

*Interdividuals, Individuals and Fragmented Selves:
How Can Mimetic Theory Help Us Understand "Huiiothesia"¹?*

(Presentation for COV&R/AAR meeting, Denver CO, Sunday 18th Nov 2018)

In John 3, Jesus wonders at Nicodemus' inability to understand what it means to be born of the Spirit and says to him "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?" In my arrogant youth I wondered why this had not become the standard exam to be passed by anyone wanting to become a teacher within the Christian faith: the candidate would have to explain new birth to the satisfaction of a board of elders all of whom, being teachers of Christianity, could be assumed to understand what it meant. Now, years later, Jesus' question merely shakes to the core my pretension of being any sort of teacher within the Church.

This is not for me an academic or a theoretical question alone, but rather both a practical and a personal one. Let me explain. If you are a gay or lesbian Catholic, you are faced with a persistent approach towards who you are, towards what your "I" is, from ecclesiastical authority. Those who promote this approach from within the Roman Congregations as well as those who relay their signal more broadly have done their best to assure us that their approach is "the Teaching of the Church", and thus in some way positively related to the mind of Christ who would be teaching us through them.

These promoters, faced with both a traditional prohibition against same-sex acts and at the same time a growing recognition of the non-pathological nature of the minority variant that most call a same-sex orientation, made a bold move. They could have recognised that in all probability the traditional prohibition is only truly a prohibition for those for whom it would be against nature – their way of being - to act in this way. While for those whose nature is same-sex oriented, then their path would lead them to learn to humanise their way of being such that they avoid whatever turns out to be bad use of their sexual faculties and become habituated to what we discover to be good use. Just as you would expect with straight people.

Instead, the promoters of this attitude doubled down on the traditional prohibition. They sought to inscribe the prohibition into the nature even of those we refer to as gay or lesbian, those with a same-sex orientation, by deriving from

¹ "*Huiiothesia*" is the New Testament word for "the process of adoption as son (and we would now say daughter) of God" It also implies, in St Paul's use, that plural sons and daughters are becoming a singular reality: the Son (not understood as defined by gender). I use the transliterated Greek as shorthand to get round the issues of gender, anachronism, and number all of which are flattened out in a direct translation.

a definition of “the sexual act” as something intrinsically open to procreation, a definition of the “homosexual tendency” as something “objectively disordered”. By which they mean “not ordered towards its proper object”, which is to say procreation.

It has never been clear from their explanation whether this definition is supposed to be a psychological claim. That is what it would be if what they mean by “homosexual tendency” is what most gay people mean by “sexual orientation”. And if that is not what they mean, they have never explained where in the psyche of the person who is learning from them their definition is supposed to have impact. The only thing that is obvious about their claim is that it follows a circular logic given the teleological weight attaching to their initial definition of “the sexual act”: they presuppose that definition to correspond to an anterior created reality with relation to which human intentionality and psychology is irrelevant. However the lack of clarity concerning where in the psyche of the disciple their definition is supposed to have impact has not stopped promoters of the position from filling in the meaning-deficit they themselves have provoked.

Here I want to focus not on the truth or falsity of the position of the Roman Congregations, which I have done elsewhere, but instead to look at the consequences for *huiiothesia*, as it is lived out by gay and lesbian Catholics, of this filling in the meaning-deficit. Because the promotion of this approach to potential disciples has very distinctive consequences in the field of *huiiothesia*. For example, there was a time when Roman congregations made a distinction between “egosyntonic” and “egodystonic homosexuality”. Someone is “egosyntonic” when they say “Over time, and maybe after a certain amount of struggle, yes, I have discovered myself a lesbian or gay person, and, along with other more or less stable characteristics such as my nationality, mother tongue, skin colour, handedness, and height, it is as such that I find myself a human being in relationship with God, with other human beings and with the world in general.”

Meanwhile, someone is “egodystonic” who says: “I am a human being who, in addition to my other characteristics of e.g. nationality, mother tongue, skin colour, handedness and height, have found that I also suffer from a very strong disorder called same-sex attraction, one which threatens to overpower and indeed become, my sense of self. Unlike my genuine characteristics, this same-sex attraction can never be a positively contributory part of my “I”. Rather it is my ongoing conflict with this attraction which is a genuine characteristic of how I find myself a human being in relationship with God, with other human beings, and with the world in general”.

From the point of view of the Roman congregations the “egosyntonic” person – the one who says “Yes, I am gay, so what? Now I’ve got to get on with learning how to make of my life a project of love starting from where I am” has gone down a false path, away from *huiiothesia*, while the one who sticks with some variant of the “egodystonic” is heroically holding on to the chance of becoming a daughter or son of God. The latter person would say “I’m not really gay, I’m what the teaching authority refers to as a “homosexual person” by which that authority appears to mean someone whose intrinsic, but not experienced, heterosexuality is occluded by a very strong same-sex attraction. That attraction is itself entirely part of futility and does not include any inherent relatedness to God’s plan for creation.”

So, two quite different avenues towards the possibility of *huiiothesia* in the lives of real people, for whom the issues involved are often experienced drastically as those of life and death, salvation or damnation – loss of soul issues. And for these people of course, the psychological and relational consequences of either avenue are very markedly, and practically, different.

Now I’d like, if I may, to take a step back from this presenting issue, which is merely the occasion for my discussion, to bring out a point about theological context, before then turning to the possible contribution of the mimetic insight into how we may more plausibly live the reality of *huiiothesia* better, entirely independently of the gay question. You will probably have noticed that the two positions I’ve described above, are each inscribed in two quite different narrative approaches to the coming into being of the self. The first seems to be the direct descendent of the *via moderna*, the Ockhamist approach to God’s freedom and to nature which both Ockham’s boosters (like Larry Siedentrop²) and his critics (like John Milbank³) understand to have paved the way to modern secular liberalism and with it the absolute value of the individual. While the second is directly related, if not to Aquinas himself, then to Thomistic attempts since the dawn of the modern era to insist that the other is prior to the self, and that what that other is can be known by logical deduction from first principles concerning created realities as they genuinely are in God’s mind. Hence the usefulness, at least provisionally, of Aristotelian teleology to Christian theology: Aristotle’s “final cause” comes to stand in for the way in which “created order” automatically, inherently, and without any need for human intention to be considered, signals God’s goodness and God’s glory.

² L. Siedentrop *Inventing the individual: the Origins of Western Liberalism* Cambridge MA: Harvard UP 2014 esp ch 23

³ In chapter 1 of J. Milbank *Theology and Social Theory* Oxford: Blackwell 1990, as well as elsewhere in his writings.

We have, in short, one narrative where the self is prior to the other, and one where the other is prior to the self. So where does this leave us Girardians, for whom the anteriority of the other to the self is axiomatic? Well, I want to claim that it leaves us in the splendid position of being able to intuit an approach to *huiobesia* which is both more accurate than the modern secular individual one, and much less aprioristic than the decadent Thomistic one. Let me begin to try and say what I mean.

Following Girard's insistence on the inexistence of the individual, but rather the existence of the interindividual, it becomes possible to describe the image of God which is to be found in humans through the terms "Other, Self, and In-between". In theological language, this is God the Father (the Other other in my terminology), God the Son (the Christ who is becoming the I in each of us without displacing us) and God the Holy Spirit (the In-between who creates through relationality). So what do we mean when we talk about any particular person, what the modern world calls an "individual"? I would say: we mean a body who has been brought into being thanks to what is other than it and who is being inducted relationally into becoming a visibly active negotiating "I", or self, over time in the midst of the "we" that precedes them and reproduces itself in them by drawing forth imitation. So, the other brings forth the self through the in-between.

In an ideal world, the social other which brings us into being and reproduces itself in us through our imitation would be fully aligned with the Other other who brings into being. In this way the fully alive "I" or "self" would be what we normally call a "real individual", genuinely and fully themselves, the visible bodily "pole" of this relationship. While the in-between, constantly creating and maintaining pacific imitative desire between models and disciples, would ensure both the similarity and uniqueness of each bodily pole of interdividuality and the shared good use and enjoyment of any objects which might be discovered as of worth. In other words what we are pointing towards when we describe someone as a "real individual" is in fact "a richly ecclesial⁴ interdividual".

However, as is evident, we don't live in such a world. We live in a world in which two simultaneous realities are going on, at the very least among the baptised, but evidently more widely. These combine in such a way that in the first place, the ideal created reality described above is in fact happening; and yet that the form that takes among us, what it actually feels like to live this reality, is that we find ourselves seemingly dominated by what appears to be its reverse and come into being as

⁴ For clarification: I use the adjective "ecclesial" to refer to the living of the sign of reconciled humanity, and the adjective "ecclesiastical" to refer to the institutional elements which may or may not help form and sustain such signs.

protestors and dissidents from the “order” that reverse seems to prescribe. That is to say: we all find ourselves within some sort of struggle or process of conversion away from a locked down or futile version of the above, a futile version which is the sacrificial culture participated in by all of us since hominization.

I want to stress the simultaneity of these two realities, since they bring out what I think is genuinely pointed to by the Doctrine of Original Sin, which is that the reality of undergoing *being created* is always and everywhere⁵ experienced by humans as *undergoing salvation*. We are the creatures for whom forgiveness is our access to creation. However, we are very often fooled into thinking, therefore, that Creation and Salvation are two separate things, two separate realities. With Creation in the strong sense having happened a long time ago; and in a weaker sense being some sort of contemporary maintenance-in-being exercise. And Salvation in the strong sense as having been a particular and datable divine intervention into human chronology, and in the weak sense as being extended in time through the ministry of the Church.

From this separation into two realities, there emerges a chronological slippage between something that happened a very, very long time ago and something, the Incarnation, that happened within relatively recent human history. This slippage then morphs into deductions concerning created order as something prior to us. Within this, an historical moment, that of the Cross and Resurrection, is in some way made to function as a putting right of something that at some stage went wrong with that order, a “something” that can in fact only be deduced from the act of putting right itself.

The two most obvious rabbit holes down which Christianity has gone thanks to the slippage and the morphing are what one might call the drastic, or quasi-Calvinist one, and the complacent, or neo-Thomistic one. The former turns Christianity into an individualistic salvation cult, since in order to stress the power of the Saviour, created reality as we know it gets to be regarded as radically fallen. The “saved” human cannot learn from created reality what she or he is, but only from the words of Scripture, themselves divinely protected from fallibility. Any learning that contradicts the words of Scripture is the product of pride, vanity, or delusion. The result is a religion based on a personal conversion experience but one in which the Creator has little or no role *qua* Creator, and where Church life is that of the voluntary association of the like-minded rather than a divine gift for the corporate induction of *huiiothesia*.

⁵ With the evident exceptions of both Our Lord and, as defined dogmatically, Our Lady.

The latter, complacent variety remembers and celebrates the reality of Creation as something good, and one which produces an order which is divinely willed, and about which and from which we can learn in ways relatively unsullied by our fallenness. Indeed, following this way of thought, salvation doesn't seem to teach us anything new about the created order. Rather it enables us to be realigned to that which we were always meant to be, and so we become active and conscious participants in fulfilling that created order. The fall didn't have such deleterious effects on our nature that we can't work out from first principles what that nature is. And while our minds may be somewhat darkened and our wills prone to stray, and we are particularly prone to self-deception, especially in matters of our "passions", luckily God has provided us with the mind of Christ, in the form of an ecclesiastical authority gifted with divine rationality and certainty. This is empowered to tell us what our nature really is, and how we are to return to it through obedience, and independently of whatever passes as our subjectivity. The result of this rabbit hole is the arrogance and invulnerability to learning of our clerical caste which has led to an exodus from the life of the church of those who might have been inducted into *huiothesia*; and the loss of credibility of an episcopate whose abstract formulae have everything to do with their own corporate spirit, and are pretty much unrelated to either witness or any genuine act of teaching.

Well, what I would like to propose is that the mimetic insight offers us a way of talking about Creation and Salvation that avoids both the slippage into two chronologically distinct realities and the morphing into deductions concerning order – its total lack in one case, and its little need for redemption in the other.

What if, rather than being two different sorts of activity, Creation and Redemption were the same activity? Typically in Jesus' going up to his death on the Cross it is the imagery of Atonement which is used to give us some notion of how God is for, towards, loving of us. The ghastly business of a human lynch murder, a human sacrifice, is turned completely inside out and on its head. Thus, by means of a huge subversion-from-within of a recurring human reality - expulsion so as to create order - a distant analogy of God's love is made available to us: God's order is so unlike our order, that God is able to step freely and generously into our order both bringing it to an end and enabling hints of God's order to be brought into being by those undergoing being set free from their addiction to the old way of being ordered, and empowered to help each other become signs of a new human way of being together.

Well, so much for atonement. But then we have Creation, and typically that leads us into a different set of images: those to do with making, causing to be, and thus a different set of potential analogies. Isaiah, famously, asks "Does the clay say to

him who fashions it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles'⁶? This functions at the level of challenging our intelligence and understanding, since we know well that pots and other objects we might make don't have any insight into our intelligence in making them, what they are for and so on, so the distance between God's thoughts and ours are well brought out. But the image doesn't work as an analogy for creation, since of course, not even our finest potters make their clay *ex nihilo*. Where "making" is our primary analogate for creating, its connotations can be radically misleading. In Genesis, however, God speaks things into being, saying "let there be..." and that offers a more subtle image of the act of creation, for while none of us even begins to be able to match that kind of speaking, we do have some sense of powerful people, kings and the like, creating realities, dukedoms, counties, by their word. Isaiah 45: 18 - 19 bring together both the notions of free-forming and establishing on the one hand and speaking clearly, manifestly, on the other, thus spelling out the inherent intelligibility of creation⁷. But once again, the images simply affirm an ordered quality rather than saying anything about that order.

But how would it be if the principle image we have of Creation is not either that of making or of speaking, but of Atonement? The very question seems bizarre until we remember that the rite of Atonement was, in its earliest version, the rite for God's renewing of creation. And that the completion of the rite of atonement was also seen as the inauguration of the new creation.

Please remember that the key element to the understanding of the Temple rituals was that what we might participate in here below, the ritual event in the Temple, was not the real thing. The real thing was already lived out in heaven. And visions given to priests and prophets concerned elements of that which was already unspeakably full; it was outside time and space in heaven. Thus it was not reducible to human narrative possibility. That fulness had been glimpsed by prophets and priests such as Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel⁸ as something that was on its way in, was coming into the world and would eventually arrive as the terrible "day of the Lord" of which Zechariah speaks⁹ and which would lead to the end of the Temple. What we have in the book of the Apocalypse is the account of how that fulness, emerging from the Holy Place, interacts with time-structured sequential earthly reality in the

⁶ Isa. 45:9 RSV

⁷ Isa. 45:18-19 RSV ¹⁸ For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): "I am the LORD, and there is no other. ¹⁹ I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, 'Seek me in chaos.' I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right.

⁸ Ez 1:4-28; Ez 8:1-16; Ez 40-48, Daniel 7

⁹ Esp. Zech 12-14, with particular attention to Zech 14:4, a reference to the Messiah coming on the Mount of Olives. Hence the desirability, to this day, for pious Jews of being buried close to the Mount of Olives.

form of the coming of Jesus, his teaching, his death and resurrection and the working out of his prophecies concerning the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D.70. In the midst of these, the New Creation is fully inaugurated. So the “fulness” starts to become comprehensible as a series of human narratives, dependent on time and place. Each of the seven “seals” opened by the slain-and-risen Lamb is a dimension of that narrative interaction between heavenly reality and earthly turbulence.

However, it is not in the Apocalypse alone that we see this understanding. St Luke’s Gospel and the beginning of Acts gives a very clear picture of the Book of Genesis winding down, running backwards, in the events leading up to the Crucifixion. So Jesus in the Garden is the New Adam, with his sweat running down his body mixed with the red dust, looking like clots of blood, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Genesis 3:19¹⁰. Then when he is on the cross, the sun fails, and there is darkness over the land: we have reached the beginning of Genesis 1, and light itself has become uncreated. At that point the Temple Veil is ripped in two, which is to say that the whole of material reality is now brought to an end. At which point Jesus breathes out his Spirit which is now back outside the yet-to-be inaugurated Creation, hovering over it¹¹. It is that Spirit which will come back in the Acts of the Apostles, after the Ascension, inaugurating the new Creation through the new temple, which is not a cultic reality, and starts with the fire being reignited in the upper room¹², which is not the holy of holies, and which starts to spread to all nations.

My point is this: the only analogy we are given for creation in the New Testament, rather than “making” or “saying”, is the breathing out of his Spirit by a dying man who had given himself into that place of shame and degradation out of love for those who are inclined to create such a place. Please notice what this means. It means that we are given a remarkable picture of what (or who) God is with relation to God’s creation. What does it mean that God creates? It means that God is always and already before everything that is *as a dead man*. As one who has deliberately, and out of love, given himself away beyond any sort of taking control (dead men have no control over what comes after them). Yet that making himself available before us as a dead man is not a contentless reality. The contents of the reality of that being a dead man, the sort of dead man he is before us, is as one

¹⁰ “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Cf Luke 22:44 And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (KJV) A series of puns play out between the two in Hebrew with relation to the words “red” “blood” “ground” and “Adam”.

¹¹ Lk 23:44-46 ; Gn 1:2

¹² The “tongues of fire” at Pentecost cf Acts 2:3

who has *for the joy that was set before him*¹³ occupied the dark void thanks to which *we* create – make order, togetherness. In other words the loving quality of this being-before us as a dead man is the fullest refinement available to us of what Creation is. St Paul seems to have understood this when he talks about Christ crucified as the Power of God and the Wisdom of God¹⁴. These are creation-related words: the bringing into being out of nothing which is the breath of a dead man, and the creative orchestrating into being of a pattern of aliveness which we are invited to share as the Spirit is breathed into us¹⁵ and we are told “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”¹⁶ The opening up of creation (that opening up which is creation) is left in our hands.

I hope that you can see that this image of the simultaneity of creation and redemption has marked consequences for our understanding of *huiiothesia*. In the first place, it means that created order is always *ahead* of us, and not behind us: something which is coming upon us as we undergo both being brought into newness of being and discover that this is what we really are as created originally. So rather than being people who are first ordered, and then fall from order (and so are dis-graced), and then restored to order by forgiveness, understood as a form of pity from on high, we may find it possible to tell another story: we start as those who are not yet ordered, and find ourselves being summoned out of our too-small selves into being, and actually being let go from those too-small selves which are inclined to grind down in fear and security-seeking into too narrow an order, as we are challenged to reach beyond any sort of safety. As we reach out to those who in the Apostle’s words “are not”, we find ourselves starting to enjoy an entirely different order which is made for our enjoyment.

This process of being brought into being as *huiioi theou*¹⁷ is one process, creation, which is experienced by us as “redemption opening us up into creation”. The remarkable thing about it is that we can’t feel that we are being created. For we are creation’s autonomous symptoms. But we can indeed feel the sense of loss, constantly throughout our lives, of all the things that we might hang on to rather than undergo creation. It is wonderful when we feel joy and the other fruit of the Spirit, but they are just as much, and maybe more greatly, gifts in us when they are not felt by us, but by others because of us, even when what we feel is nothing.

¹³ Hebrews 12:2

¹⁴ 1 Cor 1:24, but see vv 21-31 as interpreting the creative function of Wisdom, even bringing into being “that which is not”

¹⁵ In John 20:22 “*enephusésen*” exactly as into Adam’s nostrils in Genesis 2,7 “*enephusésen*”

¹⁶ John 20:23.

¹⁷ Lit: sons/daughters of God. cf note 1

I can't help feeling that this picture is much more like the one which Paul gives in Romans 8¹⁸, as if it were obvious: creation subjected to futility in hope, so that even the grotesqueries of human cultures built on sacrifice are in fact, and without them knowing it, almost bursting beyond themselves, pointing up something beyond themselves which they don't know. And now the creation fully opened up so that even previous things which were murderous caricatures of ecclesial *hmiiothesia* start to be able to live their predestined life in hope. And the true logos, or meaning, or order, of the world, is present not with an added on superior act of pity from above, but with an equal-hearted, sharing of forgiveness which opens up reality.

A silly image, and one for which I beg indulgence from those who really know about music, which I don't. Imagine the musical mind of Bach, let us say, composing ever broader, more complex melodies and structures. And imagine a world in which music is atonal, Webern and Schönberg. The former stands in for creation, and the latter for futility. But such is the wisdom of creation that it is able to make beautiful music even from the gaps and atonalities of futility, bringing into being richness that those deliberate un-melodies could never have imagined. So it is that even from our failures and losses, more is able to be brought into being than we could possibly have imagined¹⁹.

Time prevents me from taking this further today. But the next step will be to attempt to develop an understanding of what is misleadingly referred to as "natural law". For when Aquinas refers to God's "eternal law" (by which he did not mean anything legal in a modern sense) it is to Divine Wisdom that he is referring²⁰. This anterior Wisdom, and its capacity to bring about created order according to a *logos*

¹⁸ Rom. 8:12-23 RSV ¹² So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh --¹³ for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. ¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; ²¹ because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

¹⁹ Since writing this, my friend Randi Juno pointed me towards a much better set of images to make the same point in Michael Kirwan's discussion of overacceptance (with reference to S Wells and W. Cavanaugh) in his article *Swearing, Blaspheming, Wounding, Killing, Going to Hell The World, as Seen and Heard by Ignatius* in the October 2018 issue of **The Way** Vol 57, no 4 pp 77-89

²⁰ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2091.htm#article2>

(a structuring creative word) inherently points to the glory of God. If we can recover a more ancient teleology of God's Wisdom, one less categorical and complacent than Aristotle's turned out to be, then we will have come much closer to an account of *biothesia* suitable for the Christianity that is arriving in the midst of our current birth pangs.

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Madrid/Chicago/Denver
October/November/December 2018