self-judged, the sinner weeps to find herself and her deeds turned away from the only good that can satisfy. She fears the eternal sorrow to which her road must lead. This is true fear of the Lord.¹⁰¹

The abstinence and renunciation that characterize self-offering to God amid this repentant and sorrowing fear enact a "sacrifice of compunction."¹⁰² Herein, fear looks to avert the loss of God by atoning for past sins and being healed against future sins.¹⁰³ This sacrifice undoes by tears the evils done and makes up by mourning the love left undone¹⁰⁴; moreover, one's abstinence forestalls future judgment also by healing the heart's desire so as to avoid future sins.¹⁰⁵ It is not that God must cause fear; but fear shelters a love not yet strong enough to stand on its own. In Girardian language, we might say that puppets of acquisitive desire must unlearn the habitual shortsightedness of the Satanic¹⁰⁶; fear of losing the greatest good weans them from the acquisitive fear of losing lower goods, which they now recognize as unable to provide eternal happiness.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile, incipient love enables one's true abhorrence of sin as an evil (and not just as something punishable), yielding a truly repentant sorrow. Together, these in turn drive the renunciation that parts one from vice and widens a space in which love may grow further.¹⁰⁸ By learning to be hungry, one learns to resist covetousness. But it is love that makes penitential works fruitful¹⁰⁹ as true (even if imperfect) sacrifices of self-abandonment to God.¹¹⁰ Even while worldly attachments linger, "their heart is rightly said to be the altar of God when from their sorrow the fire of compunction burns and the flesh is consumed."¹¹¹ And "he who is conscious that he is a sinner, has begun in some measure to be righteous" because "by this accusation of himself he begins to cleave to God; when . . . he condemns that in himself which he perceives to be displeasing to him."¹¹²

The loveless can make no such sacrifice. Unable to apprehend their sins *as* sins in light of God, they lack compunction's self-knowledge and efficacious sorrow.¹¹³ Their unfruitful penance

¹⁰⁰ Girard and Chantre, *Battling to the End*, xv.

¹⁰¹ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 5.16.33; 1.13.17; 2.24.43.

¹⁰² Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.4 (Tomkinson 442).

¹⁰³ Proceeding through this healing purgation, the Christian regathers herself from dispersion in desire. Attaining to freedom from lower things, her sacrifice of fear, obeys Christ's command "deny yourself." Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2008, 2.32.2 (Hurst 258).

¹⁰⁴ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 2001, 32.3.4.

¹⁰⁵ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.20–21 (Tomkinson 455–57); *Mor.*, 1997, 27.18.38; Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection*, 212–17.

¹⁰⁶ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 25.7.13–14.

¹⁰⁷ Gregory I, 27.17.33.

¹⁰⁸ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.8.20 (Tomkinson 127–28); *Mor.*, 1994, 9.42.65.

¹⁰⁹ Gregory I, *Past.*, 3.13 (Demacopoulos 118–19).

¹¹⁰ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 1.26.37.

¹¹¹ Gregory I, *Ezekiel*, II.x.19 (455).

¹¹² Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 24.8.15; 25.7.13–14.

¹¹³ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.4.9–10 (Tomkinson 81); *Mor.*, 1997, 25.7.14.

evinces not fear of the Lord but a mercenary fear of loss¹¹⁴—far closer to scandal’s fear. They may fear hell and its sufferings but they neither mourn the good left undone nor have they a sense for God as highest good. They will soon withdraw from almsgiving to reembrace acquisitive desire because, without the love of God to oppose it, fear of present privation will soon overwhelm their dread of future sorrow.¹¹⁵

The initial renunciation in the compunction of fear attacks the roots of covetous mimetic desire to set right every linkage of stability that was broken in the fall: God and soul, soul and body, Christian and world or neighbor. Here, in a violent struggle against vice, the Christian disciplines the flesh, both for atonement and to disentangle herself from addiction to fleshly pleasure. Not yet ready wholly to forsake her own material possessions, she but curtails her coveting of her neighbor’s goods.¹¹⁶ Toward her neighbor, the Christian (not yet ready for compassionate love) at least restrains her hatred and foregoes vengeance. Already, then, we have a viable alternative to Satanic scandal. Even so, mimetic rivalry is here only held back, not yet eliminated. Nonetheless, Gregory reassures us, those who make the sacrifice of fear do already imitate Christ. As worthy models, they lead the covetous back toward God by attracting them to imitate a love that will free them from the bondage of rivalry.¹¹⁷

While the love of God “originates through fear,” yet it is eventually “wholly transformed by growing into affection” so as to rise into the full flame that casts out fear.¹¹⁸ “The hearts of the Saints burn with love for the Heavenly Kingdom.” Pierced by a compunction now of love, “they long for eternal joys, they sigh for the fellowship of their fellow-citizens on high.”¹¹⁹ Having atoned for her sins and having advanced in interior healing, the Christian now no longer flees hell but zealously seeks the reward of heaven by deeds of love amid an abstinence that trains her toward serene detachment.¹²⁰ Now the sacrifice of this compunction is fully become the “sacrifice of love.” This sacrifice reciprocates between contemplative repose and worldly activity, embracing Christ’s call to “take up your cross and follow me.”¹²¹ The Christian gains self-possession neither by violent Satanic catharsis, nor by fear-driven feats of restraint, but by a true healing reorientation to the love of Christ. Detached from fallen desires, she follows him freely; her tears are tears of longing. Lest the chaotic passions again draw her into dispersion, she continues to wear down the flesh, no longer to atone for lost love but only to heal and train, by her love of God and neighbor, lest she be ruled again by the false needs that avarice would conceive from appetite.¹²² No longer merely restraining covetousness, she makes true fasts for God by giving away the things from which she abstains.¹²³ Spiritually, she abstains freely from every desire for lower things, a dove who hovers at the window but who is not drawn forth, looking upon but not compelled by the world’s beauty.¹²⁴ She offers sacrifice by cultivating virtue. Acknowledging what is lacking even in her own deeds

¹¹⁴ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 7.26.30; *Mor.*, 1994, 12.51.57; *Mor.*, 1992, 7.26.32; 7.28.34; 7.27.33; *Mor.*, 1994, 9.38.61.

¹¹⁵ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.3.18 (Tomkinson 70).

¹¹⁶ Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2005, 1.5.4 (Hurst 13).

¹¹⁷ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.19–20 (Tomkinson 455–56).

¹¹⁸ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 7.24.28.

¹¹⁹ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.8 (Tomkinson 446).

¹²⁰ Gregory I, 2.10.20–21 (Tomkinson 455–57).

¹²¹ Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2008, 2.32.3ff. (Hurst 260ff.).

¹²² Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 6.37.58; *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.8.15 (Tomkinson 408); 2.10.23 (Tomkinson 457). On needs falsely so-called, see 2.7.18 (Tomkinson 390).

¹²³ Gregory I, *Past.*, 3.19 (Demacopoulos 139).

¹²⁴ Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2005, 1.5.4 (Hurst 12–13).

of love, she seeks a reward but would credit God for its attainment.¹²⁵ To the neighbor, she offers not restrained hatred but compassion in love, not merely foregoing vengeance but granting forgiveness. This triumph of compassion is brought about by her imitation of the desire of Christ her Head. For “every Saint is led toward the likeness of [Christ] . . . insofar as he copies the life of his savior” who “in His Passion intercedes for His tormentors.”¹²⁶

Such an imitative renunciation, with its consequent ability to forgive, mirrors Girard’s own description of Christ’s refusal to become scandal upon the Cross. Unlike the Satanic sacrifice, the Gregorian account of theomimetic sacrifice does not efface differences by rivalry, but effaces rivalry by compassionate relations of love that establish sympathy between the differing particularities of individuals. Therefore, by its ongoing training which subdues the flesh while enflaming love, theomimesis also avoids the diminishing returns of the Satanic sacrifice, for the sacrifice of love builds up the community rather than relying on its near-disintegration.

In this sacrificial community, Gregory distinguishes nonexclusively between a higher and a lower sacrifice of love. The higher conforms itself to Christ primarily by contemplation; one shares the fruits of this sacrifice with one’s neighbor by intercessory sighs, compassionately suffering for the neighbor’s woes and so guarding the Church by this prayer. The lower sacrifice, more active, having learned of God from the sacred Scriptures and from preachers, turns then to teach and to admonish sinners, or by alms to help those in need, assisting especially those who are making the penitential sacrifice of fear.¹²⁷ Within the Body of Christ, both sacrifices of love exercise a sort of priesthood that uplifts the fearful neighbor. Meanwhile, the interior movement of compassion—be it realized by contemplative intercession or by descending into active service—progresses in an ever more perfect sacrifice that ever more perfectly imitates Christ’s own revelation of the divine life.¹²⁸

In that compassion is itself a translation of the divine life, it is also—by grace—a human appropriation of that life, a knowledge of God by communion and likeness of love:

Each soul will be so high in knowledge of God [*cognitione Dei*] as it is broad in love of neighbor. For while it spreads itself out through love it exalts itself above by knowledge . . . Let us be spread in charity’s affection that we may be exalted in the glory of highness. Through love let us have compassion [*compatiamur per amorem*] on our neighbor that we may be joined together by knowledge of God [*coniungamur per cognitionem*]. Let us stoop to the least of our brethren on earth, and let us be made equal to the angels in heaven.¹²⁹

The earthly sacrifices of compunction—by atonement, healing, and the enkindling of love—prepare for the final and full “sacrifice of praise” that is the life of heaven. All temporal sacrifices, therefore, must be seen in light of this “eternal whole-burnt offering,” the pure love in which the saints offer themselves to the triune God whom they know in the beatific vision.¹³⁰ This eternal sacrifice is anticipated temporally by the higher sacrifice of the compunction of love, which offers an “earthly whole-burnt offering,” while the sacrifice of fear is not yet a “whole-burnt offering”

¹²⁵ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.23 (Tomkinson 457–58).

¹²⁶ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.2.19 (Tomkinson 54–55).

¹²⁷ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.12–14 (Tomkinson 448–50); Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection*, 224, 227.

¹²⁸ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.2.1011 (Tomkinson 287–88); 2.2.15 (Tomkinson 291–92); *Past.*, 2.5; *Mor.*, 1992, 7.15.18.

¹²⁹ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.2.15 (OGM 3/2:64–66; Tomkinson 291–92).

¹³⁰ Gregory I, 2.10.4 (Tomkinson 442).

but only a “sacrifice” because it remains attached to this world.¹³¹ However, all of these sacrifices, in their progression from earth to heaven, chart the soul’s ever-increasing consumption by the fire of love unto true and everlasting peace.

Whoever kindles within himself this fire of love, places himself upon it as a burnt offering, because he burns out every fault, which wickedly lived within him . . . [And] the inward fatness of new love, making peace between ourselves and God, emits from us the sweetest odour . . . [This] love continues inextinguishable in the heart of the Elect [and] . . . “is that perpetual fire, which shall never go out on the altar” [Lev. 6:13] . . . because the glow of love increases in their minds even after this life. For it is the effect of eternal contemplation [i.e., the beatific vision], that Almighty God is loved the more deeply, the more he is seen.¹³²

Heaven’s whole-burnt offering of praise is the blossom cultivated by the earthly sacrifices of compunction: Abstinence of the flesh has prepared the resurrection’s bodily incorruptibility, and renunciation of the spirit has forged integrity. Contemplation has given way to direct vision. The very love that fired earthly sacrifices now enflames incorruptibility, integrity, and vision to be an eternal sacrifice of the whole person, body and soul.¹³³ This same love also maintains the theomimetically sacrificial community of Christ’s Body, the Church, by binding the blessed both to God and to those on earth; therefore, prior to the resurrection, the saints who have gone before will continue in their compassion to offer intercession for those still on the way.¹³⁴ The theomimetic sacrifice need not hide the differences that might otherwise rouse acquisitive rivalry, for through love’s compassion the saints meet each individual as he or she may be, assisting those below them through the new and graced mimesis of imitating Christ. This continuous path of theomimetic sacrifice thus subverts covetous desire and mimetic rivalry to accomplish a self-reinforcing community within Christ’s Body that is made progressively immune to disruption.

Sacrifice Eliminates the Possibility of Scandal and Its Violence or Accusation

Thus far, we have seen that the theomimetically sacrificial life heals the soul to undermine acquisitive mimetic desire and its Satanic rivalry. Now, we will see the theomimetic sacrifice directly attack the third stage of the Girardian Satanic: the moment of scandal, wherein escalating mimetic covetousness would yield to the double lie of the single victim mechanism—unanimous accusation and unanimous murder.

Scandal begins when, with acquisitive desire frustrated, one’s attention shifts from the desired object to the mimetic rival. However, if theomimetic sacrifice has taught the Christian the painful renunciation of earthly comforts, then she cannot be commanded by others’ enduring desire for these things.¹³⁵ She has learned well that “the world . . . is not able to remain the same. In vain do you fix your heart to it, because that which you love is fleeting.”¹³⁶ Willing to renounce even her own deeds, she cannot be drawn into scandal.

¹³¹ Gregory I, 2.8.16–18 (Tomkinson 409–12); 2.10.4–5 (Tomkinson 442–43).

¹³² Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 25.7.16; *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.2.9 (Tomkinson 286).

¹³³ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.4 (Tomkinson 442).

¹³⁴ Gregory I, *Dial.*, 2.38 (Zimmerman 109); *Mor.*, 1994, 16.51.64.

¹³⁵ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 10.21.39.

¹³⁶ Gregory I, *Past.*, 3.27 (Demacopoulos 170).

Yet even to those unready for such a freely made renunciation, Gregory proposes that one respond to scandal by a nonrivalrous shift of attention to God and to oneself rather than to one's rival. That is, when earthly hopes are disappointed, one must hear the loving God, calling the Christian to regather her attention to self-scrutiny and theomimetic self-offering. Although humankind makes the world an occasion for forsaking God, God permits its every allurements to become a pedagogical chastisement through the tribulations of famine, disappointed lust, fleeting beauty, unobtainable or ephemeral riches and power, and even assault by one's neighbors.¹³⁷ Understanding this, when a suffered loss is experienced as so onerous that it threatens the stability of one's love of God and neighbor, one can by self-scrutiny recognize a remaining attachment and perhaps a sin to lament.¹³⁸ This turn to Christ refuses scandal's Satanically sacrificial turn toward the rival and sharpens scrutiny for a truer self-judgment and a purer self-offering.¹³⁹ Advancing in this way amid tribulation, by desire for Christ and patience in this world's sufferings, they "begin truly to be such as before they emptily thought themselves to be."¹⁴⁰

Gregory offers also the lineaments of an answer also for victims. By a similar path—authentic self-knowledge and desire for God—the sacrificial response of the innocent sufferer resists the pseudo-sacrificial passivity that would only reinscribe one's impotent suffering and so drive one to despair or to vengeance. On this, I offer three points:

First, by affirming God as one's true happiness and exemplar, authentic sacrifice (as opposed to mere passivity) trains the afflicted victim to refuse both despair and vengeance as she denies to inflicted privations the authority to circumscribe the meaning of her humanity.¹⁴¹ Suffering, never a good in itself, can yet be made an opportunity to name "God as [their] joy."¹⁴² Herein, Christians "deplore temporal evils" by "link[ing] their hope (with every consolation) to the everlasting good"¹⁴³ of love's union with God and neighbor. No vengeance is necessary to reclaim one's integrity because no external privation can snatch away the highest good—God himself.

Second, for Gregory, Christ models not a passive victimhood but a stability that leads to victory in love. Ultimately, sacrificial love is defined with unshakeable reference to God, not to one's assailant; therefore, the sufferer's patience enacts a self-offering to God, not a surrender to the assault. Then, by offering forgiveness, the victim who loves her enemy identifies an assault as forgivable and therefore simultaneously condemns it as sinful, a gross failure to love. Even while thanking God for the occasion of exercising so piercing a love, the victim thus rejects rather than validates the assailant's claim to authority.¹⁴⁴ Precisely by inviting him or her to receive the victim's love as forgiveness, the sacrificial love of enemies steadfastly accuses and calls those enemies to repentance. By counseling "patience," then, Gregory valorizes not passive submission but the fortitude of love exercised even in the face of that brutality amid which the Satanic most cunningly attempts to sway the heart.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁷ Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2008, 2.35.1 (Hurst 302–3, 307–9). See also *Mor.*, 1997, 24.4.7. On the pedagogical efficacy of earthly goods' being unobtainable to those who crave them, see *Mor.*, 1992, 5.46.72. On how this pedagogy teaches humans to relinquish the love for earthly things by which they have abandoned God, see 3.9.15.

¹³⁸ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, Praef.5.12. See especially Gregory I, *Past.*, 3.12 (Demacopoulos 117). Also Straw, *Perfection in Imperfection*, 212–22, 231–32; Girard, *Reader*, 285–86.

¹³⁹ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.8.17 (Tomkinson 411). For the limits of confidence in one's own innocence, see *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.9.14 (Tomkinson 166–67).

¹⁴⁰ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.7.12 (Tomkinson 384–85).

¹⁴¹ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.9.32 (Tomkinson 179–80).

¹⁴² Gregory I, 1.9.32 (Tomkinson 179).

¹⁴³ Gregory I, *Past.*, 3.27 (Demacopoulos 169).

¹⁴⁴ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, Praef.3.7.

¹⁴⁵ Gregory I, *Past.*, 3.9 (Tomkinson 102–7).

Third, in that the true sacrificial response identifies and defies evil, it cannot of itself encode any assumption that the victim is guilty or deserving of the assaults perpetrated by her neighbor. That is, when Gregory calls for self-scrutiny and sacrifice, he does not urge that every victim assume himself or herself to be guilty and therefore at fault for the assaults perpetrated by his or her neighbor; rather, true sacrifice denies to evil the last word by turning instead to God as the only reality capable of defining meaning. One must judge oneself in light not of one's persecutors but of God. One must consider that, whether one be innocent or guilty, judgment belongs to God who alone can determine the meaning of one's life; those who slander or harm have no such authority.¹⁴⁶ One must consider, then, how much one loves, how worthy of love is God, and how God loves the sufferer. Job, Gregory writes, rejected the accusation of guilt leveled by his friends, publicly maintaining his innocence,¹⁴⁷ while he stably offered to God his steadfast love amid suffering.¹⁴⁸

Renunciation, forgiveness, and endurance—each declaring God's love as the ultimate goodness, authority, and truth—are revealed as victory rather than defeat. For the cruelest affront to suffering victims occurs when—by rivalry, vengeance, or despair—they meet the Satanic on its own terms and so fall to its narrow view of reality. Those who have learned instead to judge and to use all in light of God's love are able to see past the Satanic deception. Their sacrifice defeats evil by a liberating repentance and forgiveness that confess the love of God and neighbor to be the one thing that the Satanic cannot comprehend and therefore cannot snatch away. Sacrifice denies the Satanic its violent victory.¹⁴⁹

Meanwhile, self-scrutiny guards lest pride or despair undermine the good mimesis of sacrifice and lead to mimetic violence.¹⁵⁰ By forestalling acquisitive desire and vengeance, such watchfulness converts every potential scandal into an occasion of imitating the sacrificial patience of Christ. Thus does scrutiny silence the false accusation of Girard's "persecutory unconscious," which would have initiated the single victim mechanism's Satanic sacrifice. Without at all denying the evils of this world, the Christian can learn to gratefully¹⁵¹ and joyfully turn chastisements to his aid as simultaneously atoning, healing, and vivifying sacrifices that, rather than adumbrate eternal loss, do instead achieve a renewal of love.¹⁵²

The Communion of the New Creation Is United in Christ by Love

The Foundation of the New Creation

Now we come to the final refutation of the Satanic: the unity of the Church, the Body of Christ sustained by the love of theomimetically sacrificial living. The Satanic sacrifice fabricates unity by a false accusation and a murder wherein one mimetically identifies oneself with a supposedly-righteous crowd. This judgment and this identification together recapitulate the Satanic refusal to love. The theomimetic pattern, however, judges truly by declaring one's own guilt, past or present (or at least the anchorage of one's satisfaction in God)—and makes a truly good mimetic

¹⁴⁶ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.9.14 (Tomkinson 166–67).

¹⁴⁷ Gregory I, 1.9.20 (Tomkinson 170).

¹⁴⁸ Gregory I, 1.9.14 (Tomkinson 166–67).

¹⁴⁹ Gregory I, 1.7.12 (Tomkinson 122); 1.4.9 (Tomkinson 80–81); *Hom. eu.*, 2008, 2.35.4–5 (Hurst 305). See also Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 3.28.54; *Mor.*, 1994, 10.21.39.

¹⁵⁰ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.16 (Tomkinson 451–52); *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.4.10 (Tomkinson 82).

¹⁵¹ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, Praef.3.7.

¹⁵² Girard, *I See Satan*, 125–27.

identification with Christ who is both the truly innocent victim and the truly forgiving Lord. The theomimetic response to any guilt or offense therefore is to seek innocence by the mimetic path of Christ's sacrificial love.

Unlike the crowd's unstable Satanic unanimity, the unity of Christians is not forged against a scapegoat but in a common imitation and pursuit of Christ by the love of God and neighbor. This theomimetic communion of identification with Christ is self-reinforcing also because the Christ-like love of God intrinsically incorporates the neighbor: "By the love of God the love of our neighbour is brought into being, and by the love of our neighbour the love of God is fostered."¹⁵³ If compassionate love is the true imitation of the Trinity, then to exclude the neighbor is to abandon God, hence "the 'one hope of our calling' . . . is not achieved if we do not strive for it with a mind in unity with our neighbor."¹⁵⁴ This unity makes true worship of the sacrifices of the many that, in concord, "praise him in a chorus."¹⁵⁵ True theomimesis unites each Christian to the activity of Christ as to that of the whole Church.

This bond, impossible to mimetic puppets, is given by the Holy Spirit, who, by the grace of love, forms and unifies the Church as Christ's Body.¹⁵⁶

Charity . . . kindles, consumes, fuses and, as it were, reshapes diversities of minds into a single appearance of gold. But insofar as the elect so love they must needs hasten to him whom they would deserve to see in Heaven with eternal joy. For the Lord and our Redeemer are One, who here binds the hearts of his elect in unanimity and always stimulates them to heavenly love through inner desire.¹⁵⁷

The Satanic demands an adversary for its violence while, even in the throes of renunciation, the theomimetic asks only for love. Within this mimetic community of love, Christians become examples for one another, ensuring the propagation of sacrificial theomimesis.¹⁵⁸ Even to those outside the Church, the saints are exemplary mirrors and images of the Holy Spirit who empowers them to "expel the darkness of error from the hearts of sinners" by "the heat of their desire and the flame of the word."¹⁵⁹ They are living images of the triune life in living the life of compassion. Girard calls the murderous origination of Satanic sacrifice the "foundation of the world." Gregory calls the members of the Church, founded on Christ's loving sacrifice, the "new creation" (*nova creatura*) (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17) that lives by the good mimesis of sacrificial love.

Not to love transitory things; in humility to stretch out the mind unreservedly to God and our neighbor; to preserve patience against offered insults and, with patience guarded, to repel the indignation of malice from the heart; to give one's property to the poor; not to covet that of others; to hold dear the friend in God [and] on God's account to love even those who are one's enemies; to mourn the affliction

¹⁵³ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.8.1–9 (Tomkinson 133–40); *Mor.*, 1992, 7.24.28.

¹⁵⁴ Gregory I, *Past.*, 3.22 (Demacopoulos 149).

¹⁵⁵ Gregory I, 3.22 (Demacopoulos 150).

¹⁵⁶ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.5.8 (Tomkinson 87).

¹⁵⁷ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.4.3 (Tomkinson 318).

¹⁵⁸ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.7.23 (Tomkinson 131).

¹⁵⁹ Gregory I, 1.5.7 (Tomkinson 86).

of a neighbor; not to exult in the death of one who is an enemy—this is the new creation.¹⁶⁰

Theomimetic sacrifice is never reducible to a transaction; never does it merely endure present pain for a later reward; rather, its very act both trains for and actualizes a self-offering in love. It depends entirely on the ongoing work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, who conform the Christian to the stability lost by Adam and renewed by Christ.¹⁶¹ One must immolate one’s sinful attachments in order that Christ may have their place. So doing, one lives in his likeness¹⁶² and is joined to the society of the saints.¹⁶³

The Eucharistic Sacrifice

This paper cannot conclude without acknowledging the centrality, for Gregory, of the eucharistic sacrifice. Just as only the God-man Christ could reveal the Satanic mechanism, so too only his own heavenly sacrifice can sustain the theomimetic sacrifice of Christians. All those whom God enflames with love are joined as members of Christ’s Body so that Christ’s human compassion may become an intercession on behalf of his members; and so that he may also transform each human person’s activity, raising it to participation in this otherwise-impossible love.

The Mediator of God and humanity [came so that] . . . he might in himself singly unite the things below with the things above, and that herein there might be made for us a way of returning to God . . . And so the Lord intercedes for us not with the voice but by the act of compassionating; because what he willed not to be condemned [i.e. humanity] . . . , he set free by taking [it] upon himself. And so [by Job, representing the Church,] a helper is sought, that “the desire may be heard;” because were not the intercession of the Mediator employed in our behalf, surely the accents of our prayers would remain silent to the ear of God.¹⁶⁴

Theomimetic sacrifice, Gregory teaches, is fulfilled only within Christ’s compassionate offering. This participation is conferred by the Holy Spirit, who gives Christians the virtues and stirs them into love,¹⁶⁵ that it may be truly an offering through Christ, in the Spirit, to the Father.

This sacrifice consequently depends entirely upon Christ’s Body, the Church.¹⁶⁶ For Gregory, all sacrifice must be made within the Church, which, as Christ’s Body and Bride, participates by love in the ongoing intercession of compassionate sacrificial love that he offers to the Father for all humanity. Therefore, the life of sacrifice imitates and lives particularly in the eucharistic sacrifice, for it is in the eucharist that the Church temporally renews, for human salvation, its union with Christ’s own perfect offering of self-renunciation and love.¹⁶⁷ It is not a new sacrifice, but as the very presence of Christ himself who offers himself perpetually with the love that he accomplished on the Cross, it is a true sacrifice. By eucharistically receiving the living “Blood of

¹⁶⁰ Gregory I, 1.10.9 (Tomkinson 187).

¹⁶¹ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.7 (Tomkinson 444).

¹⁶² Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2008, 2.32.2 (Hurst 259).

¹⁶³ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1992, 1.2.19 (Tomkinson 54–55).

¹⁶⁴ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 20.27.42.

¹⁶⁵ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.10.5–7 (Tomkinson 443–44).

¹⁶⁶ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 2001, 35.8.12–13.

¹⁶⁷ Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2008, 2.37.7 (Hurst 333).

our Redeemer,” “each sinner takes to himself the price of his redemption”¹⁶⁸—the loving Christ himself. Yet in order that the eucharist may be effective for one’s own transformation unto salvation, each must partake of the fruits of Christ’s sacrifice by—during the eucharistic liturgy—making of oneself a sacrifice of love like Christ “in sincere immolation of the heart.”¹⁶⁹ During the liturgy, the Christian—as a member of the whole Body—completes the anti-Satanic self-judgment followed by mimetic identification with the innocent Christ. Christians must do so with tears of compunction (both of fear and of love); and they must carry forth therefrom the sacrificial and exemplary living that alone will bring them and their neighbors finally within the heavenly temple.¹⁷⁰ A sacrificial life, Gregory writes, must be conformed to the Sacrifice.¹⁷¹ For Christ did not suffer that we might escape suffering; rather, Christ loved, that we might love.

As Christ’s sacrifice, in which Christians participate by their own perfect sacrifices of love, the Eucharist anticipates the perfect sacrifice of praise that is the eternal whole-burnt offering of heaven. It therefore portends the eschaton’s utter subversion and destruction of the Satanic. Uniting humanity to divinity in his Incarnation, life, and Cross, Christ is the New Adam who restores, transcends, and continues forever the sacrifice that Adam refused when he fell.¹⁷² Therefore, at the eucharistic sacrifice, the heavens are opened, the angels descend, and Christians too are united to the heavenly liturgy¹⁷³ not by image only, nor only by hopeful expectation, but truly because that God-given desire, which burns in the Christian’s compunction of love, spans the gap between heaven and earth and between invisible and visible¹⁷⁴ so that the Christian does truly enter into the praise of the angels. For by the Holy Spirit and in the Eucharist, the Christian has access indeed to the perfect eternal whole-burnt offering, despite his or her imperfect participation in it during this life. This is the love that makes all things new. This indeed, is the healing of desire. This is the true mimesis. This, Gregory seems to urge, is the true sacrifice before which all Satanic sacrifice must vanish like smoke.

Final Remarks

This paper has gone beyond Girard into the theological territory that he so humbly avoids, yet I hope that its diagnosis of the Satanic and its antithesis, the theomimetic, will be found a faithful development of what Girard has given. As is by now apparent, the theomimetic sacrifice is not first of all a response to the human history of sin (indeed, that is the province of the Satanic); it is a response to God that is only contingently conditioned by sin. Were there no sin, there would still be sacrifice. Therefore, even when it atones, theomimetic sacrifice is not a matter first of pain but always of stable perseverance—despite human distortion—in love of and union with God. The true sacrificial life performs a mimetic education of desire that liberates one from the Satanic sacrificial system to become a friend of Christ and child of the Father. It is in such theological territory that this paper proposes its answer to Girard’s anguish over the seemingly hopeless plight of the mimetic puppet.

¹⁶⁸ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 13.22.25–26.

¹⁶⁹ Gregory I, *Dial.*, 4.61 (Zimmerman 273).

¹⁷⁰ Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1994, 13.22.26.

¹⁷¹ Gregory I, *Hom. eu.*, 2008, 2.37 (Hurst 333–37); 2.22 (Hurst 169–70); *Dial.*, 4.61 (Zimmerman 273).

¹⁷² Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1992, 1.24.32.

¹⁷³ Gregory I, *Dial.*, 4.60 (Zimmerman 273).

¹⁷⁴ Gregory I, *Hom. Ez.*, 1993, 2.5.14 (Tomkinson 345); 2.10.5 (Tomkinson 443).

Simultaneously, I have sought to distinguish true sacrifice from sacred violence. One has not yet taken up one's Cross in the renunciation-dominated sacrifice of fear but only in the sacrifice of love. Hence the Cross, which is re-participated in the sacrifice of the Eucharist, is first of all a pure and purifying offering of love; it is atoning, yes, but only because its renunciation is made not in the cold economy of a selfish fear but in a living flame of love that, in this life, prepares to look on the divine face in the next.

I have attempted to show that sacrifice can be a useful theological category precisely when deployed to subvert two pseudo-sacrificial paradigms—the “Satanic” sacrificial violence diagnosed by Girard; and, more briefly explored here, the valorization of suffering that traps victims in passive subjection to their assailants. In this Gregorian-inspired account, Satanic vengeance is a negative image, structurally similar to Christ's sacrifice but fundamentally distinguished by its failure to love.¹⁷⁵ When the self-donation of the Son, a compassion that echoes the triune life itself, is properly recognized as the nonviolent and supremely loving origin of true sacrifice, the Satanic sacrifice is revealed to be no sacrifice at all, but only a failure, no, a bald refusal to offer sacrifice. Every victim of the Satanic is a scapegoat in place of God himself,¹⁷⁶ of whom the Satanic has made a rival for the possession of all good. Only love, applied sometimes with apparent violence to the resistance of the distorted soul, can truly cast out the violence of the Satanic. Only the Crucified, known in the neighbor and received especially in the eucharistic sacrifice, can cast down the imposter from his seat and dress with wine and oil the wounds of his every victim. Only thus can the community of Christ's Body, founded upon and participating in his sacrifice of love, know true peace in eternity.

JORDAN JOSEPH WALES is an assistant professor of theology at Hillsdale College, where he teaches historical theology. His research focuses on early Christian understandings of the vision of God, as well as contemporary theological questions relating to artificial intelligence. He received his M.T.S. and Ph.D. in theology from the University of Notre Dame after studying under a British Marshall Scholarship in the United Kingdom, where he received a diploma in theology from Oxford and an M.Sc. in cognitive science and natural language from the University of Edinburgh.

¹⁷⁵ For this structural point I am grateful to Michael Darcy, who pointed it out to me.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Gregory I, *Mor.*, 1997, 22.15.30; *Mor.*, 1992, 4.27.49.