SIGNS IN THE HEAVENS

René Girard on the Apocalypse

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When René Girard died in November of 2015, Bishop Robert Barron made the case that we should regard him as "a kind of Church Father"—a somewhat stunning endorsement. Why was this "comparative anthropologist" being likened to great saints like Justin, Irenaeus, Basil, Augustine, and Benedict? The Fathers' great literary and rhetorical feat was to transpose the teaching of Christ, the religion of the "Lord" of a strange semitic people, into the highest forms of intellectual culture of their time and place. If René Girard is indeed a contemporary Church Father, it is because he has hijacked contemporary academic methods to preach the Word and discipline the world. Barron calls Girard a Church Father because, at a time when Western culture has become acutely skeptical of Christianity and has begun to list it beside other great mythic systems, he upends the model and says that Christianity is not one more instance of the "monomyth"; rather, it is the deconstruction of the myth of violence.

Girard's story

Girard's central achievement was to put the human story of sacrifice (which includes the story of human sacrifice) into terms both ancient and new. He begins with a simple story about desire. When we see another person desiring an object, regardless of our satisfaction with what we have, and regardless of the intrinsic worth of the other object, we have an overriding desire for what the other person is desiring. For Girard, this imitation of desire, or *mimesis*, is a universal cause of both friendship (union because of common desiring) and conflict (rivalry because of common desiring). Conflict arises mysteriously and demands resolution.

Some noticeably different third party is singled out for blame—a "scapegoat." In banding together to punish this imagined "cause" of the conflict (which was really caused by a natural compounding of desires) the community moves from rivalry to friendship.

This happy turn often takes on a divine quality: the mysterious forces of war have been appeased somehow; the gods' anger has been quelled by punishing the guilty. Girard contends that the God of Israel had begun to draw back the veil over this "mechanism" by commanding the sacrifice of explicitly *innocent* victims. The Gospels, however, put this in full spotlight. The clearest example is *Caiphas propheta*. In his office as high priest, says St. John, Caiaphas prophesied that "it is better for you that one man should die for the people than that the whole nation should perish" (Jn 11:50).

The Greek name for the Book of Revelation is *apokalypsis*, which means "pulling back a covering." Girard is right to see an "uncovering" of the scapegoat mechanism of violence in Christ. The scapegoat is a figure of Christ, who was made to pay for sin through innocent suffering. But the condemnation of Jesus is also the occasion for him to reveal who he is, as St. Matthew writes:

> The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." "You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Mt 26:63–64)

Jesus uncovers his divine sonship publicly and, at the end of time, fully. Girard develops a Johannine insight: "the devil has sinned from the beginning. Indeed, *the Son of God was revealed to destroy the works of the devil*" (1 Jn 3:8). Jesus throws light on the ancient machinery of sin and death. But do we stop there, or must we go on to say: the Son of God came to reveal new things as well? He also came to reveal himself, and to reveal the knowledge of the

Father to his children. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, St. Thomas says that the teaching of the only-begotten Son who makes the Father known (Jn 1:18) "surpasses all other teachings in dignity, authority and usefulness" (11.221).

René Girard was no Thomist. In fact, his quasi-theological, sweeping theories about history and human nature challenge St. Thomas's teachings, especially on the important concept of sacrifice. But in his contribution to *Ressourcement Thomism* (2010), a contemporary Dominican theologian, Richard Schenk, counsels that "future Catholic reflection would do well to learn" from Girard "through a critical and selective reception of Girard's often overly reductionist theses" (203) on the different dimensions of sacrifice at work in the sacrifice of Jesus in first-century Palestine. Furthermore, Girard's narrative, which takes us from Jesus's fulfillment of Jewish cult to the peculiar form of religious terrorism which threatens us today, is rich and compelling, and deserves serious consideration. I aim to offer a Thomistic "selective reception" of Girard's thought.

The Fulfillment of the "Scapegoat" Ritual from the Book of Leviticus

Death and disorder have maimed the world. When we consider our inclinations to destroy ourselves and one another, we begin to wonder: did we cause this? How did it happen? How can we resolve it? In his book, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (1999), Girard compares the ritual violence that plays out in many cultures to the catharsis of ancient drama: by watching violent scenes, we are purified of violent urges. When a Greek wonderworker named Apollonius of Tyana induces the citizens of Ephesus to stone a beggar to death in order to quell an "epidemic" in the city, "he expects from this violence a *cathartic* effect superior to that of ordinary sacrifices or of the tragic dramas that were performed, no doubt, in the theater of Ephesus in the second century of our era" (53). Girard is able to multiply instances in history and

literature in which the collective murder of one person, picked out for his difference, has a pacifying effect on society.

But the eyes of faith begin to see through such devices from early in the Old Testament. The God of Israel demands that his people be holy as he is holy. While God accepts, even commands, sacrificial offerings, he often makes clear to his people that he has no need of this service, as for example in Psalm 50:

> If I were hungry, I would not tell you;
> for the world and all that is in it is mine.
> Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
> or drink the blood of goats?
> Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
> and pay your vows to the Most High;
> and call upon me in the day of trouble;
> I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. (Ps 50:12–15)

Nonetheless, God does demand sacrifice. The offering of the goat in Leviticus 16 is a mystery of the Law, enshrined almost dead-center in the Five Books of Moses. Girard capitalizes on the rich ambiguity of the ritual. Aaron the priest takes two goats and sacrifices one by lot to the Lord. The other "shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel." William Holman Hunt's painting of the scapegoat evokes the pathetic nature of the spectacle, in which a poor, unlovely goat staggers over what one critic called "the world as a god-forsaken wasteland, a heap of broken images where the sun beats" (*The Iconography of Landscape,* 22). The divinely commanded rite strips sacrifice of its sublimity, and we see the innocent victim sent out, with our sins on him, to a brutal death.

Although the scapegoat does pull back the covering of the machinery of religious violence, it also reveals a sort of fear of demons and compromise with their power. In his JPS Torah Commentary on Leviticus, Jewish scholar Baruch A. Levine writes of the scapegoat, "Chapter 16 transforms the sacrificial worship of

demons into a set of rites that coerce and subjugate the sinful and evil forces identified with the demon. The High Priest, acting in accordance with the command of the God of Israel, forced the iniquities of the people back on Azazel" (252) which "in later myth was the name given to the demonic ruler of the wilderness" (102). This give and take with the powers of darkness will reach a zenith and be abolished in the sacrifice of Christ that it foreshadows.

William Holman Hunt — The Scapegoat

The Destruction of Idolatry, or "Demythologization"

Paul in the New Testament, and Isaiah in the Old, are the great Biblical mockers of idolatry. Once, Paul was waiting around in Athens, on his best behavior, I imagine. But in that great and philosophical city, "his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). In Acts 19, Paul is slandered by the guild of craftsmen who make idols of the goddess Artemis in Ephesus. The author, St. Luke, draws out the humor of their outrage:

> You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited. (Acts 19:25–27)

The preaching of the Gospel includes, then, a "demythologization" of the religious culture of Jesus's time. The Jews were continually called to turn to God from idols; now, the gentiles have also "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven" (1 Thes 1:9–10).

Girard reads this turning from idols as an unmasking of demonic powers. And well he should: as St. Paul says, "the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God" (1 Cor 10:20). Now, pagan sacrifice is what Donald Rumsfeld might call a "known unknown." The danger of sacrifice is that it opens us to a dark spiritual territory. Only by revelation, the knowledge that we have in Jesus Christ, do we learn that the darkness behind the idols is demonic.

In a talk given at Calvin College in November, 2016, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek pointed out that Rumsfeld's table of knowledge was incomplete. In addition to known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns, we have unconscious knowledge, or unknown knowns: things that work in our mind without our conscious acknowledgement. Freud traffics in these. Girard, in Freudian fashion, wants to draw out the unconscious aspect of the machinery, to depict it as an "unknown known." That is, whether or not we openly court demons, we have an unconscious pact with the demonic *in the scapegoat mechanism*. Some part of us recognizes that sacred violence is necessary to resolve the tensions

of human existence. Why else would man, "little lower than the angels" (Ps 8:5), do something so stupid as worship rocks?

Girard goes so far as to say that this violence is the foundation of human religion. "By accepting to be crucified," he says, "Christ brought to light what had been 'hidden since the foundation of the world' [see Mt 13:35, which cites a version of Ps 78:2 not found in most Bible translations, and which is used as the title of a collection of Girard's work, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978)]—the foundation itself, the unanimous murder that appeared in broad daylight for the first time on the Cross." Girard sees natural religious ritual as deeply informed by a "founding murder" (Freud's term, which Girard adopts).

Girard goes too far in my view. If we take Sacred Scripture in its full complexity and reflect on the natural inclination to sacrifice to God, we cannot accept this flattened idea of sacrifice. Yes, Jesus took the powers of the world captive. But before that, many sought to acknowledge the one true God by sacrifice, albeit in a flawed way, and this act even defined humanity. Girard would have us see the twisted inclination define humanity in a way that almost touches on our nature.

A Thomistic idea of natural religion also sees sacrifice as an aspect of our nature, but never considers that nature to be totally corrupt in its basic form. Girard's idea of sacrificial religion, if it is to be accepted, has to be reconceived as a wounding, a defect in our naturally good inclination to make sacrifices of love; but as he understands it, sacrifice is a stable cultural habit, rooted even in individual souls, toward sacred murder by conspiracy. Schenk argues that even if we hold a higher idea of sacrifice according to St. Thomas's notion, we must also take care to distinguish it from the real forms that Girard identifies. In the next phase, we will see how this complex notion of sacrifice plays out in the light of Christ's revelation.

The Failure of Christianity

Girard sees the Christian revelation as an impossible ideal of equality. Pulling back the curtain on the idolatry, "which is good in the absolute, has proven bad in the relative, for we were not prepared to shoulder its consequences. We are not Christian enough" ("On War and Apocalypse," *First Things*, August 2009). He thinks that the failure of Christians to live up to this ideal has generated a dangerously self-deceived world of demystified ritual aggression: "Once in our history the truth about the identity of all humans was spoken, and no one wanted to hear it; instead we hang ever more frantically onto our false differences." Now that the pantheon of gods demanding sacrifice has been disbanded, the violent instincts that they symbolized remain pent up until they flare out in self-righteous crusades. One imagines an ancient, purer Christianity, when men and women imitated Christ and their martyrdom continued to shed his light on sacred violence.

But Girard thinks that this initiative "failed." And necessarily so! "Christianity is the only religion that has foreseen its own failure. This prescience is known as the apocalypse." Thus, what is uncovered, or *apocalypsed*, so to speak, is actually the failure of the Church, not its justice. Girard believes that Christ's Spirit doomed Christianity to a final destruction, which it foresees in Scripture.

While Girard appreciates the Book of Revelation, he does not understand the significance of its wedding feast. This feast is perpetually lived out in the Eucharistic liturgy of the Church, which has priority of importance over the *martyria* of individual Christians. The victory of the Cross was already established at the Last Supper. Girard says, "We can all participate in the divinity of Christ so long as we renounce our own violence" ("On War and Apocalypse"). But a better formulation would be: by participating sacramentally in the divinity of Christ, we come to renounce our violence as God strengthens us with the infused virtues of faith, hope, and love.

As an example of this I offer Dorothy Day (1897–1980). This young socialist journalist struggled with the Christ who commanded non-retaliation and identified himself with the poor. Through her reading and her life with the poor in slums, jails, and breadlines, she became convinced that modern "peacekeeping" measures were, in reality, often unnatural, violent social mechanisms for dealing with the unwanted neighbor in a cruelly industrial age. She believed it was necessary to abandon the World and the State as far as possible, and to "build a new society in the shell of the old," as her mentor Peter Maurin frequently put it. Girard said, "Violence is a terrible adversary, since it always wins. Desiring war can thus become a spiritual attitude" ("On War and Apocalypse"). Day would agree with the latter judgment, and she proposed a strong Catholic "attitude" as an antidote to the love of war. However, she would not have agreed that we are locked in a demonic historical movement in which "violence always wins." She acknowledged the failure of Christians to be Christians, but she did not place this fact within a historical scheme that basically admits the defeat of Christian society and looks with terror toward the future. Rather, she took it as reality. Reality is hard, but pliable. Human desire is twisted, but good can be elicited out of its gnarled roots. Day was smitten with the "little way" of St. Thérèse. There is nothing that cannot be done for God, and this littleness invades great powers. It is not the martyrdom of the early Church; it is rather the martyrdom of love: "In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love, and thus I will be all things, as my desire finds its direction," said Thérèse in *Story of a Soul*.

Girard does not exclude love, but fear seems to crowd love out of his account. But it is the light of God's love, given in the sacrifice of the Son, which reveals the darkness of sacred violence. Love may be at the periphery of Girard's account, but it belongs at the center.

Sacrifice Without God

In Girard's narrative, we now live in a time when the idols are broken, and we no longer believe in sacrificing to them. We are past heaping our sins on a goat, but the scapegoating continues, and the "uncovered" nature of it propels us more rapidly and openly towards apocalyptic violence. We find aggressive post-Christian forms of sacrifice which simply embrace some form of the scapegoat ritual *with* the knowledge that it is a merely human ritual for resolving human crises. This can be secular: we need to create new technologies which demand human death for the happiness of others, whether that entails fatal labor conditions, abortion and sterilization, or humanitarian war against the unenlightened along with its "collateral damage" of innocents. Such political movements, as many have pointed out, have a kind of subliminal religious ideology about them.

But the religious form of this, for Girard, is Islam. In the Qur'an, the ram that saved Isaac from sacrifice was somehow the same sacrifice that had been sent to Abel. This was so that he would not have to kill Cain. Girard interprets this to mean that Islam *understands* that sacrifice is a human, ritual means of combating mimetic violence. Its new suicidal forms of ritualized violence are born of a desperate struggle against Western technological violence. "Terrorism is a superior form of violence," says Girard, "and it asserts that it will win." In the demythologized West, we don't have the means to understand why religious terror is superior to ordered strength. We try to explain terror in terms of social oppression and mental disorder. But in reality, it is a post-Christian, demythologized sacrificial system. Girard points to the transparently false piety of Mohamed Atta, the September 11th hijacker, who spent the three nights before the attacks celebrating in bars.

Again, Girard's narrative may not be incorrect. But neither does his account do full justice to the truth. The apocalypse is not essentially a historical movement caused by human and demonic

forces of collapse. Josef Pieper, a titan of Catholic religious-historical speculation, wrote a study called *Über das Ende der Zeit* in 1953 (published in English in 1954 as *The End of Time: Meditations on the Philosophy of History*). He compared his own time, with its "purely immanent, 'culture-sociological' conception of history . . . disposed to envisage the possibility of a catastrophic end as to be expected or even imminent" (*The End of Time*, 140–141) with the apocalyptic speculations of the thirteenth-century Joachimites. They thought that they perceived the last revival of Christian life around the figures of SS. Francis and Dominic, whom "the Lord has aroused at the end of terrestrial time" (138). Girard's own speculations are an interesting synthesis of, on the one hand, the sociological kind of speculation about global catastrophe, and on the other, the religious, prophetic anticipation of an apocalypse.

St. Thomas's response, which Pieper urges us to follow, is "characterized less by perpetual contemplation of the final catastrophe, than by a mute readiness" for it (140). The basis of this silent readiness is something lacking in Girard's history-focused account: "the affirmation of created reality" (137). Pieper cites another apocalyptic Catholic thinker, Erik Peterson, whose study of martyrdom and apocalypse highlights how "the martyrs utter no word against God's creation," and "only the Gnostics, who avoid martyrdom, can speak ill of God's creation" ("Witness to the Truth," in *Theological Tractates*, 171, 255). Sometimes, Girard comes close to doing the latter, when he suggests a violence hidden at the foundations of this created world. (I do not accuse him of Gnostic heresy, I only mean that his characterization of man's religious operations suggest a deep corruption of man's natural inclinations.)

An Act of Love

Bishop Barron rightly admires Girard, whose sociological readings of history and religion give Christians some strong weapons against those who would reduce Jesus to the status of a

mythical resurrection-figure, or who would characterize Judaism or Christianity as violent. But, as I have tried to show, Girard's attempts to seat violence in human nature itself, to rule out naturally good forms of sacrifice, and to see Christianity as an exercise in failure, are problematic.

We should pay attention to man's violent inclinations and the intellectual acrobatics which systematically sustain them through politics and economics. But to dwell on these things leads, not to responsible action, but to despair. Girard's explanation promises a certain liberation from unconscious ritualism, but the mechanisms he describes suggest a kind of inexorable doomsday machine: unconscious violence will have its way, bolstered by demonic religious manifestations in whatever culture, Christian or not.

There is in this vision a temptation to hate this world. But the Christian, who in Revelation is the witness (or martyr) of God's work, as Pieper says, "finds creation, in spite of everything, 'very good.'" Thus, in the midst of apocalyptic fervor, "the attention of St. Thomas seems so completely drawn towards the plenitude of reality, and therefore of good, in the created order as well as in the *ordo gratiae* [order of grace], that the atmosphere of his work is wholly derived from this point" (*The End of Time*, 140).

Girard concludes that the meaning of history is "terrifying." Another great French Catholic thinker, Blaise Pascal, was famously "terrified" by the situation of man: hung between silence and emptiness, lost in an eternal blank, until he is found suddenly by the dark and terrible Fire of God. But God does not want us to be terrified. In Jesus, he reveals our unconscious slavery to Satan and his works. Why? Not so that we may shrink or scoff. Rather, he wants us to know the truth, to know of his victory over those forces, and to have courage. Courage is that quality in us which, when it sees the fearful, rises up to destroy it for the sake of the good that lies beyond.

On the subject of the evil found in nature, and the violent and truth-concealing slant of human acts, the teaching of

St. Thomas on creation as an "emanation" or "procession" from God himself has always been a great consolation to me (*Summa Theologiae* I, qq. 44–49). The effect always contains some trace of the form of its cause. The fire from which we are born, from which we "emanate," as St. Thomas says, makes of us a fire, and the Creator of all things is a fire of love and knowledge, mercy and truth. We are made, not only with trace or vestige, but "after the image" of this Creator. His act of sacrifice is an act of love, and "love is unitive force," as Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite says (*On the Divine Names*, IV.12). True sacrifice unites, not all against one, but all to God who is all in all, whom we love "in all things and above all things" (Collect of the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time).

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