Faith in the Modern Areopagus

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Introduction

Paul says on the Areopagus: "What you worship unknowingly, I declare to you plainly" (*Acts of the Apostles* 17:23). He takes it for granted, it seems, that worship is one of the things that human beings do; the task for him is not to persuade anyone that worship is necessary but to bring to light what or who is being worshipped. We ought to be clear at the outset that this is not quite the same as the question, popular in liberal theological circles in the middle of the last century, of what is of "ultimate concern" to people.[1] This is not a discussion about "values," that dangerously vacuous term forever hovering on the frontier between descriptive and prescriptive language; it is about what by definition commands a measure of attention and loyalty strong enough to push the ordinary workings of the self aside and denies that self its normal liberty of definition. Put like that, worship appears, reasonably enough, as an area of some risk or danger within human affairs. To be invited to worship is to be invited to suspend routine assumptions and allow yourself to be acted upon, indeed to be defined by something outside the self. It may, in other words, be the most dramatic example possible of a claim to power, the kind of power that refuses other agencies or presences the capacity to name themselves and narrate their identity simply in their own terms.

I hope to argue that the contemporary force of Paul's Areopagitic argument is precisely in pressing us to reflect on worship, and more specifically on how and why a secular worldview is bound ultimately to avoid the difficulty of dealing with the danger of worship. In brief, I want to suggest:

i) that a robust concept of the non-negotiable dignity of the human person requires that the only proper object of worship be that which is radically other than the contents of the finite universe,
ii) that the phenomenon of human language, and the radical trust involved in addressing a human other with the expectation of being understood, entail a fundamental orientation away from the apparent naturalness of individual self-definition in the usual sense, and
iii) that once it is clear that God alone is to be worshipped, the finite agent is freed to stand "in the place" of God without the risk of any Luciferian claim to be the object of another's

[1] The phrase is associated especially with Paul Tillich and was popularised in Britain by the writings of Bishop John Robinson, especially his *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

total devotion: the finite person is "deified" not by the accrual of unimaginable power but by the worshipful embrace of a wholehearted responsiveness.

Central to all these points are two orienting convictions which I have tried to explore in other contexts: the significance of the wholly and necessarily non-rivalrous relationship between finite and infinite, and the understanding of all intelligent perception as involving the awareness of perspectives other than that of the individual ego, that is to say the object that is seen or known is seen and known as *always already seen and known*. Paul intends to declare to the Athenians what they act on but do not know; and so here we seek to direct our thoughts to what we act on but do not acknowledge in some of our central linguistic and ethical practices.

1. Rights, Ethics, and The Origins of Culture

There is vigorous debate in theological circles as to whether the notion of human rights as generally understood these days is fully compatible with a Christian anthropology; a number of influential voices (for instance John Milbank, Oliver O'Donovan, and Nigel Biggar[2]) have been raised to argue that any belief that human beings are endowed with a set of intrinsic claims is hard to reconcile both with the conviction of the absolute priority of *gift* in the work of creation and with the imperative of self-surrender articulated in the gospel. Surely, it is said, the human person in the biblical perspective is so thoroughly dependent and interdependent that the discourse of rights as inalienable endowment is at best a distraction from the central moral and spiritual labor of human responsibility. A persuasive argument, and an important corrective to the increasingly fragmented and forensic approach to rights that has become common in recent decades, it neverthless perhaps misses the seriousness of the founding impulse of those who first shaped the discourse. This impulse might be summed up as the conviction that there is an *appropriate* set of responses to anything recognized as a human agent, responses whose appropriateness does not depend in any way on the *decision* of a human individual or a human group. Recognizing a "right" is not so much (as is sometimes said) recognizing a simply identifiable duty on my part, but recognizing that the moral standing of another person is not in my possession to give or withhold. It pre-exists the relation or encounter between us; it holds for those I shall never actually encounter or relate to, in past, present, and future. It is, in sum, to do with accepting that what I meet here is not at my disposal or under my control.

To come at the same point from a slightly different direction, this is a recognition that the moral standing of the human other is not something that has to be or can be *earned*. The "appropriate" response is not a reward for performance. Let us look at an example that can be the subject of much confused thinking: if a person is deprived of normal civic liberties as a punishment for criminal activity, this is not a suspension of the category of appropriate response

[2] See most recently N. Biggar, *What's Wrong With Rights?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

to their humanity; the way in which we manage the deprivation of certain liberties has to have in view the moral standing of the criminal as someone held responsible for their acts and also held responsible for the possibility of changed behavior as the outcome of the penal process. And the responsibility of the penal process is to acknowledge true culpability where it exists and to support behavioral change; if its workings have the effect of humiliating, disempowering, or stigmatizing, it has failed, and the failure is a failure to see what is appropriate to the offender as a human subject. Or to take another uncomfortably current issue: there has been much discussion recently of the pressure exerted on some pregnant women to abort a fetus which may exhibit signs of Down's Syndrome or is in a category where the risk of this is high; there has been something of a campaign to "eliminate" the condition (national policy in Iceland, for example, has led to a near-total eradication of Down's Syndrome by means of selective abortion). The implication has not been lost on those actually living with Down's and their families: there is a prescribed norm of human capacity which those with Down's fail to exhibit, and so they fail to "earn" what would otherwise be the appropriate moral standing for a human subject. It is a conclusion that ought to be familiar from arguments about supposedly inferior races in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or even from what passed as scientific discussion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of the capacities of women.[3]

At root, a defensible discourse of human rights is one that refuses any suggestion that we need to assess capacity before acknowledging moral standing; the organic, physical recognizability of human identity determines what counts as an appropriate response – a set of facts which we as human others do not determine. To respond with appropriate attention – that is, in a way that grants the other a standing like my own, a proper expectation that their need and well-being will be seen as morally significant in the same way as my own – is to accept that there is a response that is "just," that "does justice," as we like to say, to what is in front of us. And justice cannot be done if I am in any sense claiming ownership of what confronts me. It is why slavery is so regularly presented as a sort of paradigm of the infringement of human rights and dignities; but as we become more alert in identifying modern versions of slavery (such as human trafficking, indentured labor, child labor, child marriage, and child soldiering) we may be able better to grasp what is morally at stake here: the fundamental shape of unjust relation is the situation where one party reduces the other to a function they can define and limit – most damagingly a function that is simply a matter of serving the interest of the first party. Security is won and kept by successfully discharging this function, earning dignity or respect. The real moral energy of human rights language is in its attempt to secure the expectation of respect and nurture *independently of successful performance*.

[3] A valuable discussion is in J. Bourke, *What It Means To Be Human: Historical Reflections from the 1800s to the Present* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2011).

So far, so good – although the mention of Down's Syndrome and the abortion question reminds us that there is a longish trail of inconsistency in the outworking and direction of this moral energy and a frequent slippage towards precisely the correlation of status with capacity that the rights schema is supposed to rule out. But how do we establish a coherent basis for the presumption of inalienable moral standing? Affirming this is already a recognition that there is a problem in the human world with ineradicable conflicts of interest, and that securing one group's or individual's interest at the expense of another is a routine matter; "rights" are asserted as a protection against an unmediated battle between acquisitive interests.

If we are to follow Rene Girard's analysis of the origins of culture,[4] the neural and cerebral developments that enable us to represent to ourselves the thinking of another human agent are also what make possible the peculiar spirals of rivalry that characterize human culture – not merely the competition for resources that is found in the animal world generally but the development of *desire for what the other desires*. We are socialized by imitation, which is also something that we have in common with other animals, but this socializing entails from the beginning the imagining of another's narrative of wanting and achieving, and this act of imagining prompts the fear that what the other wants is a limit on my own wanting and achieving; so that if I then want and achieve what the other wants, I forestall the possibility of frustration, and secure my own projects. In other words, to be sure of the security or welfare I desire, I must learn to want for myself what the other wants. The treatment of this process by Girard and those who have learned from him (Dumouchel, Palaver) continues to provoke controversy and skepticism (and frequently some fundamental misunderstanding), but it offers an unusually comprehensive account of how and why human beings need protection from the impulse to try and "possess" one another, to abolish the distance between agents and absorb the projects of others into those of the ego. Girard takes this still further in his complex discussion of the way in which the ego's desire for the other's desideratum eventually constitutes the other both as an object of unconditional and definitive longing *and* as the supreme obstacle to the ego's attaining its goals – as divine and diabolical at the same time.[5] The other becomes an object of "worship" in the sense of commanding absolute attention and devotion, defining my/our desire. It is emulated and resented. And it is this doubling of reaction that enables the scapegoat mechanism to be activated: a dominant group identifies an individual or sub-group as simultaneously possessed of significant and threatening power and also as alien and vulnerable; and it proceeds to their violent extermination or expulsion. They no longer block my/our desire,

[4] R. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (London: Athlone Press, 1987*)*; see also G. Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossraod Publishing, 1995) and W. Palaver, *Rene Girard's Mimetic Theory* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).
[5] Palaver, *Rene Girard's Mimetic Theory,* 129; cf. Girard, *Things Hidden,* 99–104, 290–4, 331–2.

they can no longer "own" the good I have learned to want; their removal from the scene allows the dominant and excluding group to celebrate its self-identity and its reconciliation with the longed-for, sacred terminus of desire: the divine.

Girard, like Freud, wants us to think in terms of a literal and historical "founding murder" at the roots of every human culture[6]. Whether the overall theory really requires this is not clear; what is clear is the mechanism by which the "sacred" is generated through the mimetic spiral which eventually demands an act of collective and violent expulsion or exclusion. That which is both adored and dreaded is made the subject of successful negotiation by the sacrificial process. The relevance of this to our thinking about rights and about worship needs some spelling out, but the connection seems to be something like this. Human beings perceive themselves as living precariously, their desires bounded by the insistent rivalry of others. They seek to circumvent that boundedness by making the desire of others their own.

There is thus at the root of human life together a profound faultline, the threat of an endlessly intensified competition which could issue in a "war of all against all." Cohesion is secured by identifying a candidate for expulsion, the collective bearer of the mimetic fantasies of the group. Archaic religion is the regularizing of this mechanism (since it is never done with once and for all). Thus far Girard; and linking this with our Areopagitic starting-point, we can then say two things. What is *worshipped*, what makes an irresistible claim on the ego, is in Girardian perspective the ego's own alienated desire, mediated by the imagined desire of the other. Our collective life as humans is haunted by the compulsive pressure towards absorbing and (at best) immobilizing or silencing one another; in times of serious social crisis, this pressure leads to the scapegoating and expulsion (often the murder) of those who cannot defend themselves against the projection of frustrated desire. We do not have far to look in the contemporary scene for the rhetoric that combines a picture of the threatening other as both failing or weak and endowed with sinister and elusive powers. Thus, the idea of ascribing to human subjects a moral standing that is outside this mechanism becomes an important aspect of challenging both the mimetic spiral and the scapegoat ritual; we must learn to see the other as more than the model, rival and obstacle to my desires. To put it in condensed form, we must see the other as more than simply other to *me*. But what is it that establishes the other as – in this sense – "turned away" from its relation to my desire or my ego, as living, desiring and acting out of a depth of difference that is inaccessible to me? The genius of Girard is to bring to light the way in which both the classical theological account of the divine nature and the specific narrative of the incarnate life of God the Word provide a decisive and liberating ground for this.

The traditional doctrine of God, including the affirmation of immutabilty and impassibility, is completely misconceived if it is read as a bloodlessly philosophical attempt to deny to the divine

[6] Girard, *Things Hidden*, Book I, Chapters 1 and 2.

life some of the active and positive qualities we prize as finite subjects. By insisting that God is beyond need or lack of any kind and that God is never passive to finite agency, it declares that God is in a fundamentally non-competitive relation with the universe. God is not one of several candidates for successfully filling a space within the universe; God's agency is not, like ours, evolving in a mixture of initiative and reaction. The way in which God sees the world can therefore in no sense be shaped by any kind of self-defense, any kind of *interest*; the divine regard for finite reality is the ground of its very existence and so cannot be dependent or reactive, cannot be conditioned by what happens within the universe. That is a very abstract formulation, but it can be translated immediately into the recognition that the divine regard is never to be *earned*. If God's action is creative action, bringing into being what is other to God and yet is open to God's life-in-act, that divine action is always a bestowal of reality and thus a loving self-communication devoid of self-interest. What therefore we see and encounter in any other human being (and indeed in the finite world as such) is *that which is regarded by God with unconditioned, non-acquisitive affirmation*. What is other to me is always already in relation to God, as a reality willed into being and loved by God. That is what is non-negotiable in the finite other, the ground of "moral standing." But this recognition, in the Jewish and Christian languages of faith, of the non-rivalry between God and the world is not a deduction from general principle; it is anchored in specific narratives in which the relation between God and finite reality is given a decisive shape, narratives in which God's distance from any kind of self-interest is rendered concrete in the form of both justice and mercy. God is encountered as "doing justice" to the world, and doing so by manifesting mercy.

When Abraham in Genesis 18 intercedes with God for the population of Sodom, he casts his appeal in terms of God's consistency with God's own laws: "Shall the judge [*shophet*] of all the world not act according to statute [*mishpat*]?" (*Genesis* 18:25). And that "statute," paradoxically, turns out to be the sparing of the wicked so as to guarantee the life of the righteous. This is an odd and disturbing justice, which appears as inseparable from comprehensive mercy. In the prophetic tradition, God's unwillingness to give up the people that have been chosen simply because compassion is stirred in the divine heart (*Hosea* 11:8) expresses the further paradox that God's consistency in mercy is God's way of "doing justice" to the divine life and nature itself: God cannot cease being merciful without ceasing to be God. God's "self-interest" is precisely the interest of all those who have been created, chosen, and loved. A justice that decrees punishment makes sense only within the context of divine self-consistency in seeking the good of what has been made. These attempts in the texts of Hebrew Scripture to clarify how the apprehension of divine mercy opens up a perspective on a justice that goes beyond simple reward undergird the developed and revolutionary narrative on which a distinctively Christian theology rests. In the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the divine life lives fully within a finite human agent without in any way

reducing or compromising the integrity of the finite[7]; returning more directly to Girard's framework, this divine agent becomes the one whose murderous rejection uncovers the lethal nature of the scapegoat mechanism. God becomes unequivocally the victim of human power and violence; no shred remains of a divine power that will fight for its place by subduing hostile human activity. "If my kingly authority derived from this world, then my servants would fight," says Jesus to the Roman governor (*John* 18:36).

What human society, trapped in the patterns of retributive fantasy and rivalrous power, expels and seeks to destroy in Jesus is precisely the wholly guiltless, wholly non-violent affirmation of the other that is God's own life: just *because* it is God's own life, it cannot be ultimately expelled or destroyed, it cannot be denied a place in the world *because it does not seek a place in the world that is won and held at the expense of any reality within the world*. The event of Jesus's crucifixion exposes the contradictory and arbitrary nature of scapegoating, its ultimate toxicity for the human world, its refusal of its own foundational reality, and uncovers the character of the creative act that is beyond rivalry and so universally affirming and compassionate. From the point of view of this narrative of faith, the foundation of an unequivocal and universal valuation of every human organism is this revealing and imagining of a creative act involving eternal commitment to the freedom and well-being of the finite. The doctrinal formulations of incarnation and atonement express in complex and extended terms the conviction of unconditional divine regard as the ground of all finite identity. This in turn entails a comprehensive refusal of any object of worship other than the life revealed in these narratives. There is always a dimension or level of the life of any human subject inaccessible to ownership or control by any other finite subject. No finite agent has the authority to require another to abandon all right to self-definition, to the possibility of shaping the conditions of their life. No finite subject is the embodiment of the ultimate and total good for any other finite subject. No finite subject can be simply the model for another's desire, adored, and feared as the numinous "ideal possessor" of desired goods. The ego and its "other," its mimetic competitor, are alike freed from their mutually destructive compact; and the authority to resist the totalizing claim of any human system is established. The only intelligible terminus of worship – the only reality that can "legitimately" be expected to displace and re-condition the human self – is that which is not in competition for power or control; surrender to what in this way transcends the economy of rivalry is not victory for one party and defeat for the other, because what is surrendered to is the generative love from which the self's very reality arises. Surrender to this is acceptance of what is already the self's actual and radical identity; or, in the more familiar formulation, "the one who loses their life will save it" (*Mark* 8:35).

[7] See R. Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 1–6, for fuller discussion of this; and cf. K. Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), Chapter 2, for an exemplary treatment.

2. Language, Recognition and Mutuality

Thus far I have been outlining how the classical grammar of Christian doctrine and Jewish-Christian narrative bears on the question of how we can ground the notion of ineradicable "right" or universal human dignity; if convictions about this are not to be simply the corporate decision of a human majority, if they are to be genuinely something apart from power and choice in the human world, they stand in need of grounding. A Christian and Christocentric anthropology proposes such a grounding, declaring openly what has been hidden, declaring above all the secret toxicity of "worship" in the world of rivalry and destructive competition. We noted earlier the role played in Girardian thinking by questions about the origins of culture and language; in the next part of this reflection, we return to this issue of language and its associated topics of intelligence and self-understanding. To speak at all is to invite *recognition*: when I say something, I assume that I occupy a world that is not exclusively mine, a world where the criteria for speaking intelligibly are shared with others whom I may never have met, others with whom I have never negotiated any sort of agreed protocol for conversation. I assume that the human stranger, even when speaking what seems a completely alien tongue, can make sense to me. The impulse to *translate* is universal. But in contrast to what some philosophical models – the kind of models decisively challenged both by phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* – seem to imply, we do not gradually assemble evidence for the conclusion that the human stranger has an interior life comparable to my own, and so deduce that they are making sense on the same basis as myself. I pick up a set of behavioral conventions, patterns of making noise, from my human environment, and sort out in the process a kind of mental map in which I as an agent/speaker am located over against another agent/speaker. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*:

> "We are no longer in the presence of two entities (expression and meaning), the second of which might be hidden from the first [. . .] acquisition no longer resembles the decoding of a text for which one possesses the code and key; rather it is a deciphering (where the decipherer does not know the key to the code) [. . .] The child [. . .] learns to speak because the surrounding language calls up his [sic] thought." [8]

The notion of being a conscious agent is one that comes into focus as I assimilate the patterns of sound to which I am intensively exposed, patterns that manifestly expect my imitative response. What is more, this is a process that goes in step with acquiring the concept of being a *body* – imagining the bounded physical space from which I speak, including those dimensions to which I

[8] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 50–1.

cannot have direct sensory access (I cannot see the back of my head, as I cannot walk around my body).

St. Edith Stein, whose 1914 thesis on empathy significantly anticipates a good deal of what was later elaborated by Merleau-Ponty, argues in this work that the registering of the fact that I am physically alive is inseparable from developing the concept of "life" in the world around me, so that I know myself as always already potentially an object to the other; [9] in this process, I form the concept of plural centers of perspective. It is this recognition of plural center of perspective that allows me to construct the very notion of a physical object and thus of a consistent spatial world. I acknowledge that the idea of a world is a continuous process in which I am one partner among many; and I acquire the notion of the body as intrinsically a center of pattern-making, a "zero-point of orientation" in the collaborative mapping of a coherent environment. In this context, it is equally important to register that self-awareness is necessarily incomplete and that the sensorium of an individual body alone cannot deliver a coherent picture of the world or a coherent account of the body. Stein notes that this also entails the fact that encounter with other embodied selves clarifies in various ways what we are *not*: not simply the boundedness of our own embodiment, but the partial character of our systems of value.[10] Any ethic, in other words, requires corporate labor and the relinquishing of any aspiration to create a moral schema by the exercise of my will. The implication of this is that the search for a human ethical framework is always tied up with the articulating and exploring of a *shared* world: each individual is "preceded" by the continuing life of ethical work, the negotiating of different schemes of value within a shared material environment where we have no option but to seek hopefully for mutual intelligibility. Law and social protocol may accept and manage diversities, often deep diversities, in society, but *argument* manifestly continues, seeking at the very least some possibility of imaginatively penetrating and identifying with other convictions and drawing closer to a picture of the human good that can be "owned" increasingly widely (this is what I have elsewhere called an "interactive pluralism" in society, a situation where the constituent sub-communities of a society are free to argue over unchosen, "absolute" imperatives, but the social and legal order overall does not seek to enforce any system as binding on conscience). But the point in relation to our wider argument is that the entire character of our work in constructing a concept or image of our humanity – its embodiedness, its social nature, its capacity for memory and narrative, its commitment to making sense of, to, and with one another – works on the assumption that something is *accessible* to us as we speak together, an order of coherent communication which puts a certain sort of pressure upon speakers in the direction of

[9] E. Stein, *On The Problem of Empathy* (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1989).
[10] Stein, *Empathy,* 116.

convergence. We assume a shared world, not only in the obvious sense of assuming compatible levels of sensory experience in other agents/speakers, but at a more elusive level.

Stein makes a few very tantalizing remarks about how our imagining of other perspectives in the construction of the idea of the embodied self is parallel in some ways to the imagining of past selves, including the imagining of my own past self that we call memory: we experience and understand ourselves as single embodied agents here and now not only because of the network of current others whose perceiving I must imagine, but also because of the recognition of how this network extends back through time. The self is always "embedded," but (more specifically) always engaged by what it has not itself generated, stimulated into coherent and collaborative mental activity by what is – to use the word again – accessible to us in the exchange of language. Linking this to our earlier discussion of the Girardian scheme, we can see how the mimetic spiral of Girard's anthropology is precisely a depiction of the shadow-side of Stein's analysis: to desire the desire of the other is indeed to assume a convergence of human experience, a mutual intelligibility in the form of the recognition of what the other wants or values as something I might intelligibly want for myself. As Terry Eagleton observes, referencing Freud, though he might equally well have cited Girard: "It is possible, Freud considers, that the project of culture or civilization demands more from us than we can properly yield"[11] – that is, the ideal of mutual transparency and coherent intelligibility among human beings has the capacity to become an idolatrous object of worship, demanding sacrifices it cannot rightly claim. Yet that ideal is built into linguistic and social practice, a necessary aspect of any account of human identity that is not destructively and nonsensically individualistic. We should not see Girard as offering a negative picture of the processes of formation in self and society, and neither should we see Stein and other phenomenologists as giving a more positive image of co-operative world-construction. The interdependence of selves in the labor of world – or self-construction – is a mark *both* of the possibilities of convergence and mutual nurture in the human community *and* of the possibilities of murderous competition, precisely because I am able in some degree to understand and imaginatively own my neighbor's desire, and because I come to the recognition of my own desire through the mimetic process. If the Girardian analysis of destructive desire opens up the meaning of the revelation of a God who is entirely beyond the competitive struggle of finite agents sharing a world, Stein's understanding of the "empathic" basis of our awareness of our embodied selves similarly offers a way in to understanding what is meant by seeing the world as the product and the bearer of logos, the active communication of convergent meaning in the unceasing action of God towards creation. The act of trust involved in our speaking, the constant work of making collective sense, fits with the narrative of creation as an unconstrained act of

[11] T. Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 173.

intelligent love, communicating its own generous relationality in and through the ordered relation of finite things.

3. Witness and the Divine Image

The two analyses of culture and knowledge outlined here, Girardian and phenomenological, suggest a reading of the human consciousness as always both addressed or invited and insecure or acquisitive. This does not add up to some contemporary version of the Five Ways or whatever other structure of argument towards the divine that may be thought of as canonical, but it pictures human consciousness in a way that converges strikingly with the implications of the Christian story of creation and incarnation. It is possible to say that *if* the reality of the divine were as Christian doctrine claims, this would make sense of these features of human awareness and agency, and that if these are the salient and distinctive features of human awareness and agency, it is this kind of narrative of divine action that would most comprehensively address the imprisonment and aporia of human imagining and relating. It is what Alister McGrath has called – with reference to C.S. Lewis, though many aspects of Newman's thought would exemplify it also – an "abductive" mode of apologetic reasoning: not a deduction of conclusion from established premises but a kind of heuristic appeal to a framework which connects and grounds various imperfectly articulated assumptions about human intelligence in action.[12]

This takes us into our final area of reflection. If it is the case that the Christian narrative offers a solid framework for understanding the nature of human understanding itself, its "justification" is never going to be some conclusion that makes no difference to the self-understanding of the subject. Wittgenstein notoriously said that he could not believe in the resurrection of Christ without becoming a different kind of person, and this was not said dismissively. The Areopagitic line of thought we have explored here implies that if we test the ultimate foundation of our working assumptions about our human world, we can come to see ourselves as the object of a transcendent and changeless regard, and at the same time as wholly implicated in the interdependence of finite identities. The action of the transcendent source of affirmation upon us and our world is such as to make clear that our interdependence does not have to be violent, toxic, and destructive, if we are enabled to step back from perpetuating the mimetic spiral. To identify with the act that breaks the mimetic spiral – in Christian doctrine, the Creator's self-identification in the Incarnation of the Eternal Word with the guilty and suffering creature – is the way in which the hidden truth of our humanity is allowed to come to light, both its destructiveness and its intrinsic relational connectedness.

It is a significant fact that such an identification can be seen at times in those who do not overtly profess belief in the Christian narrative but believe that it is possible to embody the

[12] See A. McGrath,*The Intellectual World of C.S. Lewis* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

refusal of a mimetic and violent destiny. Interest continues to grow in the figure of Etty Hillesum, whose notes and journals from the era of the Second World War and the German occupation of the Netherlands chronicle her journey from a sympathetic agnosticism to something like religious faith – though there is no sensible way of assigning her to any one religious community. She never abandoned her Jewish roots, though her vocabulary and reading became increasingly shaped by Christian sources. But what is most salient for our discussion here is the theme that recurs with increasing intensity in her writing about and from Westerbork, the holding camp for those who were to be transferred to Auschwitz (where Etty would be killed in November 1943; it is an extraordinary coincidence that she met Edith Stein and her sister in Westerbork in 1942). She expresses it in her wartime letters and diaries as "safeguarding" God[13] or as "clearing the path" to God for others in oneself[14] and being a "mediator" for the encounter with God,[15] a means by which direct encounter with God can be opened up; most strikingly,[16] she declares that there must be "someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times," and asks why she should not be that witness, "saving" God in herself, taking responsibility for "shepherding" the "great and beautiful feeling of life" that she carries.[17]

It is a very distinctive theme; she does not attempt to systematize it theologically in any way, but it is clearly grounded in her overwhelming sense that something had opened up within her that was quite beyond her comprehension, and that this gave her the resource to approach the appalling squalor and suffering of the transit camp and the casual cruelty of those administering it with a clear perception of comparable depths in every other she encountered, including camp guards – although she can record poignantly that, after one night of watching the guards rounding up people for transport to the death camps, she struggles with relating the guards' faces to the biblical declaration of our creation after God's likeness; "That passage spent a difficult morning with me."[18] The central point is that her awareness of a persistent and never fully accessible depth in her selfhood – her belief in God – is strictly inseparable from the imperative to *become a means* of opening up that depth for others. If the existence of God is debatable, incredible, unintelligible for those around, her responsibility is to live in such a way that it would make sense to say "God lived, even in these times." Connecting this to our earlier discussion, we could say that if language about God is language about (among other things) the actuality of non-competitive, non-revengeful, non-violent engagement with otherness, including violent and threatening otherness, that actuality becomes believable when it is actual in finite acts and lives. It is actualized in those lives through *surrender* – in worship of what alone is

[13] *Etty. The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 488–9.
[14] Ibid., 519.
[15] Ibid., 516.
[16] Ibid., 506.
[17] Ibid., 498.
[18] Ibid., 644.

worthy of worship, which is the generative reality of the non-worldly act of God, the act that does not contend with or displace finite action but lives in the depth of finite reality and is able to work through that reality as and when it is radically opened up to be more completely a vehicle for the eternal act of gift. Etty Hillesum's language about "shepherding" and "safeguarding" the divine, so far from making the divine dependent on created agents, is about witnessing to the persistence of an agency that is not vulnerable to defeat or extinction.
The believer's act of faith is a "stepping aside" from the self-sufficiency that blocks the access of others to God – a self-forgetting that is also an alignment with what gives the self its life in the first place. The believer can thus be said to "stand in" for God, to take on the responsibility of representing God by the radicality of their standing *aside*. Etty Hillesum sees her calling in the Westerbork transit camp as a letting go of whatever in her might stand in the way of God being credible and palpable to her neighbor, and this is the essence of the worship she offers. There is no gap between the act of self-surrender to God and the denial of private and protective self-interest in order to clear the way of the neighbor to God and God to the neighbor.

4. Conclusion

It is not difficult to see how the life of faith understood in these terms embodies the insights from Girard, Stein and others summarized earlier. The life of faith sets out to realize in the created order the non-defensive, non-interest-dominated life that is God's, the life whose manifestation in our history releases us from the lethal mythology of mimetic struggle and sacrificial exclusion. It implies a reimagining of "human rights" in terms of the perception of the other as one who needs me as an acquisitive or self-defended individual to step out of the light and allow God to be visible to them – a particularly focused form of attentiveness and service. It also assumes that my own growth into humanity needs always to be nurtured by the divine act and image in the neighbor, and that my receptivity to this is the key to my own release.
That all of this is realized not by unaided imagination and human effort but by the gift that is bestowed in the events of biblical history, culminating in the paschal mystery of the rejection and killing of the Word Incarnate and the overcoming of that rejection by God is not to be established by argument; its evidences are to be found in the persistence of lives characterized by the mutual 'standing-aside for the sake of God' that are to be found in the community of Christ's Body. The ongoing life of that Body is centered upon the act of surrender and adoration that is the sacramental enactment of Christ's own life-giving surrender to the Father – the Eucharist. In our own recognition that we come to "stand in" for God in faith, a somewhat terrifying realization, we accept that this happens only in an unqualified embrace of our complete dependence on divine gift as the source of our being; and so the divinity we come to

embody in the life of faith is always the divinity of the Word, the Son, eternally dependent on gift, eternally pointing to its source, standing in and standing aside.

Paul's Athenian audience appear to have lost interest when he began to speak about Jesus and the resurrection; and the contemporary Areopagus is not likely to be any more receptive. What these reflections have sought to do is to suggest the need for human society to understand something about true and false worship. To know that God alone is to be worshipped because God alone has no desired goal to pursue, no interest to defend and no coercive power to reinforce is to know that no other claimant to worship is to be taken seriously, whether the external tyrant or the internal systems of desire. If God is to be worshipped, *nothing else is*. God's transcendence of the economy of negotiating and warring egos is the ground of that human transcendence of the claims of power that is seen in the confessors and martyrs – including those who, like Etty Hillesum, might not have made anything remotely like an orthodox confession but yet understood the imperative of resisting both idolatrous power and revengeful violence. The liberty of human beings from the economies of coercion and competition, as also from the anxieties of earning worth and security, is linked inseparably to the acknowledgment of a self-imparting divine action, embodied in the drastic non-violence of Jesus: the bearer of the plenitude of divine meaning who is excluded by the exercise of human coercive power and manifests in his resurrection that coercive power can have no hold on the divine.

The question of faith in the context of a modern Areopagus is still to do with that opening question: what do humans worship? And how does worship become life-giving rather than the ultimate tyranny? If God is not as manifested in the scriptural narrative, God's claim to worship is indeed no more than another case of the destructive pattern by which some are disenfranchised, silenced or annihilated by others within the world. Any apologetic inspired by Paul in Athens needs to attend to two interrelated tasks: it must return again and again to the clarifying of the underlying grammar of what the Jewish and Christian tradition says about God; and it must find ways of displaying how that tradition charts the way of liberation from a world in which the non-negotiable worth of human subjects is repeatedly eroded. This entails some close tracking of how we speak about ethics and language; perhaps it is ultimately most engaging when it takes us back to story and practice, to the not always articulate witness of the person who offers their body as a place where God may become credible, and to the collective practice of Christ's Body in its performance of the transforming "anti-sacrificial" sacrifice of the Eucharist. After all, one of those who did linger to listen further at the Areopagus was the Dionysius to whom the entirely unreliable tradition ascribes those classical works on liturgy and on self-forgetting inarticulacy.