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Locating Love Amid the Violence: Girard, Vattimo, and the Radicality of Love

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ERADICATING THE FALSE SACRED, TRYING TO LOCATE ANOTHER SACRALITY

To try to recover something of the religious framework that is inextricably connected to the history of apophatic thought amid the emancipatory claims of various modern nihilisms, I find it helpful to consider how contemporary philosophical views have worked steadily toward an eradication of the false sacred in our world in order to produce nothing more than an empty space that might nonetheless yield the possibility for something like a source of sacrality to appear—though being careful to refrain from making such suggestions for the most part. Though such possibilities flirt with the utopian, they may also highlight a religious sense of grace that is also a necessity in our world though seemingly coming from beyond it.

For example, Giorgio Agamben has suggested that the main task facing humanity today is one of "absolute profanation," a restoration to common use of what had once been deemed sacred.[1] In response to this call for an "absolute profanation," the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has wondered, at what point does an

absolute profanation become ground zero for what is considered sacred in the first place?[2] As a decidedly Hegelian proposition and adding to this Žižekian line of inquiry, what if the removal of all that was once considered part of the dynamism of the sacred became the only way to access something like the sacred once again, but this time, for real? What if an act of absolute profanation revealed the true stakes of what the sacred actually was, beyond our ability to inscribe it into human traditions and institutions (and as opposed to the mere suppression and concealment of the sacred, or what becomes the secular in the modern age)? Even if what was experienced "for real" were merely an empty space, as Žižek contends, the insight gained would be inestimable, even if practically speaking nearly impossible to sustain as a legitimate principle of social and political order.

Comprehending an absolute profanation as the only possibility for the sacred to enter our world—as is, I might suggest, an intimacy without established or defined relations, as Agamben defines love—becomes something like a "second naïveté," in Paul Ricoeur's sense. It is a chance to see the world anew after the previous conceptions have been deconstructed. This "second naïveté" lies before us as a genuine possibility in the wake of apophatic methods that have been utilized throughout centuries of Christian discourse, as well as in contemporary philosophical terms, without reference to actually existing political or institutional configurations. The key for Agamben to overcoming the violence of the (false) sacred, as he states explicitly, *the* task of overcoming the varied apparatuses of this world that construct the human being into particular norms based on given theological signatures, is precisely this: ending the mechanisms of sacrifice that ceaselessly construct and divide the human being.[3] Though Girard himself has been more embracing of sacrificial themes after his initial critique of them,[4] Agamben's overlap with the thought of René Girard on this issue is significant, if understated, and it is for this reason that I want to turn directly to Girard's thought as the backdrop behind everything else that follows in this essay.

Though Girard has been more nuanced than his continental-philosophical interlocutors through his defense of established religious structures, there has lingered the sense that his theories open a Pandora's box of nihilistic sentiments. It is precisely in this manner that I find it helpful to recall the theologian John Milbank's critique of the work of Girard. In brief, Milbank had wagered that Girard's thought was an entirely negative enterprise focused on eradicating the false sacred from our world by rendering the single victim mechanism inoperative without putting something else in its place.[5] Girard's project, by this count, is not just apophatic, but nihilistic, providing the possible end of most

institutions and traditions in our world, without conceiving of what a truly just order might actually be. Every order is consequently subject to deconstruction based on its inherently violent proclivities, but what, Milbank asks, remains to be built once the false sacred has been removed? As Milbank is intent on defending the ecclesia as a site for the sacred that needs to preserve its right to punish those who step outside of its bounds, he repeatedly asks, what place is there for the sacred in our world if our time is mainly spent on the removal of false forms of sacrality? In other words, how are we to recognize the sacramental nature of existence when we need to spend even more time than we had ever imagined trying to defuse and disengage the violent mechanisms that have sustained human existence, and certainly religious being, for so many millennia? Though his reading of Girard neglects to account for the more "conservative" Girardian responses to modern forms of nihilism, answering these questions has since become the central debating ground among Girard's foremost interpreters. This apparently nihilistic force utilized in deconstructing false forms of sacrality dependent upon a sacrificial logic has maintained a deep resonance with those of his readers especially who would favor a kenotic reading of Christian truth claims above all else.

Perhaps nowhere is this inclination stronger than in the work of Gianni Vattimo. In a brief article on "Nihilism as Postmodern Christianity," Vattimo lays out the basic contours of his philosophy of "weak thought" and a positive assessment of that very nihilism that Milbank so frequently, and vehemently, denounces as the opponent of the Church. Nihilism, Vattimo suggests in a Heideggerian context, declares that there is nothing to "Being as such."[6] Nihilism is thus not a historical process, and it does not involve an object of any sort. The "dissolution of the modern metanarratives," he claims, "opens postmodernism to the understanding of myths, understood not as metaphysical truths, but as myths that cannot be truly denied by any absolute, or metanarrative, or reason."[7] Hence, he concludes, there is no "History," but only a form of "weak historicism" that admits "no other resources outside its (own) history."[8] Similar to Jacques Derrida's messianic force moving within history, the only power that can counter a metanarrative is an event lodged within a particular history, not another History to challenge it and perhaps even reign dominant over it. Such an event acts as a disruptive undoing of whatever narrative had dominated the field of representation. It is only a weak historicism, then, that admits of multiple truths, myriad points of view, and a plurality of peoples. Though Girard himself attempted to critique such a position, as I discuss in the following, such positions reveal a major piece of the truth that Girard's mimetic theory unveils.

Within this postmodern philosophical perspective there is both a recognition of a postcolonial world and a stress upon the immediacy of experience that has historically been overlooked or repressed in favor of a monolithic and oppressive history. It is to counter such tendencies that everything must be recognized as an interpretation, and not simply as the imparting of objective fact.[9] In the modern "clash of cultures" that surrounds humanity as never before, we are involved directly in an experience of "the loss of a center, the devaluation of absolute values, the dissolution of Being as stability of principles both unquestioned and unquestionable."[10]

The thoroughly modern reality before us that includes an almost absolute respect for alterity—which Vattimo imagines as a situation wherein not even the Pope would try to convert the Dalai Lama to Catholicism today—means there is no "objective Truth" as it was once conceived. His radical proposition, and here Girardian thought will play a central role in his reading, is that it was Christianity that had once sought to free humanity from such an absolutizing of Truth. In his words, "This liberation is also a liberation of religiosity more generally, which is the only way—I am not aware of others—in which religious experience can have meaning."[11] There is much to contemplate in this consideration of a genuine religious experience made possible only through the negation of a monolithic and dominant Truth, though this scenario perhaps also misleads us into thinking that nihilism clears the grounds for authentic religious experience (akin to mystical experiences), when what Vattimo is actually suggesting, as did Heidegger before him, is that "nihilism is the (most likely, probable) form of religiosity of our epoch."[12] As he continues, "There are no transcendental conditions of possibility for experience."[13] There is no longer even the category of the authentic.[14] There would be only the weak event, a reduction of the particular religious sentiment to its essence, that guides the individual away from forms of the false sacred.

This is a point that will endear Vattimo to the work of Girard and the latter's critiques of false sacrality, as Vattimo himself repeatedly acknowledges. It is also a point that will generate his preference for "weak thought" and even the possibility of a "weak theology" that seeks to embody the kenotic (nihilistic) forces at work within every theopolitical claim. Within a weak theology is only the destruction of false idols and false forms of divinity. The apparent destruction of traditional religious structures signals the end of religion as we have known it. Though it is also, Vattimo wagers, perhaps the beginning of an authentic experience of the grounds of the sacred, though such a thing could—even should—perhaps never be clearly defined or made into a normative proposition. He recognizes as much when he further

suggests that "To be sure, this also makes problematic the 'positive' aspects of Christianity—namely its institutional expression in Churches, dogmas, authorities, and disciplines. But might not these very complexities—or even more, an active contestation of institutions, dogmas, and Churches—be what Christianity needs today?"[15]

The emptying of positive content from Christian metaphysical claims certainly shares aspects with Agamben's attempt to do the same in his reading of Pauline thought.[16] It also accords with much of what has been proposed thus far as squarely within the nature of the apophatic. We could certainly, following Gideon Baker, label such activity in Agamben's thought as a form of nihilism exposed in the wake of Heidegger's legacy.[17] It also helps us to see why Vattimo too turns to Walter Benjamin's theses on history when attempting to explain the revolutionary, weak messianic forces active within history, much as Derrida's thought was also resonant with a reading of these forces.[18] There are only new possibilities for human experience left available to us, though none that *must* be so (naturally)—*this* is the "weakness of Being" that gives humanity only a "weak ontology" with which to explore its meaning within existence.[19]

The historical question remaining to be asked is: To what degree do Vattimo's claims resonate with mystical theologies, or at least with Derrida's deconstructive gestures that claim to be more apophatic than apophatic theology?[20] And do such apophatic gestures place one solidly on a nihilistic track, as Milbank had suggested of Girardian thought? Or are they somehow always already bound up with the processes that identify operations of sacralization and community formation?

They are at least resonant with the "dissolution of dialectics" that Theodor Adorno might call, as I have and as Vattimo does, a negative dialectics.[21] Dialectics, for its part, as Vattimo saw, had been "deeply complicitous with the alienation it intends to control."[22] Any attempt to "overcome" metaphysics or ontotheology is really, therefore, complicit with dialectics.[23] Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God was the signal that this relationship was at last severed for good, and an alienation that could not be domesticated by dialectics was introduced by both Benjamin and Adorno, among others, in order to find redemption for those dominated and repressed by a monolithic History. "God is dead" was the proclamation of the end of Being as a metaphysical construct and the entrance of an unresolvable ambiguity regarding the (non)existence of God.[24] There will henceforth—though it was also always true—never be a way to prove or disprove God's existence. Within the ruins of history is the "only real fuel of revolution—not some project legitimized in the name of a natural right or an inevitable course of history."[25] The difference of Being, as once explicated

by Heidegger, introduces us to Being as "interference" or, perhaps in Benjamin's language, an interruption of whatever master narrative we attempt to construct. This suggestion even has its parallel in the shortest definition of religion, as once was quipped by Johann Baptist Metz: interruption.[26] In this sense, so many theologies are really just an attempt to keep open the possibility of an interruptive event, not to foreclose such an event forever through its transformation into a lasting (static or dynamic) tradition.

Because the domain in which we are working is a theopolitical one that does not exclude but only furthers economic, social, cultural, and geographical-contextual matters, many discernable political issues are brought into view through these reflections, such as speculation on how a constitution may or may not be able to include non- or anticonstitutional elements.[27] Such questions parallel those Girardian ones regarding the possibility of human (communal) relations beyond mimetic desire, or that which might be characterized as a state of grace that we yet find difficult to embody in concrete social forms.[28] Philosophically, we are faced once again with the divide between form and content (as, e.g., reflected in legal structures that cannot include their foundation within a legal code), wherein Derrida's depiction of messianism had once sought to illustrate the way justice functions to deconstruct any existing structure, institution, or normative order. Theologically, which is really what lay at the heart of each of these reflections, we are faced with the problem of the law and its origins, law and lawlessness, the restrainer (*katechon*) and the antichrist (or "lawless one") who represent the tensions between law and grace that are fundamental to the foundations of the Christian narrative. These historical debates are reflected moreover in the philosophical debates between law and its excess, as between representation and presentation, with each begging the question of how one might have a democratic expression of love or grace, or how love might ever be embodied when one accounts for the violence so frequently at the heart of communal relations.

As is well known, Girard himself was loathe to merely accept such modern democratic or egalitarian impulses that sought the end of traditional religious forms. The loss of religion in the modern period was a gamble too far, as such deconstructions threatened the very structures that kept the negative side of mimetic desire at bay. In his dialogues with Vattimo, in particular, Girard was quick to counter Vattimo's more "liberal" positions with his own. Girard's more "conservative" claims suggest society needs the *katechon* of religion to delay the apocalyptic destruction perhaps made possible through the elimination of those religious rules and restraints that have limited social violence for centuries. His critique of Vattimo is that no utopian Eden is possible simply because

a genuine secularization has taken place; rather, "if we try to do away with all the prohibitions, the limits that the archaic religions imposed, we are putting at risk not only ourselves but the existence of the whole world."[29] Such "extreme optimism about history," as Girard puts it, is precisely what may make possible the worst violence.

Though Girard's critique undoubtedly contains truth within it, it is also true that his own mimetic theory, and the problematics associated with trying to elucidate a "positive" or constructive mimesis as opposed to merely a negative version, often reveal the ambiguity, and potential contradictions, of his mimetic theory, as Luca Di Blasi has shown.[30] Far from demonstrating the need to eliminate any possible contradictions at the heart of mimetic theory, however, such sentiments rather illuminate how the (im)possibility of a positive mimesis is perhaps the very condition of (Christian) love. As Pablo Bandera will also elaborate on the (im)possibility of a positive mimesis in Girard's thought, "Girard would acknowledge that a utopia of nonrivalistic relationships is not feasible in reality or any large social or cultural scale, but this is due ultimately to our own weakness and not to the inherent logic of mimetic desire itself. Nonrivalistic relationships are possible in principle, and in fact are demanded of each individual Christian."[31] Girard's reluctance to follow Vattimo's suggestions would seem then to stem from a politically realistic, even pragmatic stance, though his mimetic theory does offer us a glimpse of a grace, or love, possible beyond the negative connotations typically associated with mimetic desire.

THE SEARCH FOR A LOVE BEYOND VIOLENCE

The search to embody an egalitarian form of love is certainly nothing new to the history of mystical and pseudo-mystical thought in the West, though linkages to nihilism are certainly harder to come by, and though the reasons for this are not entirely clear. Parallel to Michel de Certeau's description of post-Reformation mystical trends, Simon Critchley has highlighted the social dislocation that arose among the urban poor of the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries at the hands of economic changes that were sweeping through Europe.[32] What was witnessed as a slow evolution was in fact the introduction of a religious, revolutionary millenarianism during this period that had sought to achieve "a boundless social transformation that attempts to recover an egalitarian state of nature, a kind of golden age of primitive communism."[33] As Girardian thought illustrates quite profoundly, attempting to locate a community not founded on mythological, sacrificial violence proves most difficult to do in practical terms.

Responding to the rise of new technologies and new forms of exchange, particular groups of the marginal and the dispossessed were drawn to such speculations on the recovery of an idyllic state of existence such as what they had lost, leading to the formation of groups such as the Waldensians, the Amaurians, the Franciscans, and, as it interests Critchley in particular, the "heresy of the Free Spirit."[34] In the latter movement specifically, a sort of mystical anarchism free of ecclesial structures and rules results from speculation that the Spirit resides within a community, something that was linked theologically to the writings of Meister Eckhart and Marguerite Porete. Eckhart's notion of the "poverty of spirit," as Critchley notes, seemed to derive directly in fact from Porete's work.[35]

Porete's process of self-deification, which had motivated Eckhart in no small measure, involves going through something similar to Simone Weil's act of "decreation," or the annihilation of one's will so that God's will alone might remain within the individual soul.[36] As many interpreters of Girard's elaboration on mimetic desire have noted, to will the annihilation *of the will itself* is yet still an act of willing, or that which becomes a contradictory and seemingly unresolvable act. However, in a gesture parallel to Eckhart, Critchley finds how Porete imagines one detaching from the will altogether into a state of "absolute poverty" that reduces the self to nothing.[37] In Critchley's commentary, "What the soul has created is the space of its own nihilation. This *nihil* is the 'place'—or better what Augustine would call the 'no place'—where God reflects on himself, where 'God sees himself of himself in her.'"[38] It is, as Critchley suggests following the poet Anne Carson, a form of love understood as impoverishment, submission, passivity, and masochism—again proving a suitable comparison to Weil's mysticism. It is also a profound illumination of the nihilism that Vattimo sought as the basis of modern religiosity, here present *in nuce* within the heart of apophatic thought.

Such viewpoints were deemed heretical of course because to become nothing was to become in essence God. This is the view, we should also note, that basically holds for a modern form of nihilism that replaces God with the human being. It is also what draws my attention to Critchley's attempt to recover medieval mysticism as laying the groundwork for revolutionary political notions of love, especially as they assert themselves as alternatives to religious conjectures. Though no actual, realistic community may be founded through the radical desires of love that point us beyond mimetic desire—as Girard himself argued on multiple occasions—there are yet those apophatic, even nihilistic, impulses that seek to bring an end to the violence that more often than not legitimates communal claims to identity.

The political form of such a mystical anarchism that searches for a state beyond original sin is communism, we are told, an ideal model for political association that is higher than the law itself.[39] Those who follow such a "Free Spirit" mentality are therefore not bound by the moral laws that contradict their experience of freedom. A certain "anarchic eroticism" might possibly arise from this place, as it certainly has from so many emancipatory movements within the modern period.[40] But what Critchley isolates too is the desire for "the training and submission of free will in order to recover a condition of commonality that overcomes it, namely love."[41] At the same time, however, these efforts are a "deeply antinomian" affair, "refusing the metaphysical, moral, legislative, and political authority of both church and state."[42] Hence Michel Foucault's interest in Porete derives as a model of resistance and revolt that culminates with Luther's fierce resistance to the Catholic Church undertaken from a similar location.[43] Though such movements, as with so many others, typically fail or possibly even achieve some sort of totalitarian status, the impetus within them to deal with the agonizing reality of (mimetic) desire is nonetheless very real, and sheds a good deal of light on the stakes of Girard's own ambivalence regarding the negative and positive sides of mimesis.

Critchley's overarching claim is that Porete's *askesis* of the self is a very demanding one, not an open license for a libertine's amoralism; rather, it is a stringent and demanding ethical disciplining of the self all the way to its final nihilation.[44] It is an attempt, I would add, to envision a space seemingly beyond mimetic desire, but that is really a "positive mimesis" experienced as a sort of grace and so doubly difficult to define or articulate for just this reason—much as Girard himself struggled to articulate what exactly a positive mimesis might resemble. Porete had been seeking a "creative disintegration of the ego, an undermining of its authority that allows a new form of subjectivity to stand in the place inhabited by the old self."[45] It was therefore to involve a process of maturation, as he phrases it, wherein "that which is unconscious in the life of desire" is brought to consciousness. It was likewise a "transformation of the self through the act of love."[46] This is where Critchley will link these mystical insights to nonviolent, political forms of anarchism that search for the renunciation of self as the means for social and collective projects. This as well is how, he will claim, forms of life are found to be lived beyond the rule of law and the order of the state, a point that we find in much the same form in the writings of Agamben.[47] For Critchley, in fact, these dynamics are where we can also locate Georges Bataille's mystical experience of sovereignty through the killing of the self.[48]

In Bataille's work, for its part, there was an expanding of the "boundaries of the possible," as Niklaus Largier has described it, so that the individual

undergoing some sort of mystical experience might comprehend the "impossibility of knowing" and yet seek to transcend those boundaries at the same time.[49] New states of experience are only fathomable on such a basis. Mystical prayer, specifically, brought about "the creation of an inner space of *experience*, *exploration*, and *amplification* of the emotional as well as of the sensory life of the soul."[50] It is not hard to see how such an expansion of human experience could register itself in opposition to the established, traditional structures of human life. This is primarily why, as Largier also notes, Luther had to be particularly careful in championing a certain revolution within ecclesial structures while also downplaying the antinomian and revolutionary political ramifications of mystical thought.[51] What must be portrayed in this context, as so many mystical and political revolutionary thinkers make clear, are the rhetorical effects of those mystical theologies that bring humanity into "a realm of utter possibility to 'be' or 'become everything' in breaking through the intentional, instrumental, teleological, and rational order of the world."[52] This is what Porete and Eckhart had done, among others, and it is what Critchley is particularly attentive to in order to begin thinking political possibilities beyond those that currently exist in our world.

There is no doubt that the impulses and intentions of the "Free Spirit" movement sought to promote the "utopian impulse in thinking"—something that may never be possible in reality as an established communal form, I would add.[53] Yet despite its utopian flavor, the reality of establishing human connections beyond those prescribed by any social, religious, political, or economic relations was, and is, a very real possibility. What Critchley will call the "politics of love," found squarely within the varieties of mystical anarchism that he looks at, is precisely what appears to bring the disruptive, anarchic force of love as experienced on a personal level to the social, collective level (and as what many had once thought communism might most directly embody). To annihilate the self in order to make room for love, as Porete envisions, is what brings about "the immortal dimension of the subject," and what offers politics new possibilities for collective association.[54] The "politics of love," at the same time, promises a disruption of thought that takes place in order to produce new thoughts, even if whatever new forms follow cannot be predicted in advance. Seen in this context, the nihilistic impulses of apophaticism may parallel the Girardian effort to denounce the negative mimetic desires active within the mythological narratives that have haunted communal foundations and the violence that it justifies. And even though there may be no utopian community possibly constructed through such a politics of love—somewhat contra Critchley's suggestions—there is no reason to doubt that a politics of

love may alter our relationship to already existing social and political struc-tures, which, though they may also be with us, restraining our most basic impulses toward violence (acting then as myriad *katechon*), are in need of correction from time to time.

THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF LOVE

But what does all this talk of nihilism and the "death of God" amid any pos-sible recovery of a contentless sacrality that might resemble a politics of love have to do with Girardian thought? I want to wager that trying to envision a world beyond mimetic desire is not entirely possible, as Girard had himself contended, though the search for a positive mimesis that Vattimo "optimisti-cally" encourages is neither wholly a nihilistic nor a utopian affair either, though it bears shades of both. This quest is to be understood as the domain of a self-sacrificing love that is illuminated best through those negative acts that cause us to reform any existing structure or institution. In other words, though orthodox theologians might fear the implications of a modern form of nihilism operative within the church, it is at this same point that a philosophy of love, such as Critchley helpfully illuminates, might become indistinguishable from something like a sacramental experience of grace that becomes transformative of communal identities, though not doing away with them altogether.

The Christian narrative that Girard, Vattimo, and Critchley work with makes clear that love is made possible as an opening to vulnerability, as an end-lessly kenotic giving that empties the one who loves. The ones who love pour themselves out to the point of rendering themselves subject to abuse, deception, or becoming the possession of another, but this does not stop love from making such gestures. As Jacques Lacan once famously quipped in his seminar on love, when love comes up against hate, love allows hate to win.[55] This is simply the nature of love, though we humans frequently attempt to conceal and distort this reality in an attempt to render ourselves less vulnerable to others, or to fuel the fires of mimeticism. Such concealment, however, is done at the cost of losing the experience of love itself.

Simon May's conclusion regarding love, which coincides in part with Harry Frankfurt's assessment (and which is here highly significant within the context of Girardian responses to the end of mimetic structures), is that love is not dependent upon a particular moral or institutional code. This is a point too that allows May to consider a wholly secular approach to loving even as he is able to make sense of why humanity has historically identified the powers of

love with the existence of a higher being. The deity who is or who typifies love stands outside of any moral or institutional order, guaranteeing its existence as the sovereign who decrees its existence, but not being identified with the order itself. Love, it seems, escapes every order or system that we would fabricate. It is thus more at home in the discourse of mystics attempting to reach out toward it in complete unknowing than it is in the hands of an overly scrupulous religious zealot. In Frankfurt's words, "The function of love is not to make people good. Its function is just to make their lives meaningful, and thus to help make their lives in that way good for them to live."[56] Whatever one constructs later on, whatever moral system or institutional tradition, love stands always outside and beyond these ever-meager structures, maintaining within itself a latent force capable of destroying each and every human achievement. But, of course, love destroys these things only so that it might get closer to loving what lies beyond all the representations we might put in its path, not that it wants to merely destroy whatever entirely human institution exists within our world. Love yearns to touch what cannot be said or seen, again putting us in close proximity to traditional conceptualizations of divine being, but also to the brute forces of the nihilistic that want to deepen their truth through a deconstruction of their limitations.

It is helpful to imagine divine beings in this regard, and especially the act of trying to relate to them (traditionally the domain of prayer), because love is given in such a way that one does not expect reciprocation, and may not even hear a voice speaking back after it is given, thus severing the ties of established relations between persons, as both May and Agamben have noted in their own ways.[57] Søren Kierkegaard had himself once noted the same thing in the act of loving those who are deceased, as this is the greatest act of loving, since one loves but cannot be loved in return.[58] Everything is given and nothing is presumed to be given back—what May considers as both the command of, and yet the freedom within, the act of loving.[59] For May, this passionate search for the ultimate ground of our being, whether religious in nature or secular, is the purpose of human life and the grounds for the establishment of meaning.

What takes place in such a nonreciprocating "intimacy without relations" is what Kierkegaard had called "the most unselfish, the freest, the most faithful love."[60] It is a love that preserves the mystery of the other who cannot ever be fully known and certainly cannot be possessed. Such a love, as Luce Irigaray has also described it, is what protects "the obscurity and the silence that the other remains for me" and is that which "aids in discovering proximity."[61] This posits love, in Agamben's language, as an inappropriable object that can only be shared, something for common use, but not to be possessed, and so existing (or

at least appearing as) "beyond" the domain of the mimetic.[62] To share what is ultimately inappropriable: that is love.

There are deep political implications for seeing love in this way, as we can note in Critchley's assertion of the political anarchy of love, but that we can also locate deep within a Girardian framework of communal relations. In Critchley's words,

> The only proof of immortality is the act of love, the daring that attempts to extend beyond oneself by annihilating oneself, to project onto something that exceeds one's powers of projection. To love is to give what one does not have and to receive that over which one has no power. [. . .] The point is not to kill others, but to kill oneself in order that a transformed relation to others becomes possible, some new way of conceiving the common and being with others.[63]

What Critchley points toward is nothing short of a possible way to live "beyond" the violences perpetuated by mimetic desire. To allow love into one's life, into one's construction of one's being, is to allow anarchy to run riot at times, with its deconstructive force maneuvering past and through whatever established relations and structures had guided one previously. The self is undone in the face of what can only appear as a nihilistic force bent on the destruction of everything that one had held dear beforehand, but this anarchical power is also the mystical-sexual yearning for a force that can remake us at the same time, even if such a remaking lies entirely beyond the scope of what one can imagine. Though Girard would contend that such forces do not spell the complete eradication of existing social, religious, and political institutions—a point with which I find myself in agreement—there is yet within such descriptions of love the power to reformulate such institutions and our interaction with them. It is by stepping for a moment "outside of" our structured existence, the very *ek-static* potential of love, that we are able to reinvent and re-form the structures that do identify us in this world.

As we see repeatedly in Vattimo's thought, there is an absolute kenosis taking place that seems to defy anything like a pure resurrection, asking us to consider whether we can, or even should want to, escape representation (and its reductive violences) altogether. In other words, is the goal of a nihilistic-apophatic thought a complete, and perhaps unrealistic, nonviolence that cannot really be embodied? Certainly, to tangle with love is to contemplate one's demise, a small death (*la petite mort*) that is also an ecstatic union. We are taken out of ourselves (*ek-stasis*) in an almost loss of consciousness at the same moment that we are profoundly united in and through love. But how are we to imagine this in practical, concrete

terms? Answering this question, much as contemplating a world without mimetic contagion, is a decidedly idealistic, even utopian goal, one brought about through somewhat nihilistic means, as Milbank had once detected at the heart of Girard's work. And yet we do know love to exist *beyond* the violent mechanisms in our world. Was this not the essential message that Christianity had sought to lift up above all else, and so that was brought into the modern world as a potentially nihilistic endeavor that even gave birth to the secular sphere?[64]

If May's suggestion regarding the secular nature of love bears any weight, then we might be able to see how a truly sacramental and kenotic love is not only *not* afraid to appear at times to lose the moral, institutional, and religious orders that had seemed to sustain its being; following closely behind Girard's critique of mimetic desire, it is actually compelled to renounce them and perhaps even to see their end (in whatever current form they exist, so that perhaps a new form might subsequently, even immediately, appear)—an absolute profanation of what we had once thought was sacred—so that something truly sacred might appear. It is a most hopeful (indeed, "optimistic") suggestion that would posit how the duality of the sacred and the profane might be said to itself disappear so that we are left with only what lies before our eyes, asking us to love it and expecting nothing in return. It is in this sense that we might begin to understand, along with Vattimo, how religion may actually empty itself kenotically, sacramentally, to the point of ceasing to exist, allowing the secular to flourish in ways heretofore never seen. But it is also this movement, through love and beyond all institutionalized structures, that might also allow us to return to these restraining forms, much as Vattimo himself experienced in his return to the Catholicism of his roots. This is a move that allows humanity finally to take religion seriously as the grounds of human existence, even and especially when God has appeared to leave the picture. This too is precisely where we need, following Girard, to formulate a better account of secularization, one that takes account of new possibilities for love at the same time that it recognizes the possibility for greater violence to happen in the face of religion's demise.[65]

NOTES

1. Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York, NY: Zone, 2007).

2. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2013).

3. See Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

4. René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues of the Origins of Culture* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2008), esp. chapters 5 and 6. See the early back-and-forth in René Girard, "A Non-Sacrificial Reading of the Gospel Text" and "The Sacrificial Reading and Historical Christianity," in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978). Here Girard is already moving beyond his initial explorations in *Violence and the Sacred* and discerning whether there is a greater knowledge to be unearthed from sacrifice. See also René Girard, "Sacrifice as Sacral Violence and Substitution," in *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1996), 69–96.

5. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 392–98.

6. Gianni Vattimo, "Nihilism as Postmodern Christianity," in *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 44.

7. Vattimo, "Nihilism as Postmodern Christianity," 46.

8. Vattimo, "Nihilism as Postmodern Christianity," 46.

9. It should be noted that Girard himself was opposed to this simplified version of postmodern deconstructionism and that he felt the truth of a text (i.e., its proximity to violence) was either accepted or rejected, not merely subject to interpretation. See his responses to Vattimo in Gianni Vattimo and René Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

10. Vattimo, "Nihilism as Postmodern Christianity," 46.

11. Vattimo, "Nihilism as Postmodern Christianity," 47.

12. Vattimo, "Nihilism as Postmodern Christianity," 48.

13. Gianni Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," in *Weak Thought*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, trans. Peter Carravetta (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 40.

14. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 25.

15. Vattimo, "Nihilism as Postmodern Christianity," 48.

16. See also Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 169.

17. Gideon Baker, *Nihilism and Philosophy: Nothingness, Truth and World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

18. Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," 42.

19. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 26.

20. See Jacques Derrida, "*Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum),*" *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

21. Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," 42–43.

22. Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," 43.

23. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 166.

24. Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," 46.

25. Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," 51.

26. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2007).

27. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

28. See the discussion of positive mimesis as a theological principle of grace in Petra Steinmair-Pösel, "Original Sin, Grace, and Positive Mimesis," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 14 (2007): 1–12.

29. Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 31.

30. Luca Di Blasi, "Within and Beyond Mimetic Desire," in *Mimesis, Desire, and the Novel*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello and Heather Webb (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 39–53.

31. Pablo Bandera, "Love vs. Resentment: The Absence of Positive Mimesis in Generative Anthropology," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 14 (2007): 13–26, 22.

32. Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), 117.

33. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 118. For parallel conclusions on the contextual background of such movements, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), as well as Herbert Grundmann's account of the "free spirit" movements in his *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

34. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 121.

35. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 123.

36. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 125.

37. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 129.

38. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 129.

39. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 133–34.

40. A number of these misguided efforts are recounted in Peter Watson, *The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

41. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 136.

42. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 136.

43. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 137.

44. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 138.

45. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 139.

46. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 139.

47. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 143. It is helpful to note as well that Critchley's commentary includes a critique of Agamben's "anomic" reading of Paul (148) and the inoperativity that radical political communes search after today (149).

48. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 144.

49. Niklaus Largier, "The Rhetoric of Mysticism: From Contemplative Practice to Aesthetic Experiment," in *Mysticism and Reform, 1400–1700*, ed. Sarah Poor and Nigel Smith (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 356.

50. Largier, "The Rhetoric of Mysticism," 367.

51. Largier, "The Rhetoric of Mysticism," 369.

52. Largier, "The Rhetoric of Mysticism," 371.

53. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 151.

54. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 153.

55. Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1999).

56. Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 99.

57. Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 254.

58. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 345–58.

59. May, *Love*, 255.

60. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 358.

61. Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love* (London: Continuum, 2002), 151.

62. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 93.

63. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 153.

64. See the historical argument made in Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

65. Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 32.

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