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I see Satan fall like lightning

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author's light touch is evident, for example, in Rule of Thumb Number 7 ("An overactive imagination can get you into trouble"), Rule Number 10 ("The Bible means what it says and says what it means. Except when it doesn't") and Rule Number 20 ("Most biblical scholars can't agree on lunch, much less the precise meaning of a text"). Other of Brown's rules make explicit the need for common sense in biblical studies: see Rule Number 2 ("Be careful not to read your modern assumptions into ancient texts"); Number 7 ("An overactive imagination can get you into trouble"); Number 8 ("Get a map"); Number 12 ("If somebody in the Bible is upset about something, it's because someone else is doing it"); Number 15 ("Everybody has an ax to grind" [including scholars!]); and Number 27 ("If your faith can't stand a little shaking, perhaps there wasn't much of a foundation there in the first place"). The Rules are frequently illustrated with examples derived from biblical texts.

This book is a useful and accessible resource for those seeking to understand the mindset of modern biblical scholarship better.

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I See Satan Fall Like Lightning

René Girard. Translated with a Foreword, by James G. Williams
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.
256 pages, \$29.95 Softcover

This book presents, yet again, with minor modifications, René Girard's theory about the origins of violence, the interrelation of violence and religion, and Jesus' role in peace promotion. It is the eighth book on this topic by the now-retired professor of language, literature, and civilization at Stanford University (the first was *La violence et le sacré*, 1972; English 1977), helping to establish Girard as a conversation partner in most academic discussions about violence and religion. Those with little or no familiarity with Girard's theory will find *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* to be an excellent introduction, especially given Williams's primer in the Foreword. The book is intended for a general Christian audience. It uses footnotes sparingly, supports its points with clear examples, and employs a conversational tone. Orbis Books has also prepared it attractively.

Girard's theory purports to explain human nature, the origin and purpose of religion, and the true meaning of the Christian message. Humans, he argues, all desire what others desire (he calls this *mimesis*), which invariably leads to tensions and sometimes violence. Unchecked, this situation destroys societies. We have learned to deal with consequences of desire by projecting the tensions onto a third party (a scapegoat) that we consider guilty. Killing or expelling scapegoats results in feelings of well-being for the perpetrators; via double transference, this process sometimes also results in the subsequent deification of the scapegoat. Societal well-being, Girard adds, is also facilitated by regular ritual re-enactment of the original scapegoating. Both religious rituals and gods, therefore, emerge from the process of keeping violence in check. Myths reflect and reinforce that violence. The Gospels, on the other hand, Girard insists, present Jesus as an *innocent* scapegoat, thereby revealing the process by which mimetic desire eventually drives humans to mistreat innocent people. Jesus — resembling a gnostic revealer more than a sacrificial offering — made it possible for humans to understand their fundamental nature, and, for the first time in human history, move constructively towards peace.

Those familiar with Girard's theory will not find any significant changes in this book; they will, however, encounter, three distinct points of emphasis. First, Girard fine-tunes his theory by acknowledging that imitation need not always lead to negative repercussions: "we should not conclude that mimetic desire is bad in itself" (15). Imitating Christ, for instance, is positive. He extends this observation by arguing that bad mimetic desire is satanic. Satan "is nonexistent as an individual self"; rather, he is the violence that breaks out from mimetic desire. To refrain from improper mimetic desire is to make Satan "fall like lightning" from the sky (alluding to Luke 10:18). Second, Girard indirectly addresses the charge of anti-Semitism that has often come his way. He does so by frequently returning to the biblical roots of the Gospels (e.g., 107-20, 127), arguing against an anti-Judaic reading of the Gospels (42 re: John 8:42-44), and shifting responsibility for anti-Semitism to the ideological followers of Nietzsche rather than Christians (114-15; 170-81). Third, the pro-Christian stance is now completely out of the closet. This book is enthusiastically "an *apology* of Christianity" (3), and much of the analysis is dedicated to biblical texts. The heart of the book is the

contrast of “myth” and “gospel” (121, 137 for summaries): the Christian revelation, and only the Christian revelation, is founded on truth (with the Hebrew Scriptures pointing to that truth), and only a proper understanding of Christianity can save humanity. All other religions are “false” (125). With this *apologia* comes a sustained anti-(post)modernist stance, combined with an urgent plea for readers to take the Christian Gospels seriously in order to save the world.

This book is likely to challenge, frustrate, or infuriate many readers. Those who appreciate nuance and balance in argumentation will be disappointed. Girard employs a rhetoric of absolutes. The text is littered with qualifiers like “never” (e.g., 1, 13, 144), “all” (e.g., 1, 3, 19, 30, 110, 150), “always” (1, 9, 110), “no [other] . . . ever...” (2, 179, 183), and expressions such as “nowhere [else] in the world . . . can we find...” (124). Moreover, Girard himself scapegoats several groups who cause him frustration. For instance, the unnamed “pseudoscientific” exegetes who consider some biblical texts violent are called “dupes” (144) — as are Christians who value multiculturalism, including other religious traditions (xxii), since adherents of other religious traditions are caught up in the “lie of mythology” (113). In addition, biblical scholars will be bemused by someone outside their guild (Girard studied nineteenth-century European literature) belittling current scholarship while treating the Gospel texts as most scholars did in pre-modern times (e.g., interpreting them literally, taking the four as a unit, showing no concern for history or higher criticism, speaking about Jesus’ intentions). Finally, non-Christians will likely not read past the Foreword. Without exploring other religious traditions (except the stories of the Hebrew Bible, which he appropriates in his “Judeo-Christian” stream), Girard links non-Christian religions with classical Greek mythology and paints them with the same dark brush. This theory merits close attention because it has become so widespread in some quarters, and it has serious implications for our society that has struggled hard to be inclusive of others. In that regard, especially, Girard’s work offers a direct challenge to Christians now who seek to respect their neighbours’ truths and values while acknowledging their own religion’s particular message of peace promotion.

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