

How to End Abortion Without Casting It Out
An Attempt to Apply Mimetic Theory in Response to Bernadette Waterman-Ward

By Britt Johnston

I did not oppose Waterman-Ward's essay. In fact, I admired it, and I said so. To the extent that I opposed her thesis, it was to assert that her analysis was not a complete description of the sacrificial dynamics around the issue of abortion.

If my article seemed to take a position that could be characterized as "pro-abortion," I regret that. I may have overreached in the article by extending the argument from an analysis of anti-abortion rhetoric to advocating for legal abortion. I should not have gone that far.

My thesis considered the sacrificial dynamics of a certain subset of anti-abortion rhetoric, demonstrating (I think) that this rhetoric, most commonly found among anti-abortion evangelicals, bears all the marks of Girard's "stereotypes of persecution," up to and including direct bloody violence against "evildoers" – abortion providers.

This is not necessarily to claim that ALL anti-abortion rhetoric is fundamentally sacrificial. That point remains to be proven. In fact, I admire Waterman-Ward's argument precisely because it seems to be a truly non-sacrificial critique of elective abortion.

Now, as to whether a legal system is equivalent to a lynch mob: This is obviously not the case. Yet, there is a kinship. A legal system is a substitute for a lynch mob. It is a sacrificial institution designed to prevent mob rule. All laws are sacred differences, maintained through judicial application of limited violence. Law courts and the punishments they apply are a restructuring of the sacred altar. Like the sacred altar (according to mimetic theory), they apply a small amount of violence to control a larger threat of violence. Transcendental signifiers serve to uphold their legitimacy, but not without violence. These metaphysical principles, like the Logos of Heraclitus, are born of violence.

This is not to say that law is therefore disposable. Like Paul, I am no antinomian. We are justified by grace and not by works, but we do not sin so that grace may abound. Yet law is no longer absolute, but contingent. From the point of view of the Gospel of Grace we can make laws only for their practical value, not for their metaphysical imperatives.

If Waterman-Ward feels that there is a metaphysical imperative requiring that we outlaw abortion, then our discussion is at an impasse. I fail to see, from either the standpoint of mimetic theory, or from the standpoint of the Incarnation, how any metaphysical principle can be taken seriously. This philosophical issue must be settled between us before we can proceed to a discussion of abortion ethics. If I am right about metaphysics, then there is no point in employing metaphysics to arrive at the truth. If I am wrong about metaphysics, however, I will have to be convinced of that before I can be ready to engage in a metaphysical argument.

On the other hand, if there is a non-metaphysical, nonviolent basis for outlawing elective abortion, then it remains to demonstrate what that might be.

Arguments based on a “right to life” or a “right to choose” are metaphysical arguments, and must be set aside (for now). Arguments based on the “sacredness of human life” likewise are metaphysical and are set aside.

What is left is desire and violence.

Mimetic theory gives us an explanation for the universal prohibition of murder that goes beyond metaphysical notions of the “sacredness of human life.” Murder is prohibited because it is readily imitated. Sacred prohibitions against murder, enforced by public violence, serve to prevent violent mimetic crises. But the prohibition against murder is itself sacrificial.

So we might ask, setting aside the metaphysical concern about “human life” (yes, sneer quotes): is abortion *murder* in the same sense as ordinary murder in that it tends to generate mimetic crises? The answer seems to be “yes and no.” Abortion threatens a mimetic crisis because it constitutes a threat to the sacred metaphysical principle of “human life”; it may also be a threat in that it challenges social norms regarding reproduction, the rights of fathers, and the role of women. When such systems of difference break down, mimetic crisis threatens. The same however can be said about caste systems and taboos against touching dead bodies. Such systems of sacred difference are relativized and deconstructed by the gospel of grace.

It can hardly be seriously claimed, however, that abortion is avenged and imitated like ordinary murder. We have plenty of experience to prove that this is so. The 43 million fetuses destroyed in America since 1973, without judicial sanction, have not produced a riot of vengeance (except, ironically, among certain people who decidedly DO NOT imitate abortion). This may in fact be a part of the scandal of legal abortion – it has failed to produce the apocalypse it is supposed to produce.

To reiterate: abortion constitutes a threat to traditional systems of sacred difference but it is not equivalent to murder in the mimetic sense because it does not produce a murderous mimetic crisis in the way that ordinary murder does. Should abortion be outlawed for the sake of traditional systems of difference? Perhaps, but if that is so, there are a great deal of other things that ought to be outlawed as well. We have tried that before. We derisively call it Puritanism now, and it doesn’t seem to be on its way back any time soon. If Girard is right, then the gospel probably won’t allow it back. We have too much sympathy for its victims.

Perhaps we should outlaw abortion on the basis that it is an expression of our expanding nonviolent consciousness to attribute “humanness” to a wider circle of living beings. The human fetus is on the boundary, culturally, between what we consider human and what we consider nonhuman. If the fetus is human, then it is a victim worthy of our concern; if it is not human, then it is unimportant whether the fetus is killed or not. Is the aborted fetus a victim in this moral sense?

Quite possibly so. As I said, the boundary between the human and the non-human is expanding with our moral consciousness. Thus we have anti-vivisection laws to defend animals, and there are environmental fanatics who, not unlike certain anti-abortion fanatics, destroy property and

endanger people's lives to enforce a wider definition of what it means to be "people." "Animals are people, too." "The environment is a victim too." Surely, if animals and the environment can have human status, so can fetuses.

The question is, where does the boundary stop expanding? Do we stop after we declare fetuses fully human, or do we continue to include dogs, cats, cattle, fish, plants, rocks? Anything at all that might potentially be destroyed? As this little ad absurdum argument goes, we would have to conclude exactly that. There is no non-metaphysical way to determine where to stop expanding the circle (certain sects in India strive not to step on bugs). Besides, any boundary at all would be in effect a sacred cultural structure and therefore metaphysical and sacrificial. We'll have to find another way to think about it.

How about this: all human beings engage in mimetic rivalry (except for the true saints). In this rivalry, which is almost always for metaphysical rewards (prestige, etc.) we exploit whatever there is around us that may give us a leg up in the competition. In the urgency of our striving, we are like the sailors in a storm at sea who throw the cargo overboard in order to lighten the ship. We pollute the air, tear up the forests, exploit child labor, and so forth. This violence is not mimetic rivalry (although it arises from mimetic rivalry); nor is it sacrificial (we don't scapegoat the atmosphere). This violence is a third type – what you might call :collateral damage."

There are two ways to control collateral damage.

One is to prohibit it. If forests are being destroyed, you outlaw their destruction; you regulate industry to make it stop polluting the air, etc. But these prohibitions rely on a credible threat of retribution on the transgressors. It requires a government that is more powerful than the transgressors. But the transgressors (the common people) ARE the government. The prohibitions can only go so far before they create their own social resistance and stall. These prohibitions have built within them their own defeat. They are paradoxical, self-contradicting. Such prohibitions generate terrible double-bind problems, because they add a "don't imitate me" message from the powerful, the same people who broadcast "imitate me" to get people to engage in the mimetic rivalries that dominate the culture. The prohibition of collateral damage can never solve the problem. It also creates new ones by generating stressful double-binds that produce mimetic crises of their own.

The prohibition of abortion is one of these double-binds. Especially since women's rights have begun to take hold in our culture, women have heeded the call of cultural prestige: "imitate me." Pregnancy is an obstacle to success in this challenge, and therefore abortion has become a more prevalent solution. To prohibit abortion in this cultural situation is to add the double-bind of "don't imitate me" to the mix. It bears the potential of generating massive mimetic crisis and violence.

The solution to the problem of collateral damage (whether against the environment, workers, or human fetuses) cannot lie in the direction of prohibition. The solution must be in the direction of a release from the imperative "imitate me" coming from the domination system of the culture. The desirability of prestige, power, convenience, etc., must be deconstructed.

– Matthew 5:3

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall inherit the earth.”