

# A Minimal Model for Apocalyptic Thinking

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One of the many principles that generative anthropology shares with mimetic theory is a conviction that the dismissive expulsions of religious language performed by analytical philosophy will not do. Religious language deserves respect as a source of anthropological truth; it offers models through which we can understand those “otherworldly characteristics of language” that provide experiences of transcendence. So we might ask then, what kind of “becoming-language” is described by that subset of religious narratives (along with their secular derivatives) that we call the apocalyptic? What “otherworldly characteristic of language” is incarnated by such texts?<sup>(1)</sup> Pressured to suggest an answer, I would offer this as a minimal formula for apocalyptic narrative: *the future is now*.

*The future is now*. But how so? A future must be later, not now. That which will be happening cannot be assimilated to that which is happening. Nevertheless, much apocalyptic narrative is captured by *the future is now*. Apocalyptic narratives tend to contain the figure of a messenger who has visited a future world. The messenger has witnessed the total destruction of the current social arrangements we blithely believe will be permanent. Not so: our present is ephemeral, our future punishing. The messenger has returned to share with us rich reports of the violence-ravaged landscape, city, or planet that he has visited. We can include science fictions in the apocalyptic, from the restrained fantasies of H. G. Wells to the recent spate of Hollywood movies that aim to shame us with the imminence of ecological collapse.<sup>(2)</sup> When it is a story of alien intruders from outer space, there is no human going ahead and coming back, just the visitation of a party-crasher who has arrived at humankind’s front door. In a way, the space aliens are the worst. With the visionary, at least you can roll your eyes, nudge your neighbour, and murmur words like *too far-fetched... too extreme*. But it is difficult to debate with aliens from outer space. They possess an imperiously self-evident authority.

The figure of a future-sent messenger and the paradox of a collapsed temporality

are essential, but they are not enough. For the true apocalyptic, one must have violence: *the violent future is now*. An imaginary future emptied of or free from violence is a utopia. The apocalyptic might promise a utopia, but only after the violent bits. When you do the apocalyptic, you're definitely *in for it*. Trouble, big trouble, approaches. If the future does not terrify by its violence, then the vision does not quite count as apocalyptic.

*Apocalyptic* is no mere blip on the computer screens of cultural history; it is close to being a human universal. Personally, I spooned it up with the porridge my mother made me for breakfast, and the apocalyptic suffused my soul when I stood or sat beside my father in church on Sunday mornings, saying the Lord's Prayer or absorbing sermons. If I appear to joke a little about its oddity in this discourse, I mean no disrespect. To my mind, the violence of God (or the violence God lets humans alone to do to each other) makes irony needful. Originary thinking is not apocalyptic thinking. Whereas René Girard embraces a certain form of the apocalyptic, Eric Gans distances himself from that which he understands it to be.<sup>(3)</sup> Let me ask, then, where would the moment of apocalyptic experience be in the originary event that generative anthropology takes as a model for understanding human scenic action? A suggestion: the moment of the apocalyptic is the instant when *the sign anticipates... the violent consumption of the object*.

The exchange of signs *anticipates* the violent consumption of the central object. Apocalyptic thinking limits those who do it exclusively to anticipation. The sign gets stuck. It anticipates; that is all. Expectation is all. Because everyone will be affected by violent consumption, apocalyptic consciousness is the experience of a moralizing equality. All are to be terrified equally by nuclear war, by catastrophic climate change, by the global pandemic of an airborne virus knocking us down and eating us up like crows eat toast, or the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. This moralistic levelling links the apocalyptic to the victimary: as the all-consuming future will victimize all, those who refuse to fear it persecute those who do; or those who do fear it will experience righteous vengeance against the sinfully impious who feel no fear of future judgment. Apocalyptic thinking takes as its model the exchange of signs divorced from the exchange of things: we anticipate consumption, but we do not consume. If we are exchanging nothing but signs in anticipation of global disaster, the moral high ground gets very crowded very quickly. Or to change metaphors, we might say the overcrowded lifeboats of the equally terrorized soon sink, because everyone is leaping off the Titanic hours before the iceberg hits. The apocalyptic never really works. If the majority do it, witness Nazi apocalyptic or the Gulag. If a minority do it, witness Jimmy Jones or Waco.

The apocalyptic mind purchases the success of its devotion to *anticipation* of violent

consumption at a high price. The price is submission to an ethic of purported nonviolence that disconnects the apocalyptic practitioner from the profane world of economic and political history.<sup>(4)</sup> In the purity of its anticipatory sign-exchange, apocalyptic thinking does not move from signs to things.<sup>(5)</sup> It will not sacrifice the purely moral anticipation of an absolute future to the relativizing political necessity of an impure economic present.<sup>(6)</sup> From that immobility grows the pious contempt of those people in apocalyptic movements for the fools and sinners who carry on getting and spending in towns and cities. The members of truly apocalyptic sects—Quakers, Mennonites, Congregationalists, or those among my ancestors who were Anabaptists—they separate themselves from the religious mainstream. Those who exchange apocalyptic signs in pure anticipation limit their interest and restrain their investment in the so-called real world.<sup>(7)</sup> One understands there is no reason to wish for part of the cultural center, because one anticipates the violent destruction of the cultural center. As for those Christian congregants who belong to a Roman Catholic or a Lutheran or Anglican community—they can have no idea, really, of the radical protestant apocalyptic. For the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, the Anglican? They are state churches that have made their historical beds with Caesar for centuries. *State church* from the apocalyptic perspective must be an oxymoron, revealing a compromise that has lessened the intensity of expectation.<sup>(8)</sup>

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Having teased out some of the effects of anticipation itself, now I would emphasize that which is anticipated: *the violent consumption of the central object*. Consumption ends anticipation, though; so anticipated and real consumption cannot meet. Moreover, that the consumption will be violent is another reason to anticipate without intending to participate in it. For the apocalyptic mind, any thought of real consumption carries the tempting sensation of too-pleasant consumption too close for comfort. Violent consumption is sin; pleasure in the things of this world is impurity. No human consumption can be nonviolent: the apocalyptic is victimary, because even surviving is sinful; even just to walk around breathing is sinful, until you have been saved. The apocalyptic thinker anticipates, wishes for, and judges present humankind against a moral utopia. The utopia is one where no human does violence to any object, in which the exchange of signs gets transmuted into a perfectly reciprocal exchange of things.<sup>(9)</sup> But that utopia comes later, after the violence, so here and now pleasure is sacrificed to deferred post-violence satisfaction. That sacrifice of the here-and-now pleasure explains why asceticism, fasting, meditation, prayerful sojourns in the desert and contortions of self-punishing discipline contribute to apocalyptic drama. Theology? The apocalyptic theological instant is one of paranoia: God judges humankind now and finds humankind wanting: humankind is not up to standard because victimary morality

dictates that one do no violence to consumable objects and that one exhibit no desire to consume things in this world.[\(10\)](#)

What about history, retrospection? No refuge there. The apocalyptic instant anticipates; it takes no interest in the past. It reduces the economic past to nothing but the violent consumption of the earth's resources and the oppression of the poor by the rich, the slave by the free, or the rest by the West, or all of that. It reduces the political past to nothing but a parade of tyrants and buffoons. Ideas of human action ennobled by tragedy are considered delusional in the last instance.[\(11\)](#) And for mimetic theory at its most apocalyptic, human action is reducible to mindless violence (scapegoating). Human history for the apocalyptic mind does not signify *in itself*. Historical events count only as the indicators, precursors, and types of things to be revealed in their fullness later. That which counts is that which one anticipates; nothing else really does. And the ultimate powerlessness of humans to change anything in history will be revealed as having been the truth about humans from the origin.

Those who do generative anthropology observe that mimetic theory defines humans not in the first place by their use of language, but by their violence: collective murder happens first, non-instinctual attention second. The originary humans hesitate to notice the victim only *after* they have (in a panic) killed it. Something is revealed in an instant of peace; the violence experienced is sacred. In mimetic theory, the acquisition of language is for humans a kind of accidental by-product or side-effect of violence; one must wonder, actually, why human language is needful at all in mimetic theory, let alone where it comes from.[\(12\)](#) Or perhaps one should say that for mimetic theory the signs of language are nothing but traces of human violence. (Notice how different that is from saying that the signs of language are the *deferral* of human violence). The only event in Girard's originary scene is a one-way revelation of violence, from God to humans, the revelation by God to humans of human violence. Humankind notices nothing without God's intervention; the human exchange of signs is either stuck anticipation or a mindless after-effect.

Now I agree that Girard's discovery of the Biblical God who has nothing to do with violence is a wonderful event. It constitutes an unveiling of anthropological truth that all humans, or Christians at least, should understand and share.[\(13\)](#) But I cannot help but finding myself disagreeing with Girard insofar as his hypothesis implies that we are reduced to a certain passivity in our encounter with God, such that our being called to *name the revealed truth* is worth next to nothing. Our signs only anticipate what God *will* reveal, without giving access to a blessed reality in the here-and-now. In apocalyptic thinking of the mimetic theory variety, the thing that humans do best and most is language-less violence to the innumerable victims that

represent God. The revelation of the Divine Self in the crucified Jesus is one with the revelation to humans of their violence to each other and everything they can get their sinful hands on. (One might wonder—why did God make us so fundamentally violent in the first place, just so that he could reveal to us the horror? What was his point? But never mind.)

The founding event in mimetic theory is not an event at all. It is not an event because it is nothing in which we can imagine ourselves having participated as language-using humans. If the originary victim in mimetic theory *causes* non-instinctual attention, humans are *caused* by that figure of violence. Humans do not choose to represent it. Humans do not give the victim any sacred name. We could not have known at all what we had done in the first place, because we would not have had a common word with which to remember the event.[\(14\)](#) In mimetic theory, humans blunder more or less gradually (for the origin of language in Girard's model is gradualist) onto, into, the stages of their own stupefying, infinitely stupid violence. By contrast, originary thinking defines human beings in the first place by their mindful exchange of abortive gestures of appropriation. Certainly, the violent desire to appropriate the central object circulates; certainly, the supra-animal violence of the sparagmos will be more terrible than animal feeding precisely because it will have been represented and remembered. But it will always have happened in the *space of deferral* created by the exchange of signs; and that space of deferral is given by the shared Being in and of the sacred center.

The originary hypothesis offers a minimal model for understanding that which a human event is and does. It makes sense to think of God as a Being present at the center of human events. We come to understand God as a sacred Person in the scenic center who expects not just to be consumed but to be *named*, who must be named, from the beginning. Generative anthropology's model of the event does not limit consumption to being *nothing but* mindless scapegoating: it is not mindless violence because we have already named the object. The point to be made about human violence as distinct from animal aggression is that humans know something of what they do. The phrase "animal violence" is nonsensical, for animals have no shared sacred centers to violate. Our possession of language defines our violence; our violence does not define our language. Animal violence alone says nothing. Like nature, violence is mute. It does not signify. We as language-using humans signify, by naming sacred centers; sacred centers signify, in revealing their Being to us by demanding, calling us to name them.[\(15\)](#)

Originary thinking agrees deeply with mimetic theory on many points. Just as mimetic theory takes as the crucial problematic of human interaction the containment of historical human violence, so does originary theory.[\(16\)](#) Originary thinking does not deny the *horror* in the glory and horror of the human. For us, the

Christian revelation is the revelation of the *victimary* status of the central object. Originary thinking, furthermore, agrees with mimetic theory in its privileging of the idea that the Christian model of moral omniscientricity had world-changing effects; it agrees that the Christian revelation changed human reality for the better.[\(17\)](#) However, in *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (1990), Eric Gans makes the point that the Christian revelation is not ultimately just the revelation of a moral teaching impossible for humans to practice, though it is that.[\(18\)](#) Additionally, more differentially, it is the revelation of a person—the person, Jesus—who mediates between the impossibly nonviolent moral utopia of the Kingdom he proclaimed and the real possibility of a community of believers who share faith in his forgiveness. Paul understands that Jesus forgives humankind's inevitable failure to make the utopia Jesus himself preached appear here and now on earth. To do nothing but anticipate violent consumption is not to anticipate forgiveness for that which will be remembered with the name we already exchange. Trying out originary analysis on the sacred texts of Christian culture demonstrates that the Christian revelation need not be confined to apocalyptic anticipation.

Anyway, originary thinking presupposes that *the exchange of signs anticipating violent consumption of the central object* will not do as a model for understanding Divine action or human events. Neither at the origin nor today do humans experience language as either nothing but the anticipation of violent consumption (so we must strive for nonviolent moral utopia), or nothing but a side-effect of violent consumption (so we are damned by the scapegoating violence buried beneath every human interaction).[\(19\)](#) The divine Presence of the God who loves us is not revealed by the unnamed body alone of the victimized object. *In the beginning was the Word* does not mean *in the beginning was the victimized flesh alone that the Word became afterward and nobody knows how*. The sacred text *In the beginning was the Word*[\(20\)](#) means that from the very beginning, the excess of violence that defines the human is one with the freedom and responsibility of humans to name the beings that have suffered that violence.

God's revelation to humankind is the revelation of a space of deferral and differentiation in which God will intervene not once and for all in a single apocalypse, but continuously in every revelatory human event. God is the central locus of the scene of representation conceived as a Being, a Being who confers value on the smallest human exchanges, on the smallest historical human differences. Maybe that is what is meant in the verse about God counting every sparrow.[\(21\)](#) What if it were possible, as the beautifully passionate discourse of James Alison (a theologian strongly influenced by Girard) proves it is possible, to believe in God *liking us*—not loving us with the portentous obligations thereby implied, but just liking us—as our most loyal, easy, intimate friends do?[\(22\)](#)

Originary thinking resists the apocalyptic fantasy of a nonviolent moral utopia, knowing the invidious realities of millenarian resentment such fantasies create.[\(23\)](#) Nothing compels us to believe that the fullness of God's revelation to humankind, whether of His own violence (the fundamentalist apocalypse) or of totalizing human violence (Girard's model), is the ultimate revelation, a terrifying spectacle to make us cringe.[\(24\)](#) God does not stand in our way, forcing us to anticipate, but blocking, violent consumption. From the beginning, God has given away the Divine center; God has given way. God *gives way*, and the way God gives is the way of human-Divine interactions in history.

Whereas apocalyptic thinking attaches itself to a perfect violent world to come, originary thinking attaches itself to the imperfectly violent world that has always been since the beginning. It is the God of this world who *loves humans as they are, even despite their violence*. And how do we, mainstream humans as opposed to apocalyptic separatists, produce historical change? We do violence to the earth, planting crops and taming animals, digging minerals and diverting rivers, kissing and missing, loving and losing, trying and failing, making and breaking. We produce and consume. We exchange words and things. With each exchange, with each historical event and revelation, we may learn and come to know a little bit more about the Divine, for whatever has occupied the scenic center in human events has inherited a bit of the Divine from the beginning.[\(25\)](#) Inspired by originary thinking, therefore, one might pursue a faith in God as the suffering One who, rather than threatening perpetually to reveal once and for all the end of economic history, is always promising to give it a new beginning.[\(26\)](#) Maybe we should let go of *the future is now*. Maybe the truth is... that the present (where God is) is the only future worth hoping for.

## Notes

1. The quoted phrases in this paragraph come from Eric Gans, *A New Way of Thinking*: "What is 'absurd' in religious discourse from the standpoint of propositional reason can always be understood as the worldly incarnation of the otherworldly characteristics of language, or more generally of representation; religious narratives describe the miracle of becoming-language" (35). [\(back\)](#)
2. I am thinking of Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow*; of the Hollywood remake *The Day the Earth Stood Still* starring Keanu Reeves; of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening*; and of the Nicolas Cage picture *Knowing*. [\(back\)](#)
3. René Girard embracing the either/or of apocalyptic thinking, also utopian thinking: "We can no longer do what modern thought did: *postpone*. All men are equal, not under law but in fact. We must thus make decisive choices: there will soon be no institutions, rituals, or 'differences' for regulating our

behaviour. We have to destroy one another or love one another, and humanity, we fear, will prefer to destroy itself" (*Battling* 48). Girard again: "Deprived of sacrifice, we are faced with an inescapable alternative: either we acknowledge the truth of Christianity, or we contribute to the escalation to extremes by rejecting Revelation" (*Battling* 103). *We would indeed be doomed.* The "doom" here is one which would be imposed even in the next world by a God who would judge our possession of language to be epiphenomenal to our intimacy with the divine One, our Creator.

I believe it is ultimatums such as these that Eric Gans may have had in mind when composing the following passage, which despite its length, needs to be shared with the reader, for this essay is nothing but a reflection inspired by it: "Girard accounts for the persistence of the sacrificial in the Christian world by its (necessarily) imperfect understanding of the Gospel message, which he reformulates in explicitly victimary terms. But Girard's reinterpretation of the Christian revelation is the historical product of another revelation, that of the Holocaust. Following the Hiroshima rather than the Auschwitz model of postmodernity, Girard sets out our historical crux in the apocalyptic terms of nascent Christianity, which believed the last judgment to be imminent: we must abolish sacrificial violence or perish; utopia now or annihilation. But were this the case, we would indeed be doomed. In the nonviolent utopia of universal love, there would be no means available to carry out the essential cultural operation of *différance*: deferral through differentiation" (*Signs of Paradox* 166). [\(back\)](#)

4. Eric Gans: "To externalize the prenarrative suspension of the originary text is to extend, purportedly in the cause of nonviolence, the originary deferral and its accompanying resentment to the entire sphere of human practical action. It is characteristic of this intellectual angelism to be associated with equally pure political attitudes" (*Originary* 113). And from *The Scenic Imagination*: "Hobbes' state of nature, like Girard's mimetic crisis, goes beyond true minimalism in supposing that the participants abandon the appetitive for the 'metaphysical,' the substantive object of desire for the mimetic essence of desire itself. . . . What is missing from both is the *economic* result: the satisfaction of individual appetites resulting from the sacrificial *sparagmos*, in which each member of the community receives his portion of the consumable central object" (34). A hypocritical (because impossible to sustain in practice) indifference to consumable objects; an intellectual angelism that ascetically suspends the desire to transform the exchangeable sign into the consumable thing—together, they characterize the apocalyptic. [\(back\)](#)
5. Eric Gans: "An ethic maintains a social order; morality, on the contrary, is indifferent to any such order. Morality is a vision of human relations derived exclusively from the reciprocal exchange of signs on the scene of

representation" (*Science and Faith* 94). In *Signs of Paradox*, an opposition is set between "the moral concern with reciprocal communication" and "the ethical abandonment of this concern in the interest of preserving the community as a practical, worldly entity" (214, note 10). [\(back\)](#)

6. Compare this remark, made by René Girard: "Modern political thought cannot dispense with morals, but it cannot become purely moral without ceasing to be political" (*Scapegoat* 116). [\(back\)](#)
7. The following remarks (all from Eric Gans) are relevant background in this context. "Morality takes the originary scene as a self-sufficient model of human interaction, whereas ethics is concerned with its prolongation in the ethical life of society. Signs are infinitely reproducible; things are potentially scarce, and access to them must be regulated" (*Science and Faith* 95). From a different place: "The ethical realization of the moral goal of equality is not conceivable as a final state, but only as the *telos* of the market's ever-expanding capacity to produce, distribute, and consume the differences that are the measure of human freedom" (*Originary* 61). [\(back\)](#)
8. For the background to these remarks, see Reuther, chapter 2, "The Radicals of the Reformation and the Puritan Revolution" (21-35). [\(back\)](#)
9. Eric Gans is unafraid to point out this hard truth about Christian victimary thinking, and its uneasy kinship with victimary self-righteousness. An impossibly demanding moral code is as likely to frustrate as it is to liberate: "The moral model contains within itself a latent tension that will render humanity, happily or unhappily, incapable of realizing the utopia put forth in the Gospels. The originary exchange of signs must be and yet cannot be the universal model of our behaviour" (*Originary* 47). In a different context, the same point: "The moral intuition that accuses the lyric of exploiting and ultimately killing the Other can be reconciled with the human community only through the Christian redemptive vision. For this moral vision condemns not the esthetic, nor even the 'cultural,' but the human in general insofar as it is the product of the originary event" (*Originary* 201). What is "condemned" is the necessity of our doing violence even to objects we love; what is condemned is our dependency on language for the *naming* of ourselves and God as the way of beginning to transcend that violence. The Christian vision redeems us from the condemnation in that Jesus as Person forgives us our failure to be as nonviolent as He. [\(back\)](#)
10. When the Girardian polemicist skeptical of originary thinking's completion of mimetic theory accuses humans of desiring the desire of the other but never really desiring things in this world, he is making the accusation that humans universally are already inclined to apocalyptic fever. Or so it seems to me; I stand to be corrected. For a polite but polemical debate along these lines, see Bandera and the response from van Oort. [\(back\)](#)
11. This is not to say that Christianity (as mediated by originary thinking) must

insist on the insignificance of political sacrifice. For the Christian faith encouraged by the originary hypothesis is not apocalyptic, or not limited to the apocalyptic. It makes space for the eternal significance of worldly tragedy. A most relevant essay here is “Tragedy and Christianity: Minimal and Maximal Faith”: “Tragedy depends on this minimal faith; we are all [as humans] bearers of difference, on the model of sacred difference, but in conflict with it, provoking resentment that no sacred ritual can contain. In contrast, Christian faith maximally conflates sacred difference with human firstness, thereby transforming resentment of firstness into worship” (*A New Way of Thinking* 111). [\(back\)](#)

12. Eric Gans: “The most obvious weakness of this model [Girard’s model of scapegoating violence as human origin] is that, like its Freudian ancestor in *Totem and Taboo*, it generates a humanity for which language is epiphenomenal” (*Signs of Paradox* 133). [\(back\)](#)
13. René Girard: “the apocalyptic violence predicted by the Gospels is not divine in origin. In the Gospels, this violence is always brought home to men, and not to God” (*Things Hidden* 186). Girard again: “That is indeed the main lesson to be drawn from this brief analysis. The notion of divine violence has no place in the inspiration of the Gospels” (*Things Hidden* 189). Girard again: “It is upon men and men alone that responsibility for the tragic and catastrophic nature of the changes humanity is about to witness” (*Things Hidden* 203). René Girard: “However, the devastation will be all on our side: the apocalyptic texts speak of a war among people, not a war of God against humans. The apocalypse has to be taken out of fundamentalist hands. The disaster . . . concerns only humanity” (*Battling to the End* 48). [\(back\)](#)
14. And at one level, we did not know what we were doing: “And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’ And they cast lots to divide his garments” (Luke 23:34). But at another level, to understand such a prayer in the way of originary analysis is to understand that our earliest ancestors must have heard something of such forgiveness even at the origin. Language is good to us and good for us because in language God reveals the (his/her) Divine Person to us. See my “Object of Originary Violence.” [\(back\)](#)
15. Animals are significant for and to us; but animals have no need among themselves of the kind of scenic signifying we need. They live, feed, breathe, mate, fight, feel, and die just fine as creatures quite without language and scenicity. Their “societies” are not organized around sacred centers. For better, for worse, our societies must be. Now we can try and try to grasp our self-organizing as the performance of nothing but animals; and ever since Darwin many great minds have tried in diamond-sharp but vain brilliance to do just that, seeking in primate behavior or mathematical formulae the keys to unlocking a scientific knowledge of human behavior. The ubiquitous recourse to the very word “behavior” betrays the error. For human action is not animal

behavior, just as knowledge is not information and the exchange of sacralising names is not the processing of indexical signs that occupy the ontological level of the world of things. Human history begins with language; language defers intraspecific animal aggression and converts it into uniquely human violence; human history, in all its horror and its glory, is irreducible to a cosmic process. The real mystery is why so many well-intentioned humans wish so to reduce it, and work so hard to find a way to know themselves as something other and less than historical actors. (But then if you resent God as the enemy of the ahistorical material Object the existence of which you seek in vain to verify, you will probably have no desire to get to know yourself as a being who occupies a level of reality where self-knowledge might require a little thinking about the idea of God. Atoms and the void leave no more room at the inn for God than they do for humans.) [\(back\)](#)

16. Eric Gans, like René Girard, believes that the approach to anthropology they share is “consequent on the revelation at the end of World War II of the absolutely crucial problem of deferring human violence” (*Scenic Imagination* 19). Consider this as well: “Before humans can engage in natural science, they must form communities, and Girard, if not Durkheim himself, has made clear the dependence of human communities on the sacrificial expulsion of violence and on the myths that sustain it” (Gans, *New Way* 86). [\(back\)](#)
17. Eric Gans: “Jesus situated himself at the most radical point of the prophetic tradition, as a preacher of moral apocalypse in which the ‘Kingdom of God’ is exclusively characterized by a new quality of interpersonal relations” (*Science and Faith* 92); “As a preparation for the apocalyptic destruction of the worldly order, Jesus’ radicalization of prophetic moralizing was the revelation not merely of a new theology but of theology’s self-abolition. For theology is nothing but deferred anthropology; in the Kingdom, we shall shortly see God, and therefore ourselves, face to face (*Science and Faith* 100); “This vision [(Jesus’) purely moral vision of human relations] is essentially polycentric; it cannot be conceived as emerging in revelatory fashion from a single point” (*Science and Faith* 97). [\(back\)](#)
18. Central to Gans’s interpretation of these texts is an emphasis on “Paul’s intuition that Jesus himself, in the role of the crucified savior, must occupy the central position in the new theology that would guarantee this moral doctrine” (*Science and Faith* 92); it is “the crueler truth of the crucifixion that Paul’s deeper anthropological intuitions recognizes as fundamental” to our grasping the significance of Jesus (*Science and Faith* 92). In other words, Paul knew that building a community on what Gans calls the “moral apocalypse” of Jesus alone, on his teaching alone, unaccompanied by a theological centralizing of the remembered Person, would have been an historical impossibility. Compare: “The utopian Kingdom of Jesus’ preaching could not be convincing in itself” (*Signs of Paradox* 156). Consider this also: “But the ‘taking’ of this revelation

only becomes assured of its historical permanence with the conversion of Paul, who alone grasped the meaning of Jesus' posthumous success. It was Paul who led early Christianity beyond the mere expectation, mediated by the word of the master, of the imminent moral apocalypse of the 'second coming'" (*Science and Faith* 102). The reader is begged to register that Christianity moving *beyond mere expectation* is Christianity becoming a faith that is not only apocalyptic. Finally, consider this passage: "The Christian can only be made to participate vicariously in the moral apocalypse once it has been made clear that responsibility for living up to his commitment to Jesus' moral doctrine, a commitment for which he can never be guaranteed sufficient saintliness, has been removed from his shoulders" (*Science and Faith* 107). [\(back\)](#)

19. "Girard's pioneering attempt to found an anthropology on the mimetic theory of desire takes as the fundamental mode of human interaction not conflict-deferring language, but sparagmatic violence. Perhaps only one inured to eternal awaiting can afford to be more optimistic" (*Signs of Paradox* 167). It is worth pondering the paradox that being "inured" to eternal awaiting makes one more optimistic about human history than one would be made if one were not so inured. Perhaps to believe in human-Divine interaction in history is to believe that God does not want it to end once and for all. [\(back\)](#)
20. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:1-5, Revised Standard Version). [\(back\)](#)
21. "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:28-31; Revised Standard Version). [\(back\)](#)
22. For James Alison's wonderfully helpful critique of apocalyptic thinking, see *Raising* 124-26. For his invitation to imagine God liking us, see *On Being Liked*. I cannot recommend these works strongly enough. [\(back\)](#)
23. Eric Gans: "In a world that . . . is beginning at last to understand that the socialist and fascist utopias are cut from the same poisoned cloth, no millennial image of the good society can have any but harmful effects. The only figure we need is the figure of the origin, the only scene absolutely necessary for the constitution of a single human race. This scene is not utopian; it is the locus of an interminable agon" (*Signs of Paradox* 167). Again: "We are 'after' the millennium in the sense that we must dispense with millenarianism, the awaiting of the final apocalypse" ("GA and the Linguistic Turn"; Chron. 334).

[\(back\)](#)

24. René Girard: “No one wants to see that Christ’s ‘return,’ in the implacable logic of the apocalypse, is simply the same thing as the end of the world” (*Battling* 105). “The relevance of the apocalyptic texts is therefore absolutely striking when we accept their meaning. They say paradoxically that Christ will only return when there is no hope that evangelical revelation will be able to eliminate violence, once humanity realizes that it has failed” (*Battling* 119). The problem with formulations such as these is that although they are meant to describe the undesirable, they can inspire a wish for the thing described: if Christ will only return when humanity realizes it has failed, then we may begin to wish humanity would just go ahead and fail. They invite a will to failure, although that invitation would not be Girard’s intention. [\(back\)](#)
25. Eric Gans: “Every representational event is a revelation; the structure of consciousness is revelatory. The least of these revelations is in principle irreversible, leaving its trace in memory, just as the greatest [revelations], those the memory of which is preserved in Biblical faith, designate the fundamental stages of our understanding of the scene on which they appear” (*Science and Faith* 112). [\(back\)](#)
26. Eric Gans: “For in the Kingdom of God, all revelation will already have taken place; God will realize his promise by abolishing his external power over man. God will thus be no more than a memory; but this memory of the promise fulfilled will inhabit all men. For the apocalyptic leap will not abolish past history; universal fraternity will always recall the divine guarantee without which it never could have been realized” (*Science and Faith* 104-105). [\(back\)](#)

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