

Some theological considerations...

A position paper for the meeting
of the expanded Imitatio Research Committee

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Thank you very much for agreeing to include Theology in the agenda for this meeting. It is a risky business trying to include such a slippery customer in research discussions, but as Jean-Pierre demonstrated in his position paper, the links between MT and Divine Revelation are just there. His three points encapsulate this perfectly.

- a) A science of Man is possible;
- b) God exists;
- c) Man has access to the science of Man via God's Revelation.

Points (a) and (c) of this would produce, I have little doubt, at least as much of a shock in many anglophone theology departments as the full threesome would in many other faculties. So please allow me to start with a brief working definition of my discipline, and forgive me if I am teaching my grandmother to suck eggs.

In classic terms, the discipline which the Catholic Church (to talk merely about my home turf) understands as theology (as opposed to theodicy, philosophy of religion, or religious studies) is strictly only possible as a response to *Deus Revelans*. That is to say, it is the rigorous and ordered study both of *what has been revealed* and thereafter of *everything that is* strictly in the light of God who reveals. Please notice that this means that theology is in the first place not a discipline in which humans attempt to discover something about a relatively inert distant object about which it is difficult to know anything – i.e. “God”. The presupposition of Theology is that it is, as a discipline, a small but important subsection of God's continuing self-communication to all people. Furthermore it presupposes that the One who is “pushing” this discipline, the discipline's protagonist as it were, is God, not the humans who become theologians. It is God who wishes to share a certain *scientia* about God's-self and about everything that is with humans. We are, as it were, the relatively inert distant objects which are, as it happens, being invited into this form of knowing, thus becoming subjects, and we tend to be resistant to the

invitation (for all the reasons which produce the “méconnaissance” which is so central to MT, as Jean-Pierre points out). We are not so much searchers as ones who are being found, and our (I hope) rigorous intellectual contemplation and handing-on is the form our being-found takes in the case of those who are called to be practitioners of this discipline.

You can see, I hope, why Jean-Pierre’s phrase “Man has access to the science of Man via God’s Revelation” would have rejoiced St Thomas Aquinas’ heart!

There are of course many sub-sections of the discipline of Theology: Biblical Theology, Moral Theology, Spiritual Theology, Political Theology, Philosophical Theology, Dogmatic Theology etc. and practitioners in these spheres are well represented among us. Nevertheless, it is from the more generic understanding of theology that I have given above that I will be working in the rest of this position paper.

What I would like to do is point to some of the areas of my discipline (and this could not be an exhaustive list) where the conjunction of MT and Theology offer huge opportunities and challenges to us in and as Imitatio.

1. God

We are very lucky to be coming on the scene as Imitatio at a time when the atheist popularizers (Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens et al) have shot their wad. Finally, what has been a sort of background of surliness surrounding the God “question” has been brought out into the open, and the supposed intellectual superiority and greater attunement to modernity of atheism has been shown to depend just as much on cultural positioning, bad arguments and histrionics as anything that believers have come up with through the ages. So far, many of the responses to such writing have been delivered from within the same set of presuppositions as the “new atheists”, though a recent book by Anthony Flew¹, formerly the grand old man of British Atheism, in which he expresses belief in God, is obviously at an entirely different level.

It seems to me that what we can bring to this discussion from MT in a creative and non-reactive way (and therefore, when the time is ripe), are

¹ *There is a God: how the world’s most notorious atheist changed his mind (2007)*

two central insights, one which is a core tenet of MT and one which is its inexorable result.

The core tenet: ‘we desire according to the desire of the other’ (RG), or ‘the desire of the other is prior to the “self” of any of us’ (J-MO). Translated theologically, this enables us to make a distinction between the “social other” (i.e. everything that is on the same level as us, human and material), and the “other Other” whose desire is prior to anything that is.

The inexorable result of time spent with MT: the requirement of any of us working in MT to make the effort *at least to imagine* non-rivalistic desire (even if with enormous difficulty, and very rarely able to be instantiated).

The conjunction of these two enables us to add flesh to the traditional apophatic description of God as “not on the same level as anything that is” (“*extra ordinem entium existentium*”) by exploring how “not on the same level as” can function as an equivalent to “not in rivalry with” which begins to sound like an understanding of Grace: an anterior desire which brings what is into being and is not in rivalry with it in any way, and thus is able to move what is without displacing it.

It seems to me that MT offers the possibility of a far richer engagement with recovering a non-Deist, non-mentalist way of talking about God because at its centre is the realisation *at a completely non-mystical, properly anthropological level* that the “weight”, the “centre”, the “rock” of the existence of any of us is (a) anterior, prior to any of us; and (b) works through the creation or recreation of patterns of desire of which we are much more the symptoms than the originators. This enables us to recover a sense of what is meant by the term “Creator”.

2. Catechesis and Spirituality

One of the “success stories” of the impact of MT, again often outside strictly academic compounds, but with considerable academic overlap as J-P.D has noted, has been the outworking of the possibilities which are raised for basic education in matters of faith by the bringing together of four elements, all of which derive directly from the writings of RG:

a) Girard-inspired re-readings of the death of Christ, which open up an understanding of Atonement that is a genuinely grace-filled creative act coming towards, and for, us, not a form of violence imputed to God;

b) The realisation of the way in which the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism causes us to reimagine all moral categories, thus permitting a basic Christian catechesis which is not a form of moralism wedded to a sacrifice;

c) An understanding of the spiritual life which is principally concerned with the way the desire of the “other Other” can transform and replace the pattern of desire formed by the “social other” in this body over time (usually known as a “self”). This sets people free from the individualist and folk-psychology presuppositions of much of what is made available in the burgeoning field of “spirituality” (I have found J-M.O, P.Dumouchel and H. Grivois especially useful here, but it is also increasingly evident how much neuroscience might bring to this field);

d) Enormously enhanced possibilities of reading and making sense of the Scriptures – to this latter I will develop an entire section. I include it here as well, since in addition to more substantive hermeneutical questions, the speed and delight with which lay people and clergy engaged in basic teaching find that Scripture as read through a Girardian perspective (i) makes much more sense of texts for themselves; (ii) relates directly to their lives without falling into literalism or fundamentalism; and (iii) is preachable; speaks for itself;

Each of these elements have, in a sense, developed haphazardly through the contagion and impact of the sense of truth-telling which RG’s writings produce in its “uptakers”. It seems to me that, as *Imitatio*, we have a responsibility to enable these catechetical tools to be developed more fully.

3. Reading Scripture

Again, we are in a privileged position as regards the current state of affairs in the study of scripture, for reasons both internal and external to *Imitatio*: internally, RG has given us many examples of luminous readings of Scripture of the sort which, once understood cannot be gone back on. These have been amplified as well by Raymund Schwager, Jim Williams, RHK, Sandy Goodhart, Norbert Lohfink and others too numerous to mention, all of whom have brought, and continue to bring, to what appears to some Biblical Scholars to be a sort of “secondary naïveté” in RG’s handling of the texts, the full weight of a thorough expertise in their respective branches of scholarship. So those of us who

pursue Reading Scripture in a Girardian manner do so standing on the shoulders of giants.

The external reasons for our privileged position, in as far as one who is not a Scripture scholar can describe them, is the extent to which in the discipline at large a number of factors are coming together. First, I would say, is the increasing awareness of just how much of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Septuagint underlie virtually every passage of the New Testament, thus putting into question a whole generation of interpreters who have read the NT as dependent on Hellenistic or Roman models for understanding Christ as God. In other words, it is becoming much more plausible to understand how the NT bears witness to Jesus being YHWH; A second factor is the growing awareness of quite how important the “hermeneutical turn” is in reading Scripture: it is not so much “what does the text say” but “how do you read it?”, and even more importantly for those of us involved in MT, “through whose eyes do you read it?” that is the central question. To the consternation of some (but by no means all) in the academy, for whom study of scriptural texts had been wedded to positivist notions of objectivity, it is becoming increasingly clear that to study the texts “in themselves” without rigorous attention to the hermeneutic question is to be as prone to “eisegesis” as the simplest *Curé de campagne*, but with the disadvantage of taking one’s own self-deliveries much more seriously.

With these twin factors, it has become increasingly possible for both Jewish and Christian readers to recover a sense of our texts as “ecclesial” (in the broadest sense) and to start to take much more seriously our respective “ecclesial” starting points *and hoped-for points of arrival* when reading the texts. In other words, what once looked like “secondary naïveté” or “a return to mediaeval exegesis” is now beginning to look much more rigorous and professional.

This leaves us in a very advantageous position, since the question of the “perspectival” nature of all texts and yet the objectivity and truth-bearing nature of the reading from the perspective of the victim is, and always has been, absolutely central to our enterprise.

It is in the light of this that I would suggest that two major tasks await *Imitatio*’s more theological branch:

- 1) To come up with a fully worked out account of what might be meant by “fulfilment of the Scriptures” or “fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets” which demonstrates how the Passion of the one who was given

the name of YHWH is Latent in the Hebrew Scriptures and Patent in the NT, but which is neither supersessionist nor anti-semitic: in other words to flesh out very rigorously the notion of a definitive and living interpretative key to the Scriptures

2) To undertake, as a group project, something like a Bible Commentary series, or perhaps a Lectionary Commentary series – (something which I am constantly being asked for, but could not conceivably do justice to by myself) – which will be working from the understanding that the “Scriptures” are the Hebrew Scriptures, and the NT is the Apostolic Witness to the Living Interpretative Principle which fulfils, and enables ongoing fulfilment of, the Scriptures

(N.B. I apologise for treading well outside my area of expertise and expect to be thoroughly shot down on this)

My next four points are very closely interrelated, so I will try to describe what I see as four different dimensions of the same (ecclesiological) problem very briefly.

4. Ecclesiology

Achever Clausewitz breaks new ground in all sorts of ways, but one of the things it does is to make it impossible for theological readers of Girard to put off any longer facing up to the question of ecclesiology. RG makes clear that he regards the Church as in some sense *ratée*. While this is not in itself a scandalous notion for a Catholic theologian to work with, it is certainly a positive challenge for people like me to come up with some plausible account of the relationship between the Divine project of bringing a new way of being human into being by undoing the scapegoat mechanism from within, and the historical working out of that project. In other words, to come up with a realistic (and not a self-serving) account of the relationship between the in-breaking of the Kingdom and the historically situated group of people who both to some degree bear witness to that in-breaking, and yet who, time after time fail to grasp it completely, or even bear a remarkable counter-witness to it.

To those who sit lightly to the notion of Church this might seem unnecessary. Nevertheless, as humans we are brought into being by bodies, respond as bodies to other bodies, and expect the “Other other” to work through the “social other” as well as to judge and to transform it. So, the chance to work on RG’s opening out of a post-Hegelian account

of modernity and see how it can help make the all-too-apparent gap between “Catholicité” and “Realkatholizismus” less scandalous is something of far too great a potential impact on how the faithful live the reality of “Church” to be left aside for long.

5. Secularity

A further challenge of RG’s thought in the theological sphere, and one with which we theologians need a lot of help, is in developing an account of two dimensions of RG’s thought which appear to be opposed to each other, but in reality, I suspect, produce each other. This is the challenge of being able to come up both with a relatively benign account of the emergence of “secularity” as the proper, and to-be-expected, outworking of the Divine undoing-from-within of the victimage mechanism (cf in different ways, the writings of Cesáreo Bandera and Paul Dumouchel), and yet show how this is related to and fits within, the properly eschatological and apocalyptic element of RG’s understanding, especially as recently fleshed out more fully in *Achever Clausewitz* – the element of “montée aux extrêmes”. The challenge of giving (if you will forgive the paradox) a *robust* account of the *fragility* of a certain benign secularity seems more than ever important now. The temptation for religiously minded people to be swept into a purely negative view of secularity just at the same time as a certain secularity seems to have deluded itself that it can co-opt the remnants of the primitive sacred without itself being co-opted by them, is too dangerous for Imitatio not to put our best foot forward in this field.

6. Self-critical institutionalality

Any realistic account of Ecclesiology (see 4 above) runs into the same problem as any account of the workings of institutions of any sort: as humans we are dependent on institutional life, without institutions there would not be human life as we have come to know it, so they are not in principle an evil thing. Yet, there is an omnipresent sacrificial dynamic to the life of institutions, such that they co-opt, drive and “run” their members and dependents in all sorts of ways which are at odds with their manifest function. In other words there is an inertia which controls people, often *à leur insu*, or with only a partial awareness on their part, and this inertia can become radically opposed to the well-being of humans – it is capable of a dangerous “runaway” which gets more dangerous and less easy to reform the bigger and more complex the institutions become.

Given that it is our claim that we are unpacking the Science of Man to which we have access through Divine Revelation, should there not be some way in which part of that Science of Man includes the possibility of enabling what I call “self-critical institutionality”? That is to say, can we begin to have access to regularly available sociological resources and intelligence such that we become able *as insiders* to detect the runaway sacrificial dynamics at work in our institutions, and transform them from within, rather than depending on military or political defeat, financial ruin, or despised whistleblowers being agreed to have been the truth-tellers a generation later (i.e. the voice of the victim), to enable us to recognise our mistakes and enable those who have survived to move on?

What would a perpetually penitent self-critical account of institutionality look like in terms that would be clearly comprehensible at a sociological and anthropological level?

7. Faith and Reason

Papa Ratzinger’s main point in his famous Regensburg address of 2006, leaving aside his infamous hostage to fortune, is well taken: there is at the heart of the Christian understanding of God the realisation that Faith in the goodness of the Creator, in whom there is no violence at all, works as an enabler of reason which in turn opens up the possibility of us learning much more about our world, ourselves, and God. Thus reason itself is empowered to become a critical agent within the gift of faith, and at times is even able to discover that things which appeared to be from God cannot in fact be from God, since they do not contribute to what we can objectively learn from observation to be the good of humans. Thus faith enables reason to become properly critical of what imprisons people under the guise of being “revelation”, but is merely the old violent sacred.

So far so good. What RG has offered us, and it seems to me that we must take much further, is the beginnings of an account of why the little argument which I have just sketched out, with gratitude to BXVI for highlighting its importance, is not some categorial deduction, but the properly anthropological outworking of a real possibility of growth in human knowledge made available in the degree to which the overcoming of the scapegoat mechanism works itself out in our midst (cf for example what RG has to say about overcoming the burning of witches). An anthropological account, in short, of how the Passion and what it unleashed are not accidentally but intrinsically related to the human process of discovery of What Really Is.

In other words, it is not good enough for us (theologians, Christians) to bleat, somewhat repetitively “there is no conflict between faith and reason” which while true, is useless. For it to be usefully true, we have to come up with an account of how, in fact, we have learned to be reasonable through faith, and can continue so to learn. And that means an honest and self-critical account of areas in which what we thought holy turned out not to be so, but to be a remnant of a primitive sacred, and how what at first seemed to us like an attack on our “faith” turned out to be the deepest outworkings of the inner dynamic of our faith to which we were oblivious, and into which we were drawn only with great reluctance and sense of loss.

The proper risk and humility attaching to this, is that any such account of what we have learned in the past will also serve as a probably unwelcome criterion for the present – in other words, not something of which we can be proud, but something before which we are accountable. Nevertheless what I’m talking about here is not, if what both RG and BXVI say is true, an optional extra for apologetic purposes, but a central, unavoidable and distinctive part of the whole adventure of undergoing God’s revelation.

8. Uniqueness vs Exclusivity

Finally, there is the question which I very much hope will be raised with much more knowledge of cause by other participants in our session: what we might call “the interreligious question”, particularly as it applies to our relationship with the realities covered by the term “Islam”.

One of the strongest points of MT is that it has made available a new and very strong case both for the uniqueness of the revelation of the forgiving victim and for its universal cultural applicability.

It is also central to MT that it makes the case for the non-exclusive nature of God’s love and project – precisely in our learning to detect how our ways of excluding are outworkings of a victimary mechanism.

And yet to the ordinary rivalistic way of thinking, the words “unique” and “exclusive” are interchangeable. If something makes a claim to uniqueness, ipso facto it is exclusive.

How do we hold onto the tension whereby we don’t understand the uniqueness in such a way that we give up on the non-exclusive bit (the

“conservative” temptation), and we don’t understand the non-exclusive dimension in such a way that we give up on the uniqueness bit (the “liberal” temptation)?

At least in part (to go back to my first point, about God), at question here is our imagination of Grace, of how we imagine Someone Else doing something for us, that doesn’t depend on us, and of which we, just as much as anyone we might exclude, are recipients rather than owners; and when we exclude them, we don’t learn through interaction with them, and thus won’t receive the fulness of what is in fact something entirely unique.

It seems to me that we have a huge task ahead of us in rethinking the uniqueness of what we are being given in such a way that neither in the way we receive it nor in the way that we present it does it become a covert form of building up a new “we” over against a “they”.

I am well aware, as no doubt are we all, of the ease with which Christianity, which of its nature should be a constant giving away of too small an identity so as to receive a much bigger one, can, strictly by acquisitive mimesis, gain a stronger identity by defining itself over against, and therefore in the terms of reference of, an apparently resurgent Islam.

It seems to me that Imitatio has a major role in making sure that we don’t succumb completely to this terrible temptation.

James Alison
Solemnity of the Assumption
Mexico City, August 2008