

The Mimetic Roots of Humanity, its Religions and its Technologies
-Tim Clancy (August 25, 2025)

1. Welcome to this first lecture on virtual religion. In this lecture we will be exploring the roots of religious thought and practice in the logic of imitation, or “mimetics.”
2. Religion is uniquely characteristic of the human species. It is found in no other species, but it is found in every human culture, extending back possibly even beyond homo sapiens to homo erectus and its Neanderthal descendants.
3. There is plenty of controversy over just what we even mean by religion. I take its meaning from its etymology: (1) “Religion” comes from the Latin “re-ligio” to rebind. In these lectures religion will consist in the beliefs, symbols and rituals that bind us to one another by reconnecting us to what we hold sacred. (2) What we hold sacred in turn, (3) is that which constitutes the ultimate ground of our life’s meaning; the horizon its value, against which everything appears as good or evil, meaningful or meaningless. (4) By contrast, we also inevitably suffer trauma that can (5) undermine and sabotage all meaning and purpose. In short, what we hold sacred is what orients, indeed defines, our very identity.
4. Charles Taylor, for example, differentiates all human experience into three categories of meaning, corresponding to the Christian categories of the World, Heaven, and Hell. (1) The “world” corresponds to ordinary everyday life, (2) not sacred but secular, literally, “worldly”. At times, however, we experience an epiphany of (3) something more, something richer, fuller, something transcending our ordinary experience that makes our ordinary life worth living in the first place. (4) At its most intense, such epiphanies are hierophanies, awe-filled revelations of the sacred, (5) transcendent experiences of the sublime, moments that can feel like “heaven on earth.” At the other extreme (6) are traumatic experiences that (7) drain life of all meaning and purpose, experiences (8) that feel like “hell on earth”.

Mimetic behavior and feeling:

5. What is it about the human species that accounts for this religiosity? I begin by drawing on the thought of the religious anthropologist René Girard. Gerard has provocatively argued that the roots of religion lie in another distinctively human trait: imitation. (1) Humans are incredibly imitative. Far more than any other species.

6. We may talk about “aping” others; we may dismiss someone by saying “Monkey see, monkey do” but we are far more obsessed with mirroring others than the most imitative chimpanzee. It’s not merely an instinct with us, it’s our way of being in the world.
7. Imitation lies at the root of human learning. By imitating others we learn to do as they do. And by modeling behavior we can teach others to do as *we* do. (1) But imitation takes attention; it takes the teacher getting their student’s attention, holding it and directing it towards the behavior they are trying to teach.
8. But how does the student know what their teacher is looking at, indeed how do they even know that the teacher’s attention is being directed specifically to them? By looking into their eyes, or rather into their pupils, highlighted against a white background.
9. Once again eye whites are also distinctive to the human species. With other species their eyes are virtually or fully all pupil. Looking into your dog’s eyes will tell you the general direction in which they are looking. But look fast, because the dog will be forever shifting his gaze, scanning his world.
10. Look into a baby’s eyes however, and they will lock onto yours. By looking into their eyes you can hold their attention as they hold your attention. And then you can direct their attention towards what you want to show them.
11. This was one of the difficulties teaching online during covid. As a teacher you could never tell whether your students were paying attention. For even if they had their cameras on and *were* paying attention to you on the screen, they were not looking at their camera above their screen, and so it did not seem to the teacher like they were paying attention. And of course the teacher could not make eye contact with their students either. If they looked their students in the eye, they were not looking into their camera. During covid we learned that learning was about far more than content delivery. Its also about eye-contact. Its about holding and directing one another’s attention, and a screen is a poor substitute for a face.
12. Human babies need to learn more than other animals, too. For we are born totally helpless and vulnerable. Babies can do nothing on their own other than smile or cry for attention. From the very moment of our birth we depend on others to “attend” to our needs. Compared to other animals we are born still fetuses. We *need* to be born early, if

our heads are going to get through our mother's birth canal, and if our mothers are going to be slim enough to get around and be able to care for us.

13. We humans do not only imitate behavior, though. We also imitate feelings. "Mirror" neurons in our brains stimulate feelings in us that "mirror" what we see others to be feeling. Thus, for humans, feelings are contagious. It takes a deliberate effort not to smile back at someone smiling at us, whether we know them or not. (1) Or, as any television sitcom knows, it's hard not to laugh when we hear others laughing; (2) or to feel sad when we see others sad. (3) Finally, consider the popularity of spectator sports. When we watch a game we become swept up in the excitement of the crowd, itself excited by vicariously feeling the perceived feelings of the players on the field or the court. When my team wins, I feel exhilarated, like I have won the game myself. When my team loses, I feel dejected, like I have failed.
14. Feeling the feelings of another or "empathy" means that our feelings are not solely our own. Not only do we learn from others how to behave, we also learn from others how to feel. By mirroring the feelings of those attending to us, especially by mirroring the feelings of our original care giver, our mother, we learn at times not only what to feel, or how to feel, but we learn how to manage all these feelings, how to soothe ourselves how to bring order into the "booming buzzing confusion" of consciousness.

Sensuous Communication:

15. Before a child ever learns language, a mother can communicate with her infant by directing their baby's attention with her hands and voice and, again, most intimately, through her eyes. (1) Face to face, eyes locked on each other, this is the original relation and remains the most intimate mode of emotional communication for humans. A mother soothes her child through her loving gaze, the child seeing herself seen, feeling her mother's feelings, calms or delights her own. (2) Lovers cannot get enough of looking into each others' eyes, feeling together, being together. Even after death Christians imagine heaven to consist in beholding God beholding us-- the "Beatific Vision."
16. Indeed a mother's communication with her child is now thought to begin even before birth. While still in the womb, the fetus "hears" the sound of its mother's heartbeat. Once born, while lying on her mother's chest, the infant can hear that familiar steady beat. Like looking into a mother's eyes, listening to the steady beat of one's mother's heart evokes

soothing and comforting feelings of safety and belonging. (1) So too cooing, lullabies and singsong “babytalk” communicates emotional mood without the child having to understand a word. Just the sound of her mother’s voice can soothe and comfort, or alternately warn or scold.

17. And of course feelings can also be communicated through touch. A mother can modulate and soothe her child by picking her up and holding her close. In fact, baby-carrying slings may be humanity’s second oldest invention right after sharpening rocks to skin the hides to make those slings, predating even the domestication of fire, perhaps predating even clothing itself. A sling keeps baby in touch with its mother’s body while freeing mom’s hands for gathering, cooking and other chores. And yet no other species has ever figured it out, other than marsupials for whom it is built in.
18. Mother and child even communicate through nursing. Mother’s milk provides more than just nutrition. It also furnishes the baby with antibodies to fight infections, microbes to seed the child’s gut biome and hormones, especially oxytocin, that soothes and evokes social feelings of belonging.
19. In all these ways a mother’s milk adjusts to meet her baby’s needs. (1) The infant “informs” its mother of what it needs through backwash into the nipple during nursing. (2) In fact, it is the baby’s sucking that stimulates the production of its mother’s milk in the first place. Breasts are not udders full of milk waiting to be drained. There is actually only a couple of teaspoons of milk at any one time in the mammary ducts. (3) Nursing mother and suckling child effectively form a single physiological and psychological process.
20. And so we should not be surprised that corpulent mothers with pendulous breasts constitute some of the earliest images and figurines of the divine. Prior to any language, a mother’s soft body, especially her breasts evoke feelings of abundance and safety, of soothing and belonging,
21. The rise of speech gives us something else to imitate as well—what we say, and the beliefs that are expressed through what we say. Sharing the same beliefs only further strengthens our connection to one another. Here it is not mirror neurons at work, but our need for one another to survive, let alone thrive. Common belief, common value build a common bond, a community, while thinking differently from the rest of us, set’s one

apart, makes one less trustworthy. If you think different, how can I expect you to act as I need you to?

22. Imitation results in human consciousness being porous. We are also porous to our surroundings. Where I end and my world begins blurs in my engagement with it. Our senses are not sensors, impartially recording and transmitting data from a world “outside” to our consciousness “inside.” What we sense is as much the product of our mood and expectations, our beliefs and memories as it is a datum given to us from without. Human sensations are intentional, (1) a communication between subject and object over some length of time. Neither subject nor object is wholly separate from the other but each is evoked by the other and entangled in each other through the very experience. We do not merely (2) hear sounds we listen to them, (3) we do not merely see things we behold them. (4) We do not merely touch, we feel. (5) We do not merely taste, we savor. (6) We do not merely smell, we sniff, we inhale, we “breathe it all in”. Nor do our senses operate independently of each other like separate parallel data streams for consciousness to combine. (7) The experience of consciousness is analogue, not pixilated into discrete dots of color, sound, touch, taste, and odor. (8) All of our senses spill into each other all at once. It takes time and effort to analyze our experience into digitally discrete data. Contrary to modern empiricist epistemology, consciousness does not begin with sense data, sense data is the end product of a theory laden scientific process of abstraction.
23. All of their surroundings not only engaged our ancestor’s attention, but did so by evoking their feelings and inspiring their thinking. Our ancestors empathized with everything around them, not just one another, but also with their prey, with the plants they gathered, with all elements of their surroundings.
24. Today we might look back at such behavior as anthropomorphic projection. But I would argue that they are more understandably seen as alterity relations. Rather than the modern third-person orientation of the detached scientific observer, (1) or the equally modern first person orientation of artistic expression, in religion, humans adopt (2) a second person relational connection to the people, places and things that matter most to them.
25. The logic of alterity is the logic of mimetics and mutual recognition—we act in a way that is both expressive of ourselves, but in a way that is also responsive to the other. We mirror our surroundings but each of us in our own distinctive way.

26. And again, our feelings are evoked not only by others, but also by an array of things around us, that also “speak” to us.
27. To modern humans, then, what are impersonal forces of nature, resources whose only value lies in how we might use them, (1) for our earliest ancestors were potential allies to behold and address as allies in our efforts to survive and thrive.
28. Earth and Sky,
29. Mountains and Streams,
30. Fire and Water,
31. Sun and Moon,
32. Wind and Rain,
33. Thunder and Lightning. (1) They even felt their own life, as sacred breath.
34. Such primal religious symbolism remains central to all religions to this day. Consider for example how contemporary (1) Christian rituals enlist elemental fire and water; earth and sky and the air in-between, drawing upon the feelings they evoke in us, calling us to address them in return.
35. Fire brings light and warmth, and evokes feelings of hearth and home, as well as moral purification.
36. In Genesis, creation begins with God’s voice booming over the dark abyss, “Let there be light!” (1) Similarly, at the start of the Easter Vigil, Catholics light and bless a sacred fire, from which they then light the Easter candle, light from light. (2) The deacon holding the lit candle aloft before the crowd chants “Christ our Light”. (3) So too an eternal flame burns before the tabernacle in which is housed the Eucharist: bread ritually transformed into the very Body of Christ.
37. Fire is central to the quintessential religious ritual: the sacrifice. Offerings of prey, herd animals and grain are sacrificed to the gods, smoke rising like incense, the cooked food furnishing the festive, communal feast that follows. (1) Christianity removed burnt offerings, but retained the language of sacrifice. The Mass is a “bloodless sacrifice”, through which bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ to be offered to the Father. So too Christ is worshipped as the paschal Lamb of God whose blood washes away our sin.

38. Water evokes both life and death. A desert people, the Israelites forever pined for rain and were on the hunt for drinkable water, “living” water in streams and springs. Rituals call for God’s grace to rain down, and well up to slake our parched spirit.
39. Christianity’s initiation ritual involves being immersed in the waters of death to arise reborn in Christ’s Risen life. So too water’s ability to dissolve mud and salts, becomes a symbol of the mystic’s own sought after dissolution into the divine. All that remains not yet fully one with the divine is imagined to be washed away in the waters of rebirth, (1) or burned off as in a refining fire.
40. So too earth evokes stability and fertility. We seek to be grounded. We gather and grow our food in broad fields of dark earth. In Genesis the first human being is referred to simply as “Adam”, literally “the earthen one”. (1) On Ash Wednesday Catholics have ash smudged on their foreheads to remind themselves that they are themselves from the earth and that to the earth they will one day return.
41. Our ancestors also gathered hardened earth-- stones, piling them up to form cairns to mark burials or sacred encounters. (1) Larger rocks could be arranged into great stone altars upon which ritual sacrifices were performed. (2) Medieval Christian rituals for consecrating altars involved burning small piles of scented wood or pellets of resin that could fuel a flame and waft clouds of incense. (3) Even today, altars in Catholic churches, whatever they are made of, still embed an altar stone containing the relic of some saint, ideally the church’s patron saint, for participants to not only venerate but emulate.
42. And finally there is air and sky. What other animal looks up into the night sky? Let alone searches for regularities and patterns among the stars to find guidance?
43. Air, whether felt as wind, or simply drawn in with every breath we take, evokes a host of connotations in religious traditions around our world. The words for “Spirit” itself, in Sanskrit, Hebrew and Greek, Latin and English, are all taken from their word for breath. And, again in Genesis, (1) God brings Adam to life through breathing into his earthen body. (2) So too God’s Spirit breathes over the early Christians at Pentecost transforming those mourning over the death of Jesus and cowering in fear of the crowds, into bold prophets sent to proclaim the Gospel of their Risen Lord to the ends of the earth.

44. Religious ritual uses water and fire, (1) earth and sky and (2) the air in-between to evoke (3) the origin and end, (4) the ground and horizon of our lives. As early as the rise of speech, these were (5) personified into gods both beneficial and malevolent, to worship and combat.
45. And as we have already seen how all the senses can communicate emotion and mood. Ritual enlists them all: Sacred meals taste not only good but nurture and comfort. (1) incense and smudging evoke a feeling of the sacred. (2) An incantation whether blessing or curse can transform mood even if the words are in an incomprehensible ancestral language.
46. Finally, drum beats quicken the heart, evokes gesture and movement, to the rhythm of the beat, in coordination with others. (1) The earliest religious rituals often involved dance, percussion, song and shouts
47. evoking at times manic exhilaration,
48. at other times, more somber moods of reflection or mourning.
49. Through such sacred scents and sounds accompanying sacred meals with sacred objects in sacred spaces, religious ritual binds participants together, reminding and reconnecting us with what we hold sacred. Religion celebrates who we are, to whom and with whom we belong. It gives us human beings a sense of meaning and purpose. As our technologies ever evolve so will our relationships to one another and to our world. And so too will religion ever evolve to address these new relationships and identities, as well as draw upon new resources to cope with new threats to meaning and value that come in their train.

Mimetic desire and mimetic violence

50. Now along with (1) the imitation of behavior, (2) feeling and (3) belief, there is yet another form of imitation (4) we have yet to explore: the imitation of desire.
51. This form of imitation only takes off as civilization develops. Early hunter gatherer and neolithic village life was largely egalitarian. You can only carry so much. And what good is hoarding when there are no doors or locks? You can't keep an eye over your stuff all the time. Far better to share it with others to build networks of companions ready to return

the favor.

52. However, with the rise of irrigation, and the scribal bureaucracy necessary for building, maintaining and operating these vast public works, inequalities of wealth and status arose. Accordingly, as urban or “civilized” life evolved in the river valleys of Mesopotamia and Egypt, a third kind of imitation became increasingly dominant, the imitation of desire: wanting what others want and, too often, wanting what they already have, both in terms of more things and in terms of more friends and ultimately, more power.
53. For example, how distract a child who is crying or who is causing trouble? One effective way is to begin to play with something. Soon our behavior will draw the baby’s attention, and they will want to play with it too, distracting them from their original upset feelings or disruptive behavior.
54. Such mimetics of desire grounds the logic of contemporary advertising. Advertising today is not about informing us about a product, so that we can rationally decide whether or not to buy it. The last thing an advertiser wants is to start an argument. (1) Rather advertisers associate their product with the kind of people we would like to be like. (2) Happy people, popular people, successful people, admirable people, in settings that evoke fun and feelings of belonging.
55. For example, think of beer commercials. They do not inform us about the qualities of the brand of beer they promote,.Rather they show us happy, popular people at a bar, the beer itself being the life of the party. (1) Or car commercials. Often enough they portray a car performing maneuvers they explicitly warn us to never perform ourselves. The ads do not communicate any useful information about the car, rather they associate the car with excitement, prowess, prestige.
56. For example, take Chrysler’s famous 2014 Superbowl ad, pitched by Bob Dylan. What does Dylan know about automobile performance? Who knows? And who cares? Bob Dylan is a American legend in his own time. After an iconic shot of him at an outdoor concert, the ad runs through a montage of iconic American images to the accompaniment of his strumming folk guitar instrumental:
57. They are evocative images of cowboys on horseback, (1) high school cheerleaders, (2) a diner offering “home style cooking,” (3) a nighttime baseball game, (4) a solitary red barn and silo, (5) a Route 66 road sign, (6) portraits of a laughing Marilyn Monroe (7)

and a cool James Dean, (8) a war poster of Rosy the Riveter, (9) a car engine assembly line, (10) freeways splayed atop and around one another. Dylan offers no information about the car he is pitching. In fact we do not even know what brand of car he is selling until the very end. Rather in a voice over, Dylan speaks of qualities and virtues that evoke American nostalgia, American grit, American pride. Only then does he deliver his pitch:

58. “So let Germany brew your beer. (1) Let Switzerland make your watch. (2) Let Asia assemble your phone. (3) We will build your car. (4) The Chrysler brand appears only then, in the ad’s closing seconds, over the hood of a dark blue car in the shadows.
59. The ad is less an argument than a reverie. It seeks not to inform but to transform; by communicating feelings for the viewer to mirror, feelings of fun and happiness, competence and character, pride and belonging. It works visually rather than linguistically, viscerally rather than logically.

Religious Responses to Mimetic Desire and Mimetic Violence

60. The great social benefit of mimetic desire is that it does bind us closer together. In wanting the same things, just as in emulating the same role models, we come to share common values, common beliefs, common purpose; we come to form a common cultural identity. We become us, as distinct from them. We reconnect to what defines us *as* us.
61. However all of us wanting the same things also has a downside—it creates competition. And competition creates scarcity.
62. Often enough two kids cannot both play with the same toy; they must fight one another for it. (1) And so mimetic desire inevitably leads to competition and violence.
63. And of course we imitate that violence too. You hurt me, I am going to want to hurt you back. It’s only fair...An eye for an eye. (1) In fact I may well want to hurt you back worse, to teach you, and anyone looking on, a lesson, to defend my reputation before others as someone not to be messed with. Thus, just as imitation enables behavior to spread and feelings to become contagious, so imitation also fuels desire and can quickly escalate into violence. What binds us together can then end up tearing us apart.
64. Religious beliefs and practices have evolved not only to reconnect us to what we hold sacred, sacred because such behaviors and feelings, desires and ideals enable us to

survive and thrive, but religion also seeks to combat what threatens to pit us against one another and drive us apart. Rene Girard argues that religion diffuses mimetic violence by channeling all blame onto a safe target too weak or isolated to fight back—a scapegoat. By uniting around a common enemy whom we then humiliate, expel, even execute, solidarity amongst us is restored, at least for a time.

65. Public rituals sacrificing scapegoats thus became the main business of the religious temple in ancient urban society. The social order, literally, the sacred order, “hierarchy” of the city, kingdom, or empire made fragile and precarious through the endemic violence spawned by income and status inequalities, had to be regularly, ritually restored, often at the beginning of the calendar year in the Spring.
66. However, once scribal literacy began to spread beyond court and temple bureaucracies, new religious movements arose that sought to overturn the religious practice of scapegoating altogether. Jesus for example, rather than celebrating the sacrifice of the scapegoat will identify with the scapegoat, arguing that God desires mercy not sacrifice. (1) Not surprisingly he will end up a scapegoat himself. But for his followers, he will be the last and universal scapegoat for all humanity, restoring all of us into solidarity with our Creator. Going forward, Christians commit to forsaking mimetic desire and violence altogether, dying to our “old self” to arise anew in Christ.
67. Christianity’s seven deadly sins are all natural human desires magnified to demonic extremes through mimetic intensification. (1) Hunger grows into gluttony. (2) Sexual desire explodes into lust. (3) The need for resources metastasizes into greed; while (4) loss spirals down into despair. (5) Anger intensifies into rage, while (6) the aspiration for emulation becomes vanity, and finally, (7) self-confidence and ambition devolves into pride.
68. Other religious movements will combat mimetic desire and violence in other, sometime even more radical ways:
 - a. Hinduism, for example, will call for people to bloom whether they are planted, to resist envy or ambition in the belief that if one lives the life allotted at birth, one will move up to better lives in subsequent births.
 - b. Buddhism on the other hand, will call for the elimination of desire altogether.
 - c. While Jainism will call for the elimination of all violence not just against human

life, in a life of peaceful non-violence, but also against all animal life through dissociating from our hunting heritage by not eating meat and living lightly off the land.

d. Taoism will teach against all striving, dwelling peacefully and harmoniously, not acting out of self-interest but always in accord with the way of things.

e. And Islam will analogously call for the surrender of one's own will to God's Will.

69. In the next video lecture we shall explore how human identity is also porous. (1) We define ourselves in terms of how we experience how others respond to us. We become who we are from the recognition we receive from others and the recognition we accord to them. (2) For recognition must be mutual to exist at all. Here too, then we are not ourselves by ourselves but spill into each other. (3) We will then be in a position to explore what resources religion has to offer to us today, no longer oral hunter gatherers or even literate moderns but now dwelling in a hybrid, virtual world fed by the internet and artificial intelligence.

Recommendations for Further Reading:

- Bohannon, Cat; ***Eve: How the Female Body Drove 200 Million Years of Human Evolution***, Knopf, 2023

An evolutionary history of the specifically female body, for once. I drew on its first chapter on the human breast, "Milk."

- Eliade, Mircea; ***The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion***, Harcourt, 1959.
The classic text for the understanding of religion and the sacred that I follow in these lectures.

- Girard, Rene; ***Violence and the Sacred***, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.
The classic text on Girard's mimetic account of the evolution of humanity and its religions.

- Palaver, Wolfgang, ***René Girard's Mimetic Theory***, Michigan State Press, 2013.
A clear and richly contextual introduction to Girard's mimetic theory.

- Plate, Brent; ***A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to the Senses***, Beacon Press, 2015

Musings on the evocative power of common objects often used in religious rituals:

stones, incense, drums, crosses and bread. He argues that humans are only half objects, finding their complement in the people, places and things they hold sacred.

- Taylor, Charles; ***Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment***, Harvard, 2024.

A leisurely walkabout through English, German and French Romantic Poetry and their modernist progeny. An extended argument for the complementarity of detached scientific objectivity with engaged poetic intersubjectivity.