

# On Mimesis, Folkways, and the Impossibility of Christianity

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**ABSTRACT** Neither rationally constructed nor intentionally imposed, humans live much of their lives guided by unspoken folkway traditions passed on from generation to generation. As the American sociologist William Graham Sumner reminded us over a century ago, those norms that prescribe “acceptable” social behavior bubble up from everyday life experience, rather than imposed from the top by cultural authorities. Sumner’s insights throw further light on the mimetic theory developed by René Girard and offer a more nuanced understanding of how mimesis actually works. The benefit of the extraordinary grip that folkway traditions hold on us is their utilitarian value and resultant cost-effectiveness in terms of expenditure of mental energy. We follow folkway traditions to save time and mental energy. It is the thesis of this paper that Jesus recognized this power of customary thinking as a determinant of human behavior, and it was his strategy to attack specifically those folkway traditions that were exclusionary in nature in “shocking” ways that agitated many who followed generally accepted behavioral norms. As a result, it is wrong to take Jesus for a moral law-giver, even with such benign terms as a new “law of love,” or the like. In fact, he did not propose a new formal legal tradition, but challenged individuals to reflect consciously on their unthinking behavior and assume responsible ownership of it. To follow Jesus, therefore, does not so much imply a deeper understanding of love, but a deeper understanding of the unconscious decision-making processes that unwittingly guide our everyday lives.

**KEYWORDS** authority; behavior; contagion; folkways; hermeneutics; mimesis; stranger; tradition

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The stranger is maddening, like God. Undecidable, like God. Are strangers and undecidability figures of God? Or is God a figure of the undecidability of the stranger, or openness to the other?<sup>1</sup>

To be civilized is to understand that we live in society as in a household, and that within that household, if we are to be moral people, our relationships with other people are governed by standards of behavior that limit our freedom. Our duty to follow those standards does not depend on whether or not we happen to agree with or even like each other.<sup>2</sup>

René Girard has helped us understand that a central and far-reaching connection between mimetic theory and the Christian gospels lies in the arena of social formation based on the scapegoat mechanism. While this insight has engendered a plethora of scholarly writings, far less examined is how and why this mechanism holds such power over what otherwise we might consider quite “civilized” and “moral” people. Girard’s point is not, of course, that only “evil” people scapegoat, but even the most “civilized” of societies utilize the mechanism even as they mask the fact. Hence, the problem of explaining why and how so-called “good” people can do such an “evil” as scapegoating, all while subject to minimal feelings of guilt or remorse and with their moral convictions intact. As an example, it has become commonplace to point to the preeminent scapegoating political movement in the twentieth century—Nazi Germany—as composed of numerous followers who loved their wives, children, friends, associates (and, above all, country!), even as they turned a blind eye to atrocities perpetrated against their scapegoated ones—Jews and other perceived enemies of the state. Jaundiced historians and social scientists may not be entirely surprised by the evident discontinuity at play here between act and self-awareness since history is replete with such examples, but how are we to explain the discrepancy more precisely? This paper is offered as a contribution to this task by relating mimetic theory to the socio-anthropological study of folkways, founded on the ground-breaking insights pioneered by the American sociologist William Graham Sumner in his classic study *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* (1906).

The intention here is not to offer an apologetic for the oft-times critiqued Sumner, especially as his reputation as a significant contribution to social

1. John D. Caputo, “Hospitality and the Trouble with God,” in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality* (New York: Fordham, 2011), 86.

2. Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 15.

thought ultimately tended to be dwarfed by a swirl of controversy over his predilection for largely discredited “social Darwinism” and the arguments of Herbert Spencer. I wish to argue that Sumner’s original identification and definition of folkway tradition have great import for a deeper insight into the significance of Girard’s work, as well as the gospels themselves, and thereby our understanding of the fundamental pedagogical strategy that fueled Jesus’ teachings. Simply put: examining the so-called Jesus Tradition bears witness to Jesus’ fundamental focus on folkways in his sayings, and to the way that he understood them as building blocks for broader cultural development of mores, norms, manners, customs, and the like, operative throughout the Judaic tradition. Keen interest in the mechanics of everyday life and active decision-making was seemingly of far more import to him than the developed theological abstractions, ritual practices, or even political considerations of more professional clergy and cultic personnel. The key to understanding this focus lies clearly in the pre- or proto-rational nature of folkway traditions. In fact, then as now, nearly all humans spend their days living and acting according to such traditions—all by and large without benefit of critical reflection and conscious decision-making. In short: Jesus recognized that the power that generates the engines of our behavior is imitative in nature, not rational: we do such and such, not because it is right or even logical, but because it is commonly done and thereby expected of us by those around us in our everyday lives. With this recognition the power and importance of folkway traditions begins to come into view. In fact, it is not too much of a stretch to say that civilization, including all of the social components that make it up, functions like a school, teaching its people to be conditioned through the intrinsic power of imitation. This “schooling” of society is clearly visible in the education of the young, when children are taught to follow “tradition, imitation and authority.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus’ radical saying: “suffer the little children to come unto me” is, at least in part, a recognition of the importance of social “schooling,” and how if one wishes to change human behavior it is important to address the sources of inculcating practices of predictable behavioral and commonly accepted mores and customs. Since we learn at an early age the benefits of imitative reinforcement, is it any wonder that

3. Roberet C. Hartnett, “An Appraisal of Sumner’s Folkways,” *The American Catholic Sociological Review* 3, no. 4 (1942): 197. Hartnett, a sometimes critic of Sumner’s insights into folkway, notes further in his critique: “men live comparatively unthinking lives, conforming their actions in large measure to what they see being done by their neighbors. The inclination to imitate and be like one’s fellows undoubtedly goes a long way towards accounting for much of social life.” Indeed!

such conditioning follows us throughout our entire lives always subject to the storms which contagious behavior might lead?

The key to understanding Sumner and his approach to dissecting unthinking folkway traditions is that they represent behavioral patterns that are habitually followed by members of society based on the “authority” of tradition and mimesis, rather than rational choice. Because they do not originate in consciousness or moral concerns, they do not encourage critical analysis or reflection. Because they do not go through a critical “filter” and remain safely out of the oversight of rational reflection, folkway traditions share with the scapegoat mechanism itself the imperious quality of deception. Folkway behavior does not ask such questions as: “should I, or should I not, do this?” “Is this behavior right or wrong?” “Is an act authentic or inauthentic?” Etc. Folkway traditions, in other words, present themselves as “natural,” unquestioned, and grounded in the authority of universal acceptance and the intrinsic mimetic power of “everybody does it.” Such traditions dominate social behavior through such “soft” sanctions as individual shame and community exclusion, dynamics which afford them the virtual appearance of inborn instinct, rather than community-imposed mores or law. I want to argue that it is precisely on this bedrock that mimetic folkway behavior, including the potency of the scapegoat mechanism itself, lies. Contagious behavior, whether benignly conceived or ill-willed (so-called “good” or “bad” mimesis), is not fully understood without taking into account the folkway traditions already operative in society prior to those rational machinations that subsequently enliven the spread of contagious behavior throughout society. Folkway traditions, in other words, prepare the way for the deepening hold of mimetic power in society, and then serve to beckon forth the scapegoat mechanism itself from its normal concealment in times of social crisis.<sup>4</sup>

Sumner also proposes the idea that the deepest root of mimesis itself is something yet more profound, namely the innate human aptitude for suggestibility. He writes: “Suggestibility is the natural faculty of the

4. Sumner himself notes that folkways are “unconscious, spontaneous, uncoordinated” in William Graham Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* (Boston: Ginn, 1907), 19. Although unaware of the scapegoat mechanism as such, he notes: “There is a thrill of enthusiasm in the sense of moving with a great number [of people]. There is no deliberation or reason. Therefore, a crowd may do things which are either better or worse than what individuals in it would do. Cases of lynching show how a crowd can do things which it is extremely improbable that the individuals would do or consent to, if they were taken separately. The crowd has no greater guarantee of wisdom and virtue than an individual would have. In fact, the participants in a crowd almost always throw away all the powers of wise judgment which have been acquitted by education, and submit to the control of enthusiasm, passion, animal impulse, or brute appetite.” *Ibid.*, 20f.

brain to admit any ideas whatsoever, without motive, to assimilate them, and eventually to transform them rapidly into movements, sensations, and inhibitions.”<sup>5</sup> This suggestion means that it is little wonder that one can draw a rather direct line from models of folkway behavior, through cultural childhood education to, as he says, “swindlers and all others who have an interest to lead the minds of their fellow-men in a certain direction.”<sup>6</sup> In more recent times, a more advanced manifestation of this aptitude in society is “one of the arts of the demagogue and stump orator.”<sup>7</sup> In simple terms, the general inclination of the human being is subliminally to follow and conform, rather than consciously to think and consider. Society conditions us for this social conformity in myriad ways in everyday life and the scope of readily suggestable behavioral choices provided by it in various folkway traditions signifies the deepest level for effecting lasting change in our conduct, rather than those moments of excessive social crises that too often grab headlines and special interest initiatives.

The picture of Jesus provided in the New Testament is typically that of a man interested in the folkway traditions of his culture that Sumner first isolated: he seems more accurately to be a teacher of civility, than say a psychologist, political theorist, or even theologian. I will follow the nomenclature of Sumner in this paper because the origin of these traditions lies in behavioral rules and guides for decision-making in the everyday life of “folk,” rather than the sanctioned mandates of cultural elites and upper echelon institutional power brokers.<sup>8</sup> Such folkway traditions are born in the

5. Affirming the perspective of A. Lefèvre, in *ibid.*, 21.

6. *Ibid.*, 22.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Robert Redfield terms this social domain the “little” traditions, which exist in any society in distinction to the “great” traditions of the upper echelon. He notes: “In a civilization there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many. The great traditions cultivated in schools or temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities. The tradition of the philosopher, theologian, and literary man is a tradition consciously cultivated and handed down; that of the little people is for the most part taken for granted and not submitted to much scrutiny considered refinement and improvement.” See Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 41f. In discussing Redfield, John S. Kloppenborg notes Douglas Oakman’s companion observation: “Religion, politics, and economics embedded within elite interests can be predicted to serve organization and legitimation of a social system to benefit those elites.” See Douglas E. Oakman, “Culture, Society, and Embedded Religion in Antiquity,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35, no. 1 (2005): 6, doi:10.1177/01461079050350010201. For this discussion, especially for its relevance in understanding the earliest Christian Gospel traditions see John S. Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: an Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 86ff.

necessities of everyday life, but transmitted from person to person through the power of mimesis. For the most part, Jesus did not attack such upper crusts of society, but simply ignored them: they clearly were not the focus of his teaching. In this regard, he had little to offer about such matters as criminal behavior, political/governmental policy, or organizational ethics. In short, we may say that Jesus is hardly engrossed by the things of “Caesar” (Matt. 22:21), but by what the anthropologist Robert Redfield called the “little traditions.” In contrast to the teachings of cultural elites, Jesus was quite aggressive in confronting matters of everyday life (of the “folk”); at a minimum, at this level of society he was a problematizer, complexifier, and non-traditionalist. In his quest to advance more mindful decision-making he created necessary “space” between customary “unthinking” behavior and the will.<sup>9</sup> He frequently repudiated what were generally taken for granted as *self-evident* behavioral norms and accepted rules of behavior especially with regard to those norms which upheld kinship, ethnic, and economic (class) separation and identity. These norms maintained their pervasive acceptance in society by virtue of their power to maintain social order through *instrumentalization* and “*patternization*”—both of which functioned to erect cultural boundaries by diminishing communal ambiguity.<sup>10</sup> Such “self-evident virtues” did not require the imposition of social authorities to be upheld. Their power lay (and continues to lie) in their ability to *economize* behavioral choices by simplifying, generalizing and quickly recalling similar previous examples of decisions that we and others around us have “always” made in similar past situations. Cristina Bicchieri calls these patterned behaviors “cognitive shortcuts.”<sup>11</sup> It is precisely in this “cover-up” of the true complexities involved in all decision-making, that habitual folkway<sup>12</sup> traditions built a kind of parsimonious economy

9. “to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced” Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known* (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 69.

10. Pierre Hadot termed this aspect of everyday life as “automatic behavior” Luc Brisson and Michael Chase, “Behind the Veil: In Memory of Pierre Hadot,” *Common Knowledge* 17, no. 3 (2011): 434, doi:10.1215/0961754X-1305355.

11. See Cristina Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.

12. For Pierre Hadot “the judgments in our everyday lives that comprise our inner *logos* stem from our immediate bodily preferences and self-interest, which have become necessities through habit. Through repetition, our inclinations and aversions become sedimented into our automatic actions and judgments, such that we are unable to react to the world according to reason but only based on our passions” Daniel del Nido, “Pierre Hadot on Habit, Reason, and Spiritual Exercises,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 1 (2018): 16, doi:10.1111/jore.12205. As a counter-measure to such “automatic” judgments, Hadot advanced the idea of spiritual exercises that would, in effect, redefine habitual behavior.

that simultaneous distorted reality in ways that both managed it and rendered on-going decision-making processes less energy intensive.<sup>13</sup>

Since such folkways are self-policing, they tend to stay in place uncritically in culture for extended periods as behavioral guideposts for community, not because they are actually “true” or accurately portray reality.<sup>14</sup> And, it was precisely this self-policing aspect of these traditions that Jesus addressed, rather than the external authorities of the more formal norms that were built upon them.<sup>15</sup> This seems to suggest that Jesus understood the key to social change to lie “below the surface” of perspicuous expressions of power. By refusing to affirm those folkway traditions that classified and regulated behavior toward those who were outsiders or strangers to the “group” through the exclusion of *others*, Jesus focused his approach on the mimetic and fictional nature of folkways in general.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the challenge of “doing” Christianity ultimately comes from Jesus himself as we come to recognize that the “uncomplicated” ways that we follow one another in society (even as members of churches!), all too easily allows us to avoid going beyond our stereo-typical knowledge of “outsiders” and strangers. Jesus was absolutely “unforgiving” in his intolerance of such truncated prejudicial behavior. He required close examination of our tendencies to skip such deliberative steps and simply required nothing less than

13. For an excellent discussion of what the authors term the brain’s “parsimonious principle,” see Ed Bullmore and Olaf Sporns, “The Economy of Brain Network Organization,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 13, no. 5 (2012): 337, doi:10.1038/nrn3214.

14. Slavoj Žižek notes the problem inherent in all folkway traditions in phenomenological terms: “In principle, the gap separating the phenomenal, empirical objects of experience from the Thing-in-itself is insurmountable—that is, no empirical object, no representation of it, can adequately present the Thing....” *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, New York: Verso, 1989), 203.

15. The real “authority” of folkway culture is *mimesis* itself, or the behavior of those around us: “the lessons learned about how we deploy social and moral judgments on each other are sobering. We are laden with implicit biases, moral flinches and yuk reactions, alongside self-serving and hypocritical judgements which are coloured by the group allegiances to which we subscribe.” Note Ziyad Marar’s summary of his position in the introduction to *Judged. The Value of Being Misunderstood* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). He proposes further in this book that rather than *Homo Sapiens*, the human species should more properly be classified as *Homo credens*.

16. Note René Girard’s assessment of brain function: “There is nothing, or next to nothing, in human behavior that is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation. If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish. Neurologists reminded us frequently that the brain is an enormous imitating machine. To develop a science of man it is necessary to compare human imitation with animal mimicry, and to specify properly human modalities of mimetic behavior.” In René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 7.

“perfection” in making behavioral decisions: he required complexity, even as the brain pushes us to simplicity. Our innate drive to think minimally and mimetically in conformity with others, provides an ongoing challenge to Christian thought and raises the legitimate question of whether or not Jesus’ proposal of absolute free choice and conscious living is doable on a realistic, consistent basis.<sup>17</sup> Does the pervasive and consistent distortion of reality managed and established by the brain render Christianity ultimately impossible?<sup>18</sup> Do unquestioned societal norms and values quietly “slip into” our thinking without our awareness? Is the questioning life that Jesus seems to have proposed too expensive for our parsimonious brains that naturally seek to conserve energy by preferencing conventional over problematizing thought?<sup>19</sup> In short: *Since imitative behavior pays, and deliberative thought is costly*, what exactly are the rewards for acting against established cultural patterns? In questioning this reality, there is little wonder that Jesus raised the ire of institutional authorities who trafficked in prejudicial (“pre-judgment”) folkway tradition, and for that was rewarded with crucifixion.

Against this backdrop, the question before us is: did Jesus’ questioning of the unquestioned folkway traditions render his teachings pragmatically “impossible”? Did his questioning of the “unquestionable” mean that his whole approach to understanding human behavior and decision-making would be relegated to the realm of impractical idealism and pragmatic impoverishment? In addition, the further question emerges, as to the clear

17. Bicchieri defines these “little” traditions as *informal norms*: “informal norms [are those] that emerge through the decentralized interaction of agents within a collective and are not imposed or designed by an authority.” Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*, x. She notes that social norms appear “in all those situations in which there is conflict of interest but also a potential for joint gain.” Ibid., 3. She notes that “whenever we enter any environment, we have to decide how to behave.” One way is the rational choice or *deliberative* model, and another is the *behavioral rules* model which “primes” us to behave according to preconceived *habits, roles, and norms*. Ibid., 4.

18. The approach I suggest here differs somewhat that that articulated by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, and affirmed by Pierre Hadot. Hadot affirms Thoreau’s quest to live in the woods “deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” See Pierre Hadot, “There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (2005): 229f. Admirable as we may understand Thoreau’s path to be, it differs from the one advanced by Jesus in that it does not relegate the same importance to the relationship to the *other* in mapping out authentic existence.

19. David Hume metaphorically describes the images of reality that the mind presents to us as “theater, where several perceptions successively make appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in a variety of postures and situations.” *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Longman’s, Green, 1874), 534.



demarcation between Christian faith and Christian *folkway*? Christianity, as well as other major expressions of religious life, is quite capable of adopting a wide variety of extraneous folkway traditions and recasting them in terms of "Christian orthodoxy." For example, David Hackett Fischer has shown how different Christian folkway traditions established on the Eastern North American continent before the American Revolution continued in their very distinctive and individual ways throughout the subsequent course of American history—right up unto our present day.<sup>20</sup> How different the lives and life-styles of the Puritan Christians of Massachusetts from the aristocratic Christians of Virginia! To the outsider, both seem completely "orthodox," yet major differences in lifestyle remain. Both served the major "intention" of maintaining group coherence in the new history of America unfolding on the new continent. Was one more "Christian" than the other? Just as importantly, can we determine precisely what is "Christian" and what is folkway in each? In the process of developing and maintaining folkway traditions, we are most easily influenced by normative practices of those present in our daily lives, especially those whom we love, admire, and relate to on a personal basis. Communal folkway traditions deal especially with daily domestic life, establishing those behavioral guardrails that commonly exist between intimate partners, extended families, friends, colleagues working for common purpose, casual relationships, and the like.

Domestic folkways address the part of our world where an ethic of love or friendship most easily enters and defines our behavior. Yet, while such communal traditions are extremely important in each of our lives, Jesus himself seems to have said very little about them. Rather than those whom we know, he took a stronger interest in those with whom we are unfamiliar, embodied in the figure of the *stranger*. This includes all those who live on the periphery of domestic communal relationships; such as members of other ethnic groups, the "poor" and "meek," "enemies," "sinners," "guests," "tax collectors," impersonal governmental officials, and the like. Informal sanctions regulating our relationship to such persons is more formally maintained in society by authorities and regulated by legal sanction. In such relationships, the operative ethical principle is *dignity*, rather than *love* or *fellow-feeling*. Examples of such impersonal relationships are legion: we stand in line among a group of strangers at the opera house, we keep our voices low in library reading rooms populated by strangers, we greet and thank the cashier who checks us out of the supermarket, we follow the

20. See his influential *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

“rules” of inter-personal behavior in the organizations we work in, we don’t interrupt the president while delivering the “state of the union” address, and so on. The breakdown of such practices, while not resulting in felonies or time before a judge, seems to offend the general foundation upon which the broader architecture of society is constructed. No reciprocal requirement, obligation, or law is necessary for much of our daily life carried out in the midst of such strangers, generally the threat of shame and public humiliation is enough to keep our behavior within “acceptable” bounds.

In this way, we must account for the fact that the fundamental ethical principle that Jesus advocated was drawn from the world of strangers, not that defined by kinship bond, mutual trust of friends, nor the support of close associates. We will find little guidance from him in the New Testament if our goal is becoming a better spouse, parent, colleague, or friend. He offered little here beyond that already practiced by his own folkway traditions. On those rare occasions when he did address relationships between knowns, his advice seems esoteric and mysterious, even troubling. For example, Luke records this teaching of Jesus (there is every reason to assume that Jesus actually did say this): “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26).<sup>21</sup> Clearly, Jesus separated himself from the folk traditions governing family life. However, it is a misreading of his intention to think that he was laying down a new principle of “family law” here. Rather, such a statement shocks the entire folkway tradition itself at the point of a foundational social link and the unquestioned traditions upon which it is built. The same may be said for the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16). The parable is intended to tease out of customary folkway traditions the management of envy, now ensconced in a socially acceptable economic system. Jesus’ statement to the workers who complain of unfair favoritism toward those who work less is telling for his whole approach to accepted folkway traditions: “Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am

21. For a general discussion of the ambiguity associated with the themes of “homelessness” and “itinerant radicalism” in early Christianity found in the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas, see Risto Uro, “Asceticism and Anti-Familial Language in the Gospel of Thomas,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), 216–34. The family context did allow for the ethic of hospitality to be expressed, and early Christianity itself was somewhat determinant on it for that reason. All biblical quotations are from New Revised Standard Version.

generous?" (Matt. 20:14f.)?<sup>22</sup> Folkways, it seems, may cover a multitude of "sins," and they slip by our consciousness with barely a whimper. In many cases Jesus seems more interested in turning friends into strangers, rather than strangers into friends: perhaps all the better to enhance the general power of hospitality operating throughout society?

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:43), it is not one's friends who form the centerpiece of Jesus' challenge to prevailing folkways, but the ultimate expression of the stranger, one's *enemies*: "you have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven."<sup>23</sup> Again, In place of the folkway tradition concerning love of neighbor, Jesus' words shock everyday folk practices which are simply taken for granted throughout society. Much the same dynamic occurs in other places in the gospels. Matthew, for example, provides the "parable" of the Sheep and Goats (25:31–46) in which the good sheep are rewarded by the king (God) in the End Time in part because they "feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and invite in the *stranger*."<sup>24</sup> Rewards don't come from those who simply follow familiar folkway traditions, but come as a result of providing hospitality to those with whom one does not normally associate. This is the "realm" of the Kingdom of God, rather than the kingdom of Man. Hospitality in a real sense is nothing but a synonym for this "Kingdom of God." In a similar vein, Mark recalls that "while Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him" (2:15),

22. The point here is that Jesus is not, nor pretends to be an "economist" who is advocating a new economic "system," or something of the like. Rather, he is addressing the underlying human dynamic that lies beneath economics itself and the attempt to domesticate greed and envy for societal good. We might say it in this way: Jesus uses economics to tease out and make visible the poisonous effect of greed and envy: it is the latter that is his primary interest, rather than the former (which is commonly acknowledged as a rational human construct, and not "of God").

23. Earlier generations of New Testament scholars did not take adequate account of the anonymous origins of folkway traditions. For example, Vernon McCasland pointed out decades ago that "we no longer know the origin of these sayings that people have heard." He writes: "These groups show that Matthew has freely picked up sayings of Jesus from various places and put them together in convenient collections, showing no concern for preserving the integrity of any original sources from which he drew them." Vernon McCasland, "Matthew Twists the Scriptures," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80, no. 2 (1961): 147. Yes, that is precisely the nature of folkway traditions, and Matthew neither knows or has an interest in such matters.

24. This text has been called the "summary of the gospel." See Roger Mehl, "La catholicité de l'église: Commentaire des déclarations de l'Assemblée oecuménique d'Upsal," *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 48 (1968): 369.

an account that underscores Jesus' commitment to the norm of hospitality to outsiders outside his band of more intimate followers and disciples. Even when gathering together his intimate followers in a final meal with them, Jesus makes room for the ultimate stranger to him, Judas. This account is portrayed in the story of Jesus' Last Supper in all three Synoptic Gospels and has been central to celebrations throughout the ensuing centuries of Christian liturgical practice. Christianity has perhaps been more faithful than has been understood in celebrating the unique presence of Jesus in this ritual. In one way or another, he was (is) more especially present in a group that includes his betrayer, than in familiar events of daily life among those who faithfully followed him. Even the one upon whom Jesus is said to have built his church, Peter, ultimately clearly illustrates just how difficult (impossible) Christianity really is, as illustrated by his subsequent denial of ever having known Jesus. According to the New Testament, Jesus appears to his followers on the road to Emmaus and is unrecognizable *even after the stories of his resurrection*: "and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." (Luke 24:14–6). "Kept" from recognizing him? By whom? By God? Or, by their own failure to recognize Jesus' total commitment to hospitality and the stranger? The gospel writer who takes the motif of Jesus the stranger the furthest is Mark who is convinced that the sense of the secrecy that Jesus himself kept from his followers may suggest the idea that the more one "knew" Jesus, the *less* that one understood him, not the *more*. In interpreting the Parable of the Sower, Mark has Jesus offer this enigmatic statement:

And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'" (Mark 4:11–2)

Mark, the oldest Gospel, seems to have born witness here to the earliest perception of the strangeness (*stranger-ness*) of Jesus to those around him. As the history of the church unfolded, the momentum of the faith gradually shifted toward economizing his sayings and making them more generally palatable and easier to comprehend in conformity with existing folkways. Again we are reminded that the life set forth in the teachings of Jesus is not only mentally *expansive*, but *expensive*, and that it works against the economizing function of the mind itself.

This transition from the focus on behavior towards those we know to those who are and remain strangers to us has always offered the potential for envisioning what a Christian civilization might look like—for civilizations are by definition integral social entities composed of people who are strangers to one another. In addition, the infusion of what we might term “stranger consciousness” into the spiritual heart of Christianity offers a valuable insight into its very structure. Of all the great religious traditions of the world, Christianity alone was *conclusively defined by a stranger*, namely the follower and interpreter who never met the historical Jesus—the apostle Paul.<sup>25</sup> Paul’s simultaneous relationship to Jesus as stranger, coupled with his pivotal role in formulating what becomes Christianity, provides a robust spiritual understanding of the ethic of the stranger found at the heart of all Christian thought. For Paul, his own status as historical stranger<sup>26</sup> to Jesus of Nazareth becomes the springboard for his mission to a whole new category of “strangers,” namely Gentiles who exist as outsiders to Judaism. We might say it this way: If Jesus were the Incarnation of God, Paul was the perfect incarnation of “Christian” by virtue of his incarnation of the stranger accepted into the household of faith. Importantly, his conversion from outsider (stranger) to insider (“In Christ”)<sup>27</sup> accomplished in his vision on the road to Damascus did not result in Christian perfection from a decision-making perspective. As documented in Romans 7, his inner estrangement to the ways of Jesus continues *after* his spiritual conversion: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”<sup>28</sup> Even *after* he came (spiritually) to

25. Paul’s opponents in the churches never tired of drawing attention to what was in their minds the weak point in Paul’s defense that he had never met Jesus, and on the strength of that cast doubt on the genuineness of his apostleship. See Martin Dibelius and Werner Georg Kümmel, *Paul* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 55.

26. Paul’s claimed his acquaintance with the resurrected Jesus, “gained through visions and transports, was actually superior to acquaintance with Jesus during his lifetime, when Jesus was much more reticent about his purposes.” Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1986), 3f.

27. Adolf Deissmann captures this perfectly: “[Paul’s religion] is not first of all the product of a number of convictions and elevated doctrines about Christ; it is ‘fellowship’ with Christ (*kononia* in I Cor. 1:9; 10:16; Phil. 3:10), Christ-intimacy. Paul lives ‘in’ Christ, ‘in’ the living and present spiritual Christ, who is about him on all sides, who fills him, who speaks to him, and speaks in and through him....” For Paul, Christ is “not a ‘historical’ personage, but a reality and power of the present, an ‘energy,’” Adolf Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History* (New York: Harper, 1957), 135f.

28. Günther Bornkamm calls this a self-description of Paul’s understanding of the “hopeless perversion of his being.” Here we see that Paul confesses that within his own being “will and its accomplishment part company (cf. Rom. 7:15).” Furthermore, “it all just sets sign and seal

know Jesus intimately, Paul remained something of a spiritual stranger to him: his knowledge of Jesus remained that of stranger, a relational divide that could only be crossed by Jesus himself, and not Paul.

Paul eventually comes to use his own experience as stranger as the theological basis for the nature of the Gospel itself. He argues that the Gospel had the power to reach a whole new category of “strangers,” namely Gentiles (understood as “strangers” to the Jewish people). In essence, Paul argued that the separation of Jew and Gentile was no longer paramount in Christian eyes because it was a difference of folkway only: such folkways were now understood to be of minimal importance and transcended by the appearance of the new, truly divine Gospel. And, to be at least imperfectly faithful to Jesus, the churches *must* reflect these new realities. In other words: Paul’s status as stranger rendered theological dispute, such as the question of the ongoing status of the Law in Christian churches, as “merely” folkway dispute and therefore of penultimate, rather than ultimate, significance.<sup>29</sup> After all, if Paul could be converted to the Gospel, who could not? His “acceptance” by Jesus marked the extreme of Jesus’ injunction to “love your enemies.” Importantly, this Gospel he proclaimed, even if

on man’s being lost, a state which is terrible in the truest sense of the word. Man’s discord is part of his human nature. He himself is the contradiction.” Günther Bornkamm, *Paul* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 126f. This suggests that Paul not remains a stranger to Jesus because he is a stranger to himself, even *after* his conversion. This experience appears to be the springboard to his unique Gospel.

29. Alan F. Segal notes that Paul creatively distinguished “ceremonial” and ethical laws in his own tradition see Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert. The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 246ff. However, James D.G. Dunn in the Manson Memorial lecture delivered in the University of Manchester in 1982 is closer to the mark: “[We should not] press Paul’s distinction between faith and works into a dichotomy between faith and ritual, simply because the works of law which he has in mind belong to what has often been called the ritual or ceremonial law. There is a distinction between outward and inward, between ritual and spiritual, but no necessary antithesis. Paul has no intention here of denying a ritual expression of faith, as in baptism or the Lord’s Supper. Here again we should keep the precise limitations of Paul’s distinction between faith in Christ and works of law before us. What he is concerned to exclude is the racial not the ritual expression of faith; it is nationalism which he denies not activism. Whatever their basis in the scriptures, these works of the law had become identified as indices of Jewishness, as badges betokening race and nation—inevitably so when race and religion are so inextricably intertwined as they were....” (The speech can be found at the following Web address: <http://markgoodacre.org/PaulPage/New.html>). Bogumił Strączek points out that Girard considers all ritual as imitatively harkening back to what he terms the “founding murder” that establishes social stability and thus “dispenses” violence as a symbolic killing of the victim, thereby prevents the real violence at the base of society from spilling out into the broader society from its ritual “containment” (my term). See Bogumił Strączek, “René Girard’s Concept of Mimetic Desire, Scapegoat Mechanism and Biblical Demystification,” *Seminare* 35, no. 4 (2014): 52.

shaped by him for those following non-Jewish folkways, *was one and the same Gospel articulated by his Judaizing opponents in the church*.<sup>30</sup> For Paul, in other words, the “Jewish Gospel” was one and the same as the “Gentile Gospel,” and from a divine perspective interchangeable. His opponents within the church (“Judaizers”) were making the same mistake that the larger Jewish tradition had made for centuries: they had not understood folkway traditions as humanly constructed but had chosen to treat them as divinely instituted. Moreover, Paul argues that authentic relationship to God had never depended on following the Law, which in reality was only a cultural norm upheld by upper echelon social elites. He understood that deified folkways would not only be a threat to the spread of Christianity among Gentiles, *it had always been so within Judaism itself*. His dispute with the Judaizers within the church were merely the first salvo in a much larger argument to come: could the power of folkway traditions be nullified enough for the new perspective of Christianity to take root? His interest in the law was not based on theological grounds, that is to say, did the law bring one closer to God? Rather his interest lay in the law as it related to the little traditions of his people, namely *whether or not it separated the believer from the stranger*. The only way to develop a bulwark against the socially isolating tendency inherent in all norms was vigorously to build an ethic based on the tradition of hospitality to the stranger and to embrace this one norm absolutely as the “norm of norms.” The thread of hospitality to the stranger found in the core of the Gospel is the true thread that leads seamlessly from Jesus to Paul, not their personal relationship.

To summarize: Returning to the Sermon on the Mount, a kind of center-piece of the church’s memory of Jesus’ ethical thought, we gain a further insight into what we might call his “hermeneutics of everyday norms.”<sup>31</sup>

30. For a discussion of this point, cf., Bengt Holmberg writes: “The apostles of Jerusalem, and especially the Twelve, had an ‘eschatological uniqueness’, consisting in the fact that they were the ‘indispensable connecting links between the historical Jesus and the community of the New Age. As such they must be consulted, and fellowship with them must be maintained, at almost any cost.’ (C. K. Barrett). Of course, Paul considers himself as an apostle of Christ, subordinated to the Gospel as are the others, but as he neither can nor will deny that the other apostles have been commissioned directly by the Lord, unity with them is of fundamental significance for his own apostolate.” Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1978), 27.

31. At this point, it is interesting to consider the approach to Christianity of Pierre Hadot. Against the background of the reduction of philosophy in the Middle Ages from its original concern of all of existence to “mere” philosophical speculation and discourse, Christianity continued the philosophic task by “absorbing” it. *Philosophia*, in essence, was kept alive in Christian monasteries. See Arnold I. Davidson, “Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to Pierre Hadot,” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 3 (1990): 479f. Or, again, Hadot

David C. Lahti points out a key aspect of Jesus' "contempt" for how such norms often function to isolate strangers and outsiders:

Not a single one of the 105 moral statements in the Sermon on the Mount encourages moral distinctions based on relatedness, tribal affiliation, or ethnicity. In fact, consistent with the contempt Jesus shows for such rules elsewhere (Matt. 7:5–13; Luke 7:1–10, 10:25–37; John 4), he claims them to be inadequate. "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matt. 5:46–7). Jesus recognizes the stereotypes current under Jewish custom, such as that Jews are more righteous than Gentiles. However, *he uses this stereotype ironically as a mirror to illustrate its falsity*, and to argue that Jews would need to disintegrate this very division in the service of true righteousness (my emphasis).<sup>32</sup>

Holding up a mirror to the folkway traditions of their people, especially those that were exclusionary in nature, thereby illustrating their human rather than divine origins, was part and parcel of both Jesus' and Paul's hermeneutics of everyday life.<sup>33</sup> Jesus, of course, built the foundation of this understanding by taking the first step in what he construed as a *therapeutic* approach to understanding the ordinary. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reiterates six times "you have heard that it was said," or simply, "it has been said" (Matt. 5:17–48). We might ask: heard where and said by whom? The general answer is the folkway traditions of his people, not the teachings of religious authorities. Traditional folkways do not banish anger, or lust of the heart; they too easily condone divorce, provide divine sanction for

believed that "in antiquity, religion and philosophy were inseparable; that interpreting an author went beyond an objective reading of texts to proclaim a 'truth' that was already present but not yet rediscovered, and that philosophical argument could not be divided off from everyday life," in Luc Brisson and Michael Chase, "Behind the Veil: In Memory of Pierre Hadot," *Common Knowledge* 17:3, 438. In this sense, the church is keeping alive not only the intention of Jesus, but an original intention of philosophy itself.

32. David C. Lahti, "You Have Heard... But I Tell You...": A Test of the Adaptive Significance of Moral Evolution," in *Evolution and Ethics. Human Morality in Biological and Religions*, ed. Philip Clayton and Jeffrey Schloss (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2004), 13.

33. It is interesting to think of Jesus in terms of Gadamer's hermeneutics: "Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness." He saw texts from the past as both strange and familiar at the same time, and "the true locus of hermeneutics [to be] this in-between." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marsh (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 295.



human words, maintain a tit-for-tat morality, and encourage hatred of enemies. We may conclude that while informal folkways may be essential for the parsimonious way that the brain works, uncritical acceptance and integration of them into matters of faith, presents a special kind of challenge for the authentic expression of the Christian faith. Overcoming their mostly hidden and determinative effect on our mind, Christianity seems to continue in a state of its own impossibility; and, like Paul, in a state of estrangement from itself. Think of the human condition portrayed in the Tower of Babel story in Gen. 11. Did the confusion of tongues render human community ultimately impossible? We might argue that the story indicates the impossibility of human community of any sort, Christian or otherwise. Marianne Moyaert, however, sees the whole matter of the confusion of tongues differently: She notes that by confusing tongues, God breaks the suffocating connection between ‘the thing and the word. He creates a ‘breach’ between words and things. Words and things no longer coincide, and the polysemy of words arises ... Yet this breach, which is generally referred to as ‘the confusion of tongues,’ does not mean the end of communication but, indeed, its beginning. Language becomes creative when words lose their immediacy, transparency, and univocal quality. This breach gives rise to subtle and sensitive conversation, to the plurality of meanings, to nuances, poetry, creativity, and individuality.<sup>34</sup>

In this sense, Christianity may be seen as *both* impossible and possible, in a way similar to the formation of all human community. If the Christian church is different, as most Christians proclaim that it is, it is different not on existential grounds but on the basis of its down payment *from* the future. The church, rightly understood, is something of an impossibility itself by virtue of its incapsulating the future-oriented “already, not yet” life. Nevertheless, it is too easy to affirm that “all things are possible with God,” a position that comes too close to abdicating human responsibility altogether. Such a position would be tantamount to denying Jesus’ focus on present-day decision-making throughout his teaching ministry. Richard Kearney’s effort to fashion a vision of “the God who may be” may hold a clue for hitting the right note here. Building on the work of Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger, and Derrida, Kearney makes the case for an “eschatological notion of the possible” in understanding a post-metaphysical “God-who-may be.”<sup>35</sup> He calls

34. Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011), 215.

35. Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001), 80–100.

this the future-oriented (messianic) “possibilizing of God (*dunamis-possé*),” expressed “as the support or gift of the Spirit which manifests itself in the *personal* rapport between Christ and man ... accessible through faith.” Yet, we must ask: is it God who is eschatological, or the church founded in Jesus’ name that carries the eschatological “not-yet, not-possible” burden? After all, Jesus did not question his received tradition concerning the nature of God, but rather focused on everyday folkway practices and the mimetic power in which they were entwined. In that sense, both Jesus and Paul should be seen as instructors in mimetic power, rather than traditional “theologians.” Paul came to understand the conflicted nature of his own life as the incarnation of the larger problem that the church itself came to face: the impossibility of *being* God’s people, but also maintaining a vital role in keeping the door open for the future possibility of being so.<sup>36</sup> As both Girard and Sumner have reminded us, the pathway to the kingdom does not lie in the ways and means of cultural elites, but in those everyday decisions with which life presents us. Thus, we may conclude that while loving our neighbor is an unmitigated good, thoughtlessly imitating their way of life is quite another matter.

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36. Kearney notes that Derrida’s notion of “the *in-of* the im-possible is no doubt radical, implacable, undeniable, but it is not simply negative or dialectical; it *introduces* to the possible.... [I]t makes it come, it makes it revolve, according to an anachronistic temporality or incredible filiality—a filiality which is also the origin of faith.” *ibid.*, 97.

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