

A Bird's Eye Look at René Girard's Mimetic Theory

Human Interdividuality, the Structures of Society, and Biblical Revelation

“The instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures.”¹ ~ Aristotle

For eons, humanity's greatest thinkers have attempted to put their fingers on the question “What does it mean to be a human being?” My hunch is that if you asked this of a hundred people today, you'll end up with an extensively broad range of answers. But in the West—more specifically the United States—a common theme would likely arise. That is, answers, no matter what they happened to be specifically, would be in the context of the autonomous individual. In this essay, we will challenge that presupposition, and argue instead of thinking about humanity in individualistic terms, our starting point should be to think of the human being as an interdividual,² or in other words, a relationally interconnected part of a greater whole.³

As Aristotle points out, the human being is an imitative one, and strongly so. I am oversimplifying things, but after our basic needs like food, water, and shelter are met, we don't really know what to desire. So, what we do is we non-consciously model for one another which objects should be deemed the most desirable as well as which ones should not. Girard explains it like this:

We are constituted by the other, that is, by parents, authority figures, peers, rivals whom we internalize as models and who become the unconscious basis of our desires. This does not mean that freedom of the will is not possible. Humankind as created in the image of God is not intended to be *identical* to the other or exist in

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 15.

² René Girard introduces this term in “Book III” of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.

³ Human interdividuality is depicted quite pointedly in the first creation narrative from the book of Genesis. In *From the Blood of Abel*, I note: “If we look closely, we can see evidence of the interdividuality of humankind that Girard introduces us to. We see that God's image is relational, both ‘male and female.’ Humanity, or *adam* in Hebrew, is both man and woman, not simply man. *Adam* is in dynamic inter-relationship, not autonomy.” (Distefano, *From the Blood of Abel*, 94)

slavish subservience to the other. However, since we learn first and primarily through mimesis,⁴ our freedom depends on being constituted by the other.⁵

What Girard is arguing is that any freedom this “self” has is because we share desires with the other, otherwise our desires would be on fixed objects, or in other words, a form of instinct.⁶

Pay attention to the fashion industry, which uses celebrities and other various stars to model their clothing. They do so in hopes that we will all desire their brand simply because those we look up to—guys like Tom Brady, for example—desire that brand (or so we convince ourselves after we watch a commercial). And this works! Why? Because our desires are such that they become non-consciously fueled and flamed by “the other”—those we can’t help but take on as models. For another example, ask yourself what tends to happen when two children are in a room full of toys. More often than not, they will end up fighting over a single item. It does not really matter which toy, either, as conflict comes to fruition as soon as one child shows interest in a particular one, and the other child, via mimetic desire, wants that same toy. Oh, but let’s not just blame children for this. Adults are just as guilty. Have you read the national newspapers around “Black Friday?” The shiny toys we grown-ups so desperately need—items like big screen TVs, tablets, and gaming systems—have caused us to trample each other to death in order to get one of the few blockbuster deals.

Getting to the heart of this is the point of the Decalogue’s tenth command. When the writer says “thou shalt not *covet*”—or in other words, *desire*, as the Hebrew word *chamad* can

⁴ Mimesis in Greek simply means “to imitate.” In general, when Girardians use it, they are referring to a negative, non-conscious imitation, one that leads to mimetic rivalry. However, mimesis can in fact be positive as well. That is why Jesus’ command to “follow me” is so important (see Matt 4:19; 16:24, Mark 1:17; 10:21, Luke 5:27; 18:22, John 1:43; 21:19). As I put it in my forthcoming book, entitled *A Journey With Two Mystics: Conversations Between a Girardian and a Wattsian* (Wipf & Stock): “The Father and Son’s relationship with each other and then with us acts as a sort of chain—from the Father to Jesus and then from Jesus to us—Jesus reveals both the heart of God as well as what being truly human is all about. And because God steps into humanity through Jesus, the heart of God is reflected in his humanity, which Jesus pointedly defines when he refers to himself as ‘the son of man, who came not to be served but to serve’ (Mark 10:45). So, we are to follow in serving others, in giving away ourselves for the other, just as Jesus did, and just as the Father did” (from Letter 5).

⁵ Girard, *I See Satan*, 137.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

mean either—they are speaking to this fundamental human problem. Notice how the commandment is laid out in Exodus 20:17. After going through all the objects we are to avoid desiring, the writer seems to give up, conceding that what needs prohibiting is whatever belongs to the neighbor.⁷ It doesn't matter what the object is, per se. It is the neighbor's ownership that gives the objects their powerfully desirable effect.

Yet, to this day, we continue to engage in the very mimetic conflicts the tenth commandment is warning us about. We do this, not only because it is simply who we are, but because prohibitions do not really work at quelling violence entirely. In fact, they are like the Greek *pharmakon*—both the *poison* and the *antidote*. Think about what happens when people are told not to push the “red button,” or when children are told not to touch the hot stove, or when Adam and Eve are prohibited from eating the fruit of a certain tree (Gen 2—3). I think the answers are fairly obvious.

We just can't help ourselves!

So, due to the fact that making something taboo is not the end-all-be-all solution to repressing mimetic violence, we continue in our violent ways—so much so, that throughout history, some societies and civilizations have wiped themselves out through violent in-fighting, cannibalized out of existence.

But not all of them. Why?

Here's an analogy: human societies are like pressure-cookers. Some have faulty release valves, and so will eventually violently explode. But others have a perfectly functioning pressure release valve. And what is this mechanism for relieving the pressure of societal violence? In a word: *scapegoating*.

⁷ Ibid., 9.

When societal violence escalates to the point of spiraling out of control, people turn to a surrogate victim to place their hostility on. In doing this, they unify against this enemy “other.” We witnessed this in 2011, after Osama Bin Laden was killed. A nation divided along party lines—Democrat Blue and Republican Red—powerfully came together in the city streets to sing the national anthem and “God Bless America.” We did this because Bin Laden was like a virus, a plague, the face of evil; he was the entire Western world’s *persona non grata*, public enemy number one. This, we could all agree on! So, through the scapegoating of Bin Laden,⁸ a nation divided became, at least for a brief moment in time, a nation united.

When we think about archaic societies, then, it is easy to imagine how this process of unification was believed to be divinely mandated (as if that doesn’t happen today!). We see this truth in our many ancient legends. In the Oedipus myth, for example, the Apollonian plague is not lifted until after King Oedipus is expelled from Thebes. Similarly, in Numbers 25, the plague the Israelites were under due to gettin’ down and dirty with the Moabites is lifted after Phinehas murders an interracial couple (Num 25:8).

As Girard noticed, this is the theme of many of humanity’s myths, because, as the saying goes, “dead men tell no tales.” To that end, what we have historically done is we have papered over the truth of our victimizing by claiming our violence is sacred, that we needed it in order to be spared from something dreadful, while those whom we have victimized remain forever silenced, six feet under, or at minimum, far removed from society. Then, because they are attached to the ensuing peace, we sometimes even deify them.

⁸ When I suggest that Bin Laden was a scapegoat, I am not saying he was innocent of the crimes he committed, or that he was a “good person,” or anything to that effect. In all likelihood, he was a very evil man. However, one’s morality has nothing to do with the scapegoating mechanism. In the eyes of a society in crisis, the scapegoat is guilty of everything *they* say he is guilty of, which is, not coincidentally, almost always the very ills the society is suffering through. While it is easy to point out how evil Bin Laden was, and how much responsibility he bore for some of the atrocities in the Middle East and elsewhere, his killing achieved nothing in addressing the underlying problems that still remain. In fact, only more “Bin Ladens” continue to rise up, in large part because of the hegemonic foreign policy of the West, and more specifically the United States.

We see this, quite pointedly, in the myth of Maria Lionza.⁹ In one account of this tale, it is said that the daughter of the Caquetio Indian chief, because of her being born with green eyes (a sign that she was perhaps a spy for the invading Spanish¹⁰), is delivered over to an anaconda that lived at the bottom of a lake. After she is thrown in, however, she comes right back up to the surface, not in the same manner that she went in, but as an exquisite goddess encircled by multitudes of animals, waters, and plants. So, in other words, she is scapegoated and killed because she is just a bit different than the rest of society—green eyes rather than a darker color like most Caquetio Indians—and in her sacrificial slaying, rises to god-status. Hence, like the many other mythical gods, Maria Lionza was the *pharmakon*, the poison and the antidote.

In order for a society to keep the peace for as long as humanly possible, we ritualize this process of societal bloodletting, giving birth to the altar of sacrifice—the lynchpin of religion, archaic and otherwise. In our minds: *If the killing of a surrogate victim (scapegoat) brought peace the first time, another event like that should work thereafter.* That is why blood sacrifices often reenact, insofar as they are able, the original killing. I'll quote Girard at-length to explain how this happens:

To understand how these rituals are born, let us imagine a community's state of mind when, after a period of bloody conflict, it is delivered from its misfortune by an unexpected mob action. In the early days or months that followed this deliverance, it is likely that a great euphoria prevailed. But sadly this blessed period never lasted. Humans are so constituted that they always fall back into their mimetic rivalries. "Scandal must come," and it always does occur, sporadically at first, and little attention is paid to it. But soon it begins to proliferate. Now those affected must fact facts: a new crisis threatens the community. How to prevent this disaster? The community has not forgotten the strange, incomprehensible drama that sometime ago drew it up from the abyss, where the community now fears it will fall again. It is

⁹ Admittedly, the details regarding the Maria Lionzan religion are speculative at best. As Gabriel Ernesto Andrade writes, "It is impossible to speak about any aspect of Maria Lionzan religion with certainty. There are no official beliefs and practices, there are no canons. Historians have not been able to reach an agreement as to when and how this religion started to develop." (Andrade, "A Girardian Reading," sec. 1, para. 1)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, sec. 5, para. 26–33.

full of gratitude toward the mysterious victim who plunged it initially into that disaster but who subsequently saved it.

When the people involved reflect on these strange events, they must say to one another that if the whole process unfolded as it did, it was without a doubt because the mysterious victim wanted it that way. Perhaps this god has organized this entire scenario with the purpose of arousing his new worshippers to reproduce it and renew its effects so that in the future they will be protected from a possible recurrence of mimetic disorder.¹¹

Although many of the world's religions have unique characters and rituals, the deep-seeded truth behind them is the same, which is, sacrifice assumes an original murder. That is to say, human religion and culture are founded on *violence*. The many founding myths—Cain and Abel (Hebrew), Romulus and Remus (Roman), Cadmus and the Dragon (Greek), and so on—all speak to this truth.

But here is where the Bible parts ways with other ancient writings: it includes the voice of the victim. And more than that! The Bible includes the voice of the *forgiving* victim. To understand what I mean by this, let's begin by looking at the story of Cain and Abel.

This tale is not unlike other founding murder myths. For example, legend has it that Rome is founded after two brothers, Romulus and Remus, bicker over how to interpret an omen, which then leads to Romulus slaying Remus. The Hebrew Scriptures put a twist in the tale though. In the biblical story, the voice of the slaughtered victim can be heard (Gen 4:10). The slain Abel cries out for vengeance! But God is not having it, and in spite of Cain being entirely guilty of the murder, puts a mark on him in hopes that violence will stop dead in its tracks (Gen 4:15). As we are all probably aware, however, it doesn't work. In a handful of generations a man named Lamech is taking vengeance on others at a rate of seventy-sevenfold, and by the time we

¹¹ Girard, *I See Satan*, 79.

meet Noah, violence and corruption are so prevalent that it overwhelms humanity in a flood of epic proportions.¹²

Fast forward a few thousand years to Jesus. Like Abel, the first century itinerant preacher from Nazareth is murdered in cold blood. Both the dying bandit on the cross and the Roman centurion testify to this (see Luke 23:41, 47). But unlike Abel, the blood of Jesus does not cry for vengeance from the grave. In fact, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, the blood of Jesus “speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:24). How do we know? *The Resurrection*. Only three days after his death, Jesus raises from the grave to speak that good word—shalom, forgiveness. Whereas the voice of religion always speaks the language of death and sacrifice, and whereas most human victims cry for retribution and vengeance, the voice of divine revelation transcends this by speaking the language of life, by the pouring out of one’s self in love for the other. John 20:19–23 captures this brilliantly:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

It is here where we are introduced to what Catholic theologian James Alison calls “the intelligence of the victim.”¹³ Due to the Resurrection, for the first time in human history we can see just how wrong we’ve been doing things all along. We can see with certainty how contradictory human kingdoms are to the kingdom of God. Human kingdoms are founded and maintained by the spilling of innocent blood, but the kingdom of God is founded on the resurrected life of the risen Christ. Those responsible for pouring out Jesus’ blood—or, in other

¹² For a detailed look at how I interpret the flood myth, see *From the Blood of Abel*, pp. 98–100.

¹³ Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 33–58.

words everyone per the Christian tradition—are forgiven from atop the cross (Luke 23:34) and after the Resurrection (John 20). My good friend Michael Hardin puts it like this:

Jesus' blood covers our sin, not through some divine forensic transaction but as we lift our blood stained hands we heard the divine voice 'You are forgiven, each and every one of you, all of you.' . . . The cross of Christ is the place of revelation, the resurrection of Jesus is the vindication of that revelation, and the ascension, where Jesus is given the Unpronounceable Name (Phil 2:5–11) is the place where that revelation is confirmed for all time. This is the good news, this is the gospel, and this is why we trust God to use our brokenness to shine his light from our lives into the lives of others, just as God uses the broken prophetic and apostolic witness to continue to shine light to us and for us today.¹⁴

Because of Jesus, we have a chance to enter into a new type of human community. The breaking of bodies can be replaced by the breaking of bread. The pouring out of our victims' blood can be replaced by the pouring out of a fine cabernet sauvignon. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear (Matt 13:16).

Shalom, and praise be unto the Name above all names, Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹⁴ Hardin, *Jesus Driven Life*, 175.

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