

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 7, Issue 1

2005

Article 12

THE RELIGIOUS AND THE SECULAR

Rene Girard: I Saw Satan Fall Like Lightning

David Lyle Jeffrey*

*

Copyright ©2005 by the authors. *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <https://ir.uiowa.edu/ijcs>

Review Essay: Rene Girard: *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*

David Lyle Jeffrey

Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, translated, with a foreword, by James G. Williams. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis; Ottawa: Novalis; Leominster (UK): Gracewing, 2001. 193 pp., index

In the Metropolitan Museum in New York there is a notable Renaissance triptych painting known either as the “Ingelbrecht altarpiece” or as the “Annunciation” by Robert Campin, the Master of Flémalle. Aside from the richly iconographic and dramatically effective presentation of the angel’s visit to Mary, the left panel represents two donors and the right panel depicts Saint Joseph in his workshop making a mousetrap for the devil. This late medieval juxtaposition of the incipient Christ with the entrapment of Satan has seemed to many one of the more curiously inept of medieval topoi; in the anthropological perspective on the gospels afforded by Rene Girard, however, such a tropic insight goes right to the heart of the gospels as to deep cultural meaning

I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, first published as *Je vois Satan tomber comme l’éclair* in 1999, was issued in a careful, intelligently annotated English translation by James G. Williams two years later. The translation has now been reprinted five times and, like Girard’s other books, has helped to him for many one of the important Christian thinkers of our time. Prior to his position at Stanford as Andrew B. Hammond Professor of Language, Literature and Civilization, from which he retired in 1996, he had taught for some years also at Johns Hopkins. Among scholars of comparative literature anthropology is an unusual vantage point; Girard has made of it a distinctive and, in respect of his major insights, a revolutionary perspective on founda-

tional texts. His major works, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1965); *Violence and the Sacred* (1977); *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978; trans. 1987); and *Scapegoat* (1986) have acquired a dedicated but coterie readership among *literateurs*, theologians and, less predictably, a few social scientists. All of Girard's work has been broadly informed by late twentieth-century theoretical perspectives and yet, at the same time, worked against the dominant grain of their discourse.

While it is too little to say of Girard's *oeuvre* that it is characterized throughout by one central and repeated insight, it is not too much to say that his central thesis has been unified, developed and clarified as well as pushed more deeply and candidly to its source over an entire career of persistent reflection. His basic thesis thus reappears with a kind of Levantine intensification in the present volume: concisely, his grounding conviction is that much political and religious violence is a result of mimetic desire and a kind of social contagion that follows from it in cycles of conflict, victimization, and cruelty. This in turn produces an eventual restoration of order through what may be variously understood as lynching or sacrifice. Whereas Girard began to explore this pattern with the novel and moved through the anthropology of myth to reflections on Shakespeare, Christian theology, and Freud, here his analysis falls directly on the gospel accounts solo, with particularly illuminating effect upon the Gospel of Luke – from which comes the quotation of Jesus that forms the title.

But Girard's intention is much larger than the making of textual commentary; it is not less than to unlock the revolutionary power of the redemption or *kerygma* itself for an understanding of cyclical violence in universal terms. He has also in mind several adversaries or interlocutors, including especially Nietzsche and Derrida. Of these, the former is most important, for reasons that are identified by his translator: "One of the proofs that the concern for victims is the absolute value ... wherever Western influence has had a deep impact, is a negative one: Nietzsche's interpreters avoid the subject" (xxii).

It begins with an obvious feature of post-Christian modernity. "The more desperately we seek to worship ourselves and to be good 'individualists'," says Girard, "the more compelled we are to worship our rivals in a cult that turns to hatred" (11). This contradiction of the commandment to love the neighbor as oneself results in numerous confusions concerning what is meant both by "love" and "neighbor." Mimetic desire is confounded by narcissism to the degree to which "we feel that we are at the point of attaining autonomy as we imitate our models of power and prestige," yet "the more 'proud' and 'egoistic' we are, the more enslaved we become to our mimetic models" (15).

The mimetic cycle which ensues, Girard argues, is what the gospels mean by Satan, and mimetic desire is both archetypally (e.g. Genesis, *Paradise Lost*) and actually the means by which Satan seduces his willing victims. At first he "may sound like a very progressive and likeable educator," and in imitating him "we may feel initially that we are 'liberated'," but our seduction proves to be a speed-trap on "the superhighway of mimetic crisis... the first of many transformations of Satan" (33), by which the seducer is transformed suddenly into a roadblock, a forbidding

adversary. This is to say that whether as a principle of disorder or of apparent order, Satan has no fixed or concrete being, but rather must act surrogatively as “a parasite upon God’s creatures.” Chimerical, effectively non-existent as an individual self, he is necessarily “the father of lies” (42). When mimetic contagion identifies a victim or scapegoat, it is the Satan principle that operates to form the accusation: as Nietzsche said in a different context, “the first lie is the lie one tells to oneself.”

In conventional mythology, Girard suggests, “the protagonist is the entire community transformed into a violent mob” (63). Believing that an isolated individual, often a foreigner, represents a threat, they spontaneously massacre or scapegoat the outsider. Paradoxically, they then often deify their victims, as in the case of Oedipus or Pan. Girard suggests that such myths arise from real victim histories, and that in the religious drama of the Greeks (e.g., that of Sophocles or Aeschylus), “the goal of tragedy is the same as sacrifice,” namely “a ritual purification or Aristotelian *catharsis* which is an intellectualized or ‘sublimated’ version of the original sacrificial effect.” The murder of all the prophets “since the foundation of the world” is of this order. (78)

But there is a fundamental difference between pagan myths and the Bible: “In the myth the expulsions are justified, each time. In the biblical account they never are” (109). In both the myths and the crucifixion of Jesus, “duping oneself is what characterizes the entire satanic process,” but “in revealing the self-deception of those who engage in violence, the New Testament dispels the lie at the heart of their violence” (127).

Injustice in the first case is a kind of mass therapy that enslaves, while in the second it is a therapy that liberates. Christ, however, does not achieve his victory through violence. Rather, he obtains it through a renunciation of violence so complete that violence can rage ... without realizing that by so doing, it reveals what it must conceal” (140). Here, then, is Saint Joseph’s mousetrap. Whereas “medieval and modern theories of redemption all look in the direction of God for the causes of the Crucifixion – that is to say, are fundamentally forensic in character – for Girard the actual answer is to be found in “sinful humanity, human relations, mimetic contagion, which is the same thing as Satan” (150). One consequence of this misprision is an analytic failure in Christian anthropological reflection whereby “instead of criticizing ourselves, we use our knowledge in bad faith, turning it against others” (158). Thus, the corrective example of Jesus Christ notwithstanding, we perpetuate the cycle of mimetic contagion.

This point brings Girard full circle, to what he calls the “two-fold Nietzschean heritage.” Here he suggests that in a paradox of empathy, “the concern for victims has become a paradoxical competition of mimetic rivalries” in which “the victims most interesting to us are always those who allow us to condemn our neighbors” (164). In our day it happens to be that Christianity itself has become “the scapegoat of last resort,” (164) while, again paradoxically, “our concern for victims is the secular mask of Christian love” (165), a force which may, Girard argues, be “unifying the world for the first time in history” (167). Whereas Hitler’s goal was to root out of European culture the concern for victims, “in our days the ‘deconstructionists’ reverse the positivist error,” wanting to be “more Nietzschean than Nietzsche,” so

“instead of getting rid of problems of interpretation, they also get rid of facts” (171). The impending terror in a Nietzschean world is that it does not recognize its “Dionysian stance as the supreme expression of the mob in its most brutal and ... most stupid tendencies” (173).

No one alive escapes this particular contagion, Girard suggests, and it is hugely dangerous to our current social fragility, for “if our world were really to escape the influence of Christianity, it would have to renounce its concern for victims” (180). His analysis is thus unsparing at precisely the point at which our appetite for self-affirmation makes us most vulnerable. In Girard’s analysis, it is we ourselves who may prove the Satan to Saint Joseph’s mousetrap.