

# Introduction

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It seems almost from another era: in July 2019, half a year before the Covid-pandemic struck, the Colloquium on Violence and Religion held its annual conference at the University of Innsbruck dealing with the challenges of global migration. Experts from many fields gathered to discuss the problem of migration, and to elucidate it with the help of Mimetic Theory.

Now, almost four years later and after the pandemic, the situation does not seem so different after all. We still remember that the years after 2015 were dominated by the theme of migration in many respects: some politicians stoked and instrumentalized fears of migrants so as to gain and hold on to power; others tried to find more or less humane solutions, but were still subject to political upheavals. Today refugees of the war in Ukraine, who are often treated with more understanding in Europe than those from more distant parts of the world and with different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds, have joined the throng of migrants.

However, the migration theme can be read as part of a larger challenge: how do we perceive the other – the other who migrates from a foreign land, the other who thinks and behaves differently than “we” do, or the other who transcends this world altogether, and whom the religions call “God”? Aware that imagination is a mimetic process, the contributors to this volume try to illuminate different aspects of this complex entanglement, asking whom or what we mean by “the other”: the stranger and migrant, the brother or sister, nature that envelops or defies us, the transcendent Other.

This volume presents a selection of – partly updated – papers given at the conference mentioned above. The selection gives a clear indication of the wide range of Mimetic Theory’s applications, while focusing on the theme of “the other” in the sense explained. The contributions therefore are subdivided into three sections:

Part One deals with the imagination of the other and the challenges of migration, with the help of mimetic theory in a broader sense.

Part Two illustrates the politics of migration, looking at particular problems and case studies: problems of migration between Africa and Europe, within Africa, in Latin America, and finally between the Islamic World and Europe.

Part Three widens the scope and looks at the imagination of the other between exclusion and adoration.

Part One starts out by Jean-Marc Bourdin claiming: *We are all migrants*. Employing Mimetic Theory, Bourdin analyzes the various desires that lie behind migration, and concludes that “humans have been migrating since they were humans” and “as long as a terra incognita appeared in sight”. Politics should come to terms with this.

Beginning from a meditation on the *Mona Lisa*, Wilhelm Guggenberger argues that the problems of migration would be much easier to handle if there were a real encounter with the migrants, rather than mere imagination about them. This would not end all conflicts, but it would offer “the possibility of discovering in the other a real person in common life practice instead of just perceiving him or her as an image that triggers a pre-programmed pattern of reactive behavior.”

Andreas Müller provides an analysis of the legal framework for migration and asylum. Starting with the Geneva Refugee Convention, Müller critically appraises the common European asylum system and the problematic attempts to defend the EU’s borders. He draws some interesting conclusions for European identity: “European identity remains frail, to say the least. And nowhere does this become as clearly and painfully manifest as in Europe’s dysfunctionality with respect to the Common Asylum System.” The different approach to Ukrainians fleeing the war in their country, might be seen as a sign of hope, but is not without problems either.

Matthew Packer approaches the problem from another discipline: literary studies. Analyzing the depiction of mimesis and migration in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s novel *The Sympathizer* and Mohsin Hamid’s novel *Exit West*, as well as in Ai Weiwei’s movie *Human Flow*, he argues “that the migrant crisis *is* a mimetic crisis, on a global scale, and that this hypervisibility and the work of writers ... are helping us recognize it as such, even making it unavoidable as a topic.”

Part two is opened by Gilles Reckinger and his insights into *Trans-Mediterranean Migration and the Exploitation of African Mobile Workers in Southern Italy*. Migrants from Africa are often declared to be inferior, and this inferiorization is used to deny “access to the fundamental rights of citizenship to non-nationals”,

allowing “the existence of a category of subalterns excluded from power, labour and civic rights, isolated or even interned, and without the possibility of making their grievances publicly audible.”

Domèbèimwin Vivien Somda also looks at African migration to Europe, but especially analyzes – and partly criticizes – Africans’ mimetic desire for Europe. In employing Mimetic Theory and Dramatic Theology, he proposes a constructive role of the church for solving problems of migration. He hopes that “in the light of dramatic theology [...] immigration is not and should not be a fate. In Jesus Christ there is a positive force at work for the salvation of all, which includes well-being.” Somda received the Raymund-Schwager-Memorial Award for this essay.

Timon Ochieng Odeny looks closely at an instance of inner-African migration: the situation at the border between Somalia and his native Kenya. He sees Somali refugees in danger of being scapegoated, although “Kenyans want to give refuge to, and protect, vulnerable Somali refugees.” The cultural and religious differences between Kenyans and Somalians can easily be instrumentalized so as to inflame resentments among the two groups, and in consequence “this rivalry can lead to violence against individual victims, who become surrogates for all refugee victims.”

The next three papers take us to a different corner of the world: to Latin America. Iván Camilo Vargas Castro takes us to the Catatumbo region, close to the border between Colombia and Venezuela. The author views borders “as territories with social and symbolic rules that allow coexistence around them” which transcend the rules of the states delineated by the borders. Here, the communitarian order helps to construct a kind of “border citizenship”. Vargas Castro also received the Raymund-Schwager-Memorial Award for his essay.

Miguel Rolland takes us back in time, as he considers *Migration and Identity Appropriation in Ancient Mesoamerica*. He explores “the Mexican migration story anthropologically” and considers “how the formation of group identity is fundamentally related to the mimetic dynamic of appropriation and reciprocity which violence and religion appear to foster.” He makes a strong plea that the story of Huitzilopochtli should, like the story of King Oedipus, be re-read from the scapegoat point of view.

Roberto Solarte Rodriguez and Camila Esguerra-Muelle return us to the present, and show us how “migrants acquire the double-face of the sacred”. The au-

thors discuss available data on migration, together with the ethical and political reflections of Gloria Anzaldúa and René Girard. Their aim is to open up with this combination “a horizon from where we can address questions such as the fate of minors, women and the LGBTQ population, the pauperization of migrants’ work and the inadequacy of public policies”, thus helping to escape a consideration of the other as an enemy and as a threat.

Part Three begins with two papers focusing on the sometimes difficult imagining of the “other” between other monotheistic religions and/or secularism and Islam. Raja Sakrani takes a look at *Images of the Other in Islam*, and asks *Is there an Islamic Mimeticism?* She analyzes how Muslims imagine their own identity and that of others in a particular way, and in the end explains how their view of the “monotheistic other” is related to “the construction of Islamic Identity.”

Michaela Quast-Neulinger takes a look from the other side, so to speak, namely at *The Rivalling Constructions of “Europe” and “Islam” in Contemporary European Discourses*, which engender a *Theo-Politics of Fear*. After uncovering and analyzing the ways in which Europe and Islam are construed as mutually exclusive or even inimical by both sides, she proceeds to suggest how “an identity [can] be shaped that, on the one hand takes the various religious and non-religious traditions seriously in their contribution to Europe, but on the other hand excludes any form of violent exclusivism.”

The revised text of Nidesh Lawtoo’s Raymund Schwager Lecture looks at *The Patho-Logies of Exclusion: Politics, Media, (New) Fascism*. By establishing a genealogical connection between mimetic theory and crowd psychology, Lawtoo revisits “three related mimetic concepts – contagion, community, and myth – in order to show that they played a key role in the rise of fascist phantoms that may not be completely new, yet effectively use new media.” Highlighting the rise of Donald Trump and his election in 2016, he opens up a highly interesting and perhaps for some provocative discussion, about “a perverse hypermimetic dynamic” that he sees “at play” today both in mass media and political spectacles.

António Machuco Rosa considers *Mimetic Desire, Exclusion, Polarization in Social Digital Networks*. He wants to “show how, due to their technological design, based on intersubjective relationships created by buttons such as ‘Like’, ‘Following’, ‘Share’, etc., the new digital social networks create conditions for the proliferation of pseudo-narcissistic and pseudo-masochistic behaviours.” Furthermore, he

argues that this “pseudo-narcissistic behaviour gave rise to the mathematical distribution that characterizes almost all digital networks . . . : a power law distribution”.

Kathleen Vandenberg also deals with problematic consequences of social media, but she looks at a different “other”: the inner-worldly “other” of humanity: nature. Social networks fuel mimetic desire and cause *overtourism* to certain places, which greatly endangers their very beauty. She argues that the “mimetic consumption of the world’s most beautiful and fragile sites cannot continue indefinitely. In their search for transformation, in their metaphysical desire to be the other, travelers are destroying the very thing they think they desire.”

Sherwood Belangia analyzes the role of mimesis in the piety of Socrates. He argues that what Socrates called his *daimonion* is neither a superstition, nor another word for *conscience*, but “is best understood as a product of mimetic forces.” Belangia proposes as a hypothesis “that the *daimonion* is a premonition of *scandal*, a premonition generated by conflicting desires within Socrates’ psyche.” This premonition of scandal warns against the following of desires for appropriative goods that leads to conflict, and entices the following of desires for “convivial goods.” As a “divine *eros* for the dominion of convivial desire”, Plato’s *Symposium* describes the *daimonion* as “a mediator between human and divine.”

Philosopher Tania Checchi González also addresses a partly theological theme. In analyzing the Biblical story of the tower of Babel in a refreshingly creative way, and further developing her thought with the help of Girard and Levinas, she concludes “that we, city dwellers, post-babelites, live in a time when uniformity of purpose can no longer be transmuted into a great mythological story, one that legitimizes all violence occurring in its instrumental core, as happened in the famous city and its tower – not, at least, without second thoughts.”

J. Columille Dever, another recipient of the Raymund-Schwager-Memorial Award, directs our attention to *John Chrysostom Unmasking Envy on Cain’s Fallen Face, Our Fallen Nature*. A central theme in Chrysostom’s thought on this theme was envy, and the tricks it employs to hide itself. Dever sets out to show “Chrysostom’s procedure for unmasking the envy latent in the biblical narrative, and how that unmasking enables Chrysostom to script a cure for the envy within his congregation.” Of course, Dever employs Mimetic Theory to elucidate what actually drives envy.

Theologian Nikolaus Wandering directs the readers’ attention to a problem: can we imitate God at all, as we cannot experience God in our sensory percep-

tion, and as God is called by some the “wholly other”? His answer: we can, if we accept that there is one human – Jesus –, who truly shows us what God is like, and through him we learn that in principle, all humans – created in the image and likeness of God – carry a reflection of God. However, they have this transcendence in a distorted way, due to original sin. Therefore, the unbroken image of God in Jesus Christ is so important. However, it is not just the model that is important but also the mode of imitation. It should not be acquisitive but receptive.

The final two essays of the volume were written in honor of theology professor Józef Niewiadomski, on the occasion of his retirement. They deal with important questions of Mimetic Theory, and how it looks at the other. Mathias Moosbrugger examines the problem of teaching another person, and the mimetic traps and snares connected with it. *On the (Im)Possibility of Teaching Others* draws a line from Socrates to Niewiadomski, and shows how the latter developed the humility of discipleship through Raymund Schwager and René Girard.

Wolfgang Palaver deals with Niewiadomski’s theology of the Eucharist, connecting it to Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*. By linking Niewiadomski’s insight into the Eucharist’s “transformational power to overcome rivalries and mechanisms of exclusion” with his own insights from the novel’s depiction of the transformative power of “pro-existence”, Palaver addresses the natural tension between a dogmatic theologian like Niewiadomski and an ethicist like himself, and explains the importance for both of a theology of grace.

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