

# Girard and the Analogy of Desire

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## Introduction

If the devil is in the details, then God is in the prepositions, and I want today to look at one such preposition: the little word “for”. I think this to be the most difficult and delicate word to parse in the whole of theology. Let me explain why. As St Thomas Aquinas taught us, we cannot say of God what God is, only what God is not. This very properly negative approach to God is vital if we are to avoid idolatry. Idolatry is where whatever passes as “god” is in fact a function of our group dynamics and the patterns of desire which they produce in us, a bit-player within a thoroughly human imaginary projection. Yet in Christian Theology the whole purpose of the *via negativa*, as it is called, is not so as to leave us with nothing that we can affirm, but rather to set our minds and hearts free from the interferences by which we block God who is not-a-thing, from showing Godself to us as affirming *us*. In other words, the pruning, which certainly feels negative, is part of a purely positive movement towards us.

Now here is the problem: if God is not a “being” in any normal sense of the word, not something that “is” within the order of everything that exists; if God is much more like nothing at all than like something that is, is much more like no-god-at-all than like one-of-the-gods, then in principle we have no reason at all to conceive of God as in any way either for, or against us. God really would be so much “other” than anything that we can imagine that there would be quite simply no hook, no criterion by which this other could have incidence in our world. If you are a chocolate pudding, a Beethoven string quartet “exists” in a sense which you cannot possibly pick up. It is not in any way in rivalry with you, does not occupy the same space as you, it floats by in an entirely different

sphere from you, and has no incidence in your life or existence. Even if it had in fact inspired a cook in a kitchen to make you, and even if its sound does in fact envelope you completely while you are being cooked, none of this is available to you. Neither can you hear *it*, nor can it smell or taste *you*. You pass each other by indifferently like ships in the night.

And of course, some people have tended to see the *via negativa* as making of God something indifferent. Indeed, I have read material by some who subscribe to the *via negativa* which has left me with a sense of horror: all that emphasis on unknowability can lead to the emotional correlate of a sense of lostness before a completely arbitrary other. Those, among whom I include myself, who strongly defend the *via negativa* as indispensable if we are to avoid idolatry, have a real task on our hands if we wish to defend both the utter otherness of God, and, yet, while holding onto that otherness, a sense of there being in, and as a non-arbitrary part of, that otherness, a “for” us.

The difficulty with this is that the moment you have a sense of a “for”, some hint of a movement towards, or benefitting, you, you are by definition talking of the incidence of the totally other in your reality, and therefore of something that in principle cannot be understood only negatively, but has to have some positive content that is available to you from within your frame of reference.

It may be that a tiger in a game reserve in India is hunted down by the warden of the reserve and shot with a tranquilizer dart. This puts it to sleep so that it can be moved with comparative ease to another reserve where there is a better eco-system for its survival, and potential mates for its reproduction. As a member of the film crew accompanying this, you can see quite clearly that the whole exercise is *for* the benefit of this tiger in particular, and is being conducted by people who are in favour of the survival of tigers in general. All of this is entirely unavailable to the tiger, which can only relate to the unfolding events from within the framework of invincible tigrity. The tiger is quite unable to distinguish between wardens armed with tranquilizer darts and hunters armed with guns. No attempt by the warden to parlay with the tiger and explain why he was going to shoot a tranquilizer dart into it would have the slightest effect.

When the exercise is finished, something has indeed happened *for* the tiger, but the tiger cannot talk about what happened being either for it or for tigers in general. For the tiger this was an arbitrary part of a kill-or-be-killed world in which, as it happened, it lived to prowl another day.

So when humans talk about the “for” in God we are actually saying that we are marginally different from the tigers, in that there has been some form of communication which does not totally pass us by; that there are some hooks in our cultural framework by which a “forness” which is entirely from outside our way of being, is able to be understood, and responded to, by us as having incidence within our way of being.

Now the easy way of coping with this is to say “Yes, in principle we can know nothing about God, but God has communicated to us in this or that way – by means of a cataclysm, or a book, or a prophet, or a law, or a sacrifice – so a perfectly straightforward positive knowledge of what God wants of us is now available to us”. Nevertheless, I hope you can see that *any straightforward positive communication* of a “for” us will always be interpreted by us, put to use by us, entirely within the pre-existing social and cultural framework which forms us. In other words the sense of the word “for” is as liable to idolatry as the word “is”, or even more liable. By definition, the sense of “for” is partial – partial to us, to me. So part of the problem of any claim that a communication of God is “for” us, or “for” me is that it seems to be saying “OK, we’ve got all that negative stuff about God’s “being” out of the way, so now we can go back to a purely positive account of God’s partiality, one which meshes with our pre-existing sense of what being “for”, or being “me”, or being “us” means. And, whoops, although we’re convinced that we are right, because we have a positive communication, in fact, for all practical purposes, we’ve fallen straight back into idolatry.

It’s as if the tiger, recovering from anaesthetic in its new wildlife reserve, and discovering a gun left planted nearby, were somehow to have associated the gun with it being brought to this new place. So, along with other tigers, it worships the gun as a totem, entirely blind to the distinction between wardens with tranquilizer darts, and hunters with bullets, and with no alteration at all in its kill-or-be-killed attitude to its

general surroundings. It would be an entirely futile form of worship because the tigers would not, in any way at all, be having the structure of their engagement with their own way of life altered from within such that they could begin to share, with a degree of equality of understanding, in the network of human relations which had done something *for* them. The gun-totem, bereft of the tigers being given *from within the terms of reference of their own tigritude* the wherewithal to interpret what it was about, including making sense of its potential ambivalence, would be worse than useless: it would be misleading, a false source of security.

It is rather the same with a word which is often bandied about by people of different religious backgrounds as associated with God. This is the word “mercy”. The human claim that God is merciful is entirely useless unless accompanied by a self-interpretation by God of what God’s mercy looks like within human interaction. That is to say, unless it offers us an anthropological criterion and the wherewithal for us to be taken inside the criterion’s own interpretation of itself, we are left within the equivalent of our invincible tigritude. After all, the “mercy of god” can be invoked and thanked by a group of people for whom it reveals itself in having shown them which defiler was disturbing their unity, and must thus be cast out. God’s mercy can also be invoked by the defiler, who may or may not have done anything wrong, as he is led to the gallows. In his invocation of mercy he is begging protection from, and a way out of, what looks to him like crowd violence, rather than God’s mercy. God’s mercy can even be invoked by an entirely innocent person in the process of being thrown out. She is invoking it upon those who are engaged in throwing her out – while they are thinking that this is how they receive mercy – as an act of her not holding their tigritude against them. But there is nothing in the word itself to say which of these uses is true. And since the uses are completely opposed to each other in meaning, then the word either means far too much, or nothing at all. It means whatever it means entirely within the pre-existing human framework, nothing more. There is nothing in the word itself which requires us to engage in any self-criticism, any *via negativa* concerning what the words “for” and “us” might mean.

All of this has been to bring us to the place where I would like to highlight how Girard can help us. Let us take the phrase: “God is for us”.

It seems to me that where traditionally the negative approach to God has hinted at a sense of God who is not in rivalry with anything that is, and thus saved us from the danger of worshipping a god within the order of things that are, it has done so by problematizing the word “is”. It doesn’t offer much help in problematizing either the “for” or the “us” – which are inseparably bound together. It seems to me that Girard’s insight into the mimetic nature of desire, which some people accuse of being far too negative, actually gives us a chance to problematize the “for” and the “us” in very helpful ways. Or to put it into nutshell: when we say that “God is not in rivalry with anything that is” the phrase “not in rivalry” might be a very useful starting place for working towards a sense of a “for” that is not part of our cultural framework, and yet which has a positive incidence in it. So I’d like here to set out some hints of what I might call the Girardian analogy – the *via negativa* of rivalistic desire.

### **Traversing hostility**

Let me illustrate what I’m talking about – my parameters if you like – from Scripture. I’m taking two apparently unconnected texts, and what I will hope to discuss is how Girard’s insight helps us traverse between what is unsaid in the one and what is said in the other.

The first is from St Matthew’s Gospel<sup>1</sup>:

“You have heard that it was said ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

The second is from St Paul, writing to the Galatians<sup>2</sup>:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. The life in the flesh which I am living now, I am living in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself *for me*.

When I called your attention to the word “for” earlier, it was its

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 6:43-45.

<sup>2</sup> Gal 2:19b-20.

appearance here in Galatians, where it translates the Greek υπερ, that most strongly impressed itself upon my mind. I have deliberately chosen this passage, where the word “for” is linked to “me” rather than one of the occasions where “for” is linked to “us” (for instance, Ephesians 5:2 or Titus 2:14). My choice is because it is, I think, much more difficult to come up with a satisfactory way of interpreting the “for” when it points not to a general collective but to an historical individual, and to one with whom, as it happens Jesus had no personal contact at all during the course of his life and ministry. It is also true that, at the personal level of any of us, it is a much less demanding exercise to imagine God loving “us” than it is to imagine God loving “me”. It is too easy to have recourse to lazily idolatrous pictures of what it is for someone to love an “us”, whereas to glimpse what is meant by talk of someone who is both historical and invisible loving *me* is a real stretch and a challenge.

So, let me explain the parameters of what I would like to bring out. In the quotation from St Matthew we are given something approaching a characterization of the “otherness” of God: “your Father who is in heaven...who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust”. Alongside this we have an indication that the one speaking thinks that his characterization is not so removed from the earthly sphere that it is simply inconceivable that humans might be in some way like God: “love... pray... *so that you may be sons of your Father*”. We also have an indication of precisely what criteria, in the anthropological sphere, constitutes the sort of human activity by which some degree of similitude to God becomes possible: “love *your enemies* and pray for *those who persecute you*”. In other words, the similitude is to be found in the sphere of desire stretched by the presence of some well-specified social interactions.

So here in the Matthean text there is an astonishing mixture: We have an apparent Divine indifference or impartiality – being for everybody regardless of their moral status rather than partisan in being for this person and against that; We have a guarantor of overall cosmological benevolence who is in some way personal, since it is not merely “the” sun, but “his” sun that God causes to rise; And yet we also have striking hints, attributed to God, of an entirely particular sense of being *for* which

is both personal and yet doesn't include any sort of *over against*. It is this latter sense which, I would suggest, is typically massively mysterious to us, such that it is very difficult for us to imagine any positive content to it at all. How can being *for* my enemies and those who are out to get me include any positive sense of being for *me*? Jesus presupposes both the complete *otherness* of God to our ways of thinking, and yet insists that this otherness not only does not disclude, but actively includes a potential similitude, though one which is a huge stretch for us: being for our enemies.

It is in the context of this stretch that St Paul's understanding of God being *for* him becomes especially interesting. St Paul's starting point here is that he was an enemy of God – for that is who he had discovered himself to be on the road to Damascus. The sort of *for* that Jesus describes in St Matthew's Gospel was experienced by St Paul. However not in the first place as a moral injunction telling him to do something towards an enemy, but rather as an accurate description of what he, Paul, *as an enemy*, found himself undergoing at the hands of someone who was *for* him. There was a definite shape to the *for* of God, and it involved God's occupying a specific place in the human scheme of things: as one vulnerable to hatred and persecution at the hands of enemies. It involved a human movement toward voluntarily occupying the space created by enmity before anybody realised the importance to them of that space, indeed while they were entirely blind to its importance for them personally. The blindness to its importance is absolutely part of the enmity from which the enemy is being, unbeknownst to him or herself, set free.

If I may use yet another inadequate image: it looks as though in the Matthew text, Jesus is describing a somewhat shapeless glove – the outer shape of a movement of an as-yet-content-less benevolence from God pointing towards humans, who are seen as hostile and persecuting, a benevolence which Jesus' listeners are being urged to fill out, to en flesh. St Paul is describing exactly the same glove but from the receiving end. Now this glove has been tightly stretched by a living hand, a thoroughly content-ful human acting out by Jesus, pointing towards him, Paul, as just such an hostile and persecuting human.

Now the phrase “just such an hostile and persecuting human” doesn’t yet make it personal to a “me”; it leaves Paul as a typical member of a collective. So I’d like to go further than this, since in the passage in question, St Paul problematizes the “me” who is on the receiving end of this “for”, and the way he problematizes it yields, I hope some insight into the nature of the “for”.

As far as I can see there is a genuinely detectable mimetic anthropology at work in St Paul’s very mysterious-seeming utterances here, and I wish to express my gratitude and indebtedness to Robert Hamerton-Kelly for his insistence on something that hadn’t been at all obvious to me. And that is the importance of the occasions when Paul talks of the faith *of* Jesus Christ or *of* Christ, or *of* Jesus<sup>3</sup>, alongside the occasions when he talks about faith<sup>4</sup> *in* Christ. I have come to see that given that St Paul is talking not simply about an historical being who is an object of faith, but about one who has become a life-giving spirit, to use his own language<sup>5</sup>, then what he is bringing out is the sense in which the “life-giving spirit” in question is an active protagonist of faith. In other words, this life-giving spirit *believed in him, Paul*. And the strength and force of this person’s passionate belief *in him* is what has completely taken him over from within. It is because this person’s – Christ’s – passionate belief *in him* has taken him over that he finds himself coming to believe on the inside of this person’s – Christ’s – belief. So when he talks about believing *in* Christ he is expressing both the sense of being on the inside of someone’s belief, within their subjectivity, as it were; and their being a completely permeable, and non-graspable, “object” of belief.

Now let me quote to you a little more from that Galatians passage:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. The life in the flesh which I am living now, I am living in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

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<sup>3</sup> e.g. Rom 3:22, 26 as well as this Galatians passage.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Gal 2:16.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor 15:45.

At first glance the phrase “for through the law I died to the law” seems odd, since it makes it sound as though Paul somehow considers himself the victim of the law. Yet I think it very important that there is nothing victimary in his thinking here, but a very clear mimetic anthropology. Paul’s understanding of the self is always reflexive, interindividual to use Girard’s only neologism: your only access to your self is in your relation to another. As you do to your neighbour so you do to yourself. If you are complicit in killing someone, you have consented to killing yourself. Thus when Saul was driven by his investment in the law to persecute Jesus’ Way and consent to the killing of Stephen, the law was actually killing him in making of him a murderer of his neighbour. But please notice he is not using this realisation as some sort of special pleading, to mitigate the circumstances in his defence: “Sorry Officer, it was the Law made me do it”. On the contrary, he seems glad of the state in which this has left him: he’s not complaining about it at all. It was as someone who was a dead “self”, and therefore beyond any of the reaches of the Law, which is entirely moot among the dead, that he was reached by the one whose enemy he had been.

The appearance to him of Jesus on the road to Damascus as “YHWH Jesus whom you are persecuting” was the appearance of someone *who believed in him*. And let us not double-guess the English language here: it is quite right that believing in someone can be both a relationship towards someone which ends in them as an object of one’s belief; and it can also be a powerful attitude of yours which enters into the person as subject such that they, knowing themselves believed in, can do much more than they might have done. It can be both on the one hand “I believe in X, my candidate for mayor, or “I believe in Y, my bright hope for saving Manchester United from dropping down the league tables” and, on the other hand it can also be “Go on girl, you can do it, I believe in you!”

I think this points to a perfectly normal, and healthy, human experience: I, who am not very sure of who I am, of my strengths and weaknesses, of what I dare to aspire to or not, have the good fortune to be met by someone who believes in me, even when I don’t. They can clearly see more to me than I can myself. They can imagine me doing things that I

can't, can see some of the pitfalls to which I am prone, and which I will interpret as dead-ends by which I will be discouraged. But they can envision these apparent dead-ends as crucibles through which I may be turned into something much bigger than I could have imagined. And as I take on board that they believe in me, it is in fact *their* imagination, their vision, their pattern of desire which will come to “run” my relationship to the events, the people, and the situations in which I find myself. I will start to look at these situations “through their eyes”. I will start to think my way through such and such a situation “as if” they were thinking inside me, as if it were their mind thinking through me. However it will not be their mind thinking through me *instead* of me. It will be their mind thinking in me *as* me. I will be in the process of receiving a new “I” that is in principle inseparable from the “I” of the one believing in me.

Thus Paul's former self – Saul – was dead, because of its consenting complicity, via legally enflamed persecution, in the murder of Christ. So what the appearance of “YHWH Jesus who you are persecuting” opened up for him was how he was both an enemy to God, and actually dead “in his sins” at the time he was approached. He was approached by someone who *believed in him* even though he was both dead and an enemy – that is what being *called*, given a vocation and a new name actually means. The One who called him, in the very act of doing so, was showing that he believed in him, that there was a someone who he, Paul, was called to become, and would become in the degree in which he took on board that impelling belief of Jesus in him. The source of his “I” is the one who believes in him, and so his “I” is interchangeably his current historical “fleshly” life, and yet run from within by the “I” of the one who believes in him.

Paul says:

The life in the flesh which I am living now, I am living in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

I propose that the last phrase “I am living in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” be read in a slightly unfamiliar way. In this reading it is not that there is a subject, “the Son of God”, and then a couple of more or less emotionally charged qualifications tacked on – “who loved me and gave himself for me”. Rather there is one

subject: “The Son-of-God-who-loved-me-and-gave-himself-for-me”. The purpose of this whole is to indicate the nature, the full richness of anthropological content, of the protagonism towards him, Paul, which included a human longing and trusting of the sort that can get alongside, and thus within, another human being – believing in them.

Please notice the extraordinary combination of power and of powerlessness which this suggests. The power consists in being able to make of a grotesque and awful human death not only a one-off act of “standing in” for someone else, but in fact a gift outside any possibility of reciprocity, an act of communication of a huge love of passion and longing for those trapped in the self-demeaning cycles of enmity. But there is something of even greater power than this present. By losing to his enemies, Jesus is not “secretly winning” through some hidden ruse. Rather, one dimension of the power of the act of communication, the appeal, is in the *loss*, the occupying and remaining in the place of loss.

The loss, and the powerlessness, is appealing to Saul, saying to him “Here is where my being not out to get you, but for you, leaves me. It leaves me beneath your feet, as it were, under you, powerless before you. It is as one who is dead before you that I am for you. Only thus could I be *towards* you, for you, in a way that is not *over against* you in any way at all, for the dead are in no way at all over against the living. What God being *for* you looks like is unimaginable except in as far as you learn to see a dead enemy as having in fact been *for* you. It is only available to you as you begin to glimpse how *your* sense of God being “for” “us” was in fact driven by hostility, such that you were the enemy of what was authentically for you. But it is genuinely as one who has allowed himself to be defined by all the worldly helplessness of the dead before you that I am for you – that is the content of my being a life-giving spirit. From now on, it really will be *you* who takes this somewhere new. I am entrusting myself to *you* to do with as you will. I want to show you that I don’t do the “God” thing separately from you and independently of you. But I believe in you, and so I will come to be all that I will come to be with you, and in you, and not independently of you. The gentleness of my belief in you is such that I don’t invade you, but come on board without displacing you; this happens in the degree to which you, discovering

yourself believed-in are able to let go of that “I” built in self-destructive enmity. I know of no richer way to say that I love you than to say that I am overjoyed to be in this apparently dead-end place for you, since I know that by my being in this place I can get it across to you that *I believe in you*. My occupying this space was not, and is not, a juddering to a helpless halt before you, it is an act of communication towards you, a sign of how much I want to come out to play with you, my completely irrevocable statement of trust and belief in you: that I know you have potential for a much much richer way of being than you yet know. Where will you take this? What will you make of me-who-am-entrusting-myself-to-you? I am psyched about what you are going to make of this”!

### **The negative analogy from desire**

Well, I hope you can see that this discussion might fit in with conversations that we have been having among those who have taken on board René Girard’s mimetic insight, as also with some classical theological discussions, and even with some modern discussions concerning desire and religion in the wider sphere.

The *via negativa* of mimetic desire, turns out to offer us a way in which the word “for” can have a non-idolatrous but genuinely human meaning from a place just outside our ken, our understanding, our being able to grasp it. It is sealed off from our grasp by its apparent powerlessness in the place of death. However, it has come to have a non-idolatrous meaning only through traversing an anthropological space which is entirely familiar to us: the space of one being driven out to death, and facing us from that driven-out space, invisibly, as it were, except in as far as we find ourselves being let go of our hostility to it. In other words, the inexhaustibly rich positive sense of God’s “for” begins to show itself amongst us only in and as a pruning of all our senses of “for” derived from within rivalry, vengeance and over-against.

I hope that it becomes clear how this might illumine one of the most difficult discussions concerning the place of human desire in relation to the things of God. If I may give some slightly cartoonish

characterizations: there are those for whom human desire is so negative, so corrupt, that grace is extrinsic to us. It can reveal, and then forgive and cover over our wickedness; however, if we are to be given the chance of a genuinely new human culture it is one which does not start here, but in heaven, and is not in organic continuity with what we know here. So there is no analogy between our sense of “for us” and God’s. Fear of idolatry is such that all we’re left with is idolatry, since there’s no criterion in our midst by which we might recognise what isn’t idolatry.

Then there are those for whom human desire is not so negative, such that the kingdom of heaven starts here and is very much in continuity with what we know here, God’s sense of “for us” and ours are not so different, which is another way of having no criterion in our midst for recognising our idolatry, since we simply idolatrize our criteria.

What it seems to me that Girard’s understanding offers is the anthropological shape of our idolatry as offered to us by someone outside it who is offering us to be stretched beyond it through empowering us to traverse our own hostility. Grace perfects nature through a very specific social shape: having our hostility undone by One who has approached us from within the centre of our hostility.

I don’t have time in this conference to develop this in all the ways I would like – the radical blossoming of the personal, the flowering of creativity which begins to show through from the other side of the *via negativa* of desire. However I would like to end by sharing with you a passage in the Gospel which brings out all that I have been trying to say here with such clarity that it is blinding.

In St John’s Gospel<sup>6</sup>, there is a meeting of concerned parties to try and work out what to do about Jesus: he is creating such waves that they fear that the colonial power, the Romans, will take advantage of the disruption as an excuse to destroy the Temple and their nation. Caiaphas, who was acting High Priest, says to the meeting:

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<sup>6</sup> Jn 11: 49-52

“You understand nothing at all. You do not conceive that it’s expedient *for* you that one man should die *for* the people, and that the whole nation should not perish”

Well, we’ve all heard this before: in fact it is the classic statement of sacrificial political ethics. In my terms of reference, it is the word “for” used with invincible tigritude. What we rarely remember is the verse immediately following:

He did not say this from himself, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die *for* the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

Here there is a positive sense both of priesthood and of prophecy, even if one entirely unknown to, and working despite, its placeholder. Using the hook of a strikingly ambivalent human dynamic, a hugely positive act of communication, with an abundance of fruit way beyond what the ambivalent dynamic could possibly imagine, was unfurling itself in our midst as a “for” that is in no way run on our terms.

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