

# MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR AND RENÉ GIRARD: A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

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**Abstract:** *For Maximus the Confessor, the Holy Scriptures is a guide for the ascetic ascension and the commandment to imitate the Lord means love. For R. Girard, Christ's passions take down the resorts of the victim's mechanism, signaling the mimetic functioning of culture and the false sacredness instituted by violence. In hermeneutic approach, the two discourses unveil their similitude, proving alternative paths from the text of the Scriptures to their significance.*

**Key words:** *hermeneutics, asceticism, sacred, violence.*

## 1. Introduction

Hermeneutics means search for significance. Initially denoting a modality for approaching the text of the Scriptures, the term extended its connotations, turning into a fruitful method for approaching any discourse and entering thereby in the field of philosophy. The operation of significance search may develop, starting from the text level, upwards or downwards; it is crediting or deconstruction, remaining within the limits of the previous definition. This statement may be argued for in the very initial field of hermeneutics, the text of the Scriptures.

The interpretative discourse may be ascendant or descendent, may enrich the text or may impoverish it. In an example close at hand, Maximus the Confessor credits the text of the Scriptures and René Girard, in a likewise hermeneutic approach, refuses its metaphoric dimension. The two divergent interpretations function on the same text and they are approaches of the same type.

The paper herein argues for the sense similarity of these two hermeneutic discourses. Maximus the Confessor and René Girard preach love to the same extent. Heraclites' path upwards and downwards proves to be, once again, one and the same.

## 2. Steps towards Self-Accomplishment at Maximus the Confessor

For Maximus the Confessor, Dumitru Stăniloae deems, [3] our Lord's embodiment is the sense and the purpose of the world. It was created to be sacrificed to God, to the purpose of Christ's mystery.

The sin, defined as separation of the will from the nature's reason to be, is a diminution of the human being and a narrowing of the world. It is a closing of the access to meanings, a sliding on the sensible surface of the things, a valuation of the sentient against the reasoning it should have served. Salvation is the re-opening towards the world and thereby towards God. The deification process is conducted by divinity within the world as

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efficient power and from outside, as purpose. The divine plan of unification with the human involves two moments. In the first, God turned into human being. In the second, the human being turns into God, through unification with Him. Between the first moment, of the embodiment and the moment of the deification, there is interposed the climbing. It has, in Maximus the Confessor's standpoint, three steps: the purification from passions, the knowledge in spirit upon the world's reasons to be and the unification with God through contemplation, in His direct Light, of the reasons to be of things. On another plan, in correspondence with it, Christianity means commandment, dogma and faith. At the end of the climbing, the accord with nature is remade, asked by its very sense.

The Ascension is only possible through the Logos, which is through the reason hidden within nature. Through the embodiment, the Logos undertook humanity, contradicting from within its penchant towards the sensitive and constituting Himself, along a subtle exercise of dialectics, into a model of non-suffering through passions. The climbing is the ever-thinning of the climber's being and of the world, so as to allow the Logos to be perceived in them, less body and more Word, in virtue of the simple and intuitive understanding. [4]

The climbing fulfills itself, without coming to an end, in the human being's lifting to the condition of God through Grace and opens for it the possibility of the apophatic knowledge. The ascension is simultaneously a mystic death. Through Jesus, a universal law functions, the one of immortality through death.

For Maximus the Confessor, the Scriptures are guide on the path of the ascetic achievement of the union with God. Its text is a long metaphor for the fight of the Logos in the body and at the same time

a subtle course of elaborated psychology. The biblical situations are, in a deeper significance, consignations of the permanent fight within the climber, between passions and grace. Corresponding to the three levels of the self-accomplishment, the Scriptures in their horizontal development possess the ever-deeper cover of the clerical man: the Law is his body, the Prophets are his feelings and the Evangelists, his soul.

If existence lies in God's power, then the participation in His goodness and wisdom resides in the rational beings' power. The option for Christ's path is an issue of potency and act, placed under the sign of the embodied Logos, as example of non-suffering. The commandment to imitate God means love. In virtue of this love, the world fulfils its sense, God uniting with humankind. Through the Logos within oneself, the human being intertwines in the divine Logos and in the reason of things, which means in love.

### **3. The Transcendence of Love as Alternative to the Transcendence of Violence**

Human conflicts strike roots in the mimetic, René Girard shows. [2] Nothing in human behavior can elude the reduction to imitation. The relation between the subject and the desired object is never innocent. There is no spontaneous wish. Any desire is mediated; it depends on the model that the subject imitates. The mediator is as uglier as it simultaneously plays the part of model and the one obstacle against the satisfaction of the subject's desire. Competition generates rivalry. The subject and the desire mediator take this way shape as symmetrically antagonist characters, perceiving themselves as essentially separated, although they are identical through desire. The desired object is

forbidden not because of the law, as Freud deemed, but because of those emphasizing it as desirable, wanting it in his turn.

When mimicry reaches its climax, its double power of attraction (towards the model) and repulsion (against the obstacle) rises and rapidly transmits itself from one individual to the other as hatred. In that moment the state of mimetic crises is instituted. The extension of the rivalries determines their purification, which is the detachment from the object and the aversion orientation towards the same victim. The victim turns into scapegoat. It is innocent but it polarizes the collective hatred and solves the crisis. The lynched common victim is then sanctified, in virtue of the responsibility for disorder and order. The process describes the functioning of the *victim's mechanism*, Girard shows.

The scapegoat is simultaneously looked at in horror, as it brings along disease, and with veneration, as it possesses healing powers. In the reversal of the relation between the persecutor and the victims, the sacredness comes into being, Girard thinks. The master of life is the master of death.

Within traditional societies, there are interdictions with respect to violence and group imitation. The primitives knew their reciprocity, for which reason they instituted the rules that aim at the mimetic contagion as regards objects that cannot be shared in peace, which are: women, food, social positions. These interdictions approach the mimetic crisis in void; they are attempts to remove it. The rituals cope with the mimetic crisis in development, orienting the events in a previously proved direction.

The process of humanization stands for a series of floors in mastering the ever-increasing mimetic intensity, separated through catastrophic crises, however fecund, to the extent in which they generate more and more rigorous

interdictions and more and more efficient canalization rituals.

The myths conserve and conceal the information on the funding lynching Girard deems. Rituals disguise the funding lynching less than the myths.

There are two distinct moments in the myth. The first of them aims at accusing the scapegoat, which is not yet sacred, but condensates the malefic powers. The second moment, the one of the positive sacredness, aims at the change towards the better of the scapegoat's malefic powers, simultaneously with the community members' reconciliation.

All religious phenomena have the same model, Girard further shows. [1] The differentiations come from the distinct interpretations of the funding event. These interpretations emphasize either the benefic aspect, or the malefic aspect of the victim's sacrifice. The power of religion comes from the capacity to supply useful advice for keeping some tolerable relations within the group.

All human institutions are reproductions of the reconciling victim's mechanism. The differentiations are due to the different interval instituted between the victim's selection and the sacrifice.

There is a trans-cultural scheme of collective violence, generating persecutions. As stereotypes, in this scheme, there enter violence, social and cultural crisis, accusations of non-differentiation crimes (such as parricide, incest, rape, lese-majesty, bestiality, profanations, poisoning) and the signs of victim's selection. The abnormality which impresses the crowds turns into a sign of guilt for the crisis of society.

The history of culture keeps the persecutors' perspective upon the scheme of collective violence and upon its own persecutions. Contemporary people deem myths to be fictive; however they do not doubt the Jews' massacre or the massacres

in the Middle Age. The correct comprehension of the historical texts upon these massacres is dated at the beginning of the modern age and might be followed by the correct understanding of the myths.

In the medieval texts, there is emphasized only the first of the victim's mechanism moments, the one of accusing the scapegoat. This partial representation signals the fact that collective violence is a myth producing machine, functioning more and more badly in the Western cultural universe, because of the rise in the human power of deciphering.

Religions and culture dissimulate violence so as to substantiate and perpetuate themselves. The rise in the human power of deciphering is due to the action of a force that counter-acts the cultural tendency towards occulting sacrifices. This force is, Girard deems, the one of the Bible. The Western power to analyze cultural mechanisms comes from the indirect and unnoticed influence of the Scriptures.

Jesus' passions represent the same story, however from a perspective refusing the persecutory interpretation. The victim's guilt constitutes itself in principal resort of the scapegoat mechanism. Taking down the mechanism resorts impedes its functioning. Contemporary Westerners believe less and less in the guilt of scapegoat-type victim. The persecutors' unanimity could not impose their perspective upon the event in the case of Christ's passions. Jesus' death perpetuated itself with another significance than the regular one. This signification did not immediately impose itself, but gradually penetrated Evangelized peoples.

History is worked by Evangelical revelation. Evangels are not myths. They render the same murder, however from the victim's perspective. Unlike mythical victims, Jesus refuses any complicity with violence. The mythical victims'

resurrection and sanctification are phenomena represented from the persecutors' perspective within the persecutory mechanism. Jesus' Resurrection ruins the persecutory mechanism, as it produces against it.

The violent order of culture, revealed through Jesus' passions cannot survive to its own revelation. Spirit works in history to reveal the victim's mechanism, source of the mythologies and of the gods of violence. The West has already gone through a long history governed by revelation. Contemporary Westerners better understand history as they have been for more than two thousand years under the influence of Gospels.

Jesus does not die for the sacrifice, but against all sacrifices. Listening to God's words, Jesus reaches to a human perfection which is one with divinity, encountering God through his love. Until Jesus, the transcendence of love was overwhelmed by the transcendence of violence. To discover it, the victim's mechanism had to be understood, Girard shows.

All great theories of modern science unconsciously and partially send to denouncing the victim's process. Within a universe where violence was revealed and the victim's mechanism no longer functions, people have two alternatives: let violence go or find their end in unleashed violence. Evangels do not require from people to give up imitation, but to imitate the sole model who does not risk to turn into a fascinating model.

Girard's text is, in its author's own appreciation, part of the historic process governed by the Evangelic text. In the end of philosophy, there is therefore possible some thinking assumed both as scientific, in the human being's field, and as a return to religion. The future mimetic crisis has to be solved with no sacrifice, Girard shows. The Logos of violence is not compatible with the Logos of love.

#### 4. Common Sense of the Two Discourses

The two discourses previously approached may equally claim the status of hermeneutic approach, on the same text, the biblical one. The search for significance is however undertaken in opposite directions.

Maximus the Confessor's writing is theology. The discourse unfolds within the perimeter circumscribed by the dogma and shares a revelation. René Girard's works are anthropological. The author constructs a theory, referring to the undertakings close by and taking over their useful truths. The discourse, of Hegelian nature, through the dance of three of the mimetic desire and through the slyness with which the reason of the Evangelists works the history, lies under the sign of the liberties undertaken in the context of the contemporary West. There is a wide detour through its methodic doubts and a translation in specific language of the message upon survival. In the name of the same liberties, Girard's text contests the necessity for the dogmas, sending at most to an unpretentious "Why not?" Maximus the Confessor's writings assert themselves from the truth of the revelation, incomprehensible through discursive and logical knowledge. Girard's writing listens to the truth-coherence.

Maximus the Confessor's text places itself in the continuation of the tradition; it is in and for it. René Girard's approach comes from outside and develops against tradition, as an alternative to the former. The perspective it builds implies a well defined interval between the discourse and the meta-discourse. As a matter of fact, any interpretative undertaking presupposes this interval. Relating the discourses under discussion to tradition is not exhausted by the previous specifications. On one hand, the schism should be admitted in the very heart of the first theological discourse.

However, the instituted interval is covered in the texts of revelation through the workings of the Holy Spirit. In virtue of these workings, the texts are restored between the limits of tradition. On the other hand, the theory of mimetic order, constantly named *revelation* by its author, may impose modifications in the Holy Spirit's connotations and implicitly upon His workings. This way, the relations existing between the two types of discourse complicate themselves.

Maximus the Confessor operates a mystic interpretation of the text of the Scriptures, crediting the divine wisdom. René Girard proposes reading the text of the Scriptures for deconstructing divinity. Maximus the Confessor's interpretation is a complication of the text, its investment with significance. In the phrase *text interpretation* the accent lies on interpretation. Girard's interpretation simplifies the text. The significance is to be retrieved within and the stress may fall on it. Maximus the Confessor enriches the text of the Scriptures, enhancing it through moving off from its letter. Historical events are parabola for the inner life; the text is a long metaphor of the needs for self-accomplishment. René Girard operates an impoverishment of the text through moving closer to its letter. The events are divested of any interpretation, even the primary one, of the Evangelists. For Maximus the Confessor the text is auxiliary, it is the material for exemplification. In Girard's approach, the text is an essential argument in the demonstration. Paradoxically, crediting a writing considered of divine inspiration serves to deconstructing the idea of divine and going beyond the writing, which is its reconsidering, praises divinity.

Between the two approaches of search for significance, significant operational oppositions are marked. Despite them, the discourses converge towards undertaking

the same commandment, the one of love. This is a starting point in Maximus the Confessor's writing, that he justifies. It is before any discourse, without words and in essence. In René Girard, love is argued for through discourse, it is the result of the reasoning, as it well suits any Western approach. The pleading for it is the consequence of the approach, stands for its end. The two developments of ideas support, despite these differences of approach, the same necessity for love. To the limit, which is under the theological or anthropologic cover, the developments are functional in the field of psychology, Maximus the Confessors confesses upon the transformations that occur within the hermit's inner life through the needs towards self-accomplishment. Girard enters with the theory upon the mimetic desire and the victim's mechanism in the themes of social psychology.

These approaches, psychological in their essence, connect the human to divinity. They are in equal measure approaches towards the revelation of the divine through the human, although undertaken in opposite directions: upwards in Maximus the Confessor's case, for whom the human being may be divine through self-accomplishment and downwards at René Girard, for whom divinity is human, the transcendence is born out of hatred or love. With the specification that the two positions remake the much exploited distinction Orient/Occident, that Girard's discourse is more complicated, its finalization being inevitably Gnostic and that mimetic desire is perverted love, to the significances brought to light by the two interpretative approaches there may be recognized the coincidence in the urge of knowing, through love, the divinity, who is love.

## 5. Conclusions

For Heraclites, the path upwards and the path downwards mean the same way. His statement is confirmed in a spectacular manner through the superposition in senses of the previously discussed approaches, in the same urge. The path from the text of the Scriptures to their sense may be gone through in two manners: through theological tradition and through science, in René Girard's case, through anthropology.

For the contemporaries, the theological approach simultaneously reveals truths that pertain to science. Scientific approach proves convergent with tradition. The two approaches reciprocally complete themselves, clarifying each other. Among the text of the Scriptures, its meaning, the theological tradition and science, a hermeneutic interdependence may be postulated.

In its name, the scientific undertaking of the world is a roundabout way, in virtue of the Western appetite for dichotomy and doubt towards simple truths. In the name of the same postulate the solution of the roundabout way must be recognized for its validity.

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