

## Conversion, the Self, and the Victim: East Timor and Girard's Mimetic Theory in Dialogue

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**Abstract:** *This essay explores how repentance and conversion are connected to a changing sense of self through the relation to what René Girard identifies as the innocence and forgiveness of the victim. It shows how the operations of conscience through Christian faith have anthropological elements that help us to understand repentance, and more broadly, offer paths for approaching the study of complex human phenomenon. This exploration will be undertaken with reference to the story of an East Timorese man, Alexandro, who was an Indonesian soldier during the Indonesian occupation of East Timor (a half-island nation located in south-east Asia) and was ordered to shoot some of his own people during the violence after the 1999 referendum. After this experience, Alexandro went through a process of repentance which will be examined in dialogue with the insights of Girard.*

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**Key Words:** René Girard; Mimetic theory; East Timor; Timor-Leste; victim; repentance; conscience; conversion; self; forgiveness.

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The order for the soldier, Alexandro, to shoot his own people came after the August 1999 referendum that gave a choice to the East Timorese people between autonomy within Indonesia or independence from Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> A small, mountainous and sparsely populated territory, East Timor (or Timor-Leste, as it is known officially) was occupied by the Unitary Republic of Indonesia from 1975 to 1999 after Indonesia pre-empted Portugal's decolonisation efforts to leave the colony after 400 years. The UN-sponsored Commission on Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) reported that at least 102,800 people, and likely even more than 183,000 people, died from unnatural and conflict-related causes during the Indonesian occupation.<sup>2</sup> Many died directly at the hands of the state military and militias, including after the announcement of the result of the referendum in September 1999 in which the East Timorese voted in favour of independence by 78.6%.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This story is from an interview with Alexandro on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2004. The following report of the events and his reflections are taken from this interview. Alexandro is not his real name to protect his identity. See J. Hodge, *Stories from the Hidden Heart of "sacred violence": An exploration of violence and Christian faith in East Timor in dialogue with René Girard's mimetic insight*, PhD dissertation, (Brisbane, Aus: University of Queensland, 2009), 36-59.

<sup>2</sup> Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation Timor-Leste (CAVR), *Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation Timor-Leste (CAVR)*. CAVR, 2005, <http://www.cavr-timorleste.org/en/cheгаReport.htm>, 44 & 73. Accessed 13/9/11. This total came from a population of approximately 700,000 when the Indonesians invaded, which is one of the worst per capita losses of life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> There was also a large increase in East Timorese affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church during the Indonesian rule: from approximately 25-30% of the population being Catholic in 1975 to over 90% in the 1990s. One of the reasons for this shift is related to Indonesian law in which each citizen must nominate

Alexandro was part of the Indonesian military, which is known under the acronym TNI (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*), though he was a native of East Timor. With incentives and coercion, the Indonesian military had recruited East Timorese and placed them into special regiments, particularly to provide a presence in the restive province and help fight the on-going battle with the East Timorese resistance army, known under the acronym of Falintil.<sup>4</sup> Alexandro had previously heard of a plan to attack the general population after the referendum. The plan was later to be exposed as a campaign of state sanctioned and orchestrated violence that sought to punish the Timorese populace for the referendum result and create an impression of civil war. According to Fernandes, by directing East Timorese militias against Falintil, the Indonesian authorities the illusion of civil war would be created, in which they would claim to be re-establishing order in Timor through military action.<sup>5</sup> Under this plan, the local Indonesian authorities and Indonesian military and police constructed and directed militias to target so-called enemies of the state and cause indiscriminate violence.<sup>6</sup> The TNI participated in and directly inflicted violence on the populace.<sup>7</sup>

As part of this campaign, Alexandro was ordered to shoot his people. Alexandro was part of a unit in the east that was ordered to cause destruction and directly fire on the populace. However, he could not accept his orders to shoot. Nor could he accept the actions of the other soldiers who were shooting at the populace.<sup>8</sup> Instead of shooting at the people himself, he broke ranks (convincing some other soldiers to do so along with him) and shot the other, non-Timorese soldiers who were killing East Timorese. He, then, deserted his post and fled to the mountains to seek refuge with other East Timorese

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one of five religions that are deemed acceptable in their belief in "one God". Furthermore, Patrick Smythe has argued that the Church's role and Timor's shift to Catholicism can also be seen in terms of the experience of oppression and the contribution of Christianity to Timorese resistance, identity and survival [P.A. Smythe, *"The heaviest blow": the Catholic Church and the East Timor issue* (Munster, Ger.: Lit Verlag, 2003), 47-8].

<sup>4</sup> Falintil is an acronym for the Portuguese title of the resistance army, "*Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*". See "Falintil," *Wikipedia*, 2011, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falintil>. Accessed 13/9/11.

<sup>5</sup> C. Fernandes, *Reluctant Saviour: Australia, Indonesia, and the independence of East Timor* (Carlton North, VIC: Scribe Publications, 2004), 47-85. See also Geoffrey Robinson, "East Timor 1999 Crimes Against Humanity. A Report Commissioned by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)," 2003, [www.etan.org/etanpdf/2006/CAVR/12-Annexe1-East-Timor-1999-GeoffreyRobinson.pdf](http://www.etan.org/etanpdf/2006/CAVR/12-Annexe1-East-Timor-1999-GeoffreyRobinson.pdf). Accessed 13/9/11.

<sup>6</sup> As part of an increasingly desperate strategy to retain East Timor, the Indonesian military and government raised and armed militias in 1999 [John Martinkus, *A Dirty Little War* (Melbourne: Random House), 51-262; D. Greenlees and R.Garran, *Deliverance: the inside story of East Timor's fight for freedom* (Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 120-43, James Dunn, *East Timor: A Rough Passage to Independence* (Sydney: Longueville Books, 2004), 352-60; Robinson, "East Timor 1999 Crimes Against Humanity," 82-129]. The members of the militias were drawn from the local East Timorese as well as from other parts of Indonesia and the Indonesian military. Their job was to target certain enemies of the regime, such as those associated with the independence movement or the Church (Robinson, "East Timor 1999," 255; Dunn, *East Timor*, 346; J. Jolliffe, *Balibo* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2009), 254].

<sup>7</sup> The plan did not work for a number of reasons, two of the most important being: first, the international surveillance of Indonesian operations that knew of the Indonesian plan; and, the decision by the East Timorese resistance leader, Xanana Gusmão, to order his soldiers not to respond to provocation once he recognised the Indonesian tactics (Greenlees & Garran, *Deliverance*, 79).

<sup>8</sup> East Timorese were allowed to enter the lower ranks of the government and military but they were usually not promoted highly or used in skilled occupations.

people and the East Timor resistance army (Falintil). He could evade capture in the mountains.

Alexandro had a crisis of conscience, which continued after the Indonesian military left East Timor. He felt guilty about what he had done and reflected on it at length. In the moment before the shooting of his fellow soldiers, Alexandro's examination of conscience led him to conclude that the soldiers were shooting *innocent* people. He was consciously awakened to the awful violence going on around him and was shocked. His immediate reaction was to use violence against his fellow soldiers to protect those innocent people being killed. He knew that killing was wrong but chose what he saw to be the lesser evil. He then fled and sought to reunite with his family.<sup>9</sup>

The soldier's change of heart could be seen as a swapping of sides from the Indonesian to the Timorese as the Indonesians lost control of East Timor. However, what motivated his actions became clear when the United Nations assumed control of East Timor and he settled with his family after his return from the mountains. He recognised that his step out of violence contained violence, and that the violence and killing were wrong. This is a rational deduction but what motivated his rationality? His violence was not motivated by vengeance but he still recognised that it was wrong. Though he tried to protect people, the acts of violence and killing were still something for which he felt guilty.

Alexandro, like most East Timorese, is Catholic.<sup>10</sup> After he returned from taking refuge in the mountains, he sought guidance and advice from a family member who is a religious sister. After his examination of conscience, his guilt became deep contrition. He, then, sought reconciliation with and healing from God. With family support, he undertook the sacrament of reconciliation. He felt his actions had placed something unsurmountable in his life—a sin that needed to be faced. This unsurmountable barrier stood not only between himself and the deceased men, but fundamentally between himself and God. God as creator and judge could heal and reconcile him so that he could be free from his violent actions and sins. In being forgiven, Alexandro felt he could live again, providing an example to his children by always remembering those he had killed and the chance he had been given through forgiveness, despite his violent actions.

Alexandro's story highlights some interesting features of Christian experience. His experience does not prove or represent a universal sample of Christian experience but does give some material to examine the nature of Christian faith in this case, not only in what actions it may produce but in how it formed his conscience and self existentially and anthropologically. Yet, questions remain: What is the nature of the faith that Alexandro as a Christian displays? How does it shape moral judgements, especially ones that are not seemingly in one's own immediate interests and even cause actions that differ from past behaviour with potentially dangerous consequences? In particular, what is the nature of the Christian's identification with the figure of Christ and why is Christ able to motivate a perspective that sees beyond one's own good, seemingly at odds with the conventional cultural view?

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<sup>9</sup> This paragraph temporarily ends the report from Alexandro's interview.

<sup>10</sup> This paragraph relates further information from the interview with Alexandro.

The questions prompted by Alexandro's experience produce an interesting point of departure for dialogue with the anthropological insights of René Girard (known as the "mimetic theory"). Girard and those who apply his insights have grappled with similar data and questions about human motivation, morality, violence, culture and religion. For example, Girard indicates that the emergence of a different view of the world not dominated by violence does not easily or naturally occur in human cultures or persons.<sup>11</sup> It was this worldview that Alexandro seems to have developed as he rejected victimising his enemies and repented of his actions. Girard claims conventional cultural practices, myths and rituals present a certain view of the world dominated by violence, which culture attempts to contain through adherence to violently sacrificial practices and worldviews.<sup>12</sup> By identifying the anthropological movements in faith, Girard's insights may help to shed light on Alexandro's eventual opposition to the violent reconstitution of the social order (which includes both his violent opposition to the regime and his opposition to justifying his violent actions by making new victims and enemies of those he killed and the regime) and his later repentance from his violent acts. Girard's suggestion that faith in Christ inaugurates a different kind of awareness or consciousness from the violently sacrificial worldview (which is based in distorted desire and mimetic violence) may provide some avenues for fruitful exploration. In order to undertake this dialogue, I outline the nature of Girard's work as well as Girard's primary insight into mimetic desire and the insights into violence, culture and Christianity that later developed from this. I begin by exploring the scientific nature of Girard's insights and how they form a basis for engaging with the experience of East Timorese Christians.

#### IN DIALOGUE: GIRARD'S MIMETIC THEORY AND EAST TIMORESE EXPERIENCE

In order to introduce Girard's insights, let us return to Alexandro's story and ask: How is this soldier's perspective possible? Is it just a change of mind? A subjective experience? Or does it really present something about being human? How one answers these questions will depend on one's understanding of the human person and the epistemological method based on this understanding. Present scientific methods can perpetuate a certain view of the human person that is rational, evolutionary and amenable to experimentation and change. This view derives from the epistemological *belief* that humans come to know only or primarily through experience of and experimentation on the other. According to Joseph Ratzinger, this view has been influenced by the way in which science has developed, that is, as seeking to control its object in order to experiment upon it.<sup>13</sup> "In the scientific experiment, the object of experience is not free. The experiment depends, rather, on the fact that nature is controlled."<sup>14</sup> Ratzinger points out that this kind of methodology is inappropriate in the human sciences.<sup>15</sup> Yet, even in the human and social sciences, an attitude of dissection and deconstruction can dominate. For example, in writing his first book, Girard underwent a change from the kind of scientific method that Ratzinger critiques. He went from deconstructing and debunking the object of inquiry for his own

<sup>11</sup> R. Girard, "Are the Gospels Mythical?" *First Things* 62 (April 1996): 27-31.

<sup>12</sup> R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy S.N.D. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), 348-9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

academic gratification and self-justification, to engaging the other in a more complex and open dialogue.

In fact, as his style of inquiry changed, Girard found he was undergoing a similar experience of conversion as those authors whose works he was analysing.<sup>16</sup> According to Girard, novelists such as Proust and Dostoyevsky show an explicit “change in outlook” in their writing derived from a “collapse and recovery”.<sup>17</sup> These novelists experienced a collapse or “existential downfall” in their attempts at “self-justification” through their creation of caricatured heroes and enemies.<sup>18</sup> In this way, the novelist is broken from his attempt to objectify, glorify or blame some other, “... to realize that he has become the puppet of his own devil. He and his enemy are truly indistinguishable. The novelist of genius thus becomes able to describe the weakness of the other from within himself, whereas before it was some sort of put-up job, completely artificial”.<sup>19</sup> This collapse even leads toward religious conversion, such as for Dostoyevsky whose Christian symbolism indicates a change.<sup>20</sup> Girard concludes that those authors who showed human desire as other-dependent (in books he termed as “novels”) had undergone some experience of existential collapse and conversion, while those who had not let go of their “Manichean” caricature of good and evil tried to hide their insecurity by asserting “the autonomy and stability of desire” (in books he termed as “romance”).<sup>21</sup>

Like these novelists such as Proust and Dostoyevsky, Girard experienced what he termed an “existential downfall” that shattered “the vanity and pride of the writer” and led him to an “existential conversion”.<sup>22</sup> He was then able to recognise the complex interactions of human relationships structured by desire in which the self and other are intimately connected. However, Girard said his conversion was an intellectual one at first which “was a very comfortable experience, self-indulgent even.”<sup>23</sup> His health scare in the late 1950s, compounded by the fear of death, led him to an existential crisis. Facing death led Girard to a crisis that stripped him of his notions of self-aggrandisement and intellectual arrogance.<sup>24</sup>

Girard says that without this religious conversion and existential crisis his intellectual endeavours would have remained as “debunking” exercises in line with mainstream academia.<sup>25</sup> Girard’s existential crisis showed how he had kept himself from

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<sup>16</sup> R. Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. J.G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 284; M. Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), 15-16.

<sup>17</sup> Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 284.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Related to this point, the scientific experiment is usually an attempt at a form of self-justification. The scientist does not begin with a neutral endeavour but develops a line of inquiry based on a hypothesis, which he/she seeks to justify (or disprove).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid..

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 284-5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>24</sup> After going through this health crisis, Girard went to confession, had his children baptised and remarried in the Church (Ibid.). As Girard says, his intellectual interest in Christianity did not require a great personal commitment, but after suffering and facing death he realised that what he had come to believe required personal action.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

the experience of the other out of arrogance and self-assertion. Girard's own experience of self-renunciation led him explore human experience and literature in a new way. His experience seems to accord with Ratzinger's description of inquiry in terms of moving from the stage of investigation and experimentation to the stage of being opened to experiencing the other in which one lets go of control, ego and "self-will".<sup>26</sup> As Girard's experience attests, the experience of the other can provoke a change in one's self and how one thinks about and interacts with the world. This change is evident in Alexandro's experience as he moved from state-sanctioned mob violence (protective of the powerful) to defensive violence (in favour of the victims) to complete repentance and conversion, in which he recognised his own complicity in violence rather than make scapegoats of his enemies.

Thus, by engaging with the experience of the other—the East Timorese in this case—this essay seeks to identify some features of conversion as an anthropological change. The symmetry between the formation of Girard's insights and Alexandro's conversion experience may help to enhance the dialogue between the two. Girard provides a beginning point in the exploration of this change by suggesting that the change occurs because of a movement in the human being that seeks to satisfy and reconcile one's self to the other in what he calls "mimetic desire". He identifies how this reconciliation can occur in one of two ways: through constructing the other as enemy or rival; or by recognising the identity between the self and the other, as the great novelists and Alexandro himself did. By being able to recognise the other's deep connection to the self, and the way in which the other can be constructed to justify violence against him/her, Girard's insights can help to see the real change in Alexandro that resulted from the motivation of his faith. As I will show, it was Alexandro's faith that provided the vital ingredient for him to recognise the other as human, intimately related to the self, and not as an enemy (even when the other committed violence). In order to make this argument, I will outline Girard's mimetic theory in the following section, and following this, bring it into dialogue with Alexandro's experience.

### GIRARD'S MIMETIC THEORY AS HERMENEUTIC

Girard's major epistemological break-through was the discovery of what has been termed "the mimetic insight". From this, there developed two other major insights. To summarise, Girard's insights have three major parts:

- 1) human desire is mimetic or imitated, i.e., humans desire according to the desire of the other;<sup>27</sup>
- 2) human cultures use scapegoats or victims to resolve mimetic conflict and create unity;<sup>28</sup> and,

<sup>26</sup> Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 349.

<sup>27</sup> R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Y. Freccero (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); *"To Double Business Bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (London: Gracewing & New Malden, UK: Inigo Enterprises, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred; The Scapegoat*, trans. Y. Freccero (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); *Job, the Victim of his People*, trans. Y. Freccero (London: Athlone Press, 1987); with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. S. Bann & M. Metteer (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1987); *Violence and the Sacred and Oedipus Unbound: Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire*, ed. Mark R. Anspach (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

- 3) the Hebreo-Christian revelation, in contrast to myth and sacrificial ritual, reveals the scapegoat mechanism within culture as well as human desire as mimetic, and provides an alternative way for structuring desire and culture.<sup>29</sup>

According to Girard, the origins of human relationality and self-identity, as well as violence and religion, are to be found in the nature of human desire. Girard argues that human desire is uniquely structured by imitation or mimesis, i.e., desire is stimulated for an object that the model seemingly desires.<sup>30</sup> Girard calls this mimetic desire (or “triangular desire”).<sup>31</sup> Mimetic desire is originally good as it helps bring humans into relationship by shared desires that form human identity. However, instead of desiring the other’s good (or sharing in common desires that enable learning, language and communication), mimetic desire is often distorted into desiring what the other has or is. This distortion occurs because the subject of desire misconceives the model of desire as a rival.<sup>32</sup> Thus, when common objects of desire are fought over (such as the land and power which the Indonesians sought by invading and occupying East Timor in opposition to the Portuguese, and their later rivals, the local East Timorese<sup>33</sup>), mimetic desire is distorted into rivalry and conflict in which the rivals become scandalised by each other and seek to defeat one another in what Girard calls “acquisitive violence”.<sup>34</sup>

Further, mimetic rivalry is grounded in a metaphysical yearning and distortion: through mimetic desire, the subject is seeking ontological fullness. Thus, when the subject sees the model possessing an object which seems to lend the model “ontological density”,<sup>35</sup> the subject seeks to acquire the object in order to gain that ontological density. As was seen in the Indonesian regime’s extreme efforts in 1999, their grasping at the object of their desire (the loyalty, order and control of the Timorese populace and territory) sought ontological fullness through violence against perceived enemies of the state. This strategy was flawed and led to greater dissatisfaction and frustration,

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<sup>29</sup> R. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. J. G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001); with P. Antonello & J. Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London & New York: Continuum, 2007); *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> See Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel, Violence and the Sacred and Things Hidden*.

<sup>31</sup> Girard (*The Girard Reader*, 268) says that what he means by “desire” should be conceptualised in a broader sense than by its Freudian connotation as erotic or sexual (and does not include natural appetites, such as eating). He says instead of desire one could substitute the term “‘drive’, or *élan vital*, or even Sartre’s ‘project.’ Almost any word that could express the dynamism, the dynamics of the entire personality” (Ibid.). In this way, “...mimesis is really prerational and prerepresentational...” and structures human being itself (Williams in Ibid.).

<sup>32</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 145.

<sup>33</sup> The Indonesian dictator, Suharto, and political and military elite wanted to incorporate East Timor into Indonesia because the Portuguese owned it and the Indonesians saw it as part of their entitlement as rulers of the Indonesian islands; an entitlement that was exacerbated by claims of communism in East Timor that supposedly threatened Indonesia. The desire of the Indonesian (primarily, Javanese) elite is complex and historically grounded in their successful supplanting of the Dutch colonisers resulting in their control of almost the whole Indonesian archipelago. The dominance of the Javanese elite in Indonesia led to them to use the military to consolidate territory over the diverse cultures and islands of the archipelago. Thus, while there was a religious divide in East Timor between the largely Muslim Indonesian army and the Christian Timorese populace, the motivating factor for the state-sanctioned violence in East Timor was more nationalistic than religious (although both are connected).

<sup>34</sup> Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 61-3.

<sup>35</sup> Henri de Lubac in G. Bailie, “The Vine and Branches Discourse: The Gospel’s Psychological Apocalypse”. *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 4 (1997): 132.

particularly since such violence never achieved the desired results and needed to be routinely repeated, like a drug that provided only temporary satisfaction.<sup>36</sup>

The kind of violence in which Alexandro participated in 1999 was directed against the so-called enemies of the regime, though these enemies were arbitrarily identified. The aim of this violence was to draw the Timorese people into the web of violence, either through: active participation with violence through mimetic fascination, envy, fear or rivalry<sup>37</sup>; or, acquiescence to violence in fear of becoming a victim, which led to citizens isolating themselves from each other.<sup>38</sup> Victimisation, according to Girard, is the primary mechanism by which humans find unity, particularly in times of crisis where cultures struggle with their own disunity.<sup>39</sup> By analysing a varied array of ancient and modern cultures, rituals and texts, Girard has argued that victimisation is the most effective way for disparate members of a group to be unified. Girard argues that human conflicts and rivalries are resolved on a cultural level by the unification of desire that occurs in scapegoating a victim. Girard concludes that scapegoating produces a newfound cultural unity and order because of the power of unanimous violence that targets a victim as “guilty” for the problems the people are experiencing. Humans become unified around one accusatory gesture which scandalises and directs all desire against a scapegoat (or victim). This scapegoat is usually blamed for committing some kind of crime that is said to be the cause of disorder and conflict. In the case of East Timor in 1999, various people were indiscriminately accused of being guilty of opposing the regime and causing internal problems, which provided impetus for the militia to target and kill them. This action sought to unite the regime’s agents, its collaborators and even the general populace, who were meant to avoid being associated with the victimised out of fear, misinformation, or kin and tribal enmity.

Finally, Girard found that the scapegoating that lay at the heart of human culture was discussed in a different way by Christianity and the Bible than in comparable myths and cultures.<sup>40</sup> According to Girard, the innocence of the victim and the injustice of human violence and culture are definitively revealed in Jesus Christ, who was killed as victim for his loving self-giving.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to other ancient literature, the victim in the Gospels is vindicated. Rather than glorifying the victory of the mob, the Gospels present how Jesus’ Resurrection overcomes death (the weapon of the mimetic violence) and exposes the distorted cycle of desire and violence in human culture by revealing the true form of mimetic desire in Jesus’ loving, self-giving relationship with God the Father.<sup>42</sup> James

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<sup>36</sup> This was shown in the numerous massacres that occurred throughout the country in 1999, such as in Lautem, Dili, Liquiçá and Suai, which particularly targeted the Church and the resistance.

<sup>37</sup> The Indonesian regime was effective in manipulating some traditional Timorese rivalries and disputes, particularly amongst families and tribes, to create envy, enemies and fascination with the power of the state.

<sup>38</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 45-48.

<sup>39</sup> René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 198-9; *Things Hidden*, 202.

<sup>40</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 1-168; *The Scapegoat*, 1-99; *Things Hidden*, 105-79; *I See Satan Fall*, 1-102.

<sup>41</sup> See, in particular, Girard, *The Scapegoat*, *Things Hidden* and *I See Satan Fall*.

<sup>42</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, 103-160. There are two important themes that Girard particularly highlights about the New Testament that shows the Christian perspective on violence. Firstly, he discusses the New Testament’s awareness of the mimetic violence of the mob that seeks a victim. For example, Girard says the “two words, *without cause*, [from the Book of Psalms and Gospel of John] marvellously describe the behaviour of human packs” (Ibid., 128). Girard also highlights a text from Acts of the Apostles that shows the ignorance of the mob in violence: “Now I know, brothers, that neither you nor your leaders had any

Alison, a theologian who has appropriated Girard's work, claims that Jesus provides a new consciousness to humanity by building a new form of mimetic identity and communion:

The intelligence of the victim [in Jesus] comes from a freedom in giving oneself to others, in not being moved by the violence of others, even when it perceives that this free self-giving is going to be lynched as a result. ... He [Jesus] taught people how to loosen themselves from relationships of violence with each other, where their personalities were constituted by the reciprocal give and take of that violence, and instead start to side with the victims and those who can easily be victimized, even though, as an inevitable consequence of this breaking out of the violent determinism of the world, they would be liable to become victims themselves.<sup>43</sup>

Girard is quite honest about how the mimetic insight developed organically: "... indeed I am neither an expert nor a 'synthesizer.' I never intended to be transdisciplinary. The single insight that dominates my work is doing it for me. I follow it wherever it takes me."<sup>44</sup> Girard's work increasingly stood at odds with some significant trends in post-modern theory and some notable treatments of desire.<sup>45</sup> Yet, some of its criticism is due to misunderstanding of the apparent pretensions of Girard's work. Alison describes Girard's insight in this way:

... that rather than being one of the *idees generales* or *systemes*, which Grasset erroneously imputes to Girard on the back cover of the *livre de poche* edition of *Des choses caches*, mimetic theory is first of all a very small understanding or insight, a little glimpse of a *sagesse* that is of almost infinite application; such is its flexibility. It is both a simple and a very difficult idea, precisely because it is only insofar as one allows it to illuminate one's own relationships that it yields anything. It is thus very different from systems of thought which impose a straight-jacket on thinkers who become involved in them and which can be grasped intellectually without involving the subject in some sort of conversion at the level of desire. It will be apparent that such an idea—involving an insight into human desire, a hypothesis about hominization and the founding of human social life, and an awareness of our being structured by violence and death—cries out to be questioned.<sup>46</sup>

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idea of what you were really doing" (Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 111). Secondly, Girard highlights the Gospels' realisation of Jesus' conscious and purposeful sacrifice in which he accepted death on a cross *for* humanity. Jesus' words on the Cross, "Forgive them for they know not what they do" (Gospel of Luke 23:34), highlights the burgeoning Christian consciousness of the victim (and of the real nature of human life) in forgiveness and the mob's amnesia in violence.

<sup>43</sup> James Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, new ed. (London: SPCK, 1998), 45.

<sup>44</sup> Girard in Golsan, *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction* (New York, NY & London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 139)

<sup>45</sup> Some feminist scholars critique Girard's view of mimetic desire as masculine in that the violence of the mob is primarily an action of males. Further, these scholars attempt to place the oppression of women as prior to the victimage cycle (Golsan, *René Girard and Myth*, 113-6). Girard (in Golsan, *René Girard and Myth*, 141-6) rejects this by saying that males and females share the same mimetic nature and engage in the same mimetic rivalries and scapegoating. Females can participate in the cycles of mimetic rivalry and violence in different ways to men, but the underlying cause of oppression and victimisation is not male power but the mimetic desires that lead both men and women to distortedly seek relationship and unity through blame and scapegoating.

<sup>46</sup> James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 21.

Thus, Girard's discovery of mimetic desire does not form the basis for a system to be applied but is an insight that calls for dialogue, questioning and exploration in human experience.<sup>47</sup>

One of the most important contributions of the mimetic insight, which Kirwan highlights, is how it releases human beings and their cultures and stories from violence and victimisation.<sup>48</sup> Girard's insights provide a way of interpreting the human story *with* the victim, i.e., in coming to know and inhabit the human story from the side of the victim rather than the mob. Girard's insights offer a way of reading texts and cultures through the recognition of the victim. It is a way that deconstructs human lies and facades by revealing their motivation and cover up: the violent mimesis that makes victims. James Alison has this to say about the implications of Girard's "mimetic" idea:

... the idea can only be made present as the undoing of the various forms of sacrificial cover-up to which our texts and stories are prone. The idea just *is* the gradual, and contingent, undoing of lies. There is no 'idea' without the contemporary putting of it into practice as a detection of sacrificial structure and the learning to tell a different story.<sup>49</sup>

Girard is concerned with the uncovering of the "victimage mechanism" and the consequences of mimetic desire in human culture, particularly as it is manifested in story.<sup>50</sup> This uncovering can only occur as it is put into practice in people's lives in order to tell a "different story". Therefore, the unmasking of victimisation and distorted desire is not solely an academic exercise where the object is analysed and dissected. This process engages both the critic and the object of inquiry in a mutual relationship of uncovering. Alison describes the dynamics of this process:

There is, for me, at least, a terrible stripping away involved here. In the degree in which we start learning to tell the new story, sing the new song, we find that we cannot do so except from being contemporary with, and that means being involved in, the emergence of truth in the midst of the violent lie. And there is no way of being involved with that from the position of the wise and serene spectator. As we learn to read texts and tell stories from the point of view of the random victim, so we have to learn actually to inhabit the violence of the movement, involved alongside, and in solidarity with such people. And we have to do so without ever losing the sense that the violence is random, and thus that it is not because we are 'special' that we are undergoing it.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The mimetic insight has been discussed, examined and summarised in numerous books, journals and popular media, including in anthropology, psychology, literary-criticism, theology, classical studies (eg. a *Helios* volume in 1990), and biblical studies. See, for example, G. Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1995); C. Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004); M. Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2009); J-M. Oughourlian, *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*, trans. E. Webb (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1991); *The Genesis of Desire*, trans. E. Webb (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press; 2010); R. Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. M.L. Assad (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, & New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000); S. Simonse, *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centalism and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1992).

<sup>48</sup> M. Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), 119.

<sup>49</sup> James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (London, UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001), 162.

<sup>50</sup> Girard, *Things Hidden*, 134-138.

<sup>51</sup> Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 164-5.

## CONSCIENCE, THE SELF AND THE VICTIM

Therefore, Girard's thought offers interesting possibilities for the understanding of human experiences and stories of violence. These possibilities were realised for me, as a scholar, as I engaged with the story of the East Timorese; a story of brutal oppression and violence coupled with a deepening sense of Christian faith. Their story offers a chance to engage with those who stood "in the midst of the real circumstances of victimage" and understand how they learnt to identify and stand with the victim.<sup>52</sup> For example, Alexandro's story seems to exemplify the movement of standing over against the victim to standing with the victim, though it contains the ambiguous element of his own violence. Although Alexandro's violence in defence of the victims of the regime could be justified and not necessarily sinful (in an objective sense), Alexandro still identified a problem with violence and killing, and saw a solution in Christ.

The "stripping away" that Alison discusses is what I argue Alexandro was undergoing as he came to recognise the innocence of the victim through his faith in Jesus Christ. Through his faith, he could identify, firstly, the innocence of those Timorese being killed as victims of state-sanctioned mob violence; and secondly, he could even identify the movement of violence as itself deficient, especially when taking a life, even when defending the innocent. Alexandro was repenting of a violent world in which he became embroiled; one that led him to undertake an evil act—one that he came to recognise as against his own nature and faith—in defence of the innocent. Why Alexandro began to see events in this way is related to his Christian faith. The mark of Christianity, according to Girard, is its deconstruction of all victimisation, i.e., it is no longer possible even to victimise the victimiser, which is a popular occupation in the modern world so concerned with defending victims as a new "sacred" category of scapegoating.<sup>53</sup> Alexandro, then, saw his act as potentially constructing a new enemy out of the outrage of the regime targeting innocent victims for death. Instead of participating in that kind of mimetic blame-game, he acknowledged those whom he had killed as human beings, who had engaged in unjustifiable violence, but still human beings who it was lamentable to have killed. Though he knew he defended the innocent, Alexandro resisted the temptation to justify his actions (and catalyse more violence) by victimising the victimisers, even as the Timorese emerged as victors. He could only see the killers, whom he had killed, as humans caught in a violent world who lost their lives to his own lamentable violence.

In this way, the matter required not only reconciliation between Alexandro and the deceased, but more fundamentally, between Alexandro and God. God was seen as the one who could overcome the violence that had infected Alexandro and give reconciliation with the deceased. This does not seem to be an appeal made just because Alexandro required forgiveness. Alexandro's crisis and actions were initially motivated by his faith and knowledge in God through Christ. Without a sensitive conscience (which was, according to his testimony, directed toward Christ), he seemingly would have not been so concerned with his violence. In other words, his crisis was based on the awareness his faith brought

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>53</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, 161-9. According to Girard, the last category of justified or sacred violence is when unanimous or collective violence is undertaken against someone seen to be victimising another, e.g., a war criminal, paedophile, etc. This victimisation of the victimiser is a distortion of the Christian awareness of the victim that re-institutes the power of scapegoating.

for him that motivated his desire for repentance, rather than beginning with an imagined need for healing. As the only one who had demonstrably overcome and healed the wounds of violence and death with his self-giving love, God was regarded as providing the means for reconciliation within oneself and with others.

But in what way did Alexandro's faith really motivate his moral judgements? How did these judgements develop from his own conscience and consciousness of violence? How did they lead him to repent? Alexandro was seemingly motivated by the moral wrong he felt in regards to killing. He was able to identify what he regarded as a sin (against those he killed) because he saw it as a sin against God, particularly in the light of Christ. Larry Hurtado, a scholar of early Christian studies, provides a perspective on this Christian moral agency as he argues that one of the major break-throughs in early Christianity was to imbue its adherents with a sense of being responsible moral agents.<sup>54</sup> He discusses this moral agency in the situation of slavery. Under Roman law, the master could do anything he wanted with his slaves. Slaves were regarded merely as bodies for the master's use. Hurtado notes the interesting phenomenon of conversion of Roman masters and slaves to Christianity, either independently or together, which placed new obligations and responsibilities on the lives of both the non-Jewish master and slave, such as in their relations to each other. Masters and slaves were no longer part of a divinely-inspired social hierarchy, but were now "children of God" which placed new moral requirements on each convert particularly in the treatment of one's neighbour.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, becoming part of the Christian Church involved a special type of conversion that meant its members had to disengage from some important social practices and obligations. It disrupted familial and social structures which relied for order on regular devotion to certain gods. It presented particular problems for the master-slave relationship, especially if one of the parties was not Christian. In the case of the slave, if his/her master was not Christian, he/she had to defy the master in the central and defining practice of the household—religious devotion and ritual practice. In the case of the master, he/she had to re-evaluate and change the religious practices and relationships of his/her household.

Hurtado argues that the conventional cultural and legal system behind the rights and relationships of masters and slaves was superseded by Christian values. Hurtado claims that the faith of the early Christians in one God and Lord, which did not have any major social advantages in the early period of Christianity and was seemingly motivated

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<sup>54</sup> The following discussion of Hurtado's work is based on a series of lectures he gave in Brisbane, Australia, in 2007 and an unpublished paper transmitted to the author. See L.W. Hurtado, "Social and Political Consequences of Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity" [Recorded Lecture] (Brisbane, Qld: Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane, July 28, 2007); "Freed by Love and for Love: Freedom in the New Testament," (Unpublished paper, used with permission, 2007). Cf. L.W. Hurtado, *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> These moral requirements were a result in a radical shift in worldview about God and neighbour. For example, Hurtado relates that conversion to a religious group such as the early Christian Church was regarded as scandalous because it did not follow the Roman social and religious conventions. Conversion meant adherence to an exclusive God who was said to be revealed by a murdered criminal. Hurtado says that in Roman times it was quite acceptable to worship a god whom one had not previously worshipped. However, it was unprecedented that in changing one's religious adherence and worship that one had to forsake all other gods or other religious practices. This kind of conversion resulted in a major change in the lives and practices of those who converted to Christianity.

by a life-altering experience, became the basis for an appeal to the Christian's moral conscience.<sup>56</sup> For example, the letter to the Ephesians appeals to *both* master and slave to become moral agents exercising their moral judgement toward each other and acting according to a standard consistent with their faith (cf. Eph 6:5-9). The letter makes the same plea to children and parents to become faithful moral agents in accordance with Christ, their new Lord, so that they can stand as fully human beings true to their nature revealed by Christ and not as violent and hurtful of each other (cf. Eph 6:1-4). It appeals to both those in power—masters and parents—and those who are not—slaves and children—to make their own moral judgments and actions according to their faith, not the society around them: "... as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women" (Eph 6:6-7).

The letter appealed to the Christian Ephesians not to conform their behaviour to those around them or to their conflicting desires that lead them to scandal and conflict. Instead, he asks them to focus their efforts on God "from the heart" as slaves to Christ (who is loving and crucified servant) in order to live and serve God and other humans enthusiastically. It was this transcendent dimension—the love of Christ—that moved the Christians into new moral judgments and actions.

Moral consciousness and action, then, is inherently relational; and in the undoing of negative forms of relationality through Christ, new conscientious awareness can grow of the relation between self and other. Thus, according to Hurtado, the strong identification of the early Christians (both Jew and Gentile) with Christ enabled a new moral agency that was different from the conventional cultural system. The impetus to be like Christ (as he revealed the true nature of divinity and humanity), particularly the attempt to love in a way that imitated the perfect love of Christ, became the basis for this new moral agency, which was open and applicable to all, whether one was powerful or not: "... knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free" (Eph 6:8).

Complementary to Hurtado's view, Girard shows how the transcendent quality of Christ's love expressed in his victimhood—as seeking the good of the other (self-giving mimesis), rather than seeking to take what the other had or is (acquisitive mimesis)—undermined conventional morality based on scapegoating and distorted desire, and provided a new kind of other as moral centre. The early Christians become focused on a new reciprocity based on relationship with Jesus, rather than on the violence of the other (or the mythic gods). The basis of this relationship, which gives a new moral perspective, is faith in the person and way of Jesus, who shows how to be human in mimetic relationship with God by receiving divine love, not imposing violent punishment.

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<sup>56</sup> Hurtado, "Social and Political Consequences of Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity"; "Freed by Love and for Love: Freedom in the New Testament"; In an extensive study, Hurtado also argues that the basic substance of Christianity – in the worship of Jesus as divine revealer and mediator of God – was evident from the beginnings of Christian worship [L.W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2003)]. Hurtado calls the highly unusual emergence of Christianity with its strange ideas and practices, many of which contrasted to the standards of the time, a fast-acting "mutation" [L.W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1998)].

But can we say that Alexandro's actions are the result of a new moral agency or rather something common to humanity? In other words, is he really motivated by a faith in Christ that differs from the conventional view that existed around him? Clearly, his actions differed from his fellow soldiers in defending rather than attacking innocent civilians. Furthermore, Alexandro was grappling with a deep restlessness in his conscience over taking another's life. While he may have been morally justified to act as he did, the implications of killing a human being were almost overwhelming for him, particularly as he had killed soldiers acting on the orders of a violent regime. Yet, in the forgiveness he experienced from God, he was able to see past and be freed from the violent order that was being imposed by the Indonesian military as well as his own participation in it. His ability to recognise the deficiencies of violence, particularly the temptations to reciprocate violence in mimetic rivalry, is linked by his actions and words to his Christian faith. Alexandro's faith seemed to motivate him to defy the violence of this social order by defending the innocent and, even more revealing, repent of his own violence.

As Alexandro's case shows, this repentance is particularly important in resisting mimetic rivalry, which moves humans towards justifying death. Alexandro could have used his story to justify himself and present it as a tool against the Indonesian regime to scandalise others. Instead of descending into mimetic rivalry by victimising the victimisers with his fellow Timorese, he repented of the violence he had done, even though it was done for a good cause. Thus, in mourning and repenting of the fatal act he had committed, Alexandro was also repenting of the temptation to justify, blame and scapegoat, i.e., to participate in the mimetic cycles of violence. While his guilt may have been excessive, Alexandro was in the process of becoming aware that any kind of violence, even defensive violence, reflects a lamentable breakdown in human relations; one that, even when intervening with the best intentions, is unstable and can lead to further mimetic rivalry. Only with an awareness of the deficient, unstable and dangerous nature of violence, and the need for something more to heal human relations (i.e., divine forgiveness that overcomes all violence) can one come to terms with the violent world and one's participation in it, which is the basis for repentance and conversion.

As discussed, Alexandro correlates his moral judgements, sense of the innocent victim and remorse with his faith. Hurtado says that the new sense of moral agency emanating from Christian faith comes about as people recognise and submit to God who is identified and experienced as crucified and risen in Christ. In the same way, I argue Alexandro is developing and exercising moral agency through his faith that enables his recognition of the innocence of those suffering violence by identifying them with Christ. Thus, his Christian faith seemed to enable him to see beyond the violence of his job and institution—beyond the violence of the mob and even beyond his own violence, which was a temptation to rivalry. But this moral agency required a difficult choice about how to act and, as the letter to the Ephesians says, exercise moral judgement according to his conscience formed and informed by Christ.

However, it could be said that Alexandro only changed sides to assist his native people. One could make this claim, except for the actions of Alexandro after he violently defended his people. While the identification with his native people may have assisted his judgement, Alexandro's Christian faith helped him not only to see beyond the violence of others but also to recognise his own violence, admit that it was deficient, and seek

forgiveness and reconciliation. He did not see his actions against his fellow soldiers as victorious acts for the victory of his people. They were defensive acts but he still recognised that they were deficient. He did not regard the Indonesian soldiers as his “enemy” but as people he had hurt. He didn’t run away from his regret and pain through more violence or blame but he sought healing and reconciliation, beyond the violence of the world, through sacramentally receiving God’s forgiveness earnestly and in good conscience. In confessing his sin and being forgiven, Alexandro said he experienced being freed and given peace.<sup>57</sup> This former soldier believed that despite what he had done he could be forgiven. He could let go of the regret and fear that consumed him as well as the violence and pain that acted as a stumbling block to his relationship with God and others. He said he could do this because he experienced and believed in the love of God, made present through Christ in the Church, which made it possible to be reconciled internally and relationally in a non-violent way.

Drawing on William Cavanaugh’s terminology, I argue Alexandro is acting out of what I would begin to define as a Christian “imagination” that is anthropologically grounded in the direction that faith gives.<sup>58</sup> In the Christian sense, faith is not a substitute for knowledge but a direction given to one’s life in order to cope with the business and meaning of being human.<sup>59</sup> Through Girard’s insights, this faith can be seen to have an anthropological character: it is faith *in* Jesus as self-giving victim that is the revelation of both God and humanity. The distinctive character of this imagination seems to be that it acts on behalf of the victimised and repents of its own violence. Both the characteristics are evident in Alexandro’s story, in which his faith motivated his moral consciousness. His Christian faith was clearly decisive in his action on behalf of those being targeted by the military and his coming to terms with his own use of violence. It is important to note that it was not necessary for Alexandro having protected those innocent people to then feel regret or remorse for his actions. Moreover, Alexandro took a grave risk in turning on his fellow soldiers and deserting his army post. Alexandro’s sympathy for his people combined with his Christian faith seemed to motivate him to overcome his concerns for himself. These concerns were outweighed by the moral imperative he felt to protect the innocent, and later, were again outweighed by the way he evaluated his actions.

Alexandro’s remorse and process of conversion were even more remarkable given he was eventually part of the winning side. Even though the Indonesians were driven out of East Timor, Alexandro did not feel joy at being part of the winning side. On the other hand, he did not owe anything to the Indonesians or his fellow soldiers. Yet, his conscience informed by this faith was in crisis. The desire for victory and power and the need to restore cultural balance and order through violence, such as that demonstrated by the Indonesian regime, contrasted to Alexandro’s actions and motivations. By putting his life at risk and then repenting from his violence, Alexandro showed he was not acting in his own interests, but sought freedom from violence in Christ. Therefore, Alexandro’s moral agency was enabled by his mimetic relationship with Christ, i.e., by his giving up his violent self and seeking reconciliation with God. In other words, Alexandro was handing over his mimetic identity to God by subjectively and mimetically identifying himself with

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<sup>57</sup> The following is taken from the interview with Alexandro.

<sup>58</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 41.

Christ, rather than hold onto and justify his false self. This identification has affinities with the loss of the “romantic self” in conversion, discussed earlier in the essay. In relation to Christ, Alexandro recognised the hurt he had inflicted on himself and others by participating in violence and the possibility for forgiveness, which enabled him to empty himself of justifications for that self. As Alexandro learned to tell his story (as Alison puts it), i.e., to repent and change, he learned to give up on a false sense of self justified in mimetic violence and was opened to new forms of relationality in the gratuitous forgiveness and love of Christ. It was this freely-offered forgiveness - from the other who had lovingly exposed the violence of the world - that allowed Alexandro to feel liberated from the reciprocity of violence and the despair of being part of it; and as he expressed it, build a new life for others, particularly his family, with an awareness of what violence and death meant.

By exploring Alexandro’s story with the help of Girard’s insights, this essay has examined how Christian faith can strip away the allure of violence. In particular, faith can inform human action to stand with the victim as well as initiate repentance from violence. Alexandro’s repentance was structured by his developing moral conscience, grounded in the growth of a new self, not bound to violence, and stimulated by a movement of faith in God. Alexandro’s journey of conversion involved moving through the implications of God’s subversion of human mimetic violence by placing himself in the space of gratuitous forgiveness.

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