

Article

Forgiveness and Reconciliation Through Mimetic Theory: A Girardian Perspective from Post-War Croatia

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Abstract

Forgiveness and reconciliation pose significant challenges in post-conflict societies, especially for those directly affected by violence. While legal frameworks of transitional justice are often discussed, the personal and religious dimensions of forgiveness receive less attention. This article seeks to address this gap using René Girard's mimetic theory to analyze the relationship between religious motivation and the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation. The study's empirical findings stem from qualitative interviews with 22 individuals who were victims during the Homeland War (1991–1995) in Croatia. Girard's theory posits that humans imitate not just behavior, but the desires of others, leading to mimetic rivalry that can escalate into violence—a concept known as “negative mimesis.” However, concept of “positive mimesis” is also achievable when individuals emulate Jesus Christ's model of self-giving love, facilitating a pathway towards reconciliation. The primary research question guiding this inquiry asks how individuals affected by violence navigate forgiveness and reconciliation, especially the role of religion in this process. In this context, forgiveness is conceptualized as a deeply personal and spiritual journey, whereas reconciliation is defined as the restoration of interpersonal relationships within a societal framework that requires forgiveness. Consequently, this research prioritizes exploring individual narratives and personal accounts from participants rather than addressing broader societal implications. Insights from interviews reveal participants' understanding of both negative and positive mimesis, indicating that mimetic mechanisms can foster tendencies towards violence as well as forgiveness. In this framework, Jesus Christ serves as a vital external mediator, providing a transformative route away from cycles of violence. Most participants indicated that their faith, prayer practices, and the example set by Christ significantly influenced their forgiveness decisions. This paper contributes original insights into the theological and anthropological aspects of forgiveness, demonstrating that Girard's mimetic theory effectively illuminates the complexities of reconciliation in post-conflict settings.

Keywords: mimetic theory; forgiveness; reconciliation; post-conflict society; René Girard



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1. Introduction

In post-conflict societies, a fundamental inquiry involves evaluating traumatic events and the mechanisms through which their consequences can be effectively mitigated at both personal and social levels. Addressing the legacy of such conflicts necessitates the implementation of various mechanisms and processes, with particular emphasis on the establishment of swift and efficient judicial systems that prosecute war crimes and provide equitable compensation to those impacted by diverse forms of violence. In the context of the former Yugoslavia, a critical component of this transformative process was the transition from a socialist to a democratic society—an endeavor that became increasingly complicated due to the onset of war. Beginning in the 1990s, scholars have emerged in the academic discourse advocating for a constructive and peaceful transition away from a social order marked by totalitarianism and authoritarianism. They raise important questions regarding the necessity of mediating bodies, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (Kritz 1995; Minow 1999; Phelps 2004; Hayner 2010; Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena 2006).

Ruti Teitel contributes significantly to the dialogue on transitional justice, emphasizing the imperative of ensuring a peaceful and just transformation during social processes transitioning from oppressive regimes to democratic governance. Her works—“Transitional Justice” (Teitel 2000) and “Globalizing Transitional Justice” (Teitel 2014)—propose a careful balance between the urge to pursue retribution against former regime proponents and the temptation to ignore or forget the injustices perpetuated under the outgoing regime.

Various types of truth commissions have been established worldwide and have operated in numerous post-conflict societies across Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. (Loneragan 2025; Mitchell 2023; Odak 2022; Pino Uribe et al. 2026) These commissions play a crucial role in promoting reconciliation and forgiveness, thereby contributing to broader transitional processes within these nations. However, the effectiveness of these commissions has been critically examined in recent scholarship (Nagy 2008; Miller 2008). Research indicates that the reconciliation process in post-conflict societies necessitates a commitment to seeking forgiveness (Kadiangandu and Mullet 2007; Phelps 2004; Puhalo 2010). Conversely, some scholars argue that the pursuit of forgiveness may become secondary in the activities of commissions that facilitate transitional justice (Chapman 2007) or suggest that forgiveness may not be a requisite component of the reconciliation process (Huyse 2003; Hamber and Kelly 2005). Nevertheless, forgiveness is generally regarded as an essential element for fostering reconciliation and achieving transitional justice. (Evans 2019; Molloy 2023; Polizzi 2022) In theological discussions, forgiveness is often linked to the concept of a “purification of memory” (John 1998). It is posited that divine forgiveness can initiate from the victim’s perspective, beginning with a demand for truth and justice as a pathway to establishing peace in post-conflict societies (Schreiter 1992, 1998). A key aspect of achieving reconciliation involves a process initiated by victims that requires a profound personal examination of forgiveness, acceptance of the other, and the potential to reconcile with one’s former adversary (Volf 1996). It is important to note that this research focuses on the micro-level of forgiveness rather than reconciliation in a broader societal context. The results describe individual statements and motives that cannot be easily transferred to a societal level. However, these findings do encourage reconciliation, which encompasses forgiveness but is not limited to it. It is essential to clarify that this research examines the micro-level of forgiveness rather than reconciliation within a broader societal context. The results provide insights into individual statements and motives that may not be easily extrapolated to a societal level. Nonetheless, these findings do support the process of reconciliation, which includes forgiveness as one of its components, but is not confined to it. The process of forgiveness can be analyzed within

the broader framework of cultural trauma and collective memory, which elucidates the dynamics of violence, guilt, and victimhood. (Alexander 2012; Giesen 2004; Jaspers 2000; Halbwachs 1992) While multiple approaches can contribute to our understanding of these phenomena, this research is grounded in a particular theoretical perspective that seeks to uncover the theological and anthropological underpinnings of forgiveness and its absence. This framework is based on René Girard's mimetic theory.

René Girard (1923–2015), the distinguished French theorist and philosopher, made significant contributions to theology, philosophy, anthropology, and conflict studies. He asserted that violence is intrinsically linked to the fundamental nature of humanity. Girard argued that human imitation goes beyond the purely mechanical imitation observed in the animal world, as humans do not merely imitate behavior but rather imitate others' desires. This foundational concept leads to what Girard calls "mimetic rivalry," in which individuals compete for a common object of desire, often resulting in conflict and violence (Girard 1965, 1977, 1987, 1996a). To mitigate the escalating tensions arising from such rivalry, communities historically select a scapegoat—an individual or group that is persecuted and condemned. Girard contended that this process remains a pervasive element within human societies (Girard 1987, 2001; Girard et al. 2008). However, he argued that the cycle of violence can be fundamentally disrupted through the unparalleled sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. This act represents a transformative understanding of sacrifice and self-sacrifice, distinguishing itself from other cultural and traditional narratives that often perpetuate violence and scapegoating (Girard 2001, pp. 130–31; 1987, pp. 180–81; 2020, p. 70; 2011, pp. 71–80; Girard et al. 2008, p. 211). Girard's interpretation of biblical sacrifice transcends associative discourses, offering a potent critique of the mechanisms that drive societal violence and the construction of scapegoats.¹

The existing literature on Girard's theoretical framework reveals a predominance of studies that emphasize the negative repercussions of the mimetic mechanism, often referred to as negative mimesis (Golsan 2002; Fleming 2004; Kirwan 2005; Wandinger 2013; Goodhart 2022). In contrast, some authors have drawn on Girard's insights to argue that the mimetic structure inherent in human nature can yield positive effects. This perspective suggests that when mimetic desire is redirected, it can foster an aspiration for peace, justice, and spiritual authority, as epitomized by figures such as Jesus Christ (Redekop 2002; Adams 2000; Hardin 1992; Steinmair-Pösel 2007; Reineke 2007; Turza and Pavešćović 2025; Smith 2014). Nonetheless, a notable gap remains in empirical research addressing how this concept resonates within the lived experiences of individuals who have suffered violence, particularly with regard to the viability of "positive mimesis."

To investigate the empirical dimensions of positive mimesis, we conducted a qualitative study examining the relationship between the act of forgiveness and the aspiration for spiritual authority in Christianity—specifically, through the lens of Jesus Christ—among individuals who have experienced violence. Our central research question posits whether Jesus Christ can serve as an external mediator facilitating positive mimesis for those who have endured acts of violence. This paper delineates the findings of our study, which involved semi-structured interviews with 22 participants who experienced various forms of violence during the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995). The introductory section will elucidate the principal elements of Girard's theory of the mimetic process, followed by a description of the research methodology employed. In the subsequent section, we will present the results of the study and provide a comprehensive discussion of the findings.

The results indicate that for the majority of participants, Jesus Christ plays a pivotal role in the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation, serving as an external mediator. Participants articulated their interpretations of violence as both a deeply embedded aspect of human nature and as an element fundamentally alien to the core structure of humanity.

Furthermore, they differentiated between imitation driven by the principles of forgiveness and that which perpetuates cycles of violence.

2. Materials and Methods

The present research, grounded in the theoretical framework established by Girard, employed a qualitative methodology that was well-suited to capturing the complexities of the subject matter. The sample comprised individuals who experienced varying forms of violence during the Croatian War of Independence, either through direct involvement or through the impact of violence on close acquaintances or property.

The sampling criteria were defined as Croatian citizenship and direct experience with wartime adversities. A total of 22 participants were selected, including several Croatian veterans. Gender and age were not selection criteria, resulting in a diverse cohort representative of different demographic segments; however, all participants self-identified as Catholic believers, although religious affiliation was not a criterion for inclusion. The recruitment of participants was facilitated through multiple gatekeepers—individuals known to the researchers—ensuring a degree of separation to mitigate biases associated with socially desirable responses. Upon completion of the sampling process, an interview protocol and informed consent documentation were developed and submitted to the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Croatia. The Ethics Committee reviewed and approved the research proposal, confirming adherence to established ethical standards. The data collection phase took place between July and November 2020, with interviews conducted predominantly in person at the Laboratory for Psychological Research at the Catholic University of Croatia in Zagreb. The research team meticulously adhered to ethical guidelines throughout the study, in alignment with American Psychological Association (APA) standards and further modifications suggested by Creswell (2014). Each participant was thoroughly informed about the research objectives, and they provided their consent prior to the commencement of interviews.

Interview recordings were securely stored on a protected disk, with access restricted solely to the research team. Following transcription, the original audio files were destroyed, and the transcripts will be retained for five years, also secured on a protected disk accessible exclusively to team members. Participant identities were anonymized and coded sequentially from T-01 to T-22. In subsequent references to participants, their codes and accompanying page numbers from the transcripts will be cited (e.g., “T-09, 22”). Furthermore, any identifiable names mentioned during the interviews were anonymized for confidentiality, utilizing generalized terms such as “comrade,” “general,” or “politician.”

The research utilized a grounded-theory approach, recognizing the essential reciprocity between data collection and theoretical formulation. This dialectical relationship allows for the emergence of propositions informed by qualitative data while permitting the application of a priori theoretical frameworks without constraining the findings to fit predetermined models (Creswell 2014, p. 102). The selected interview methodology was designed to elicit in-depth insights into the relevance of Girard’s theory and to examine the feasibility of constructing a novel theoretical framework centered on the concepts of forgiveness and conflict resolution. This framework aims to build upon and extend Girard’s theoretical constructs, thereby contributing to the academic discourse surrounding these themes.

When addressing sensitive topics and conducting interviews with specific participant groups, careful consideration is paramount (Charmaz 2006, p. 30). The interview protocol was inspired by Charmaz’s guidelines for grounded theory interviews on life changes, though it deviated from her proposal for a highly structured format to create a protocol tailored to the research goals. The interview protocol consisted of 13 questions, organized into three thematic units:

1. The origins and causes of war: The inherent nature of violence in humanity.
2. The cycle of violence: How violence begets further violence.
3. Christ's example on the cross: Exploring solutions to violence.

As noted by [Roulston and Choi \(2018, p. 240\)](#), effective interviewing practice encompasses thorough preparation, respect for interviewees, active listening, and thoughtful interview guides featuring concise and open-ended questions. Researchers must also maintain the flexibility to adapt as necessary and facilitate interviewees in sharing their narratives. The guidelines established by [Charmaz \(2006, p. 30\)](#) were meticulously followed during the interviews, emphasizing that the formulation and presentation of the interviewer's questions play a pivotal role in shaping the context, framework, and substantive content of the research study ([Charmaz 2006, p. 32](#)). This approach underscores the importance of strategy in qualitative inquiry, as interview dynamics can significantly affect the richness of the data collected. Given the vulnerability of participants and the sensitivity of the subject matter, interviews often included poignant silences and pauses reflective of the dynamics within participants' narratives. The intention was not to employ materials intended to prompt discussion—such as documents, photographs, or recordings. Nevertheless, some participants voluntarily brought personal artifacts (e.g., awards, photographs, letters, military recruitment decisions), which contributed to a more natural conversational atmosphere and facilitated organic dialogue during their shared examination.

Following the transcription of interviews, data processing and analysis commenced. Focused coding aligned with the research questions was employed, along with axial coding to develop subcategories. The active involvement of the researcher played a critical role in this process, with particular attention directed toward emergent themes, codes, and topics that extended beyond the theoretical framework. This concentrated engagement significantly enhances the robustness of grounded theory coding ([Charmaz 2006, p. 59](#)). During the coding process, codes related to central topics were identified, as well as those that elicited surprise or intrigue ([Creswell 2014, p. 248](#)).

The research protocol was designed around three thematic units aimed at facilitating participants' sharing of their life narratives and their perspectives on forgiveness and reconciliation, with a focus on themes of inherent human violence, the cyclical nature of violence, and potential remedies for addressing violence. Using an inductive coding approach based on grounded theory, the analysis revealed the emergence of categories and themes that coalesced into conceptual-analytical units. As a result, the research findings did not merely reflect the sequence of the interview protocol but instead provided an analytical synthesis of the elements that participants spontaneously emphasized.

This research was conducted *pro bono*, with all researchers contributing their time and expertise voluntarily. This approach aligns with the premise articulated by [Brgles and Swift \(2022, p. 291\)](#) that the most pressing inquiry in designing qualitative research pertains to its societal impact rather than its monetary value. The absence of funding, however, imposed limitations on the study, preventing compensation or tokens of appreciation for participants. Furthermore, the spatial scope was confined to the city of Zagreb, although certain participants traveled from other regions of Croatia. To advance the development of a new grounded theory informed by the findings, a larger-scale study involving a more diverse participant population is warranted. Future research initiatives could also extend into the broader European context, particularly in light of recent conflicts affecting Ukraine and the subsequent emergence of new cycles of violence.

3. Results

Based on the data analyzed in this research, the results have been organized into three thematic units that explore the role of external mediators in the processes of forgiveness

and reconciliation, an understanding of violence, and the differentiation between behaviors that perpetuate violence versus those that foster its cessation—referred to as “positive” and “negative” mimesis. These thematic units provide an analytical framework for the questions originally formulated in the interview protocol.

3.1. *The Role of the External Mediator in Forgiveness and Reconciliation*

A prevalent theme that emerged from the interviews pertained to the motivations underlying forgiveness and reconciliation. Participants were prompted to reflect on the reasons a self-identified believer might choose to forgive. They were also asked to consider the influence of religious affiliation on the act of forgiveness. Crucially, the role of external mediators in facilitating this process was highlighted. Many of these individuals articulated a belief that Jesus Christ serves a significant role in guiding forgiveness and reconciliation efforts.

For instance, participant T-22 articulated that Jesus exemplifies the ultimate model of forgiveness, stating: “Jesus did it in a way that no one can repeat, right? So, that’s something special; so much suffering and evil befell him that none of us can compare. But he is some kind of model, who, if it wasn’t hard for him to endure such a sacrifice, completely just, then this little something won’t be endured by us either” (T-22, 11–12). This notion of Jesus as a model for behavior was echoed by participants T-12 and T-13. Participant T-12 expressed a poignant reflection on Christ’s forgiving nature, emotionally remarking: “Well, Jesus forgave them, from the cross, everyone. . . (sobs). . . Who are we. . . Who are we that we don’t forgive? He forgave them, how?” (T-12, 9). Similarly, T-13 articulated the power of Christ’s example, recounting: “Well, he forgave his enemies. He forgave. He is an example. . . They also stripped him there, and they were fighting for his clothes, and they were fighting for our jackets in the camp. . . Chetniks, reservists, I don’t know who else was there. He showed by example how one should behave. In essence, how one should live faith, live faith, not only. . .” (T-13, 11).

Participant T-14 presented a vivid narrative underscoring the pivotal role of Jesus in the forgiveness process. She recounted a profound encounter during a church service with the individual responsible for the murder of her boyfriend, whom she hoped to marry. Describing this transformative moment, T-14 recalled:

“Then, during the Holy Mass, when the priest said ‘Give peace to each other,’ in front of me was the man who killed my X. He was from that neighborhood; he had a little girl, I found out. He brought his little girl to that Mass, he was with his wife—of course, he doesn’t go to communion, because he killed a man, after all. He turned around and offered me his hand; only when he turned around and saw my face did he understand who he was extending peace to. In those fleeting seconds, a voice told me: ‘Don’t give him your hand,’ and another, gentler voice said: ‘X, give me your hand; have you promised to forgive?’ I looked him in the eye and extended my hand, saying, ‘Jesus, I really want to forgive him. I’m in the temple of God; I want to forgive him’” (T-14, 15).

This testimony not only highlights the individual struggle involved in the act of forgiveness but also illustrates the profound influence of religious belief in facilitating reconciliation and healing.

The participants in this study frequently referenced Jesus Christ as an external mediator within the context of forgiveness. They highlighted the significant roles of prayer and faith as vital processes for maintaining this connection with the external mediator. For instance, Participant T-01, expressing a sense of injustice regarding the trial process, emphasized the transformative power of prayer in enabling forgiveness: “There was so much prayer, so much purification, and the

Lord opened my horizons so much, opened my heart so much that I could slowly understand when they do something unfair to you... then I received strength from the Lord... (T-01, 4).

Participant T-10, who endured detention in an enemy camp, attributed his mental resilience to prayer:

"You see, I was in that camp a billion, a million times... Non-stop... First, that: 'God, don't let me go crazy and accuse someone' so that I could speak harshly to someone, because I saw that someone was hurt, and what was happening. And that somehow kept me going, so that... I say, I don't go crazy, that kept me going, so that all those bad thoughts, somehow and persistently inside me, you simply don't think about anything else... I was non-stop praying... Every moment, when I could, when they weren't beating me..." (T-10, 21).

Several participants further connected the act of relinquishing revenge with the practice of prayer. Prayer emerged as a crucial element in halting cycles of violence, a sentiment echoed by respondents T-9, T-11, and T-18: "That presence of prayer and faith. That was probably a good foundation for not having that revenge and hatred in me and for it to develop." (T-11, 9). Another participant noted, "...when a person sees evil, it is in the nature of things to respond, to react in the same way, but prayer kept us in that sense to remain composed..." (T-11, 3). Participant T-18 remarked on the struggle with impulses of revenge, stating, "Revenge, unbelievable. When you see a friend who was killed in your unit, you would still go to the other side... without a bullet, you would fight with your hands. But it passes. I knew every night, we prayed every night. We also prayed for our enemies." (T-18, 4).

These testimonies suggest that Jesus Christ, along with faith and prayer, served as an external mediator for the participants, helping prevent revenge and fostering conditions conducive to forgiveness and reconciliation. The participants' individual religiosity proved to be a critical factor in this context, guiding them to emulate Jesus' disposition toward enemies and injustice, emphasizing forgiveness and reconciliation.

However, two notable variations emerge in the participants' narratives. The first variation pertains to how participants conceptualize the role of Jesus Christ in the process of forgiveness. Some respondents distinguish between Jesus Christ as a moral exemplar deserving imitation and as a source of grace who "intervenes" to enable forgiveness. This divergence illustrates that while some participants internalized Jesus' role on a personal level, others perceived it as a normative and moral model of behavior. For example, T-13 stated that Christ is an "example" (T-13, 11), while T-22 asserted, "we are going to do things like Him" (T-22, 11–12). Conversely, T-01 contended that an individual cannot forgive without "God touching their heart" (T-01, 12).

The second variation involves participants who, while willing to follow Jesus Christ's example of forgiveness, stated that forgiveness and reconciliation are contingent upon the perpetrator's repentance and acknowledgment of wrongdoing. One participant stated, "So, what I mean is, you can forgive the one who repents and the one who wants to, who wants forgiveness..." (T-22, 6). Another echoed this sentiment, asserting, "I've already said it, the word forgiveness is so banalized... You give forgiveness to the one who asks you for forgiveness... God gives forgiveness first" (T-09, 8). Furthermore, another participant emphasized this condition of repentance: "They say that we need to forgive them, that we should forgive them, but not forget them. I have nothing to forgive them for. I can forgive them, as long as they don't repent, I have nothing to forgive them for, I have nothing to believe in them for, nor do I have anything to cooperate with them for" (T-03, 17).

These findings support the thesis that Jesus Christ (and/or God) can function as an external mediator, enabling the cessation of violence and fostering space for forgiveness. Nonetheless, the empirical data reveal two variations: (1) the understanding of the role of Jesus Christ manifests in different forms—either as a moral exemplar or as a mediator of grace resulting in internal transformation, and (2) the notion of forgiveness is often conditioned upon the repentance and seeking of forgiveness by the perpetrator of violence.

3.2. *Understanding Violence*

The research findings reveal a nuanced interpretation of violence among participants, highlighting a spectrum of beliefs regarding its origins. Some individuals contend that violence is an intrinsic aspect of human nature, while others argue that it emerges from external influences, such as wartime experiences.

A notable segment of participants emphasizes the profound connection between human nature and the propensity for violence:

“As long as humanity has existed, the phenomenon of violence has persisted. Unfortunately, this negativity seems to be an inherent part of the human experience. . . It resides within us.” (T-04, 5);

“There is indeed a violent aspect within me, yet there is also an element of control.” (T-05, 9–10);

“I struggle to chronologically reflect on my emotions; at one point, I desired to inflict harm, even to kill. I experienced no hesitation in contemplating their deaths and felt intense hatred, particularly regarding the tragedy of Vukovar. It was only later that I questioned the origins of those feelings.” (T-17, 5).

Conversely, some participants vehemently reject the notion that violence is an innate human trait:

“Violence is not inherent to human beings; I firmly believe that.” (T-01, 10–11)

“No, violence is not a characteristic of a ‘normal’ person. From an early age, I was taught to harbor no hatred and to see the best in others, as we are all, fundamentally, children of God.” (T-02, 4)

“Violence should not, and is not, an intrinsic quality of human beings. It is often said that God created man in His own image and likeness.” (T-02, 15–16)

“No! If circumstances are normal, how can violence emerge? It cannot simply be ignited within a person. . .” (T-12, 12)

Overall, the varying perspectives expressed by participants regarding the causes and genealogy of violence suggest that reaching a definitive conclusion about its origins—whether inherent within humans or stemming from external factors—remains elusive.

3.3. *Positive and Negative Mimesis*

The concept of positive mimesis, as outlined in Girard’s mimetic theory, refers to the imitation of desires directed towards objects that promote love, peace, justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In contrast, negative mimesis refers to the imitation of desires that result in violence. The discussions with the participants indicate that the mimetic mechanism functions in dual capacities, manifesting as either positive or negative mimesis. This duality hinges on whether individuals imitate someone’s desires for justice, reconciliation, and peace or, conversely, for conquest, war, and violence.

For instance, participant T-05 articulates the relationship between forgiveness, hatred, and violence through the lens of mimetic principles:

“Just as hatred creates hatred, just as violence creates violence, so too does forgiveness. . . . The significant message here is this: forgiveness fosters forgiveness, while hatred perpetuates hatred and violence begets violence. This is a vital lesson we have gleaned from our historical experiences” (T-05, 14–15).

Additionally, participant T-07 posits that the efficacy of both war and peace hinges on the identification of role models who inspire individuals to engage in positive actions, driven by an intrinsic desire to emulate these figures: “In wartime, leadership must exemplify actions. There exist two modes of leadership: one—‘do as I say,’ and the other—‘do as I do’” (T-07, 6). T-07 further elaborates on the influence of a personal role model: “My role model was a twelve-year-old boy who tragically succumbed to a malignant illness. Before his passing, he witnessed a homeless man struggling for sustenance. In response, the boy established an association to aid the homeless. Despite his death, he expressed, ‘I have fulfilled my mission; now you must fulfill yours.’ This notion resonates with the Old Testament principle, encapsulated in military leadership. In the Old Testament, Gideon, an Israelite military commander, exemplifies this notion. Prior to launching a night assault on the enemy camp, he proclaimed: ‘Imitate me and do likewise.’ This principle transcends military applications; it also applies to civilian life.” (T-07, 17).

Participant T-13 reinforces the argument by asserting that the emulation of positive aspirations plays a pivotal role in mitigating violence. He states, “Violence pervades various facets of life—on television, within political arenas, and in our streets. It surrounds us, yet we must endeavor to diminish it by exemplifying how life should be lived, starting from within our families and extending to all spheres of influence” (T-13, 12).

These contributions substantiate Girard’s theoretical framework regarding the mimetic mechanism, which has been predominant in discussions of negative mimesis, while also acknowledging the post-Girardian discourse surrounding positive mimesis. The participants’ insights reveal that negative mimesis often arises as a spontaneous and almost involuntary reaction to violence, while positive mimesis is characterized as a deliberate act of personal choice and conscious decision-making.

The following conclusions can be derived from the participants’ reflections in relation to Girard’s mimetic theory:

1. Among believers, key factors influencing the process of forgiveness include the exemplary role of Jesus Christ, faith, and prayer.
2. Participants exhibit a dichotomous perspective on violence, viewing it both as an inherent aspect of human nature and as an external intrusion.
3. The participants recognize the dual facets of the mimetic mechanism, positing that the distinction between positive and negative mimesis can be empirically substantiated.

4. Discussion

The findings of the empirical research substantiate several of Girard’s theoretical insights, particularly regarding the role of the external mediator in the mimetic process, a concept that Girard explored extensively. This aligns with the observations made by other scholars who have elaborated on his theories (Girard 1965, 1987, 1996b, 2001; Webb 1993; Doran 2014; Taylor 2020; Veliyannoor 2010; Dadosky 2011). The research also highlights the nuanced interpretations of the underlying causes of violence, as well as the distinction between the positive and negative outcomes associated with mimetic behavior (commonly referred to as positive and negative mimesis).

While these findings suggest that Girard’s insights are relevant and observable within the narratives provided by participants, they do not constitute definitive empirical validation of his theoretical framework. Further extensive research is necessary to establish robust empirical confirmation. Nonetheless, the study underscores the significance of directing

desire toward constructive role models—such as God or Jesus Christ—who promote the values of forgiveness and reconciliation, as reflected in the participants’ experiences.

4.1. *The Important Role of an External Mediator—Jesus Christ—In the Transformation of Violence*

Participants frequently emphasized the critical role of an external mediator—specifically, Jesus Christ—manifested through faith and prayer. It stands to reason that individuals with a strong belief system might exhibit a greater inclination toward forgiveness and reconciliation, a notion that is not entirely substantiated by prior research. For instance, in the “Peace in Croatia” study, 53% of respondents asserted that “what was done in the past war cannot be forgiven” (Vuleta and Batarelo 2001, p. 36). Notably, in the same study, 86% of participants identified as Catholics (Vuleta and Batarelo 2001, p. 38). This raises the expectation that a higher proportion of these individuals would be open to considering forgiveness for the events of the Homeland War. The discrepancy can be attributed to the realization that the degree of religiosity does not inherently dictate the capacity for forgiveness and reconciliation.

The act of imitating God’s desire, as embodied by Jesus Christ, for reconciliation and forgiveness, transcends the mimetic rivalry that typically intensifies conflict. Within this framework of imitation, the aspiration for a shared object—namely, forgiveness and reconciliation—does not incite rivalry, but rather fosters healing. Participant T-05 articulates this concept succinctly: “forgiveness creates forgiveness, hatred begets hatred, violence begets violence” (T-05, 15). Jesus Christ, as a mediator, channels a longing for forgiveness and reconciliation that aligns with the desires of individuals who strive to emulate his intent.

The tension between the conscious choice to imitate Christ’s desire for forgiveness—which interrupts cycles of rivalry and violence—and the inclination to replicate desires for vengeance and animosity, which perpetuate conflict, becomes evident in participant T-14’s narrative. After a moment of reflection, she consciously redirects her longing toward imitating Christ’s desire for reconciliation, ultimately reaching out to her boyfriend’s murderer during the liturgical act of extending the hand of peace. This gesture signifies a deliberate, rather than automatic, approach to forgiveness, illustrating a purposeful shift in the mimetic mechanism toward Christ’s reconciliatory aim.

Similarly, the concepts of prayer and faith serve as vital connections to the external mediator—Jesus Christ. Engaging in prayer nourishes and fortifies the imitation of Christ’s desire, effectively mitigating tendencies toward revenge. Participant T-18 reinforces this sentiment: “When you see a friend who died in your unit, you would still go to the other side. . . without a bullet, you would fight with your hands. But it passes. I knew every night, we prayed every night. We prayed for our enemies too” (T-18, 3). Participant T-11 offers a comparable perspective, stating: “But I never had that feeling of hatred or revenge, and now I wonder how I avoided it. . . only prayer” (T-11, 7). Thus, the moral imperative for forgiveness and reconciliation is deeply rooted in the conscious direction of mimetic desire toward Christ’s example. According to the participants’ insights, this mimetic mechanism is significantly enhanced through prayer and faith.

4.2. *Anthropological and Theological Implications of Interpreting Violence*

The interpretation of the sources of violence reveals a complex duality. On one hand, the narratives of participants affirm René Girard’s insightful assessment, derived from his early literary analyses and subsequently expanded through a comprehensive anthropological, philosophical, and theological framework. Girard posits that the mimetic mechanism underpins human behavior, significantly steering individuals toward conflict. While his focus has primarily been on the detrimental aspects of this mimetic mechanism—manifesting in rivalry, conflict, and violence—he also acknowledges the potential for this same mechanism

to inspire the imitation of more virtuous desires, including peace, goodness, justice, and the divine. This nuanced understanding aligns with the research findings: violence appears both as an intrinsic aspect of humanity—an integral component of our existence—and as something external, disassociated from the fundamental nature of being. This dichotomy can be elucidated by contrasting the sentiments expressed by participants. One participant asserts: “As long as the human race has existed, the topic of violence has existed to this day. I think that, unfortunately, this negativity is still in the human race. . .” (T-04, 5). This viewpoint interprets violence as an inherent characteristic of humanity. In contrast, another participant counters this notion, stating: “No, violence is not inherent to a ‘normal’ man. I was raised to see the best in people, because in the end, we are all children of God. . . If we adopt this mindset, then there is no violence. . .” (T-02, 4).

With certain interlocutors, a Christian—specifically Christological—dimension emerges, which complicates the Girardian concept of the Mediator. While the ontological status of God as the Mediator is unequivocal, the role of Jesus invites further examination. Some interlocutors appear to internalize the figure of Jesus, identifying with Him in a manner that Girard argues is incompatible with the relationship between an external Mediator and the Subject. However, the duality of Christ—His divinity coupled with His humanity—renders this second Divine Person more accessible. Unlike a mythical hero, Jesus is both divine and human, facilitating a form of direct mimetism that is deemed impossible in relation to God the Father. The Father is beyond imitation; thus, within the mimetic framework, He occupies a dual role, simultaneously existing as both Mediator and Object. According to Girard’s framework, it is logically untenable to conflate the external and internal Mediator. If Jesus, with His earthly life, represents a more tangible figure for humanity than the absolute Mediator, and if an interlocutor identifies with His sacrificial model—viewing it as a profound critique of the practice of sacrifice—then Jesus transcends the role of merely an external Mediator. His earthly biography and distinctiveness from the Father imbue Him with an internal quality. This duality within His persona is mimetically paradoxical yet inseparable; were Jesus to be solely human, He would merely be an exemplary hero, and if solely divine, He would be utterly inaccessible—thus, remaining an external Mediator in either scenario.

The earthly dimension of Jesus is what enables humanity to imitate His mimetic desire for the Father. This dynamic allows individuals to attain their subjectivity and assume the role of mediators, so that others can mirror their desire for Jesus (Turza and Pavešković 2025). Consequently, in addition to emulating Jesus’ longing for the Father, a transformation occurs from mere subjectivity to an active mediating role.

One interlocutor offers a paraphrase of Jesus’ sentiment: “. . . I knew that God’s will would be done, that the Lord would be with me. . .” (T-01, 6). He then profoundly reflects on his interactions with fellow inmates during his unjustly served sentence:

“. . . 91 prisoners changed there; I approached many with the rosary. Many asked me to pray for their needs. Beneath what appeared rough on the surface, each of those individuals harbored a heart yearning for love, and I endeavored to offer them that love. I am grateful to have been able to introduce Christ to those who had never heard of Him. . .” (T-01, 6).

This dialogue illustrates how the participant, enlightened and inspired by Christ as the Mediator, transforms into a mediator himself. This duality manifests whereby love becomes the Object of their shared desire. Importantly, the statement underscores how former adversaries become mimetic doubles in love. The external nature of the Mediator—divine love—precludes the emergence of mimetic rivalry, as such love is not confined to singular appropriation. The ideal emerges distinctly from the understanding that the mimeticism of love fosters a collective rather than merely individual appropriation.

4.3. Positive Mimesis and Transitional Justice

This concept holds significant promise for facilitating discussions and processes of forgiveness and reconciliation in post-conflict societies. Drawing on Girard's insights and the findings of recent research, it becomes evident that external mediation—particularly emulating the desire for peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation exemplified by Jesus Christ—can play a crucial role in advancing transitional justice initiatives.

It is essential to clarify that embracing this perspective does not call for abandoning the transitional justice framework in post-conflict settings. Rather, it highlights the necessity of recognizing the profound impact that a religious dimension—capable of fostering forgiveness and reconciliation—can have in these contexts.

Additionally, further research could explore the potential contributions of external mediators, including spiritual leaders from different faith traditions and moral authorities among secular individuals. Understanding their roles at the micro level may prove vital in enhancing efforts toward healing and reconciliation in diverse post-conflict environments.

5. Conclusions

This research establishes a significant relationship between theoretical frameworks of positive and negative mimesis and the lived experiences of violence victims. Interviews with participants made it clear that the mimetic process itself is a neutral construct that can manifest as either positive or negative (Adams 2000; Redekop and Ryba 2014). The findings indicate a robust connection between the theoretical underpinnings of positive and negative mimesis—rooted in Girard's scholarship and contemporary studies—and the realities faced by the individuals interviewed.

Additionally, several theological insights regarding reconciliation and positive mimesis emerged from participant discussions. Notably, a distinction was made between a principled, normative role of Christ in mediation, in which Christ is perceived primarily as a moral exemplar, inspiring a specific mode of imitation through his elevated moral and spiritual principles. Conversely, a more personal and internalized approach to mediation also surfaced, characterized by the participants' profound, grace-filled experiences. This perspective led them to align their aspirations with Christ's vision of peace, justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This form of theological or Christian positive mimesis enabled some participants to evolve into mediators themselves, where their desire for Christ became a template for others to emulate.

The insights derived from Girard's theoretical framework, along with empirical findings, provide a robust basis for acknowledging the potential role of Christian communities in fostering healing among victims of violence, particularly in contexts of war. Consequently, in the operations of commissions, councils, and committees within post-conflict societies, it is imperative to recognize the significance of these religious concepts, given their pacifist and restorative capacities for both society and individuals.

The research focused on participants who identified as Catholics and were either directly or indirectly affected by violence. To further substantiate Girard's theoretical propositions on a broader scale, future research should encompass individuals who have perpetrated violence, thereby exploring the underlying causes of such behavior, as well as participants from diverse religious backgrounds, including those who identify as agnostics or atheists. Such investigations would yield a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of violence and elucidate the relationship between the mimetic mechanism and various external mediators.

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Note

- ¹ For more details about Girard's basic concepts, see (Turza and Pavešković 2025; Pavešković 2017).

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