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Reflective Mimesis and Sacrifice in the Mimetic Theory of Rene Girard

Abstract: The judgement of king Solomon recorded in the First book of the kings, chapter three, is for the great literary critic, Rene Girard a paradigm of the difference between the pre-Christic and Christic cultures of sacrifice. The former is characterized by unanimous violence or scapegoating against the innocent, while the latter is a creative renunciation of violence to save the innocent. The Christic culture of sacrifice according Girard, is informed by the Cross and built on the principles of the mimetic theory, namely, mimetic desire. Mimetic desire is the unconscious, involuntary and uncontrollable driving force of human events. Unfortunately, creative renunciation of the will to violence understood as the Christic form of sacrifice, involves a mental reflection that is inconsistent with the mimetic theory. This paper presents the reflective mimesis as a necessary prerequisite for the renunciation of the will towards violence. It is an ethical disposition informed by the cross and built on a rational expression of mimesis. The sacrifice that is informed by the action of the cross is premeditated and not spontaneous.

Key words: Mimetic desire, reflective mimesis, creative renunciation, mindful awareness, sacrifice, mimetic contagion

Povzetek: **Reflektivno posnemanje in žrtvovanje v René Girardovi mimetični teoriji**

Razsodba kralja Salomona, o kateri beremo v Prvi knjigi kraljev (tretje poglavje), za velikega literarnega kritika Reneja Girarda predstavlja paradigmo razlike med predkristično in kristično kulturo žrtvovanja. Za prvo je v odnosu do nedolžnih značilno soglasno nasilje ali iskanje žrtvenega jagnjeta, medtem ko druga nasilje tvorno zavrača, da bi nedolžne rešila. Kristična kultura je po Girardu osnovana na Kristusovem križu in zgrajena na temeljih mimetične teorije, in sicer na mimetični želji. Mimetična želja je nezavedna in neprostovoljna gonilna sila človeškega dogajanja, ki jo je težko nadzirati. Na žalost tvorno zavračanje volje po nasilju, razumljeno kot kristična oblika žrtvovanja, vključuje duševno refleksijo, ki se z mimetično teorijo ne sklada. V prispevku je reflektivni mimesis predstavljen kot nujni predpogoj za odpoved volji po nasilju – gre za etično naravnost, ki temelji na Kristusovem križu in razumskem izražanju mimesisa. Žrtvovanje, ki izhaja iz Kristusovega križa, je preiščeno, in ne spontano.

Ključne besede: mimetična želja, reflektivni mimesis, tvorno zavračanje, čuječnost, žrtvovanje, mimetična okužba

1. Sacrifice and mimesis

The event of the cross was clearly captured in the Judgement of King Solomon recorded in the third chapter of the first book of Kings. Rene Girard called it »one of the finest texts in the Old Testament« (1987, 237), when he used it in his defense for a non-sacrificial reading of the Passion. The two harlots brought before King Solomon were claiming ownership of the »living child« as one lost her child in the night to carelessness. Faced with such a difficult case, for there were no witnesses to support each of their claims, the king decides to divide the »living child« among them. At this, the »good« harlot, the true mother of the »living child« accepts that the baby be given to the other in order to spare its life. The other harlot gave in to the king's judgement to divide – kill – the child amongst them in order to deprive the true mother of her child. According to Rene Girard, »she is ready to accept being deprived of the child as long as her opponent is deprived of it in the same way«. (239) This action of the »good« harlot is hailed by Girard for it prefigured the self-donation of Jesus Christ on the cross in order to save humanity from death. Robert Petkovšek agrees with Girard in his article titled »Apocalyptic Thinking And Forgiveness In Girard's Mimetic Theory«. According to him, »the cross of Christ divides human culture into archaic, pre-Christic culture, and Christic culture« (Petkovšek 2016; 2014b; 2015). This distinction in culture of sacrifice expressed in the Judgement of King Solomon, leads us to the understanding of sacrifice in The Mimetic Theory of Rene Girard. The difference between the pre-Christic and the Christic cultures of sacrifice is the attitude of substitution towards the innocent victim. While one sacrifices the victim, the other saves the victim. Pre-Christic culture substitutes the innocent victim for the cause of the crisis, while in Christic culture, one substitutes oneself for the cause of the crisis in order to save the innocent victim.

The scapegoat mechanism describes Girard's expression of pre-Christic culture of sacrifice. Scapegoat denotes the surrogate victim whose death or expulsion from the community restores peace in moments of crisis, especially when the crisis threatens the foundation of the community. The term scapegoat derives from the victim in the Israelite ritual during the great ceremony of atonement (Leviticus 16). »The modern understanding of ›scapegoats‹ is simply part and parcel of the continually expanding knowledge of the mimetic contagion that governs events of victimization.« (Girard 2001, 155) The unanimous collection of »all-against-one«, triggered by mimetic contagion, leads to the expulsion or death of the victim, the scapegoat. The rituals in archaic culture is mere reenactment of this sacrifice – scapegoat mechanism – that has proven to be effective in restoring peace in the crisis prone community. Thus what the bad harlot did was a simple expression of what everyone within the archaic community would do given the same circumstance. It is the expression of the mimetic impulse to violence. Girard wrote that »a frequent motif in the Old Testament, as well as in Greek myth, is that brothers at odds with one another. Their fatal penchant for violence can only be diverted by the intervention of a third party, the sacrificial victim or victims.«

(1979, 4) This mechanism according to Girard (93) is the origin of human culture and myths are stories of the founding murder told from the point of view of the victimizers. »Myths arise in order to justify this practice by deceptively making believe that the victims are truly guilty.« (Petkovšek 2016; see 2013) The division of the child between the harlots is expected to bring »peace«. A peace that will not last because the source of the crisis is still not addressed. The innocent child to be slain has no connection with the fact that jealousy has taken hold of the relationship. This concealment of the true cause of the crisis is the work of the contagion that is governing the victimization. Surprisingly, this victimization, the pre-Christic culture of sacrifice is traced to the mimetic nature of human desire. Pre-Christic culture of sacrifice is an expression of the mimetic impulse to rivalry, violence, and crisis. The bad harlot is a paradigm of pre-Christic sacrifice based on the sole intention to substitute an innocent child for peace to be restored. We take a closer look at the nature of mimetic desire in order to understand the action of the two harlots, especially that of the good harlot which seems to be out of the normal pattern of mimesis

The mimetic theory identifies the chief character of human beings to be the »mimetic desire«. The etymology of the term is traced to the ancient Greek word *mimesis*, which means »to imitate«. The human being is basically a mimetic being because our desires are modelled by another. According to Girard, »imitative desire is always a desire to be Another« (1976, 83). Human beings desire »to be like« the other. Our desire is awakened towards an object through the desire of the other we choose as our model. Paisley Livingston (1992) wrote that mimesis is a mechanism that generates patterns of action and interaction, personality formations, beliefs, attitudes, symbolic forms, and cultural practices and institutions. »The mimetic nature of desire accounts for the fragility of human relations.« (Girard 2001, 10) Mimetic desire is the unconscious, involuntary and uncontrollable driving force of human events. Mimesis is characteristic of all animals, but human beings are hyper-mimetic. Animals possess a natural mechanism of deferral. Paul Nuechterlein (2000) writing on Girardian anthropology states that the animal mimetic instinct is settled by a mechanism known as dominance-hierarchies. Mimetic desire is not bad in itself, but it often leads to conflict. Girard strongly affirms that mimetic desire is intrinsically good. (2001, 15) Mimetic desire degenerates into conflict when the object of desire is what cannot be shared. Wolfgang Palaver writes that, »as soon as the object of desire can no longer be shared – as with objects of sexual desire, social positions, and the like – mimetic desire generates competition, rivalry, and conflict.« (2013, 46)

The two harlots of our story are in conflict over a »living child« that cannot be shared. It is primarily a case of rivalry that was presented before the king. The Old Testament's subtle way of expressing this is by stating that both live in the same house. For Girard, »the principal source of violence between human beings is mimetic rivalry« (2001, 11). Going by the triangular nature of mimetic desire, we can decipher that the real cause of the conflict is not the »living child«, but mimetic rivalry operating between the harlots. P. J. Watson writes that »mimesis is

triangular desire /... / involving a subject, a model, and an object. Subjects must look toward some model in order to learn which specific objects should be desired.« (1998) Conflict arises because mimesis has the innate tendency to stop at the level of desire in that the object was not the original interest. »The mimetic theory describes man as a social being that is dependent on relations to others. No human being is intrinsically complete.« (Palaver 2013, 36) The focus of the desire in our story is placed on the child in order to hide the true intention. The reason for this concealment for Girard is that »the adult is generally ashamed to imitate others for fear of revealing his lack of being« (1979, 146). This explains why a substitution naturally occurs in any case of rivalry. And when finally the object of desire disappears, the rivalry generates into conflict of all against all – mimetic contagion. It is at the stage of mimetic rivalry that the case was presented to the king. Thus it was natural for the bad harlot to give in to the king's proposal to have the »living child« divided amongst them. She acts out the memetic impulse – to sacrifice the innocent – which »appears« to be the cause of the conflict. According to Girard, »the sacrificial definition always emphasizes renunciation, death and split subjectivity; /... / it emphasizes the values that belong to the bad mother, including the elements of mimetic desire, which is identical with /... / the death instinct«. (1987, 241) The scapegoat mechanism at work in rivalry does not advocate saving life, rather it destroys life to restore peace.

The self-donation that characterized the good harlot, the true mother of the »living child« attracts our attention. As fascinating as it appears, it does not follow the normal pattern of the rivalry already in progress, hence we question its source. The actual scene of mimetic rivalry on the one hand is the presence of an object that cannot be shared. On the other hand is a model who turns back to imitate the subject. According to Girard, mimetic rivalry results from »imitation of a model who becomes a rival or a rival who becomes a model.« (2001, 11) The two harlots are obviously overwhelmed by the reality of mimetic rivalry. The good harlot is the model of the desire based on the reaction of the bad harlot to the king's proposal. She is not moved with the compassion of a mother towards the »living child« because her desire is to appropriate for herself the being of the other, the model. The proximity of the dates of the conceptions as the narrative presented, is indicative of mimesis. The good harlot reports that her rival put to bed three days after the conception of her child. (1 Kings 3:18). By addressing her rival as »this woman« suggests that she is also overwhelmed by mimetic rivalry. It is not deliberate that the narrative begins without a clear identification of the two harlots involved in the crisis. Girard wrote:

»Throughout the quarrel that leads to the king's brilliant stratagem, the text makes no distinction between the two women. It refers to them merely as ›one woman‹ and ›the other woman‹. In effect, it does not matter in the slightest who is speaking, since both of them are saying precisely the same thing: ›No, the living child is mine, and the dead child is yours.‹ To which the other replies: ›No, the dead child is yours, and the living child is mine.‹ The symmetry is obvious, and it represents the very essence of human conflict –and there is nothing more to say.« (1987, 238)

Rivalry presupposes the absence of differentiation. In the words of Girard (2001, 22), hatred is expressed not for difference, but for its absence. »Identity is realized in the hatred of the identical.« (22) The motif of the good harlot is questionable. For »she is ready to renounce her child forever, even to renounce her own life if necessary, in order to save his life. This is her only motive and there is nothing ›sacrificial‹ about it.« (1987, 241) The motivation towards the Christic culture of sacrifice is questionable giving the almost unconscious and involuntary nature of the will informed by mimesis towards violence. The »normal« sequence of reaction is to give in to the dictates of the mimetic contagion that has engulfed the situation for the singular motif of restoring peace by victimization. But in this case, the good harlot declines and offers herself in place of the »living child«. What do we make of this if we maintain that mimetic desire is the unconscious, involuntary and uncontrollable driving force of human events? How do we account for the somewhat eclipse of reason in the mimetic process?

2. Reflective mimesis

Reflective mimesis presupposes consciousness within the mimetic process. The reality of the mimetic theory as unconscious and involuntary raises the question of authenticity and motivation, the decisive attributes of a human being. Neil Ormerod (2012), a proponent of Bernard Lonergan and Paisley Livingston (1992) question the mimetic theory from the point of view of authenticity and motivation respectively. Their criticisms – motivation and authenticity - point to place of reason in the mimetic process. Neil Ormerod asked: If all our desires are mimetic what might it mean to be authentic as a human being? (2012, 258) On his own part Paisley Livingston questioned the place of motivation within the mimetic theory: »The agents effective favoring of one action as opposed to another is only explicable in terms of some kind of effective evaluation, preference, or inclination, all of which are properly motivational terms.« (Livingston 1992, 21) The two areas of authenticity and motivation point to the cognitive aspect of mimesis. Is the desiring subject passive within the mimetic process? In Françoise Meltzer's article titled »A Response to René Girard's Reading of Salome«, published in *New Literary History*, the lack of consciousness in the mimetic process is noted. He asked: »Why does Salome automatically go to her mother rather than to anyone else?« (1984) Is the desiring agent conscious of mimesis? What is responsible for what appears as an eclipse of reason in the mimetic process?

There must be a particular context for mimetic rivalry. That context where mimesis is seen as the unconscious, involuntary and uncontrollable driving force of human events. It is the context where rivalry characterizes the relationship. Establishing this context, which is not an easy task, will help to explain the place of reason in mimesis. Girard distinguished between two form of mediation of desire – the eternal and the internal:

»We shall speak of *external mediation* when the distance is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of *possibilities* of which the mediator

and the subject occupy the respective centers. We shall speak of *internal mediation* when this same distance is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly.« (1966, 9)

The proper context for mimetic rivalry is the absence of differences which corresponds to the internal mediation. According to Girard, »culture is somehow eclipsed as it becomes less differentiated« (1989, 14). The more relationships close in on the differences, the more conflictual it becomes. »There exists in every individual a tendency to think of himself not only as different from others but extremely different, because every culture entertains this feeling of difference among the individuals who compose it.« (21) The distance between the model and the object when reduced leads to rivalry. The maintenance of the differences between the model and the subject is what will sustain the relationship. But it is the nature of mimesis to acquire the desire of the model. The consistent disappearance of the differences or the closing in on the gap between the model and the desiring subject presupposes a constant which Girard identified as the neighbor. The desperate situation of the subject to conceal his weakness focuses his attention »to the one who is always present, the neighbor«. (2001, 9) The context of mimetic rivalry is where the neighbor is located. It appears that within this context the desiring agent experiences »an eclipse of reason«. The subjects acts on instinct towards the acquisition of the desire of the model. The tendency is always to close in the distance when in contact with the neighbor. Who or what is neighbor? Girard did not define the meaning of »neighbor« rather he described the space where the desiring subject encounters the neighbor as »spiritual«. According to him, »it is not physical state that measures the gap between the mediator [model] and the desiring subject. Although geographical separation might be one factor, the distance between mediator and subject is primarily spiritual.« (1966, 9) For Robert M. Doran (2007), the distance between the model and the subject is psychological or symbolic. This spiritual space, where differences disappear is where the »neighbor« is located. The context of mimetic rivalry is the mimetic encounter with a model known as neighbor. It is basically in the mind of the desiring subject, hence a spiritual space.

What we know so far is that there is an eclipse of reason within the context of mimetic encounter when the model is perceived as »neighbor«. That explains the unconsciousness that engulfs the entire mimetic process. Whatever belongs to this neighbor involuntarily attracts our desire to acquire. According to Girard, »neither the model nor disciple [subject] really understands why one constantly thwarts the other because neither perceives that his desire has become the reflection of the other's«. (1979, 147) What aspect of »neighbor« is responsible for the unconscious and involuntary nature of mimetic rivalry? Jean Michel Oughourlian wrote a book titled *The Mimetic Brain*. According to him, »it is to be underscored that the contemplation of an object triggers no mirror activity, nor does the sight of a movement made by a machine or a robot: our brain *reflect* only the brain of those who are like us«. (2016, 27) From the mimetic nature of the brain as Oughourlian suggests, »neighbor« is one who is like us. Robert M. Doran in his

study of mimetic desire recounts that, »imitative desire, wherever it occurs, is always a desire to be another, because of a profound sense of the radical insufficiency of one's own very being«. (2007, 33) Neighbor is one like us, i.e. one on the same level with us, whose being we desire due to a profound sense of radical insufficiency. The context that stimulates in us the sense of insufficiency, leading to acquisitive mimesis must be competitive and inevitably violent. From the spiritual or psychological nature of neighbor, there is a sense of equality that makes a brother, a friend and a neighbor (colleague, business associates or one next door) fit into Girardian picture of »neighbor«. Two things are involved here – the nature of the object and the other i.e. neighbor. Anyone who is equal in ability and disposition towards an object or goal is a potential neighbor. A brother, friend or colleague and, the one next door is a potential neighbor. These categories of people as Girard puts it are always there. They are always in our minds. As we think about, we close the distance. What they have is capable of generating envy and jealousy. In relating with them, one loses all consciousness and acts almost involuntarily. There is no space in between and indifferentiation sets in. In our anchor story, the two women are harlots, living in the same house, each having a son; a context charged with competition and rivalry. Worst enemies were once best friends!

3. Creative renunciation

How do we escape rivalry while in the presence of a neighbor – brother, friend or neighbor? Rene Girard proposed a »renunciation« of the will towards violence through the imitation of Christ. He is convinced that, »to break the power of mimetic unanimity, we must postulate a power superior to violent contagion /... / none exists on earth«. (2001, 189) He did not foresee the possibility of a mindful process capable of breaking the chains of mimetic rivalry. Inspired by the events of the cross that exposed scapegoatism for what it is – violence against the innocent, Girard posits the action of Christ as the perfect antidote to rivalry. »The Crucifixion reduces mythology to powerlessness by exposing violent contagion, which is so effective in the myths that it prevents communities from ever finding out the truth, namely, the innocence of their victims.« (138) Thus the triumph of the cross calls for the imitation of the life of Christ which is devoid of rivalry. »What Jesus invites us to imitate is his own desire, the spirit that directs him toward the goal on which his intention is fixed; to resemble God the Father as much as possible.« (13) Jesus invites us »to imitate his own imitation« (13). The Christological approach of Girard to the mimesis, makes Jesus Christ the perfect mediator of the good mimesis. It brings out the property of the mimetic theory namely, mediation. It is precisely this mediation – imitation of imitation – that puts the renunciation of the will to violence to serious scrutiny. The sudden change in the reaction of the good harlot is inexplicable in terms of the mimetic theory. How come her understanding of renunciation of the will from violence toward the »living child«? To dismiss it

simply as a mother's love for her child is also to affirm that part of mother's love for a child is to easily consent to giving away one's child to another, who in this case is a rival. Reason played an important role in this sudden decision.

Wolfgang Palaver, a close associate to Girard, is supportive of Christological solution to mimetic rivalry. He reads the mind of Girard thus; Jesus is the only role model who does not instigate violent struggle among those who imitate him; since he knows no »conflictual« desire, »it is impossible to fall into rivalry with him over any object«. (2013, 219) It is obvious that we cannot escape mimesis for that would amount to the rejection of life. The creative renunciation is an invitation to a superior mimesis that does not lead to violence. Palaver sees the »solution to mimetic rivalry not in a renunciation of life, as such, but rather of the death resulting from man's arrogant attempt at self-empowerment, which obstructs the way to the biblical God and creator«. (221) The creativity is the recognition of the inescapable mimesis. Only mimesis can cure mimesis. Creative renunciation does not explain how the mimetic brain would arrive at the mediated imitation of Christ. For the imitation of Christ as good mimesis must be identified as such by the desiring subject. Creative renunciation does not imply the disappearance of the neighbor from the scene. The Imitation of Christ must necessarily be mediated by the »neighbor«. The one who is always there!

4. Mindfulness

Daniel J. Siegel defined the mind as a process that regulates the flow of energy and information (2007, 5). His work on the mindful brain is anchored on the fact that experience can create structural changes in the brain (36). The work of regulation is what appears to be lacking in the mimetic process. The desiring subject needs to be aware that mimetic process is resulting into rivalry in order to nip it at the bud. The change that Siegel envisages from mindful awareness is anchored in the relationship between the brain and the mind. According to him, »mind is not ›just‹ brain activity; energy and information flow happens in a brain within the body and it happens within relationships«. (49) The difference between jogging »mindlessly« versus jogging »mindfully« is that in the latter we aware, each moment, of what we are doing as we are doing it (13). Mindful cognition of the relationship between the mind and the brain enables us »to be open to contexts, embrace novel ways of perceiving, distinguish subtle differences in ideas, and create new categories of thinking in our awareness concepts in the moment« (48). This is awareness of awareness.

The fundamental discovery of Siegel in his *The Mindful Brain*, is the discovery of the imprisonment cause by top-down process of the brain and the openness to novelty in experience through bottom-up process of the brain. According to him, top-down process »imply how engrained brain states can impinge on emerging neural circuit activations and thus shape our awareness of ongoing experience in the present moment«. (135) Bottom-up process is the opposite. It is being

in touch with our senses through reflection which »enables us to be grounded in the physical world, the body, our mind, and our relationships« (137). The receptivity, self-observation, and reflexivity of reflection each help dissolve top-down influences (137). Siegel summarizes thus:

»The basic idea is that things as they are clash with things as our top down-down invariant process expects them to be. We shove sensation through the filter of the past to make the future predictable. In the process we lose the present. But because the present is all that exist, we have lost everything in the bargain. It seems as simple as this. But it isn't easy to undo because top-down influences that enslave bottom-up living have potent neural connectivity backing them up – much more powerful than uncertainty of living in the here-and-now. And for this reason being mindful requires intention, and courage.« (151)

To overcome mimetic rivalry will require intention and courage. The mimetic crisis is such that we do not detect it because we participate in it without realizing it. And we detect it only in that in which we do not participate, hence we are able to describe it. (Girard 2001, 183) It boils down to the problem of mindful awareness which according to Siegel, »we feel distant from sensation, far from direct experience, imprisoned by previous history«. (2007, 325)

According to Pope John Paul II, »it is an innate property of human reason to ask why things are as they are« (1998, 3). The recovery of this property in the mimetic process is the aim of reflective mimesis. Awareness of awareness is possible through the process of reflection. This option offered by Siegel is borrowed from enduring religious traditions. »Christian Centering Prayer, yogic practices, tai'chichuan, and Buddhist forms of meditation have each been studied in recent years, and they appear to harness neurologic and immune improvements in the practitioners' lives. « (2007, 96) Through meditation which is the training of the mind, the mind is focused on reality as it comes in contact with it without any preconceived model of identification. It is from the above that Daniel Siegel developed the idea of a reflective thinking. Presence, according to him. »is the state of the mind that comes with all the dimensions of reflection; the quality of our availability to receive whatever the other brings to us, to sense our own participation in the interaction, and to be aware of our own awareness«. (263) Being aware of the present through reflection creates in every experience a novelty.

Reflective thinking engages mental images rather than linguistically based categories and previously constructed conceptual classifications (250). The aim of reflective thinking is to get to the novelty that should characterize every experience. A novelty that can nip rivalry at the bud. Nipping rivalry in the bud means that we mindfully recreate the distance that dispel indifferenciation. This way the reflective brain benefit from the mimesis and at the same time take necessary precaution towards any outcome of rivalry. Rather than being passive in the inevitable mimetic process, the mind can partake in the process by being aware of every step. The logic is; if we can detect mimetic rivalry for what it is and be able to describe it when we are not involved, then through reflective thinking, through

awareness, we can notice it even when we are about to get involved in rivalry by maintaining the distance. According to Pope John Paul II, »the capacity to search [reflection] for truth and to pose questions itself implies the rudiments of a response«. (1998, 29) Reflective mimesis is the ability to imitate a chosen model in a way that is devoid of rivalry. It is the ability of the mimetic mind to open up the sphere of possibility between the desiring agent and the model through reflection. Instead of being overwhelmed by the mimetic context thereby shoving sensation, we become aware through reflection – receptivity, self-observation, and reflexivity. This is not an escape from mimesis because the neighbor is the one who is always there. Rather it is an affirmation that rivalry can be nipped in the bud. The creative renunciation is the only solution proposed by Girard and reflective mimesis is a way of achieving this. Reflective mimesis has the capacity to identify the model bearing the imitation of Christ. It is the imitation of imitation that will bring the subject in contact with Christ.

5. Conclusion

The sudden change in pattern of response displayed by the good harlot is understandable as a reflected action rather than a spontaneous one. The Christic sacrifice as we see in the article of Robert Petkovšek, is the spirit of Christ on the cross expressed through self-giving, forgiveness, in order to stop the vicious circle of violence triggered by scapegoating. (Petkovšek 2016; 2014a; 2014b; 2015) Self-donation or forgiveness is not spontaneous, it is reflected. The mental process involved is not automatic. While from the biblical point the source of the good harlot's self-donation as sacrifice is not traceable to any culture prior to the cross, reflective mimesis through mindful awareness reproduces the ethics of the cross.

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