

TRANSCRIPTS

Transcript of Girard Lecture V | The Christian Revelation



JOHNATHAN BI

DEC 25, 2022 • PAID



3



Share

0. Introduction

David Perell: When I was a kid, I used to march around my religious studies classes thinking I was brilliant for rejecting biblical ideas. I used to say things like, “Moses didn’t really part the Red Sea” or “Cain and Abel weren’t real historical figures,” and “These stories didn’t literally happen.” And so, I dismissed them for decades.

But discovering Girard was a turning point for me, and I started taking the Bible seriously, if not literally. For example, Girard showed me how the same Cain and Abel story that I’d always dismissed revealed a pattern of mimetic rivalry that was showing up in my own life. And whether literal or not, I saw how these stories spoke to the constants in the human condition.

Furthermore, I learned how every Westerner bathes in the waters of Christian thinking. And Girard shows us that even secular philosophical assumptions of modernity, like say – the concern for victims – are Christian through and through. And to the extent that Christian ideas like compassion sometimes feel obvious. It’s not because they’re trivial, but because they’ve been so influential.

So I hope that Girard’s unorthodox reading of Jesus Christ will help you see Christianity in a new light, as it did I.

Johnathan Bi: In the last lecture, we've discussed our past: pagan religion. In the next lecture, we're going to understand the present, modernity, and the lecture after that we're going to discuss the future, apocalypse. Christianity then is the rupture which bridges our pagan past with our modern present and apocalyptic future.

If modernity seems eerily similar to the pagan societies that we've discussed last lecture, but also clearly distinct in important ways, then you can thank – or perhaps blame – Christianity for that distinction. In so far as our society doesn't resemble the violence, the deceit, the arbitrariness, the injustice of pagan society – that all comes from Christianity.

For Girard, Christianity is the one true religion amongst a sea of false gods. It is the pivot point where history gets taken out of a cyclical view and thrown into a linear trajectory. It is a necessary fulcrum for us to lean against if we are to grasp the direction and meaning of history and to make sense of our present. That is why understanding Girard's Christianity is the focus of this lecture.

This lecture will proceed in three steps. First, we're going to understand why Girard thinks that stories in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, are drastically distinct from the pagan religions of yore and what message they are trying to communicate. Whatever message we will find, we will find it stunted and incomplete in very important ways. And so second, I will give you Girard's argument for why Jesus is the completion of the Hebrew message, and even stronger, what makes him the one true God. After these two moves, I will finish painting Girard's Anthropology of the Christian to see how he translates the most important Christian phenomena into digestible and readily understandable cultural, psychological, and social language.

1. The Myth Vaccine

Johnathan Bi: Our first task today then, is to show that the stories in the Hebrew Bible are radically different from the religious pagan myths of yore. This is a terribly

difficult task on its own, but made all the more challenging by Girard's own understanding of how pagan religions are created. Let me provide you with a brief summary of this process that we covered last lecture. First, societies would descend into chaos, a mimetic contagion. Then, a scapegoat would be unconsciously chosen inherit all the blame and be killed. This is the founding murder. This founding murder would bring back a peace so miraculous that people attributed the saving force to the victim, deifying it. The pagan deity would be defined by its power while being both good and evil – causing and ending the chaos at the same time. Myths would be created out of this event, and out of these myths spawned the core institutions of pagan society: prohibitions prevented violence, and rituals acted as release valves for violence.

Both the scapegoating and deification are equally deceitful in pagan religion. The victim neither had the power to cause nor end the chaos – it's all a psychological projection by the crowd, grounded on nothing but unanimity. And importantly, this deceitfulness is always occluded by myth, because myth is written from the perspective of the persecutor. The persecutor writes from the perspective of the crowd. And from that vantage point, all of this would seem real – the blame, the praise, the deification are all deserved and not mere projections. Importantly, none of this could be revealed – because gods, pagan gods, would lose their power if people realized that it was they themselves who through unanimity projected that power onto them.

The story of how pagan religions are formed presents to us an immediate problem: doesn't this track the biblical story of Christ quite clearly? After all, there's a civil unrest when Christ gets into Jerusalem. What is that if not the mimetic contagion? There's clearly the unjust scapegoating of Jesus and murder on the cross. That's the founding murder. There's a resurrection and divinization. There's a mythologization through the Bible and an institutionalization through the Catholic Church and its many varied rituals and prohibitions. So how can the Christian story be true, but the pagan religions be false?

Girard's answer is that the Christian story is gonna have the same form, because Christ is also gonna be scapegoated, but with one crucial difference. The Christian story will be told from the perspective of the victim.

What the Bible is doing is to tell the same type of story as pagan religion has, but from the other perspective. Not the persecutor, which all pagan religion has been told from but the victim, and in doing so, exposing the lies of all religions to show that: the victim is innocent, that the crowd is guilty, that there is no sacred power, that all of that was merely psychological projection. The Bible for Girard, paradoxically, is a religion to end all religions, a myth to end all myths, a founding murder to end all founding murders by exposing their violent, their unjust, their deceitful origins.

Christ knows that reason alone, that an analytical articulation of the scapegoat mechanism, like the one I've just provided you, is not enough to shake societies out of this perennial cultural practice. What we need is an equally compelling story that shakes us into a new moral framework that automatically identifies with the underdog, makes us automatically side with the victim – and in doing so, see through the lies of the scapegoat mechanism and all of pagan religion.

The right metaphor then, to think about the relationship between Christianity and pagan religion is that of the relationship between a vaccine and the original disease. The efficacy of a vaccine in neutralizing the original host lies in its proximity and not in its radical difference. For example, structurally, the COVID vaccine is very similar to the original disease, just with a few important tweaks, and this similarity is what makes it a COVID vaccine and not, say, a polio vaccine.

The Bible then is a myth vaccine. And so the strategy of many modern Christians – to show that the Bible has nothing to do with the old myths, that it is radically different – Girard believes is misguided. Take something like the Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the first known myths of Mesopotamia. Modern Christians often blush at the many similarities between the two: there's a quest for the fruit of immortality from a tree of eternal life. It exists in both the Epic of Gilgamesh as well as the Bible. There's a

deceitful snake eating the fruit and robbing us of our immortality. And there's a great flood from which only the chosen are protected. Girard would say, don't blush, and don't try to distance the Bible from these myths. The Bible is effective and true because of its proximity – or more precisely, a key difference in its proximity. Let's look at some of the stories in the Hebrew Bible where this intuition of the victim's innocence is already starting to take root.

1.1 Cain and Abel

Johnathan Bi: Let's examine the foundation of the first worldly society as told by the Hebrew Bible. It's a story of Cain and Abel, and the story goes something like this. Cain and Abel are the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain is the firstborn, he's a farmer, and Abel is the second born, he's a shepherd. They both frequently offer sacrifices to God. God, however, constantly favored Abel's sacrifices over Cain's. And so one day in the fields, out of jealousy, Cain murdered Abel. Upon seeing this, God condemns Cain, punishing him to wander the lands.

This is what God says, Genesis 4:12:

┌ A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

Cain is frightened – he's worried that people who know him and what he did will try to kill him for his transgressions, for his crimes against Abel. So God puts a mark on Cain to protect him.

God says this, Genesis 4:15:

┌ Therefore, whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.

Such is the founding story of the Canaanite community. Despite the superficial similarities – the warring brothers, the sacrifice, the expulsion – we can hopefully see that this story is different from pagan founding myths in the most subtle but important of ways.

The first big difference is that the victim is shown to be innocent and the act of kill is unjust. Take the case of the founding of Rome, another society founded by a murder of brothers. While the killing of Remus by Romulus may have been presented as regrettable it is nonetheless justified by Remus' transgressions. Romulus only killed Remus after Remus jumped over the legitimate barriers that Romulus had set up around his city to mock and humiliate Romulus. Remus is really guilty. He is guilty hubris and transgression and Romulus was justified in the killing even if it was regrettable. Abel on the other hand, is shown to be an innocent, upstanding servant of God, not deserving any punishment. Cain's murder is not justifiable. There is no reason at all other than Cain's envy which motivates this killing. The most telling sentence is the first thing that God says to Cain after his murder. God says this, "Where is Abel, thy brother?" Of course, God knows where Abel is, he's God – this isn't a question, this is a deep moral condemnation. Especially the second part, "thy brother." The founding murder of the Canaanite community then is shown to be unjust and Cain was punished to wander because of it.

The second big difference between this story and that of pagan myths is that violence does not bring about peace in the story of Cain and Abel, but just more violence. In pagan mythology, the peace that immediately follows from the expulsion is taken to be the final word – think about Oedipus and the peace that visits Thebes upon his expulsion. Think of the Hymn of Purusha that we talked about in the last lecture. How the sacrifice of Purusha and dismemberment became the foundations for an orderly worldly Hindu society. In the case of the Canaanites, violence does not lead to peace but only begets more violence. What dawns on Cain after his murder is not peace but an immediate awareness that other people will now try to kill him for killing Abel. This is why God put a mark on Cain. And this mark of Cain, which God put – that whosoever should kill him will have vengeance multiplied sevenfold – is a prohibition that is attempting to prevent this escalating violence.

But of course, all prohibitions, all legalisms fail over time. Cain's grandson would go on to kill a man and a boy and go on to declare that if Cain shall be avenged sevenfold

then he should be avenged seventy-sevenfold. I think it's helpful here to imagine Cain's grandson standing over the body of his victims, thumping his chest and saying "whosoever shall kill me shall be avenged seventy-sevenfold," which of course is just Old Testament speak for, "come at me bro." What began then as a rule pronounced by God to prevent revenge and reciprocal violence, this sevenfold protection on Cain within just three generations has become a war cry, "I shall be avenged seventy-sevenfold" declared by a man and not God. What is important is both the escalating scale of violence from seven to seventy-seven, but also who says it and to what end. God says it to prevent violence, Cain's grandson declares it to invite and seek violence. The prohibition against the blood feud has become the logic of the blood feud.

The message from the story of Cain and Abel is clear. The victim is innocent, the murder is unjust, and a culture born of violence must return to violence. The civilization might flourish initially, but the violence will be inadequately contained by the legal barriers deriving from the founding murder.

1.2 Joseph and His Brothers

Johnathan Bi: Let's look at another biblical story to see whether we can still find the differences from pagan religion. And that's the story of Joseph. Joseph's story goes something like this. Joseph was the 11th of 12 brothers, a favorite of his father. He was wildly envied and resented by his brothers. And not, I would wager, completely without reason. He kept interpreting these dreams that indicated the other brother would be subservient and bow down to him. As a result, the brothers, annoyed enough, eventually expelled Joseph, selling him into slavery, where he found himself a servant to one of the Pharaoh's ministers.

Joseph was continuously seduced by the minister's wife and continuously refused her, out of anger and desperation, accused falsely that Joseph was the one trying to have sex with her. Joseph was expelled again and put into prison, but because of his charm and ability to interpret dreams, found himself soon the cupbearer, the right-hand man to the pharaoh himself, governing Egypt.

By happenstance, Joseph is reunited with his brothers, who do not recognize him. He sets up a trap to test the resolve and character of his brothers by threatening to ensnare the twelfth and youngest brother, Benjamin. Upon seeing this, one of the older brothers, Judah, volunteers to sacrifice himself in place of Benjamin. Seeing that they have changed and matured, Joseph reveals his identity, forgives them, and the family reunites.

Again, there seems to be a superficial similarity to pagan myth here, the hubris, the expulsion, the sexual crimes, the interpretation of dreams, the trials, the family feud. But it is also different in the most important of ways.

The first point of marked difference here from pagan mythology is that both acts of expulsion are painted as unjust, even if the same acts in pagan mythology were more than enough to justify victims' expulsions. The first expulsion, where the brothers send Joseph off to slavery, was not completely without reason. And that reason was Joseph's hubris. He was annoying, right? Pagan characters were legitimately expelled for much less: Oedipus' hubris for thinking he can tempt fate. Remus' hubris for transgressing his brothers' boundaries. And yet, despite this fact, Joseph's expulsion into slavery is described as unjust through and through. It's not his hubris, but his innocence that is emphasized in this story. This is what it means to be coming from the perspective of the victim and not the persecutor. It's a paradigm shift in moral perspectives. Girard has this to say to the second expulsion, where Joseph is imprisoned on false charges of adultery. Girard comments how the charge put on the head of Joseph of trying to seduce the minister's wife is symbolic of incest – because the minister treated him as well as if he were his father and so his wife would then be a maternal figure. Of course we know too well from Oedipus and the rituals of African kings that incest is so often a charge put on the victim. Well, here then, this canonical charge is shown to be groundless as well.

The second point of marked difference between pagan myths and the story of Joseph is at the ending. Judah offers himself as a sacrifice such that their youngest brother may

spared and go free. Gone are the days of vengeance. Gone is the cultural mores of expulsion. Joseph's seminal act is not one of sacrifice and scapegoating, but of forgiveness. As a result, the characters of the story are not made sacred, deified like pagan characters – given a divine aura of power seeming more than human – they are simply humanized. The final scene ends with Joseph crying with his brothers – a deeply human sentiment.

Genesis 45:14:

And he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck, and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck.

Like Jesus then, Joseph wept. What we get is not sacredness but humanity.

2. The Incompleteness of the Hebrew Bible

Johnathan Bi: The Hebrew Bible is filled with stories like this from the perspective of the victim.

David Perell: You can even argue that the story of the Jewish people centers around the victim, where the founding story revolves around Moses and the way that the Jews are exiled from Egypt. The story of Moses is told from the Hebrew perspective, which is the perspective of the scapegoat.

Johnathan Bi: Right. I think that's a good example, because here again, we find that the roles are reversed. The expulsion of Moses is not the founding event of Egypt, the persecutors, which it would be in pagan myth, but it's the founding story of the Jews who are the victims.

In pagan myth, the violence to the victim is either justified as in the case of Oedipus or whitewashed if not forgotten as in the case of the Hymn to Purusha. But what it can't permit is to have the violence shown to be unjustified. These are the exact sto-

then that appear in the Hebrew Bible that tell us of the innocence of the victims, the injustice of the expulsion, and the delusion of the crowd.

The key intuition that Girard sees brewing in the Hebrew Bible is captured quite well by a poetic verse in Psalms 40:6:

Sacrifice and offering, thou dost not desire... Holocaust and victim thou hast not required.

The Psalms are an anthology of Hebrew religious hymns, and this line is clearly meant to be sung in praise of the Hebrew God. It is praising the Hebrew God for not wanting the sacrifices and victims like the gods of yore.

However, for Girard, the rejection of sacrifice only remains but a muffled intuition in the Hebrew Bible and won't develop into a fully articulate and resounding message until the arrival of Jesus.

Girard has this to say:

Throughout the Old Testament, a work of exegesis is in progress, operating in precisely the opposite direction to the usual dynamics of mythology and culture, and yet it is impossible to say that this work is completed.

Girard, as many Christians do, finds the Hebrew Bible incomplete in both its form and its content.

In its content, Judaism does not fully renounce sacrifice and violence. The God of the Hebrew people still receives sacrifices from Cain and Abel. He still demands the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. He still used the Red Sea to destroy the Pharaoh's army. He still casts plagues upon Egypt as divine punishment. He still unleashes the flood Noah against immorality and impiety.

In its form, the Hebrew tradition still clings to the pagan logic of legal prohibitions and rituals. Its fault is legalism. The same legalism that is unable to contain the violence of Cain, and the same legalism that will eventually contribute to Christ's death. After all, who were among Christ's persecutors, if not the Pharisees and the Scribes, the Jewish legal authorities?

3. Completing the Message

Johnathan Bi: Christ then, for Girard, completes the Hebrew Bible in both its form and its content. This completion is captured in no better place than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where he articulates the core moral framework of Christianity.

I read to you Matthew 5:38–40:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.

Jesus here is taking the Jewish intuition to its completion. An eye for an eye is from Leviticus, and this type of tit-for-tat morality is common to Jewish law. The Jewish law only asks us to refrain from violent initiative, but in some sense encourages violent responses. Jesus' point is that it's not enough to simply refrain from violent initiative because in mimetic rivalries we always feel we are wronged, we are always acting on the defensive. Perhaps thinking about the example of nuclear war is helpful here. Some states around the topic of nuclear war have declared that they will not be the first to use nuclear weapons. But I think that's a very little comfort to anyone, because it's so easy to misinterpret an innocuous action for an attack and thus initiate a nuclear war when you think you're actually defending yourself. The only way to break out of the scapegoat mechanism is for everyone to unilaterally renounce violence, even in the case where violence is committed unto us. While the content of the Hebrew Bib

delegitimizes and sometimes exposes violence, it still permits for the controlled use of it. Jesus is going to take that to the extreme. We must say no to violence, full stop, period.

But to fully give up violence, we must also move away from legalism. I read to you Matthew 5:21–22:

Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, worthless, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

Jesus also completes the form of Judaism. He goes beyond mere legal prescriptions; his morality is one that governs the internal soul and not just the actions of the external body. Not only is killing, as it's prescribed in the Hebrew Bible, a sin – so is mere anger, violent thought, and intention. Legal rules, pagan prohibitions, cannot save us from the scapegoat mechanism from reciprocal violence because of Girard's views on theodicy. Human nature is so essentially corrupt that it can poison the system we set around it and use it to persecute and scapegoat, even if it was intended to stop persecution. This was the story of Cain – what was a prohibition set by God against violence – that Cain shall be avenged sevenfold became a war cry, the logic of a blood feud for Cain's grandson – declaring himself that he shall be avenged seventy-sevenfold.

David Perell: I see this all the time where legalism fails, where the laws don't do what we want them to do. And if you go back a couple years ago and you would drive around America, you would see these big yellow billboards that said Amazon, \$15 minimum wage. And there are all these people throwing their fists up, chanting: go Amazon! Go Amazon! And those people often wanted to support small businesses. That was the thing that they were interested in. They wanted to support labor. But what happened was that \$15 minimum wage actually made it impossible for small businesses to

compete against Amazon. Why? Because Amazon has a ton of cash. These small businesses don't. And so the laws end up having their opposite effect.

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, I think that's a great example. And I'm probably trying to stretch the analogy here. But it's something like in the same way that God prescribed on Cain that his killing would be avenged sevenfold, and that was to protect them from violence, social movements try to create minimum wage for labor and small businesses. But just as Cain's grandson co-opted the law from God and turned it to the logic of blood feud, in your example, it seems that Amazon co-opted the labor law and turned it away to go against labor as well as small business. Is that right? Did I understand that correctly?

David Perell: Yeah.

Johnathan Bi: And that is precisely the problem with legalism. No matter what legal institutions and rules you put in place, no matter how well intentioned you are or even how good the effects initially. Human nature has a way of corrupting them and co-opting it for perverse means.

Jesus then will end legalism. Jesus is to the Hebrew Bible, what the spirit is to the letter. Jesus' completion of the Hebrew intuition – that the victim is innocent – will reach its zenith in the crucifixion, our second topic of discussion that we must now turn to.

4. The Crucifixion

Johnathan Bi: Christ's crucifixion will be the founding murder that ends all founding murders, the myth that ends all myths, the religious event to end all religions.

For Girard, the crucifixion exposes the scapegoat mechanism – the basis for corrupt human society and false pagan religions – fatally wounding it once and for all. By doing so, Christ will show himself to be the one true God, standing above a sea of false

pretenders. The crucifixion is also the completion of the Hebrew Bible, where the muffled intuition, buried deep within its stories – that the victim is innocent – will transform into a loud, unmistakable declaration. Jesus is the ultimate victim. He's the perfect Abel. He's the perfect Joseph. And the strategy to expose the scapegoat mechanism is quite similar, through proximity to pagan myth – the metaphor of the vaccine that we just discussed. So let us first reflect on how the crucifixion is very similar to the shape of pagan religion.

First, we have the mimetic contagion within the people of Jerusalem. The very crowd that has welcomed Jesus with open arms just days before, now has fully turned on Jesus. This radical switching of allegiances is emblematic of a group in contagion. Think back to Ajax, how quickly his anger was redirected from the Trojans to Odysseus. And think to the French Revolution and its revolving door of new victim. Violence is blind, and it just wants to sink its teeth into something.

Second, we have the scapegoating event, the founding murder, the actual judgment sentencing and crucifixion of Christ. And there cannot be a better example of violent unanimity. Everyone stands against Christ. The Jewish religious authorities, the Roman political authorities, the two thieves crucified at either side of Jesus who all hurl insults at him, and all the disciples too betray Jesus, including Peter, upon whom the Catholic Church will be built. All of them betray Jesus when being confronted by the crowd. Peter denies that he has anything to do with Jesus thrice.

Third then, we have an unlikely peace that is established and brokered between two previous enemies united by their dislike and expulsion of Christ: there's Pontius Pilate, a Roman political authority; and Herod, a Jewish ruler.

Lastly, we have the divinization of Christ in his resurrection. Following from that, we have the institutionalization of this founding murder in the Bible, the Catholic Church, and all the multitude of religious rituals and prohibitions that flow from them – many of which are still with us today.

The structure of Christ's crucifixion perfectly conforms to the pure form of the scapegoat mechanism. And if this were the extent of the Christ story, then it would be just another false pagan myth like Oedipus, Baldr, or Zeus. But of course – just like the stories of Abel and Joseph – within the details we find a story that is radically different from classical mythology, and one that seeks to subvert pagan religion from within.

For Girard, there are three qualities about Christ that both perfectly expose the scapegoat mechanism and show that he is the one true God: His innocence, his truth, and his love. Let's go through each of those qualities of Christ.

4.1 Christ's Innocence

Johnathan Bi: Christ's innocence begins before even Christ begins – with his virgin birth. Immediately, we are dealing with a being drastically different from the pagan gods, whose birth has always been depicted as rape or rape-like. Think back to the intercourse that made Dionysus, for example, Zeus bears down on Dionysus' mother like a beast of prey. That's how it's described. Christ's birth is not bloody, it's not a rape, hell there wasn't even any sex in it – it was perfectly clean and an innocent beginning.

But Christ's innocence is no better displayed than in a single line muttered by his prosecutor, Pontius Pilate, who judged and eventually sentenced Christ. Let me read you Luke 23:4:

Then said Pilate to the chief priests and to the people, I find no fault in this man

Of course, Pilate here is talking about Jesus. Pilate had just interrogated Jesus by himself before he got caught up in the crowd. And his conclusion is unmistakable, Jesus is innocent. Even Pilate's wife knew Jesus was innocent and pleaded for his release. What this shows is that it was only forced by the hand of the mob did Pilate hesitantly sentence and crucify Jesus.

There's no room for confusion or doubt here on the guilt of Jesus. Jesus is not guilty because what could be a better proof of the victim's innocence than that his judge believed he was innocent? The mob is guilty, the expulsion was unjust, the victim is innocent. This is the fundamental, resounding message that comes from the crucifixion.

And it is a message that will expose and begin to tear down the scapegoat mechanism. From this moment on, we will be reading myths in light of the Gospels, which allow us to see their lies. The idea goes something like this: Christ's innocence and unjust prosecution through the proliferation of Christianity becomes the dominant moral paradigm we view the world through. We will always be looking out for persecution. We will always be siding with the victim. We will always be aware of the deceitfulness of the mob in so far as we are in this Christian moral paradigm.

And this lens allows us to slowly but surely decode and escape from the scapegoat mechanism, which cannot function if people know that the victim is innocent. Because if the victim is innocent, then catharsis cannot be achieved. Without catharsis, there's no peace. Without peace, there's no sacredity. Without sacredity, pagan worldly religions lose their prestige. And without prestige, they can no longer properly function. Christ is tearing down the pillars of deceitful worldly foundation.

If not a proof on its own, Christ's innocence, for Girard, is a strong reason to believe that he is the one true God because of his perfection. He withstands temptations. He never wrongs anyone. And unlike Old Testament victims who may have minor flaws like Joseph's hubris, for example – Christ is perfectly innocent.

But it's not just the perfection of his innocence, but a perfection of that innocence in the least hospitable environment, which Girard thinks is so notable. I mean, recall, how he said that in mimetic contagion, when society is in frenzy, that frenzy tends to get to everyone? Well, the fact that Christ was able to maintain his innocence gives a hint that he's not subject to the same human follies.

4.2 Christ's Truth

Johnathan Bi: What makes Jesus' defeat of the scapegoat mechanism all the more true was that the reason Jesus was victimized was because he was trying to expose victimization. And so the very act of his murder became a proof of what he was trying to expose. Let me try to frame this in other words. Jesus had access to truth, the second quality – Girard believes that Jesus was the first being to understand the scapegoat mechanism and its effects on society.

Girard interprets many of Jesus' parables as hinting at the scapegoat mechanism and the role of violence and murder in the foundation of worldly culture and society. But none is as convincing as what Girard calls, and some Christians call, the curse against the Pharisees.

The context for the passage I'm gonna read you is this. Jesus here is talking to and reproaching the Pharisees – the Jewish legal authorities – for persecution. This is what Jesus is trying to defend, Luke 11:50–51:

The blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world.. From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zachariah which perished between the altar and the temple.

Jesus is trying to defend all victims of persecution here. Abel to Zechariah is supposed to represent all the victims, with Abel being the first victim and Zechariah being the last from the Hebrew Bible. What Jesus is trying to do is to expose the innocence of the victims. But this middle sentence is even more interesting “blood shed from the foundation of the world.” This foundation is not Genesis, it's not the creation of the world. The Greek word that is translated to “foundation” here connotes a passing over from disorder to order. And what is that if not the peaceful effects of the scapegoat mechanism grounded on the blood of victims? The foundation mentioned is the foundation of worldly order from the scapegoat mechanism. That is what Christ is targeting here.

In this exchange, and exchanges like this, Christ wants to expose the role of innocence as victims in the foundation of worldly power, including the power of the Pharisees. So of course, the Pharisees cannot let him continue and will eventually be one of the key groups that push for Christ's death.

Christ's death then is, in some sense, a poetic victory. The fact that Christ got scapegoated for trying to expose scapegoating proves the point about scapegoating. Put it another way, Christ set up the perfect trap for the scapegoat mechanism. Either you do nothing, in which case more and more people will hear Christ talking about his message. Or you kill him, which is what they did, but in doing so, proved the very point that Christ was trying to make and spread his message even further. The very silencing of Christ became the loud voice that shouted his message.

As is the case with innocence, it's not just Christ's ability to access the core truth of human society in a vacuum, *ex nihilo*, but his ability to access that in the least hospitable of conditions that Girard sees as a sign of superhuman divinity. In the heart of the scapegoat mechanism, where reason has no power, where truth has no roots to grow, Christ was able to see and expose the violent truth of human society. Only a divine being, so Girard argues, can do so.

4.3 Christ's Love

Johnathan Bi: The last and most important quality of Christ is his unconditional love. This love, unlike his innocence or his ability to grasp truth, doesn't necessarily directly tear down the scapegoat mechanism, but rather teaches us what to do when we find ourselves in it. When we are being victimized, or when we are doing the victimization,

Girard tells us that there's only one way out, and it's captured by Matthew 5:43-44. Listen to this:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.

Jesus' prescriptions here is an extremely difficult one. If not only because this radical commitment to love and commitment to renounce violence must be done by everyone unanimously in order to end the conflict. But it is the only possible solution other than the violence, the deceit, and the lies of the scapegoat mechanism to stop an escalating war of all against all.

Perhaps we can at least take solace in the fact that Christ will eventually live up to his own word about unconditional love. Listen to this, Luke 23:33:

And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, the criminals, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

At a point when everyone turns against Christ, when he is suffering tremendous physical pain, when he is at the end of his worldly life – the dominant emotion for Christ is still his love for others. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” As is the case with truth and innocence, it is not just the strength of Christ's love but the ability for him to love in such an inhospitable environment that Girard sees evidence of true divinity.

And this makes me think of my period of study and practice in Buddhist monasteries in Nepal. One of the core tenets of Buddhism, and I'm being very simplistic here, is the love for all sentient beings. Not too dissimilar, perhaps, from what Christ is advocating here. And what I realized when I was practicing in Nepal holed up in the Himalayas is that it's easy to love all sentient beings when you are holed away in a monastery without struggle or strife in the world. But as soon as you get back into the world, as soon as your ego and your spirit enters into competition with others, boy,

it hard to love. Christ then managed to show the greatest degree of love in the least likely of situations, when everyone is wrongfully blaming and hurting him – perhaps Girard is onto something with divinity after all.

To summarize, the crucifixion exposed the founding mechanism, mortally wounding it, by showing that the victim is innocent. The death of Christ confirmed and spread the truth of Christ's teachings about the unjust and violent foundations of society. And the love of Christ gives us a way, however difficult, of preventing and dealing with the scapegoat process. It's impressive already for Christ to have maintained his perfect innocence, to have grasped the full extent of the truth, and to have displayed an unwavering love. But the fact that Christ was able to do so in an environment that was completely hostile to innocence, truth, and love is what, for Girard, makes him the true God.

5. An Anthropology of the Cross

Johnathan Bi: There's one last topic I wish to discuss today, and that is to finish painting Girard's anthropology of the Cross, and to reflect on the type of Christianity that Girard has put in front of us. By anthropology of the Cross, I'm referring to Girard's translation of the most important Christian phenomena into readily understandable cultural, psychological, and social language. To take Christian phenomena from the other world and to ground it in this world.

I began painting the picture here in Lecture II by arguing that the compulsive, prideful, unsatisfying metaphysical desire – the desire to be – was nothing but our original sin. I continued painting the picture in Lecture III by describing the Christian concept of the fallenness of the world, of a worldly evil, if you will, as really the psychological and social pathologies made necessary by our mimetic natures: Fetishization, alienation, bipolarity, masochism, oppression, and inequity. Let's continue then in fleshing out this picture and translating more crucial Christian concepts into anthropological language.

5.1 Girard's Interpretation of Satan

Johnathan Bi: What is Satan? Girard has this to say:

Satan is the name for the mimetic process seen as a whole. That is why he is the source not merely of rivalry and disorder, but of all the forms of lying order inside which humanity lives. Human beings are sons of Satan because they are sons of murder.

Satan is the scapegoat mechanism. He is the frenzy that leads groups to descend into chaos, but also the violence and lies that establishes the worldly order.

David Perell: But isn't the scapegoat mechanism responsible for all culture and society? And then does that make all human society satanic?

Johnathan Bi: It does. Or at least you are almost right. Satan isn't all of society, but of worldly power. Satan is the prince and principalities of the world. He strives to be like God. He wants to be the ruler for this world, just as God is for the next. This is Girard's conclusion: it's very surprising, so I'm not surprised at all, that you jumped and asked that question. Satan isn't some scheming, conniving figure lurking in the shadows trying to bring down the worldly order – he is the worldly order.

This idea that worldly power is inherently satanic is not a foreign one to Christian theology, and its implications are profound. The false pagan gods that the scapegoat mechanism establishes, those are all satanic – the false idols that take us away from the one true God. All of our institutions, like law, in so far as they are grounded on violence and lies, those are also manifestations of Satan. But it's not just violence that is satanic, so is worldly order and peace that comes from this violence. It is satanic because it is built upon the body of a murdered victim. In that way, by living in and benefiting from that peace, Girard thinks we are all, you and I, participating in satanism right now.

While the entire worldly order we live in is all tainted by Satan to some degree, there are particular strands of ideas that are strongly and more explicitly satanic. And for Girard, right-wing reactionary political ideologies – such as Nazism – that outwardly reject the Christian concern for the victim, that want to go back to scapegoating and killing, these for Girard are all strongly satanic.

5.2 Girard's Interpretation of the Christian Revelation

Johnathan Bi: Let's think about another concept. What does the Christian revelation translate to in anthropological language? Well, that's what we've spent this entire lecture dissecting: the Christian revelation is the exposure and defeat of the scapegoat mechanism – which is also Satan.

Christ expels and wounds Satan. And Christ just has one thing to prescribe – it's not the Eucharist, it's not the Lord's Prayer, it's not Lent, it's not virginity – in this view even the belief in God the Father is not the constitutive message of Christ – all Christ asks us to do is love. Unwavering, unconditional love for everyone as Christ exemplified, is the only thing that can save us when we are deep in the mimetic process, when we are in the grips of Satan.

5.3 Girard's Interpretation of the Anti-Christ

Johnathan Bi: Let's continue painting the picture. Let's continue building the dictionary. What about the Anti-Christ? How does that translate into anthropological language? Well, first, let's begin on the theological side. The Anti-Christ is a deviant figure only briefly mentioned in the New Testament. The Anti-Christ isn't Satan, who directly opposes Christ, but operates in a more subtle manner by competing with and subverting Christ – the Anti-Christ will work wonders, he'll sit in the temple of God and claim to be God himself.

This is what Girard has to say:

The attempt by Nietzsche and Hitler to make humankind forget the concern for victims has ended in a failure that seems definitive, at least for the moment. But it is not Christianity that profits from the victory of the concern for victims in our world. It is rather what I think must be called the other totalitarianism, the most cunning and malicious of the two, the one with the greatest future, by all evidence. At present it does not oppose Judeo-Christian aspirations but claims them as its own and questions the concern for victims on the part of Christians ... The other totalitarianism does not openly oppose Christianity but outflanks it on the left wing. All through the twentieth century, the most powerful mimetic force was never Nazism and related ideologies. The most powerful anti-Christian movement is the one that takes over and “radicalizes” the concern for victims in order to paganize it. This other totalitarianism presents itself as the liberator of humanity. In trying to usurp the place of Christ, the powers imitate him in the way a mime rival imitates his model in order to defeat him. They denounce the Christian concern for victims as hypocritical and a pale imitation of the authentic crusade against oppression and persecution for which they would carry the banner themselves.

If Satan is reactionary totalitarianism, then the Anti-Christ is progressive totalitarianism. Why? For Girard, the core message of the Christian revelation is that the victim is innocent and ought to be protected. Far-right reactionary movements directly oppose this message. They want to bring back power. They shamelessly persecute victims – Satan stands directly opposed to Christ. Far-left progressive movements, however, appropriate this message. For Girard, they pay lip service to the protection of victims in order to continue persecuting. Today, the only type of persecution that is accepted is persecution in the name of protecting victims. Think about all the horrors committed in the Soviet Union in the name of protecting the proletariat, the little guy. This is what it means to paganize Christianity and why progressive movements, in so far as they’re hypocritical, of course, constitute for Girard the Anti-Christ. The false prophet who appears so close to Christ but so easily leads us astray.

5.4 Girard's Interpretation of the Kingdom of God

Johnathan Bi: Let's move on to a slightly more optimistic Christian notion. What about the kingdom of God? How does Girard interpret that? I quote you, Girard:

The significance of the Kingdom of God is completely clear. It is always a matter bringing together the warring brothers, of putting an end to the mimetic crisis by universal renunciation of violence...The Kingdom of God means the complete and definitive elimination of every form of vengeance and every form of reprisal in relations between men.

The kingdom of God is not necessarily only available in some other-worldly beyond but establishable in this world. It is made possible by Jesus exposing the scapegoat mechanism and giving us the prescription for unconditional love. The kingdom of God is when all of us practice unconditional love and renounce violence – and I do mean all of us, because if only some people ascribe to nonviolence, they will become victims and expelled as Jesus was.

5.5 Girard's Interpretation of the Apocalypse

Johnathan Bi: However, if we don't live up to this ideal of the Kingdom of God, then Girard thinks we're heading towards Apocalypse. The Christian idea of Apocalypse captured by New Testament books such as Revelations, tells us of a violent ending of the world. Girard humanizes this ending. Violence will not be caused by God, but by us. It will be human violence, our inability to follow Jesus' prescriptions of unconditional love that will be the end of us. Now that we no longer have the scapegoat mechanism – an easy out from violence – to lean on, we are susceptible to world-scaled mimetic contagion engulfing our entire species in violence. There's nothing other-worldly about this ending, nothing "religious" in the traditional sense of the word religion – as the cover of Girard's most apocalyptic book, he had the picture of a nuclear explosion. Clearly, Apocalypse comes from the hands of man. This is the anthropological reading.

6. A Christian Dictionary

Johnathan Bi: We've compiled a dictionary here, translating core Christian concepts – original sin, evil, Satan, Christian revelation, Anti-Christ, Kingdom of God, and Apocalypse – into anthropological terms. And we can now use this dictionary to translate the essential Christian story into an easily digestible history of mankind.

The Christian story, let me give you that one first, goes something like this: imitating Satan, we developed original sin, which is responsible for all worldly evil. This original sin led us to worship Satan in the guise of false idols. Christ exposed Satan and gave us the possibility of freedom. Satan and the Anti-Christ tempt us to this day. And finally, the Christian Revelation engenders either the Kingdom of God or violent Apocalypse. It's a five-fold story. And so let's now translate this story one sentence at a time for to see the power of this Girardian dictionary that we've built.

The first sentence is, "Imitating Satan we developed original sin, which is responsible for worldly evil." This becomes: the fundamental human drive is metaphysical desire – the desire to exist in great measure – and it is responsible for all the psychological and social pathologies in this world.

The second sentence, "This original sin led us to worship Satan in the guise of false idols," becomes: metaphysical desire leads groups towards reciprocal violence – the only solution to which is the scapegoat mechanism that violently and deceitfully expels innocent victims and erects arbitrary gods. Do you see the power of this dictionary?

The third sentence then is this, "Christ exposed Satan and gave us the possibility of freedom." It becomes: the story of the crucifixion shed light on the violence and lies of the scapegoat mechanism and gave us agency to build better societal structures.

The fourth sentence, "Satan and the Anti-Christ tempt us to this day" becomes: in modernity, far-right movements openly persecute victims, whereas far-left movements

persecute victims in the name of ending persecution.

And finally, the final and fifth sentence, the ending to this Christian story is this. Let me repeat it one more time, “The Christian Revelation engenders either the Kingdom of God or violent Apocalypse.” Translated, it becomes: with the scapegoat mechanism now exposed and weakened, we are at a time in history where we can recognize each other’s humanity and unilaterally renounce violence. However, if we fail to do so, the checks on violence are gone and we will perish in one last world war.

What an achievement this is – to be able to render intelligible the core Christian message, the core Christian story and worldview without any appeal to metaphysical concepts or otherworldly ideals, but just human psychology and anthropological theories.

6.1 Girard’s Unorthodoxy: The Sacrificial Reading

Johnathan Bi: However, it is because and not despite this massive achievement, Girard’s ability to translate the Christian message into anthropological language, that at the same time, Girard presents us with a deeply unorthodox Christianity.

It is unorthodox, first, because it must reject a canonical reading of the Christ story that tells of the Father sacrificing his one and only son to redeem humanity. Girard’s reading of Christianity forces him to push back on both fronts. The father did not sacrifice his son, and Christ’s death did not redeem humanity. Why? Well, if the father sacrificed the son – in the same way a tribal leader sacrifices a lamb to end a dispute – then God would be like a pagan god, demanding blood for blood. He would be no different than Aztec gods. He would be no different than Apollo. Such a reading, that the Father sent Christ to die and made the mob turn on him so that his blood would redeem our sins, paints a picture of a God keeping a vengeful moral tally that Girard just cannot have.

And such a story would be missing the entire point of Christ's death, because instead of putting the agency in the mob and realizing the universal human folly of scapegoating, you would be putting the agency of Christ's death onto God. Suddenly then, the crucifixion isn't about a core mechanism within human nature with the universal relevance, instead it just becomes a particular event orchestrated by God. And the lessons learned in it, under this sacrificial reading, are not applicable everywhere, because this is a special show that God has put on for us.

Girard has this to say, I quote:

To interpret it as sacrifice absolves man the responsibility of murder. It sugarcoats the crucifixion as the result of a divine pact rather than the misguided deeds of men which we must introspect and correct.

And so, if God is sacrificial, it's not the sacrifice of other for self that we are used to thinking about in religious sacrifice – it's not putting a lamb in place of our sins and killing it – it's a sacrifice of self for other that Christ and God is doing – like a fireman rushing into a building knowing that he will likely perish.

And of course, for Girard, Christ's death did not redeem our sins, it exposed our sin. This exposure gives us the possibility of redemption indeed, but it's not redemption itself.

6.2 Girard's Unorthodoxy: God's Absence

Johnathan Bi: Girard's Christianity then is unorthodox, second, because of his conception of divinity. Go onto the street and ask any Christian why Christ is divine, why he's the one true God. What do you think they're going to say?

David Perell: They're probably gonna talk about the miracles, turning water to wine, raising from the dead, walking on water, and then being resurrected.

Johnathan Bi: Precisely. They would say the miracles and the fact that Jesus came back to life. But Girard says, nay. That can't be why Christ is divine. Because pagan gods are resurrected all the time, pagan gods perform a whole boatload of miracles well. Do you take Christ to be a conjurer of cheap tricks? For Girard, Christ's divinity is not in his power and otherworldliness, but in his morality and humanism.

In defending Christ as the true God, Girard doesn't even bring up the miracles. And when he does bring up the resurrection, what's important for him is less so that Christ was resurrected – pagan gods get resurrected all the time – but that there were three days between death and resurrection. For Girard, this symbolized that the link between mob violence and life, between violent expulsion and worldly peace, had been fundamentally broken.

In fact, what is more a convincing sign of Christ's divinity is his refusal to perform miracles on the cross to save himself and his experience of human suffering, epitomized by his desperate cry on the cross, Matthew 27:46:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

This is Girard's position. I quote:

Instead of making the crucifixion a cause of Jesus' divinity, it is preferable to see it as a consequence of Christ's divinity.

Girard's point here is that if Christ were a pagan god, if he were a false god, then his death and the peace that ensued would be the cause for his divinity. But Christ is the one true God, one who is moral through and through, perfected in his innocence, truth, and love, and such a being was bound to be sought out and killed by our violent and unjust world. The crucifixion is the consequence of his divinity, not the cause.

And so, not only does Jesus dismantle the scapegoat mechanism, but he also supplants the pagan sacred with Christian divinity. The genuine sacred for Girard is not power, powerful and powerless, but morality, good and evil. The genuine sacred is not pagan

transcendence – being more than man, having these miraculous powers – but humanism – perfecting the qualities of man, of truth, of love, of innocence. Clearly, there has been a revaluation of values. From now on, our dominant moral paradigm will not be between powerful and powerless, but be between good and evil.

So what is so unorthodox about this? Well, the problem, I wager, is that Girard did good of a job translating Christian phenomenon into psychological, cultural, and social constructs – and in doing so, he de-emphasizes, I think, what most Christians probably consider a crucial part of Christianity: the otherworldliness, the metaphysical, theological, cosmological beyond. Let me give you a few examples. Apocalypse comes from human hands. Satan is just the emergent sum of the victim mechanism. What defines Christ is that he perfected human virtues of truth, love, and innocence. The next eternal life is barely brought up. Christ has not come down to teach us how to save our souls for eternity, but how to be freed of violence in this world. Christ's message has been transformed from otherworldly salvation to this worldly peace.

In all of Girard's books, there's just one sentence where Girard says something substantive about the other world, about the beyond. Upon losing hope that we can establish the Kingdom of God on earth, Girard says this:

Christ's triumph will take place in a beyond of which we can describe neither the time nor place.

The only time, at least that I can find, where anything of import happens not on humanistic terms is this one single sentence that Christ will establish his kingdom in this world but the next. In about 20 or so books, that is all that he has to say about the beyond, and I imagine many Christians will find it lacking. How are our sins punished? How will God judge our souls? How does purgatory work? What is the ontology of the next world? These aren't even the questions Girard bothers to answer.

If I may be as heretical to Girard as I think he is to Christian orthodoxy, I would say that Girard is giving us a very atheistic Christianity. Where even God himself does play a big part. Listen to this.

This is Girard. I'm gonna quote him:

So now we are liberated. We know that we are by ourselves, with no father in the sky to punish us and interfere with our paltry business. Divine punishment is demystified by the Gospels. Its only place nowadays is in the mythic imagination

This shouldn't be interpreted literally and taken out of context – he isn't saying by the phrase, no father in the sky, that there is no God, but that there is no punishing God, no father in the sky to punish us, who gets involved in human affairs. But I think you get the intuition here. Girard has done such a good job explaining Christianity by appealing to humanistic mechanisms that there leaves little room for God or beyond. Far are we from the meditations on Christian ontology that we find in Augustine. Far are we from the theological teachings for the Trinity that we find in Aquinas. Far are we from the detailed descriptions of the afterlife we find in Dante. And far are we from the angelic civil war we find in Milton. In Girard's Christianity, God's absence is just as loud and jarring as humanity's presence. The success of his anthropology of the Cross crowds out a theology of the Cross.

6.3 Girard's Unorthodoxy: Historical Christianity

Johnathan Bi: But the question arises, if Christianity is so humanistic and this world if it's really against religion and sacredity, how has it become a religion in itself? How have we founded societies with it as its basis?

Girard's provocative answer is this, I quote:

The Gospels can serve as a foundation for a new culture similar to all the previous cultures, only as a result of a certain distortion of the original message.

The third way then, that Girard's Christianity is unorthodox, is that in so far as Christianity has taken on a religious form, and in so far as it has been at the seat of worldly power, it has been perverted. And that's almost all of historical Christianity. For Girard, the very idea of Christian power is an oxymoron because the core message of Christianity is the injustice of all worldly power and religion. So it's not just the clear perversions of historical Christianity that worry Girard, it's not just the selling of indulgences or the orgies in the Vatican or the justifications of conquest, the very fact that Christianity has taken on a religious form as a cultural foundation is a perversion in itself. People have deified and dehumanized Christ in the same way they did Zeus. Like the sacrificial reading, the Christian story has been distorted to be more palatable. Christianity has been the basis of persecution, the Jews, witches, Muslims, and there's a whole host of prohibitions and a whole host of rituals, just as pagan religion had.

Girard's point is clear: people have missed the core Christian message – love thy neighbor, renounce violence, that is the core of Christ's teaching, which has been muffled by a religious form. Think about how radical this is – what it means to be Christian and to be like Christ. It's not the Eucharist, it's not the Lord's prayer, it's not Lent, it's not chastity, it's not biblical study, it's not even, dare I say, the belief in the resurrection or faith in the Father. While all of these may help or are necessary supports, the constitutive quality of being Christian for Girard is aspiring to unconditional love and the renunciation of all violence unconditionally.

6.4 Girard's Unorthodoxy: Apocalyptic Ambivalence

Johnathan Bi: This incompatibility between worldly power and Christianity is so strong that there is one final Girardian unorthodoxy that flows from it. Every capital-G good thing we have talked about today, the expulsion of the scapegoat mechanism, exposure of violence and deceit, the introduction of truth and love in history, all of these will tear our worldly foundations apart and lead us to Apocalypse. And how can it not tear the world apart – if human societies, as we discussed last lecture, depend

violence and deceit for worldly peace, then the introduction of love and truth can only bring about chaos. If Satan is ultimately evil but brings worldly peace, then Christ is ultimately good but brings worldly catastrophe. After all, Girard reminds us, Christ himself tells us as much.

Matthew 10:34, Christ says:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.

In the final two lectures then, we will understand the terrible wound that Christ's sword has left on human history.



Recommend Johnathan Bi to your readers

Studying the great books, sharing my learnings through lectures & interviews

Recommend



3 Likes

← Previous

Next →

Discussion about this post

Comments Restacks



Write a comment...

© 2025 Johnathan Bi • [Privacy](#) • [Terms](#) • [Collection notice](#)
[Substack](#) is the home for great culture