

I SEE SATAN FALL LIKE LIGHTNING

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It has long been fashionable to regard Christianity as myth, no different in substance than many other ancient myths. Sometimes this is done to glibly dismiss Christ's message; sometimes it is done in sorrow, viewing, as C. S. Lewis did before his conversion, Christianity as one of many lies, even if was "breathed through silver." René Girard entirely rejects this idea, offering an anthropological, rather than spiritual, argument for Christianity being a true myth, and for the complete uniqueness of Christianity, as well for as its centrality to the human story. Girard's appeal is that his framework explains the core of all human societies, and thus explains, at any moment, the present. Therefore, though he died in 2015, Girard says much about America in 2021.

Girard was a devout Roman Catholic, a Frenchman who spent much of his academic career in the United States. (He has gotten some extra attention from the fact that he taught Peter Thiel, who became a big admirer of Girard and who gave a eulogy at his funeral.) Girard first published his theory of mimetic contagion in 1978, in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. I was going to read that book, but was encouraged to start with the more recent, and much shorter, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. So here I started, although I glanced at *Things Hidden* from time to time, as well as at several other books Girard wrote. This edition of *I See Satan Fall* contains an excellent Foreword by James G. Williams, summarizing the basics of Girard's thought on mimetic contagion, making it doubly a good place for a novice to start.

Girard begins by announcing his intent to explore and highlight, rather than minimize as most devout people do, the similarities and parallels between the Gospel and pagan myths, and for good measure his intention to dismantle Friedrich Nietzsche. He then outlines his theory of mimetic contagion, using as his frame the Tenth Commandment, "You shall not covet. . . ." "Covet" for Girard means not an untoward desire, but simply any desire for what others have. He identifies this not as God's mere prohibition on greed, but rather, far more fundamentally, as a unique early attack on the internal cycle of violence that is the basis of all human societies.

One of Girard's purposes has nothing to do with religion, and that is to explain how human societies began, namely in violence, a specific kind of violence with a specific kind of purpose. But as can be seen from his dissection of the Decalogue, his other purpose is to prove that Christianity (and to a lesser extent, Judaism) is unique among all human religions, able to release mankind from the prison into which the forms of violence the underpin all human societies have placed us. Christ's death on the Cross was fully as meaningful as Christians would have it—even if Christ was not, in fact, as he claimed, the Son of God, his sacrifice upended the entire anthropological order of the world. He showed a path of redemption, both secular and divine (reflecting the hypostatic union) previously unknown to mankind.

Violence in human societies arises because we desire what our neighbor has, because our neighbor desiring it makes it desirable in our eyes. "Our neighbor is the model for our desires. This is what I call mimetic desire." That is to say, despite our own perception that our desires are internally generated, in most instances they arise by imitation; we desire what others desire, not what we independently want. (A related principle is well-known in the context of how wealthy people feel about their wealth, but Girard's vision is far broader.) My neighbor, however, by his possession of what I desire, thwarts my desire, at the same time my desire, in a reflection of my own actions, perceived by my neighbor, intensifies my neighbor's desire for what he already has. Girard calls this "double desire," and the rivals are "mimetic doubles," very similar to each other but perceiving unreal huge differences. (This insight is part of why Thiel admires Girard; it has obvious applications in many human realms, including business.) We perceive ourselves as autonomous, when in fact we are "enslaved to our mimetic models."

This spiral of rivalry and its consequences Girard calls "scandal," and he says this process inevitably engulfs entire societies through a process of "violent contagion," citing Matthew 18:7, "Scandals . . . must come." The original rivalries are often forgotten entirely as new ones arise with blinding speed, eventually converging on one society-wide scandal. This violent contagion convulses a society; it will tear itself apart in mass violence unless something is done. That something is to identify a single innocent on whom the concentrated fury of the accumulated rivalries can be directed, through the killing of the innocent by

the society acting as a whole. This killing produces a superbly cathartic effect on the society, and peace is restored, for a time, as everyone in society congratulates himself on a job well done—even though this killing is invariably, in reality, utterly unjust. (Girard focuses on a “single victim,” but elsewhere suggests that the victim can be more than one individual, and just as easily a large identifiable group.)

Girard thus sees social conflict as normal, not accidental. It is inevitable in the nature of man. Not for Girard fantasies of peaceful societies of the distant past; he would not be surprised at the evisceration of such silliness by Lawrence Keeley in *War Before Civilization*, and he would no doubt agree with Carl Schmitt’s thoughts on the friend-enemy distinction. But it is not any violence that is Girard’s focus, but this very specific kind of violence. At the same time, he sees mimetic desire, because it allows us to choose what we desire, as what makes us human, rather than animals driven purely by instinct, and therefore of itself intrinsically good. “Our unending discords are the ransom of our freedom.”

Girard then turns to the Passion of Christ, demonstrating that the behavior of the men surrounding Christ’s death, from Saint Peter to Pontius Pilate, and even the Jews who had so lately cheered Jesus, are examples of mimetic contagion, where the players are driven to give in to the rising violence even when that is not their intention, and in fact wholly contrary to their declared and actual intention. Neither Peter nor Pilate wants Christ crucified, yet they are swept up in the contagion. In this the death of Christ is entirely unexceptional, and it echoes a long list of similar episodes in the Bible, both of the persecution of various Old Testament prophets (and of the prefiguring Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah), and of, more recently in Biblical time, the death of John the Baptist.

From whence comes mimetic contagion? It comes from Satan. Now, it is never precisely clear, at least in this book, if Girard sees Satan as an individual and entity. It does, in fact, appear not; at one point, Girard refers to the Devil as “totally mimetic, which amounts to saying *nonexistent as an individual self*” (italics in original). Yet as a devout Roman Catholic he probably did (my guess is this is addressed elsewhere, perhaps in the several books of interviews of Girard that have been published recently). Maybe this apparent confusion results from Girard’s stated intention to make his book wholly scientific, rather than theological, in focus.

Regardless, Girard heaps contempt on modern attempts to write Satan out of the Bible and Christianity; in his view, Satan is the hinge around which our temporal world turns. Satan is responsible for mimetic crisis, by showing us what we desire and then blocking our acquisition of what we desire, thereby creating scandal. Girard cites the episode in Matthew 16 where Peter “invites Jesus, in short, to take Peter himself as the model of his desire,” and Jesus responds, “Get behind me, Satan, for you are a scandal to me.” Jesus instead demands we, like him, avoid mimetic rivalry by focusing our desire on the desires of the Father.

But, in the words of Mark 3:23, Satan can cast out Satan. He initiates the cycle of mimetic violence, and also, through the catharsis that follows the killing of the scapegoat, restores order and harmony to society, a feeling of having been purified. This is the key to his being the prince of this world, for if he merely brought chaos and anarchy, he would have no power. Yet he continuously plays both sides of the game, thereby maintaining his power. The Crucifixion is an exemplar of this process; “[w]hat makes the mimetic cycle of Jesus’s suffering unique is, not the violence, but the fact that the victim is the Son of God.” His sacrifice ended the rule of Satan—because it broke the cycle of mimetic violence that was the formation of all human societies prior to Christianity, founding an entirely new anthropology. Jesus is wholly different, because he invited his disciples to desire what he desired, however that desire was not a mimetic rivalry, but the desire to imitate the Father in all things. If accepted, this protects us from mimetic rivalries entirely, and is thus an upgrade to the Tenth Commandment.

After outlining this cycle, Girard proceeds to contrast myth and Christianity, what he calls a study in comparative religion. He does this by analyzing the hagiographical *Life of Apollonius* by Philostratus, a militant pagan. (Apollonius was a wonderworking guru of the first century A.D., a great favorite of shallow-thinking New Atheists, such as Matthew Ridley in his execrable *The Evolution of Everything*, who think that the parallels to Christ in the supposed life of Apollonius disprove the existence of Christ.) Girard discusses at length how Apollonius ended a plague in Ephesus by egging on the pagan Ephesians to stone to death a crippled beggar, overcoming their hesitation by enticing them to throw the first stone, whereupon the dead beggar was revealed to have been a demon, and the plague ended, with the intervention of the god

Heracles. Girard believes this was a real episode, though certainly no demon was revealed and no god intervened, but the plague, one not of disease but scandal resulting from mimetic rivalries engulfing the city, was still by this blood sacrifice cured. Moreover, contrasting Christ's defusing of the proposed stoning of the woman caught in adultery (John 8), Girard notes that even the process of killing itself is the result of mimetic contagion—it is difficult to get the stoning started, but once it begins, it becomes unstoppable.

From this jumping-off place Girard moves backward, to earlier myths, such as those of Oedipus and those surrounding the cult of Dionysus. Girard interprets various founding myths that involve a murder followed by the divinization of the object of the murder, often in a form of resurrection, as evidence of the universal pattern of mimetic contagion resulting in a crisis existentially tearing at the social fabric and its cure through the single victim mechanism. (His book *The Scapegoat* analyzes many more examples.) Through this mechanism false gods are often created, because it seems divine how the victim can bring society together, and these new gods underpin the creation of human societies. This is the "founding murder"; the story of Cain and Abel is one, as is that of Romulus and Remus. Girard takes these myths as representative of multiple cycles of mimetic violence surrounding the formation of societies and ensuring their stability. Religion forms the core of every social system; it is essential to humanity, not a parasite upon the real mechanisms of societal formation. Girard has no truck with theories of social contract, and no doubt thinks equally little of other theories of societal formation, such as Francis Fukuyama's.

Turning back to Christianity, Girard analyzes passages from the New Testament that suggest the Gospel writers recognized, for the first time in human history, the "powers and principalities," that is, Satan, as complicit in this process of societal formation. A key point of Girard is that Gospel passages that seem opaque or obvious are often nothing of the sort, but rather encapsulate enormous insights we typically miss. His book is filled with passages from both the Old and New Testaments that could be seen as banal but into which Girard breathes life. The passages Girard cites are often read as superstitious or magical thinking, but he rather interprets them as deeply insightful into human nature

and conduct, and what is more, aware of how Jesus, true man and true god, upended this age-old human mechanism.

It is to this last point that Girard devotes the final third of his book. He directly attacks the view that the Gospels are just another myth. Anti-Christian apologists have long tried to show that the Gospels differ only in the particulars of myth; the broad themes are just the same as all other myths. In a jujitsu move, however, Girard entirely agrees with these critics—the Gospels *are* substantially identical in their form to other myths, because both the myths and the Gospel are part of a larger, essential truth, that of the cycle of mimetic violence. The difference of the Gospels is that that Christ completely inverts, and thereby utterly destroys, the universal pattern that existed before his sacrifice.

To demonstrate this, Girard steps back to the story of Joseph, comparing it to the story of Oedipus. There are a great many broad similarities—but the crucial difference, in which the ancient Jews prefigured Christ, is that Oedipus was guilty of the crimes for which he was punished, and Joseph innocent. In the Bible, the guilty are the accusers—that is, Satan; in the Greek myth, the righteous are the accusers. In other words, the Bible, both Old and New Testament, is unique, because it, even before Christ, attacks the standard mythic narrative. “The story of Joseph is a refusal of the religious illusions of paganism.” Similarly, the Psalms “are the first [texts] in human history to allow those who would simply become silent victims in the world of myth to voice their complaint as hysterical crowds besiege them.” And Job “not only resists totalitarian contagion but wrests the deity out of the process of persecution to envision him as the God of victims, not of persecutors.” “No one and no tradition before the Bible were capable of calling into question the guilt of victims whom their communities unanimously condemned.” Judaism was the first religion to reject the mimetic contagion and the divinization of victims.

So what then of Christianity, which does indeed divinize the victim? It merely appears to follow the form of myth; but in fact is a complete inversion of myth. Girard here explicitly rejects Marcionism, the ancient heresy that the God of the Old Testament is a mere demiurge and entirely distinct from the God of the New Testament. Rather, the Old and New Testaments are not in any way in contradiction. Not only is Christ innocent, as Joseph was, but there is no violent unanimity in

the community as to his death (though due to the process of mimetic contagion, unanimity is near complete at the moment of the Passion), and thus Christ's death does not bring harmony—it brings not peace, but a sword. The Gospel therefore reveals truths hidden since the foundation of the world, a crucial anthropological reality. “The Gospels reveal everything that human beings need to understand their moral responsibility with regard to the whole spectrum of violence in human history and to all the false religions.” In fact, Christ himself repeatedly cites passages from the Psalms revealing this reality, further showing the continuity of the Old and New Testaments. By the Cross, mankind escapes Satan, and thus the Eastern Orthodox view (largely disappeared in the West) that Christ by his sacrifice on the Cross duped Satan to his irretrievable detriment contains great insight and truth (although, Girard notes, it is perhaps less trick than simply “the inability of the prince of this world to understand the divine love”). Christ thereby subverts mimetic contagion, releases us from its hold, and redeems mankind.

Not that mankind often takes the opportunity to accept the redemption that Christ offers. Yes, Christianity has spread widely, and mimetic contagion is no longer the core of societies, or at least of Christian societies (though the entire world is influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the Cross). We still scapegoat, but we are ashamed of it, and try to hide our participation in any mimetic contagion in which we become involved. We accuse others of scapegoating in order to criticize them, in particular to stigmatize perceived discrimination. This leads to the modern phenomenon of victimology. “Our society is the most preoccupied with victims of any that ever was.” Yet we often tell ourselves that we are inadequately compassionate and we must do more. What is this? Merely another instance of mimetic contagion. “The victims most interesting to us are always those who allow us to condemn our neighbors. And our neighbors do the same. They always think first about victims for whom they hold us responsible.” Nonetheless, Girard ascribes the modern concern with human rights “to a formerly unthinkable effort to control uncontrollable processes of mimetic snowballing.” This is the result of Christianity, of course, even though moderns frequently, in a bizarre error, scapegoat Christianity as the cause of victimization.

Finally, and crucially, Girard examines modern trends of thought that reject Christianity's view of the victim as innocent, and attempt

to reintroduce the pagan view of the victim as the justified target of mimetic violence—justified both by his supposed actual crime, and by the benefit to society that results, both cathartically and instrumentally, from his death. He ascribes to Nietzsche the rediscovery that pagan violent unanimity was an identical process to that taking place in the Passion. But Nietzsche falsely concluded from this insight that the pagan view was superior, and, famously, Christianity a “slave religion,” born of resentment, that hampers human flourishing by excessive concern for the victim, when in fact Christianity is “heroic resistance to violent contagion.” Nietzsche exalts Dionysus over Christ; this is a regression, not an advance.

Here, and really only here in the book, Girard enters choppy waters. He makes several claims that either make little sense or have been disproved. In the first category, he ascribes to the concern for victims “colonial conquests, abuses of power, the murderous wars of the twentieth century, the pillage of the planet, etc.” It is unclear how such a causal mechanism would work and he does not explain. In the second category, he denies that the West is decadent or (spiritually) aging; rather, it “seems to have extraordinary longevity, due to renewal and perpetual enhancement of its leadership and institutions.” No comment is necessary, although this book was published in 1999, so Girard’s apparent optimism is more understandable.

Regardless, Girard did foresee the logical consequence of excessive focus on victimization. “The current process of spiritual demagoguery and rhetorical overkill has transformed the concern for victims into a totalitarian command and a permanent inquisition. . . . The fact that our world has become solidly anti-Christian, at least among its elites, does not prevent the concern for victims from flourishing—just the opposite. . . . We are living through a caricatural ‘ultra-Christianity’ that tries to escape from the Judeo-Christian orbit by ‘radicalizing’ the concern for victims in an anti-Christian manner.” Yet at the same time Nietzschean influence grows, in part because Christianity is made the common scapegoat. Those on the Right can see the Nietzschean strain rising in reaction to the Left’s advances, most notably recently in the work of Bronze Age Pervert. Girard would not be a BAP fan.

But this rising Nietzschean influence is not the real threat; those ideologies that reject the concern for victims, especially National Socialism,

never got much traction. The real threat, “the most powerful anti-Christian movement,” “is the one that takes over and ‘radicalizes’ the concern for victims in order to paganize it,” which “presents itself as the liberator of humanity . . . in place of Christ,” but is actually a mimetic rival of Christ. This ideology has brought back Satan, because it both creates mimetic contagion by “borrow[ing] the language of victims” and offers the age-old solution to contagion, violence against the innocent who are seen to oppose social justice. In other words, the modern Left (though Girard does not use that term, or identify this tendency by name) is literally Satan, the prince of this world, the accuser of the innocent, the tempter from the beginning, Antichrist.

Yet Antichrist is not an entity but something “banal and prosaic,” by which Girard means not inefficacious at creating evil, but something existing since the foundation of the world. “The Antichrist boasts of bringing to human beings the peace and tolerance that Christianity promised but has failed to deliver. Actually, what the radicalization of contemporary victimology produces is a return to all sorts of pagan practices: abortion, euthanasia, sexual undifferentiation, Roman circus games galore but without real victims, etc. . . . Neo-paganism locates happiness in the unlimited satisfaction of desires, which means the suppression of all prohibitions.” This is not surprising. Christ did not imprison Satan when he defeated him; he fell like lightning, and he fell to earth, “where he will not remain inactive.” Yes, Christ showed us how to resist him, but we have, more often than not, failed. The *katechon*, the power that holds back the Antichrist Saint Paul mentions in Second Thessalonians (and a key focus of Carl Schmitt), only holds back Satan in part. Christianity can redeem the whole history of man, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete (whose name in Greek, *parakletos*, means “defender of the accused”), but we must choose, for God gave us free will. And our record is not good.

Girard does not say what must be done, but it is obvious. We must break this renewed cycle of mimetic violence brought to us by modern neopagan philosophies, by our restoring the fruits of Christ’s sacrifice, refusing to participate in mimetic scapegoating and rejecting concern for false victims. This is easy enough to apply to 2021 America. To take only one example (there are many), Girard would see clearly that George Floyd was no victim; he is just a tool in a massive ongoing scheme of

mimetic scapegoating by the Left/Satan. The real victims, the focus of the violent unanimity of Burn-Loot-Murder joined with a constellation of other powerful groups, are white people as a group, especially those who refuse to deny their supposed “whiteness” and join their persecutors, and most of all devout Christian white people. They are demonized by the Left as it inflates a Girardian scandal.

You only have to glance at the vocabulary of critical race theory with its core ideology of demanding the violent elimination of white people to see the truth of this. As I have been saying for some time, the result is likely to be violence when a leader arises to defend, and to focus the mimetic rivalry of, whites. This social situation is, shall we say, extremely unfortunate, but Girard would not be surprised—white people are simply today’s Ephesian beggar, but with a lot more guns. This will not end well, but it will be their fault, not ours. Girard would ask, with Rodney King, that we all “just get along,” yet he would know that against this type of action of Satan, such a plea is unlikely to work—unless a society adopts the true vision of Christ, thereby breaking the mimetic rivalry. I’m not hopeful that’s about to happen, because as Girard says, the Left is an ideology, a satanic one, and ideologies can only be broken by force. Maybe after that’s finished, we can try again to master the cycle.