

## Violence, Mysticism, and René Girard

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**Ann Astell**

University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN, USA

### Abstract

Blending the science of acknowledged mystics—Dostoevsky, Weil, Péguy, Pascal, Hölderlin, and Augustine—with the insights of social scientists over the course of a long and distinguished career, René Girard contributed to an understanding of the mysticism of social life through focusing attention principally on the *ersatz* mysticism of metaphysical desire and mob behavior, but also on the interindividual's contrastive experience of Christ's "innermost mediation" of grace for conversion and charitable work in the world.

### Keywords

Emil Durkheim, mimetic theory, mysticism, René Girard, Satan, the Satanic, Simone Weil, violence

Unless broadly defined as religion itself, mysticism initially seems a topic far removed from the concerns of René Girard (1923–2015), the great French cultural anthropologist, biblical commentator, and literary critic, best known for his mimetic theory of the origins of human violence. In one of his combative moments, Girard remarks, "The narrowest empiricists accuse [Émile Durkheim] of being a mystic. And they will no doubt claim that I am even more of a mystic, despite the rigorously rational character of the genetic model that we have begun to elaborate."<sup>1</sup> Taken in

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1. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (1978; Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1987), 63.

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### Corresponding author:

Ann Astell, University of Notre Dame, 130 Malloy Hall, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556-4619, USA.

Email: [aastell@nd.edu](mailto:aastell@nd.edu)

context, Girard's disavowal of mysticism here amounts to a denial that his hypothesis is irrational. As William James complained long ago, "The words 'mysticism' and 'mystical' are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast . . . and without a base in either facts or logic."<sup>2</sup> Such a reproach in the case of Girard—elected an "Immortal" in the *Académie française*—is surely unwarranted. Girard has indeed exposed himself to the charge of being a mystic, however, through an intellectual association throughout his career with mystics of various sorts—not only Durkheim, the so-called Jewish atheist "mystic" of "effervescence,"<sup>3</sup> but also such generally acknowledged Christian mystics as Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–81), Simone Weil (1909–43), Charles Péguy (1873–1914), Blaise Pascal (1623–62), Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), and Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Blending the science of these mystics—their knowledge of self, society, Satan, and God—with the insights of cultural anthropology and psychology, Girard has focused attention on what he calls "interdividual" experience and thus contributed to a specifically social model of mysticism—a mystical theology of the often violent social life.<sup>4</sup>

Studies that conjoin the words "violence" and "mysticism" in their titles typically employ the vocabulary of psychoanalysis<sup>5</sup> and define "mysticism" itself in purely psychological, rather than traditional, theocentric ways.<sup>6</sup> While Sigmund Freud

2. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; London: Routledge, 2002), 294.
3. On the "effervescence" of mob delirium, see Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (1912; New York: Free Press, 1995), 212–16. According to Alexander Tristan Riley, "In place of the adulation inspired by the omnipotent God of the Torah, Durkheim's message is one of adulation inspired by the omnipotent creative power of society." Riley, *Godless Intellectuals? The Intellectual Pursuit of the Sacred Reinvented* (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 126.
4. See Ann W. Astell, "Mysticism of the Social Life," in M. A. McIntosh and E. W. Howells, eds., *The Oxford Handbook to Mystical Theology* (forthcoming).
5. See, for example, Peter Hartocollis, "Mysticism and Violence: The Case of Nikos Kazantzakis," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 55, no. 2 (1974): 205–10; Hartocollis, "Aggression and Mysticism," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 12 (1976): 214–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00107530.1976.10745427>; and Stephen S. Bush, "The Ethics of Ecstasy: Georges Bataille and Amy Hollywood on Mysticism, Morality, and Violence," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39 (2011): 299–320, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2011.00478.x>. A different way of combining the themes of violence and mysticism, more akin to Girard's, can be detected in the mystical theology of Johann Baptist Metz. See Johann M. Vento, "Violence, Trauma, and Resistance: A Feminist Appraisal of Metz's Mysticism of Suffering Unto God," *Horizons* 29 (2002): 7–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0360966900009695>; Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998).
6. On the various meanings of "mysticism," see Julia A. Lamm, "A Guide to Christian Mysticism," in Julia A. Lamm, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Oxford: Blackwell-Wiley, 2013), 1–24. See also Ralph W. Hood, Jr. and Zhuo Chen, "The Social Scientific Study of Christian Mysticism," in Lamm, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, 577–91.

(1856–1939) was undoubtedly an important interlocutor for him (on such topics as narcissism, ambivalence, myth, taboo, and the social origins of violence),<sup>7</sup> Girard refused to reduce “mimetic” and “metaphysical” desire to what Scott Cowdell names Freud’s “object-generated desire and sexual foundationalism.”<sup>8</sup> Girard’s Oedipus is the scapegoat of a community beset by a deadly plague, not the Freudian symbol of neurosis. For Girard, all desire is ultimately the desire to be (“Tout désir est désir d’être”)<sup>9</sup>—an empirical claim with obvious philosophical and theological horizons. Keeping these horizons ever in view and testing his own experience and vision of things against the perspective of the mystics he read, Girard undertook a life-long labor that yielded an asceticism wary of idolatry, rivalry, and victimage; a biblical topology of anti-sacrifice; and an eschatology of hope to end a history of violence.

### Ersatz Mysticism, Idolatry, and Conversion

Girard’s first two major books, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1965; *Mensonge romantique et vérité*, 1961) and *Violence and the Sacred* (1977; *La Violence et le sacré*, 1972)—the first, a study of literary realism; the second, an ethnology of primitive religions, hailed by anthropologist Victor Turner as a theoretical advance beyond Durkheim—both concern idolatry.<sup>10</sup> In the first, Girard argues for the “sociological value” of the modern novel.<sup>11</sup> Following the insight of the French political scientist Alexis de Toqueville (1805–59) that modern democracy, which champions liberty, equality, and fraternity, has the effect of increasing imitation, human competitiveness, and conflictual desire,<sup>12</sup> Girard elaborates a mimetic theory, according to which desire

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7. On Girard and Freud, see Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory*, trans. Gabriel Borrud, *Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* (2011; East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2013), 20, 163–64, 299–302. For a Girardian psychology, see Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire*, trans. Eugene Webb (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2010); Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2016); Oughourlian, *Psychopolitics: Conversations with Trevor Cribben Merrill*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2012). For a study that combines the insights of Girard and Julia Kristeva, see Martha J. Reineke, *Intimate Domain: Desire, Trauma, and Mimetic Theory* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2014).
  8. Quoted in Scott Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, and Crisis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2013), 32–45 at 36.
  9. René Girard, *Quand ces choses commenceront: Entretiens avec Michel Treguer* (Paris: Arléa, 1994), 31, quoted in Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity*, 37. Cf. René Girard, *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2014), 12.
  10. Victor Turner, review of *Violence and the Sacred* by René Girard, *Human Nature* 10 (March 1978): 24–25.
  11. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (1961; Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1965), 217.
  12. See Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 136.

is mediated by models who, in the case of “internal mediation,” also become rivals and obstacles. “Internal mediation,” he writes, “triumphs in a universe where the differences between men are gradually erased.”<sup>13</sup> Envied for their possession of goods and ultimately for their very way of being (“metaphysical desire”), which seems to transcend one’s own in happiness, these models—at once adored and hated—can and do substitute idolatrously for God himself. “Denial of God does not eliminate transcendence but diverts it,” Girard explains; when “God is dead, man must take his place.”<sup>14</sup>

Given this thesis, the language of asceticism and mysticism abounds in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, as it does, Girard argues, in the novels themselves.<sup>15</sup> “There is scarcely a cult from which Proust has not borrowed sacred terms,” according to Girard; “Magic, occultism, the primitive world, and Christian mysticism are never absent.”<sup>16</sup> Stendhal’s hero, Julien Sorel, is “dedicated to the service of Self, just as true mysticism is dedicated to the service of God.”<sup>17</sup> Dostoevsky’s Dolgorouki in *Raw Youth* “instinctively applies the precepts of underground mysticism, which are always analogous to, but the inverse of, the principles of Christian mysticism.”<sup>18</sup> “Common to all modern writers,” Girard insists, is “the imagery of deviated transcendence,” which derives from “the imagery of vertical transcendence in the writing of the Christian mystics.”<sup>19</sup>

Were the argument of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* no more than this—a debunking of romantic individualism and its supposed emancipation from religion—Girard’s book would not be what Austrian theologian Wolfgang Palaver claims it to be, namely, a “masterpiece of Christian spirituality.”<sup>20</sup> The French critic’s work attains to this status through the strength of its famous “Conclusion.” The book’s last chapter argues that “all novelistic conclusions are conversions,”<sup>21</sup> in the lives not only of the fictive characters, but also of their authors: “The hero and his creator are separated throughout the novel but come together in the conclusion,” when, “approaching death, the hero looks back on his past existence,” gaining “a new and more detached vision, which is the creator’s own vision.”<sup>22</sup> The great novelist him- or herself is changed by this clarifying vision, which coincides with what Girard calls “an almost miraculous

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13. Ibid., 14.

14. Ibid., 59, 56.

15. See Robert Doran, “René Girard’s Concept of Conversion and the ‘Via Negativa’: Revisiting *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*,” *Religion and Literature* 43 (2011): 170–79, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23347096>.

16. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 78.

17. Ibid., 154.

18. Ibid., 157.

19. Ibid., 285.

20. Wolfgang Palaver, “‘Creative Renunciation’: The Spiritual Heart of René Girard’s *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*,” *Religion and Literature* 43 (2011): 143–50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23347092>.

21. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 294.

22. Ibid., 297.

descent of novelistic grace” and expresses itself “in symbols of vertical transcendence, whether the author is Christian or not.”<sup>23</sup> The novelist, a “metamorphosized hero,” “cured of metaphysical desire,” shares in the freedom that his or her fictive Other finally gains through the “renunciation of metaphysical desire,” of *ersatz* divinity, of envy and pride—inhibiting vices that, in the author’s case, have frequently enslaved him or her to the mimesis of other writers.<sup>24</sup> In a sequel to *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*—a short book about Dostoevsky—Girard develops this angle of biographical criticism, as he does elsewhere in a study of Marcel Proust.<sup>25</sup>

But how did Girard come to this insight? Answer: through his own personal conversion process, which was effected by the writing of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and gains symbolic expression in its final chapter. “As the chapter took form [in the autumn of 1958],” he confesses, “I realized I was undergoing my own version of the experience I was describing.”<sup>26</sup> Speaking about this experience thirty years later in an interview with James Williams (following up on an earlier interview with Michel Treguer),<sup>27</sup> Girard recalls that he had started working on the book “very much in the pure demystification mode: cynical, destructive, very much in the spirit of the atheistic intellectuals of the time,” but that this project of radical demystification proved “very close to the experience of conversion,” due to the self-implication involved in any deep study of the mimetic: “The knowledge of mimesis is really tied to conversion.”<sup>28</sup>

Travelling weekly by train in 1959 between Maryland and Philadelphia (he was teaching at that time at Johns Hopkins University and at Bryn Mawr), he had had (as he remembers) “quasi-mystical experiences in the train as [he] read,”<sup>29</sup> enjoyable experiences connected with a sense of illumination. This first conversion experience made no pressing demands on him for “any change of life.”<sup>30</sup> Soon afterward, however, the thirty-five-year-old Girard underwent treatment for a cancerous spot on his forehead, and his comfortable, intellectual “conversion was transformed into something really serious.”<sup>31</sup> When the worry of melanoma was lifted, precisely on Wednesday during Holy Week, Girard, who had not been a practicing Catholic, immediately went to confession; he received the Eucharist on Holy Thursday. His marriage

23. Ibid., 310.

24. Ibid., 233, 294

25. See René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, ed. and trans. James G. Williams, Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture (1963; East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2012). See also René Girard, “Conversion in Literature and Christianity,” in *Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953–2005*, ed. Robert Doran (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2011), 263–74.

26. “The Anthropology of the Cross: A Conversation with René Girard,” in James G. Williams, ed., *The Girard Reader* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 262–88 at 285.

27. See Girard, *When These Things Begin*, 129–32; *Quand ces choses commenceront*, 190–95.

28. “The Anthropology of the Cross,” in Williams, *The Girard Reader*, 284, 268.

29. Ibid., 285.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

to Martha Girard was sacramentalized and their children baptized. "I felt that God liberated me just in time for me to have a real Easter experience, a death and resurrection experience," Girard recalls.<sup>32</sup>

In the "Conclusion," Girard discusses the themes of death and resurrection in *The Brothers Karamazov*, that great novel which, "more than any other work of Dostoevsky's, affirms his belief in the reality of mystic experience."<sup>33</sup> There Girard points to the fictional deaths that occur as symbols—one may say, as surrogate victims—for guilty novelists and guilty readers alike in the process of their conversion to new life. "Little Ilusha dies," Girard writes, "for the sake of all the heroes of Dostoyevsky's novels."<sup>34</sup>

In *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky* (1962, *Dostoievski, du double à l'unité*), a short study rapidly composed as a sequel to *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard locates *The Brothers Karamazov* within the larger context of Dostoevsky's writings as a whole and describes their analogical, interpenetrating themes of mimetic rivalry and demonology as symptomatic not only of psychological but also of historical, social, and political conditions. In this context, little Ilyusha dies not just for the sake of Dostoevsky's heroes, but for all the victims of mob violence whose fate is mirrored in his. Explicitly citing Simone Weil's view of the late-medieval inquisition as "the archetype of totalitarian solutions,"<sup>35</sup> Girard interprets Ivan Karamazov's Grand Inquisitor as making a "diabolical choice,"<sup>36</sup> strangely related to Ivan's own diabolic choices and his blaming of God for the suffering, torture, and death of children. Ivan's accusations against Christ, however, only incite "his brother [Alyosha] to concern himself with the unfortunate little Ilyusha and his friends,"<sup>37</sup> to take the side of all the victims.

Although Girard ends his first book with an extensive quote from the sublime, liturgically inflected ending of *The Brothers Karamazov*, echoing the chorus of the schoolboys, he says nothing there to remind his readers that Dostoevsky places that scene at the site of a large white stone, under which Ilyusha's father had wanted to bury the boy. The Russian adjective used to describe the stone has "the original meaning of 'pagan, heathen,'" writes commentator Victor Terras, adding, "The large boulder, a land mark, may well have seen heathen rites before Christianity came to Russia."<sup>38</sup> That large stone—"Ilusha's stone"—becomes the memorial of a redemptive pact, sealed among Alyosha Karamazov and the sorrowing schoolboys, to remember

32. Ibid., 286.

33. Victor Terras, *A Karamazov Companion: Commentary on the Genesis, Language, and Style of Dostoevsky's Novel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1981), 75. On the persistence presence of sacrifice in modern fiction, see William A. Johnsen, "Modern Sacrifice," *Religion and Literature* 43 (2011): 194–200, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23347099>.

34. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 314.

35. Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 62.

36. Ibid., 66.

37. Ibid., 69.

38. Terras, *A Karamazov Companion*, 442.

“the poor boy at whom we once threw stones.”<sup>39</sup> Terras suggests that Dostoevsky’s imagination couples the evocation of a pagan sacrifice, a death by stoning, with that of a foundational Petrine humility: “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt 16:18).

The end of Dostoyevsky’s novel, then, “borne on the highest crest of [his] genius,”<sup>40</sup> points in the direction of *Violence and the Sacred*, where Girard articulates that aspect of his mimetic theory which he names scapegoating, the single victim mechanism. Already in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* Girard affirms, after all, the potential for the interindividual’s rivalry with another to spread through whole networks of interpersonal relationships: “Metaphysical desire is always contagious.”<sup>41</sup> “Collective internal mediation,” writes Girard, “faithfully reproduces the traits of individual mediation.”<sup>42</sup>

## Things Hidden: Durkheim, Weil, and Girard on the Social and the Satanic

According to Girard’s mimetic theory (if I may briefly sketch what he elaborates with countless examples drawn from ethnographic studies), the ritual violence of human and of animal sacrifice in ancient religion (for which other forms of sacrifice can substitute) corresponds to the real danger of interpersonal violence within the community and functions to control that violent propensity, which nevertheless erupts from time to time in the lawlessness of lynching—that form of social violence in which a mob turns against a single victim, the “all” against the “one.” Girard diagnoses the loss of individuality among the members of the mob as the outcome of a contagious mimesis which has spread to the entire community from the rivalry between doubles, whom myth and taboo name as brothers and twins. The monstrous guilt of this interpersonal strife, which threatens the very existence of the group, is then projected upon a victim, the unanimous blaming and condemnation of which restores unity to the divided community. The victim, having restored peace, is then deified. At the origin, then, of ritual, prohibition, and myth is violence. “There is no culture without a tomb,” explains Girard. “It is the pile of stones in which the victim of unanimous stoning is buried.”<sup>43</sup>

Citing *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Girard credits Durkheim with a similar insight about the underlying unity of society: “Durkheim asserts that society is of a piece, and that the primary unifying factor is religion ... Even concepts of space and time, he says, stem from religion.”<sup>44</sup> But Durkheim “never fully articulated his insight,” according to Girard, “for he never realized what a formidable obstacle violence presents and what a positive resource it becomes when it is transfigured

39. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Signet Classics, 2007), 894–95.

40. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 314.

41. *Ibid.*, 99.

42. *Ibid.*, 202.

43. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 83.

44. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 306.

and reconverted through the mediation of scapegoat effects.”<sup>45</sup> Durkheim does refer briefly in *Elementary Forms* to the mob violence and sacrifice of the French Revolution to illustrate what he means by “effervescence”—a collective state of mass delirium akin (as Wolfgang Palaver notes) to Girard’s notion of the snowballing mimetic crisis<sup>46</sup>—but Durkheim’s emphasis there is on the possibility of social change, the “divinity” of the society, not the victims. Girard differs from Durkheim both in his articulation of “the mimetic cycle and the single victim mechanism” and in his recognition (first spelled out in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*) of an “insurmountable difference between primitive religions, on the one hand, and Judaism and Christianity, on the other.”<sup>47</sup> Although Girard comes to see himself as completing Durkheim’s unfinished project and praises Durkheim’s “intuition of the identity of the social and religious domains” as “the greatest anthropological intuition of our time,”<sup>48</sup> he rightly insists that he is not Durkheim’s disciple: “I first read *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* directly after I finished *Violence and the Sacred* ... I added a few relevant quotes to my book. But I was never directly influenced by Durkheim.”<sup>49</sup>

But was there an *indirect* influence, one may ask, that may help to account for the remarkable commonalities, as well as the striking differences, between Girard and Durkheim? The most likely mediator between Durkheim and Girard is Simone Weil, the brilliant French Jewish philosopher, classicist, and Christian mystic who knew Durkheim well and appropriated elements of his thought. Beginning in *Things Hidden*, Girard refers frequently to Weil, but he acknowledges her much earlier, profound influence: “I remember reading Simone Weil in 1955, while I was teaching the modern novel, and she had a considerable impact on me. Although the writings are somewhat diffuse, Weil’s intuitions on mimetic dynamics and collective victimary processes are of great importance.”<sup>50</sup>

Weil’s acute recognition of her own mimeticism had locked her as an adolescent in a destructive competition with her brother André, an extraordinary mathematician, twinned with her in genius. Weil’s biographers note that she hid her feminine beauty and signed her letters to her parents with the masculine form “Simon,” thus fashioning herself into their second son, her brother’s double.<sup>51</sup> Commenting on Weil in an interview

45. Ibid. For a recent comparative study, see Elisa Heinamaki, “Durkheim, Bataille, and Girard on the Ambiguity of the Sacred,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83 (2015): 513–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfv006>.

46. See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 212–16; Palaver, *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory*, 150.

47. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (1999; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 100.

48. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 82.

49. René Girard with Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origin of Culture* (2008; London: T&T Clark, 2010), 140.

50. Ibid., 150.

51. See Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, *Three Women in Dark Times: Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2001), 38–39.



with Phil Rose, Girard calls attention to Weil's extraordinary awareness of her own violence as a force and an affliction: "She sees violence in herself in a way that few thinkers, philosophers, or theologians have done."<sup>52</sup> "I seriously thought of dying," she recalls in her autobiographical letter to Father Joseph-Marie Perrin, OP, "because of the mediocrity of my natural faculties. The exceptional gifts of my brother, who had a childhood and youth comparable to those of Pascal, brought my own inferiority home to me."<sup>53</sup>

Weil's inspired solution was to refocus her attention, devoting it to the discovery of the truth of things. Over a period of ten years she practiced a self-forgetful attentiveness that amounted to a form of implicit prayer, rendering her receptive in 1938 to the mystical experience of Christ who came (as she recalls), suddenly and unexpectedly, to her as she recited George Herbert's poem, "Love."<sup>54</sup> Weil's mystical experience, mediated through a work of literature, a "beautiful poem" on which she "concentrat[ed] all [her] attention,"<sup>55</sup> stands in obvious parallel to Girard's "quasi-mystical" experiences while reading the great novelists on the train, having discovered in them, finally, a novelistic "truth" in conformity to the Gospels.<sup>56</sup>

Well-honed through her contact with Marxist circles, her involvement in the labor movements of her time, and her confrontation with Fascism, Weil's social analysis extends her acute awareness of personal mimeticism to group dynamics. In a passage in *Waiting for God*, she writes: "Men have the same carnal nature as animals. If a hen is hurt, the others rush upon it, attacking it with their beaks. This phenomenon is as automatic as gravitation."<sup>57</sup> Weil describes here the equivalent of a lynching. Anticipating Girard's use of the term "scapegoat mechanism," Weil speaks of a "blind mechanism" that, unless countered by grace, operates in human affairs to produce the "affliction" of victims, a particular kind of extreme suffering in which "the social factor is essential."<sup>58</sup> "There is not really affliction," Weil explains, "unless there is social degradation or the fear of it in some form."<sup>59</sup>

Weil's sensitivity to the dangers of social mimesis at mid-century colored her reading of Durkheim, whose description of the collective and its force increasingly coincided with her idea of the Satanic, of a false divinity, a great beast, ready to sacrifice its

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52. Phil Rose, "A Conversation with René Girard (August 2006/May 2007)," *Contagion: A Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 18 (2011): 23–38 at 26, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctn.2011.0006>. For an insightful study of common themes in the writings of Weil and Girard, see Marie Cabaud Meaney, "Simone Weil and René Girard: Violence and the Sacred," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (2010): 565–87, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq201084337>.
  53. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (1951; New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 64.
  54. *Ibid.*, 68–69.
  55. *Ibid.*, 68.
  56. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 217, 307.
  57. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 122.
  58. *Ibid.*, 119.
  59. *Ibid.*

chosen victims. Anne Reynaud's published notes on Weil's lectures on philosophy, given at Roanne in 1933–34, show Weil's close familiarity with Durkheim's social theory, which she presented to her students as a "sociological morality," entailing aesthetic elements (for example, ritual dance and processions), the social control of thought and desire, and a contagious mimesis.<sup>60</sup> Calling for a "science of society," she warns: "The mass of people is a very active, huge beast which reacts quite instinctively and has become completely conditioned ... The great beast possesses a very powerful collective imagination, but no understanding."<sup>61</sup> Weil's notebooks of 1940–42 include the following stark, double equation: "The Devil is the collective [Which in Durkheim is the divinity]."<sup>62</sup> *Gravity and Grace* contains a chapter on "The Great Beast," where Weil makes the same equation: "The Great Beast is the only object of idolatry, the only *ersatz* God, the only imitation of something which is infinitely far from me and which is myself ... It possesses a kind of transcendence: this is the collective. The collective is the object of all idolatry."<sup>63</sup>

Mentioning specifically Weil's agreement with Dostoevsky in *Resurrection from the Underground* (1962),<sup>64</sup> Girard already analyzes the demonic in Dostoevsky's novels as a dynamic in human relationships: "There is no break in continuity, no metaphysical leap between the double and the devil."<sup>65</sup> Girard uses the language of the satanic even more precisely in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*: "Satan is the name for the mimetic process 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 ... Satan's order has no origin other than murder."<sup>66</sup> In *Evolution and Conversion*, Girard makes explicit the same equation (the Devil = Durkheim's divine collective) that we find in Weil: "The mimetic mechanism produces a complex form of transcendence ... It can be defined as the 'social transcendence' in Durkheim's terms, or the idolatrous transcendence from the ... Judaeo-Christian perspective ... The archaic *sacred* is 'Satanic' when there is nothing to channel it and to keep it at bay."<sup>67</sup>

For Girard, as for Weil, the understanding of mimesis—personal and collective—is inescapably tied to conversion and purgation.<sup>68</sup> Retelling the story of his own religious

60. Simone Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1978), 168, 184, 202–03.

61. *Ibid.*, 218.

62. Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University, 1970), 304. The bracketed clause is in the original.

63. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002), 164.

64. Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 62.

65. *Ibid.*, 67, emphasis original.

66. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 162. Girard "started to write *Things Hidden* immediately in 1971, even before the publication of *Violence and the Sacred*." Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 39.

67. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 198–99.

68. For two recent studies of Girard as an ascetical theologian, see Kevin Mongrain, "Theologians of Spiritual Transformation: A Proposal for Reading René Girard through

conversion, Girard describes the process to James Williams as one of sustained reflection upon mimetic desire: "If you take this notion [of mimetic desire] as far as you possibly can, you ... discover what amounts to original sin. [Thus] an experience of demystification ... is very close to an experience of conversion."<sup>69</sup> Girard tells Benoît Chantre, "My conversion is what put me on the mimetic path and the discovery of the mimetic principle is what converted me."<sup>70</sup> Weil explains this best: "Conscience is deceived by the social ... Meditation on the social mechanism is in this respect a purification of the first importance. To contemplate the social is as good a way of detachment as to retire from the world."<sup>71</sup> Contesting Durkheim's language of social transcendence, Weil insists, "It is only by entering the transcendental, the supernatural, the authentically spiritual order that man rises above the social. Until then, whatever he may do, the social is transcendent in relation to him."<sup>72</sup>

For Weil and Girard alike, the individual mystical experience as a reception of grace counters the *ersatz* mysticism of the great beast, in which the individual loses him- or herself within the collective. Perhaps unwittingly, they thus renew the quarrel between Durkheim and William James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902, became a touchstone for Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, published ten years later. Choosing between the personal and the social, James elected to define religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."<sup>73</sup> Responding to James, Durkheim accepted James's pragmatic imperative and his strong evaluation of the phenomenological reality of religious experience,<sup>74</sup> but he turned his attention away from the personal toward the social, discovered an analogue for Jamesian ecstasy in "effervescence," and argued, contra James, that solitary mystics like Joan of Arc were channeling social energies capable of producing such spiritual effects as voices and visions.<sup>75</sup> "However much Durkheim ... is seen as opposing James," writes Sue

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the Lenses of Hans Urs von Balthasar and John Cassian," *Modern Theology* 28 (2012): 81–111, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2011.01726.x>; Brian Robinette, "Deceit, Desire, and the Desert: René Girard's Theory in Conversation with Early Christian Monastic Practice," in *Violence, Transformation, and the Sacred*, eds. Margaret R. Pfeil and Tobias L. Winwright (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 130–43.

69. "The Anthropology of the Cross," in *The Girard Reader*, 283–84.

70. René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2010), 196.

71. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 166.

72. *Ibid.*

73. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 30.

74. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 420.

75. *Ibid.*, 213. For a Girardian study of Joan of Arc, see Ann W. Astell, *Joan of Arc and Sacrificial Authorship* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2003). Girard himself comments on Joan of Arc in an interview with James Williams. See *The Girard Reader*, 263, 265.

Stedman Jones, “he makes significant use of Jamesian positions in the development of his argument in *Elementary Forms*.”<sup>76</sup>

The Jamesian and Bergsonian watermark on Durkheim’s work, which allowed for conversation across the disciplinary boundaries of sociology, philosophy, theology, and psychology, resulted in what Alexander Tristan Riley has called a tradition of “mystic Durkheimianism,” uniting “strange bedfellows.”<sup>77</sup> Riley mentions neither Girard nor Weil, but he singles out Georges Bataille, an acquaintance of Simone Weil,<sup>78</sup> as a “cluster leader” in this mystic tradition.<sup>79</sup> Where Weil and Girard differ from both Durkheim and James, of course, is their Christian faith and their recourse to the Sacred Scriptures as a source of revealed truth about the human condition.

## Biblical Readings and the Revelation of Hidden Things

Girard’s mid-career turn toward biblical reading and interpretation—starting with the middle section of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* and continued in such books as *The Scapegoat* (1986; *Le bouc émissaire*, 1982), *Job, The Victim of His People* (1987; *La route antique des hommes pervers*, 1985), and *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* (2001; *Je vois Sat, an tomber comme l’éclair*, 1999)—intensified his engagement with Christian mystics and with the very wellspring of Christian mysticism, biblical exegesis. As Julia Lamm notes, “In Christian mysticism, the discipline and exploration for which the mystics are known is intimately tied with the interpretation of Scripture and the belief that the mysteries of God are both revealed and hidden there.”<sup>80</sup> For Girard, “Nothing is both more disturbing and more exciting than the irresistible resurgence of the Christian text, at a time when it is least expected.”<sup>81</sup> Taking “revelation” as its watchword, the Girardian hermeneutic has produced a series of brilliant, fresh readings of biblical texts, building upon Girard’s earlier anthropological studies.<sup>82</sup> In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard stresses the similarity between

76. Sue Stedman Jones, “From *Varieties* to *Elementary Forms*: Émile Durkheim on Religious Life,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 3 (2003): 99–121 at 110, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795x030032001>.

77. Riley, *Godless Intellectuals?* 1.

78. On their relationship, see Francine du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 73–76; Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Joseph R. Berrigan (Athens: University of Georgia, 1989), 96, 124–26.

79. Riley, *Godless Intellectuals*, 206–8.

80. Julie Lamm, “A Guide to Christian Mysticism,” in Lamm, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, 1–24 at 17.

81. René Girard, *Job, The Victim of His People*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (1985; London: Athlone, 1987), 166.

82. For an overview of Girard’s contribution to biblical studies, see Sandor Goodhart and Ann W. Astell, “Substitutive Reading: An Introduction to Girardian Thinking, Its Reception in Biblical Studies, and This Volume,” in Ann W. Astell and Sandor Goodhart, eds., *Sacrifice, Scripture, and Substitution: Readings in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2011), 1–36.

biblical figures such as the fraternal twins Jacob and Esau and the brothers Cain and Abel, on the one hand, and the warring brothers of Roman and Greek myth (e.g., Romulus and Remus, Eteocles and Polyneices), on the other. In Girard's biblical studies, however, what are emphasized are the striking differences between the myths and the Judeo-Christian Scriptures.

In highlighting these differences, Girard follows the lead of Eric Auerbach (1892–1957), whose *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1957) calls attention to what is distinctive about biblical narrative style (contrasting Genesis with Homer's *Odyssey*; the Acts of the Apostles with Petronius and Tacitus). As Girard notes, Auerbach in *Mimesis* emphasizes chiefly stylistic differences, rather than the striking differences in content.<sup>83</sup> Auerbach's equally famous 1944 essay "Figura," however, discovers contrasts in both style and content between ancient allegory and biblical typology—the latter being a species of prophecy that retrospectively discovers in historical persons, events, and things a foreshadowing of later ones. Like Auerbach, who wrote "Figura" as a pointed response to the mythological Nazi anti-Judaism of his time,<sup>84</sup> Girard understood a figural reading of the Scriptures to be a powerful way of seeing Christ in historical victims, beginning with Abel, slain by his brother Cain. From Auerbach, Paul Claudel (1868–1955), Henri de Lubac (1896–1991), and Blaise Pascal,<sup>85</sup> Girard learned "the richness and power of this [spiritual] type of exegesis," which sees "the great figures of the Old Testament as prefiguring and announcing Christ."<sup>86</sup>

Reviving for a new generation a type of multi-layered interpretation once practiced by premodern exegetes, Girard hears in the laments of Job a consonance with the complaints of the psalms, where the cry of the poor and the voice of the victim resound, announcing Christ's own outcry from the cross. Focusing on the Joban Dialogues (Job 3:1–42:1–6), rather than the prologue (Job 1–2), Girard finds abundant literal evidence that Job—once a respected and envied leader in his community—is now "ostracized and persecuted by the people around him,"<sup>87</sup> a social outcast, shamed by others and blamed as the cause of his own misfortune. Job defends his innocence, "revolt[s] against the social God who is unacceptable to him," and ultimately turns in his distress to the "God of victims."<sup>88</sup>

"The Christian Bible, the combination of the Old and New Testaments, has provided that force of revelation," writes Girard, which "teaches us to decode the whole

83. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 208–09, 181.

84. Avihu Zakai and David Weinstein, "Erich Auerbach's 'Figura': An Apology for the Old Testament in an Age of Aryan Philology," *Religions* 3 (2012): 320–38, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3020320>.

85. See F. T. H. Fletcher, *Pascal and the Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), 7, 87; Jean Lhermet, *Pascal et la Bible* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1930); Emile Cailliet, *Pascal: Genius in the Light of Scripture* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1945); Pierre Force, *Le Problème Herméneutique chez Pascal* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1989).

86. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 271; see also *Evolution and Conversion*, 208–09, 181.

87. Girard, *Job, The Victim of His People*, 4.

88. *Ibid.*, 133, 139.

of religion.”<sup>89</sup> “Revelation is ... showing the truth,” he explains, and that truth includes “knowing that the victim is innocent and that everything [the false accusations, the resentment, the cowardly complicity, the violence that ensues] is based on mimetism.”<sup>90</sup> Above all, Girard insists, “The Gospels constantly reveal what the texts of historical persecutors, and especially mythological persecutors, hide from us: the knowledge that their victim is a scapegoat.”<sup>91</sup> Among the ancient writings, “only the Bible speaks of the victim as victim.”<sup>92</sup>

From Girard’s perspective, the Scriptures impart a two-fold revelation: that of fallen humanity in its proneness to mimetic rivalry and collective violence and that of God as the God of victims. “There is an anthropological dimension to the text of the Gospels,”<sup>93</sup> as well as a divine dimension, and the two are closely united in the person of Christ, whose earthly life ends at Calvary. “Christ is the God of victims because he shares their lot until the end,” whereas “the defender of victims, the Paraclete,” has “as adversary the prince of this world,” Satan, the accuser.<sup>94</sup> Once again Girard credits Simone Weil with having a comparable insight. “The concepts of the mimetic cycle and the single victim mechanism give specific content to an idea of Simone Weil,” he writes. “She held that even before presenting a ‘theory of God,’ a *theology*, the Gospels offer a ‘theory of man,’ an *anthropology*.”<sup>95</sup>

For both Weil and Girard, the blindness to which fallen human beings are prone—a blindness about the victims they condemn, about themselves as victimizers, and about God, whom they wrongly worship as the God of the persecutors—can only be overcome through divine revelation and the action of grace. “Social phenomena are outside the grasp of the human intelligence,” writes Weil, because “the human mind is ... incapable of seizing upon this whole of which it is a part.”<sup>96</sup> “This mystery [of blindness],” she adds, “creates an apparent relationship between the social and the supernatural and excuses Durkheim up to a certain point.”<sup>97</sup> The “social sentiment in Durkheim ... is not the [true] religious sentiment,” she insists, but “well and truly an *ersatz* of it.”<sup>98</sup> To be able to study it as such,” however, “one must first of all be capable of discerning it.”<sup>99</sup> “Faith,” she concludes, “is therefore necessary, in the true sense of the word ... Descending light ... The Word is the light.”<sup>100</sup>

89. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (1982; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986), 101.

90. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 205.

91. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 117.

92. Girard, *Job, The Victim of His People*, 151.

93. *Ibid.*, 163.

94. *Ibid.*, 157–58.

95. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 44. See Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 147.

96. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans. Arthur Wills, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), 1:132.

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Ibid.*, 1:226.

99. *Ibid.*

100. *Ibid.*

In the Gospels (and in folktales like the Seven Swans), Weil finds the “theme of slandered innocence pledged not to defend itself,”<sup>101</sup> for the sake of the effective revelation both of innocence and of slander. Like Weil, who speaks of a *Logos* of love extended in Christ to incarnation and crucifixion,<sup>102</sup> Girard in *Things Hidden* contrasts “the Heraclitean Logos, the Logos of expulsion, the Logos of violence” with the Johannine *Logos* of love, “foreign to any kind of violence,” which “discloses the truth of violence by having itself expelled.”<sup>103</sup> Echoing the prologue to the Gospel according to John, Girard interprets the passage as a revelation of the scapegoat mechanism: “The Logos came into the world, yet the world knew him not, his own people received him not ... The misrecognition of the Logos and mankind’s expulsion of it disclose one of the fundamental principles of human society”—indeed, its cultural foundation in the violence of sacrifice.<sup>104</sup> The rule spoken by Caiaphas—“It is expedient that one man should die for the people” (John 18:14; 11:49–50)—is, for Girard, “the definitive revelation of sacrifice and its origin,” given prophetically in the Scriptures, “without either the speaker or the listeners being aware” of its full anthropological and social import.<sup>105</sup>

The passion narratives in the four Gospels not only illumine the innocence of the wrongly accused victim, but also the blindness of the persecutors, who do not know what they are doing (cf. Luke 23:34). Since those who create scapegoats actually believe their victim to be guilty, they are blind to their own scapegoating. The notion of *meconnaissance* or misrecognition is key to Girard’s mimetic theory and helps to define the illuminative quality of that theory’s contribution to Christian mysticism. When the people gathered in Jerusalem hear Peter’s preaching on Pentecost about the death and resurrection of Christ, their unblinding comes as a compunction, a spiritual wounding: “They were cut to the heart (*compuncti sunt corde*), and said ... ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’” (Acts 3:37). As I have argued elsewhere, the Girardian notion of *meconnaissance* actually requires the infused grace (*gratia infusa*; cf. Ps 44 [45]:2) of compunction poured out as an antidote, since there is no other means for the misrecognition of the victim to be overcome.<sup>106</sup> As Gregory the Great (540–604) taught in *Moralia in Job*,<sup>107</sup> compunction in its lower stream is an unblinding—the sudden, God-given recognition of one’s own sin; in its higher stream, compunction wounds the languishing heart with longing for the vision of God.<sup>108</sup> The Gospels are revelatory in themselves, Girard acknowledges, but “the continuous teaching of Christ’s message

101. Ibid., 1:227.

102. Ibid., 1:226.

103. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 271.

104. Ibid.

105. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 114.

106. Ann W. Astell, “Girardian Conversion and Gregorian Compunction” (paper presented at the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, University of Northern Iowa, 2013).

107. See Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* 19.30 (Migne, *PL* 76.c291D); *Dialogorum* 3.34 (Migne, *PL* 77.c300AB).

108. For an introduction to the notion of compunction, see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University, 1982), 29–32. See also Michael McClymond, “Holy Tears: A Neglected Aspect of Early

through the diffusion of the Gospels is as important as this revelation,"<sup>109</sup> and people are inclined even then to be deaf and blind in applying that message to their own envy, fear, and scapegoating.

In order to illustrate the scapegoat mechanism and the phenomenon of *meconnaissance*, Girard refers frequently to the notorious Dreyfus Affair—the scandal which began in 1894 with the false accusation of treason leveled against Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish army captain, who was exiled to Devil's Island after a highly publicized trial, a conviction based on forged evidence, and a public storm of anti-Semitism. A scapegoat for France's military defeat by Germany, Dreyfus continued under condemnation long after the forgery was discovered in 1898 and new evidence pointed in the direction of another man, Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy. "The people who condemned Dreyfus," Girard explains, "are the ones who never called him a scapegoat because they turned him into one."<sup>110</sup>

Among those who militated over a period of ten years for Dreyfus's exoneration, and who suffered as supposed traitors on Dreyfus's account, was Charles Péguy—poet, journalist, socialist activist, and Christian mystic.<sup>111</sup> As Girard acknowledges, Péguy "perceived the analogy with the Passion of Christ."<sup>112</sup> "The question," writes Péguy, "was whether one would have the courage to recognize and to declare [Dreyfus's] innocence."<sup>113</sup> At first, few did. In his *Notre Jeunesse* ("Memories of Youth," 1910), a passionate memoir of the Dreyfus Affair, Péguy admits that the original *mystique* of the Dreyfusards had crossed a line, degenerating into a *politique* in the public life of the nation; in its essence, however, the struggle to exonerate Dreyfus was and remained a struggle for the very soul of France, a mystical movement of refusal to let one man, an innocent man, be the scapegoat for France's military defeat. "Mysticism may be the laughing stock of politics," Péguy observes, "but all the same, it is the mystic who nourishes politics."<sup>114</sup> Counting himself among the "mystical Dreyfusards," Péguy insists, "The real traitor, in the ... strong sense of the word, is the man who ... loses his soul, betrays his principles, his ideal ... who betrays his *mystique*."<sup>115</sup>

In his reading of the passion of Christ, Girard meditates not only on the revealed innocence of Christ as victim, but also on the revealed fear of the crowd, the social and

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Christian Spirituality in Contemporary Context," in Dale M. Coulter and Amos Yong, eds., *The Spirit, the Affections, and the Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2016), 87–112.

109. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 211.

110. *The Girard Reader*, 267. See also Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 145–46.

111. For an appreciative account of his life, see Marjorie Villiers, *Charles Péguy: A Study in Integrity* (London: Collins, 1965); Astell, *Joan of Arc and Sacrificial Authorship*, 188–96.

112. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 146.

113. Charles Péguy, *Temporal and Eternal*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 73.

114. *Ibid.*, 48.

115. *Ibid.*, 40.



political vulnerability, and the shame that motivate his betrayers. “The Gospel represents the crucifixion as a mimetic phenomenon,” Girard observes. “The true cause of Peter’s denial, of Pilate’s behavior, of the bad thief’s attitude, is their imitation of the crowd, the collective mimetism [sic], the violent contagion.”<sup>116</sup> Girard is haunted, in particular, by the denial of Peter. Exposed as a Galilean by his speech and by the servant girl’s repeated accusation, “‘This man is one of them’” (Mark 14:69), Peter reacts violently, curses, and denies Jesus in order to save himself. “The best way not to be crucified,” remarks Girard, “is to do as everyone else and join in the crucifixion.”<sup>117</sup> Weeping tears of compunction at Jesus’ glance (Luke 22:61), a humbled Peter soon comes to learn that the only way to avoid joining the crowd of lynchers is to live in an innermost union with the Lord, the God of victims. Given the sociality of violence, the Christian life requires a mystical completion.

### “Innermost Mediation,” Charity, and Eschatological Hope

In what may be counted as his last book, *Battling to the End* (2010; *Achever Clausewitz*, 2007), Girard amplifies the apocalyptic theme sounded in *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* in the context of a far-reaching sketch of modern European history,<sup>118</sup> which takes as its starting point the Napoleonic wars, the incendiary reprisals between France and Germany, and Carl von Clausewitz’s oft-quoted saying in his treatise *On War*: “War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale.”<sup>119</sup> Given this historical starting point, Girard appropriately turns in his conversation with Benoît Chantre to the insights of modern mystics, French and German, who were relatively close contemporaries of Clausewitz (1780–1831)—namely, Blaise Pascal (1623–62) and Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843). Identifying their insights with his own, Girard not only “finishes” and “finishes off” Clausewitz’s treatise, which was still incomplete at the general’s death (the French title *Achever Clausewitz* conveys both meanings), but he also brings his own life’s work to a completion through the introduction into his mimetic theory of a new and needed technical term, “innermost mediation,” replete with Augustinian and mystical significance.

Girard’s meditations on Pascal in *Battling to the End* are less surprising than his words on Hölderlin.<sup>120</sup> Girard refers occasionally to Pascal elsewhere, and a certain affinity

116. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 205.

117. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 155.

118. On Girard’s apocalypticism, see Cyril O’Regan, “Girard and the Spaces of Apocalyptic,” *Modern Theology* 28 (2012): 112–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2011.01727.x>.

119. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University, 1984), 1.1.2, 75.

120. See Cyril O’Regan, “Hölderlin,” in Sheelah Trefflé Hidden and Wolfgang Palaver, et al., eds., *The Palgrave Handbook for Mimetic Theory and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

between the two Catholic thinkers is readily apparent. Girard has described his life's work as "an apology for Christianity;"<sup>121</sup> Pascal's *Pensées*, containing his famous wager, are his collected notes for a projected *Apologie de la Religion Chrétienne*.<sup>122</sup> Like Pascal in his *Provinciales*, Girard has not shied away from conflict. Now universally recognized as a mystic, Pascal does not refer in his public writings to his personal experience of God; only the *Mémorial* found stitched into his clothing after his death bears direct witness to his transformative "Night of Fire." Girard was similarly reticent. He spoke belatedly of his conversion experience, but he called himself "an ordinary Christian."<sup>123</sup>

Most obviously, perhaps, Pascal and Girard share a profound commitment to a doctrine of original sin.<sup>124</sup> Pascal writes in his *Pensées*: "Nothing shocks us more than this doctrine. Yet, without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all mysteries, we are incomprehensible to ourselves."<sup>125</sup> Finding the best evidence for original sin in the destructive mimetic desire that Scripture names covetousness and concupiscence, Girard insists: "We absolutely need Pascal. He saw and immediately understood the 'abysses' of foundation ... Pascal is fundamental when he reaffirms that original sin is what defines man."<sup>126</sup> "It is up to us," according to Girard, "to draw out the apocalyptic conclusions of what Pascal glimpsed: *the truth of the original sin appears only in relation to the growing resentment to which it gives rise*."<sup>127</sup> This "truth," Girard adds, "is essentially at war with violence ... Pascal was right: there is a reciprocal intensification of violence and truth, and it now appears before our eyes, or at least before the eyes of a small number, those whose love has not grown cold."<sup>128</sup> By contrast, Clausewitz, "the most anti-Pascalian thinker there could be," sees "no difference between violence and truth."<sup>129</sup>

Claiming "Pascal, rather than Hegel," as "our contemporary"<sup>130</sup> in an age of terrorism and "escalation to extremes,"<sup>131</sup> Girard joins company not only with the French mystic, but also with the German poet Hölderlin, whose personal and theological ways with his friend Hegel parted.<sup>132</sup> In a surprising chapter in *Battling to the End*, Girard reveals his personal indebtedness to, and close identification with, Hölderlin, whose

121. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 3.

122. Fletcher, *Pascal and the Mystical Tradition*, 9.

123. "The Anthropology of the Cross," in Williams, *The Girard Reader*, 286.

124. For two Girardian studies of Original Sin, see Raymund Schwager, *Banished from Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation*, trans. James G. Williams (London: Gracewing, 2006); James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

125. *Pascal's Pensées*, trans. H. F. Stewart (New York: Pantheon, 1950), par. 258, 153.

126. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 22.

127. *Ibid.*, 80, emphasis original.

128. *Ibid.*, 73, 115. Cf. Matt 24:12.

129. *Ibid.*, 93.

130. *Ibid.*, 49.

131. *Ibid.*, 1–25.

132. See Tom Spencer, "Divine Difference: On the Theological Divide between Hölderlin and Hegel," *German Quarterly* 84 (2011): 437–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-1183.2011.00126.x>.

works Girard read as early as 1967.<sup>133</sup> Revisiting the places where Hölderlin lived and worked, including the tower in Tübingen, Girard “was very moved,” he says, by this pilgrimage.<sup>134</sup> “For me,” Girard confesses, “discovering Hölderlin was a turning point. I read him during the most hyperactive period of my life ... at the end of the 1960s, when I alternated between elation and depression in the face of what I was trying to construct.”<sup>135</sup> From Hölderlin’s obsession with his model, Friedrich Schiller (1759–1801),<sup>136</sup> and his rivalry with his friend Schelling (1775–1854), Girard came to understand, by analogy, “that Nietzsche’s madness was related to Wagner’s apotheosis”—an important case study for his mimetic theory.<sup>137</sup>

Girard draws a sharp contrast, however, between Nietzsche’s madness and Hölderlin’s manic-depressive bipolarity. Clinging to Christ in his experience of Christ’s absence, waiting for Christ’s return, and distancing himself from the new paganism of the Enlightenment,<sup>138</sup> Hölderlin embraced a path of “mystical quietism” and lyrical lucidity.<sup>139</sup> In Hölderlin’s contemplative withdrawal of forty years—inspired, in part and in complicated ways, by Württemberg pietism<sup>140</sup>—Girard finds a model of self-emptying Christian discipleship and renunciation of ambition. “I see in [Hölderlin’s] distancing not only an apocalyptic attitude [in the face of modernity],” he writes, “but also a form of rediscovered innocence and, I dare say, holiness.”<sup>141</sup> In so doing, Girard joins a scholarly movement that has called into question Hölderlin’s purported madness, for which the historical evidence is, in fact, highly ambiguous.<sup>142</sup>

Indeed, perhaps as a final challenge to a Freudian reductionism,<sup>143</sup> Girard goes so far as to uphold Hölderlin’s Christian sanity in the face of violent historical change:

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133. Palaver lists Girard’s mentions of Hölderlin in *Violence and the Sacred*, *Oedipus Unbound*, and *To Double Business Bound*. See Palaver, *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory*, 319–39.
  134. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 124.
  135. Ibid.
  136. See Palaver, *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory*, 25–26.
  137. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 125.
  138. On Hölderlin’s Christology, see Mark Ogden, *The Problem of Christ in the Work of Friedrich Hölderlin* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Institute of Germanic Studies, 1991). Ogden argues for the lasting influence of Hölderlin’s seminary studies.
  139. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 123–24. Excerpts from Hölderlin’s poetry are included in Anne Fremantle, ed., *The Protestant Mystics* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1964), 186–95.
  140. See Priscilla Hayden-Roy, “New and Old Histories: The Case of Hölderlin and Württemberg Pietism,” *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and Philosophy of History* 21 (1992): 369–79, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlanggerman/23/>.
  141. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 124.
  142. See Pierre Bertaux, “Was Hölderlin Mentally Ill?” *Philosophy Today* 37 (1993): 353–68, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday19933743>. Bertaux suggests that the poet may have possessed “profound eremitical wisdom” (368) and feigned madness after the example of King David.
  143. Girard observes: “Freud sometimes shows very powerful intuitions, but with a typical non-religious, nineteenth-century interpretation, much in the manner of Darwin, when as a matter of fact, they actually reinforce the biblical message.” Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 204. On Girard’s contest with Freud, see Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity*, 30–45.

"Like Hölderlin, I think that Christ alone allows us to face this reality without sinking into madness ... More than ever, I am convinced that history has meaning, and that its meaning is terrifying, 'But where danger threatens / That which saves it also grows.'"<sup>144</sup> Interpreting these two quoted lines from Hölderlin's poem "Patmos" far differently than Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) does,<sup>145</sup> Girard discovers in them what he himself believes: namely, that the kingdom of Christ continues to grow in secret in the midst of a violent world and will manifest itself in the end: "The thought of 'the neighbor as yourself' ... is secretly active, secretly dominant under the sound and fury of [undifferentiated conflict] ... Peaceful identity lies at the heart of violent identity as its most secret possibility."<sup>146</sup>

In Girard's understanding, Christ's command to love one's enemies (Matt 5:44) can only be fulfilled through Christ, who suffered the violence of crucifixion and forgave his persecutors. Christ emptied himself (Phil 2:5–8) to the point of identification with sinners, with the victims and would-be victims of all time—both in their protests of innocence and in the calls for revenge that turn victims too quickly into victimizers of other victims. As Augustine taught, in the inspired psalms, all these voices can be heard prophetically, the *Totus Christus* speaking through them all in order to purge the violence, heal the trauma, enable self-knowledge and empathy, restore harmony, and inspire praise and thanksgiving.<sup>147</sup> Girard shares this vision of the Scriptures in their mixture of voices and auto-critique. "If the Bible simply gave the monopoly of words to the victim instead of to the persecutors—if it substituted, as Nietzsche claims, a slave morality for that of the master—the revelation would be much less powerful," he observes, because "we would not be asked to confront both perspectives"<sup>148</sup> and to recognize our share in each.

The order of charity heals the disorder of mimetic desire; the love of one's enemies ends the duel. Girard recognized this truth relatively early.<sup>149</sup> He starkly opposes the imitation of Christ to that of Satan.<sup>150</sup> But it is only in *Battling to the End*, at the suggestion of Benoît Chantre, that he expands the technical vocabulary of his mimetic theory to name the special mediation of Christ and the participatory imitation, the mystical union, it makes possible.

Neither "external mediation" nor "internal mediation," as defined by Girard in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, befits the mediation of Christ or the way Christ

144. Girard, *Battling to the End*, xiii, xvii.

145. Girard also explicitly distances himself from Heidegger's interpretation of these lines: "I do not interpret these verses like Heidegger." Girard, *Things Hidden*, 122.

146. *Ibid.*, 46. On the secret growth of the kingdom, see Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroads, 1996).

147. For a good introduction to this doctrine, which permeates Augustine's verse-by-verse commentary on each of the one hundred fifty biblical psalms, see Kimberly Baker, "Augustine's Doctrine of the *Totus Christus*: Reflecting on the Church as a Sacrament of Unity," *Horizons* 27 (2010): 7–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0360966900006824>.

148. Girard, Job, *The Victim of His People*, 58.

149. See Girard, *Things Hidden*, 269, 276–80.

150. See Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 40.

properly functions as a model for imitation. Questioned by James Williams about this terminological lack, Girard replied, “Maybe the idea of Kierkegaard, the idea of subjectivity as passionate inwardness and choice, would be helpful ... I don’t know; whatever the term, something bigger and other than ‘desire’ should be used.”<sup>151</sup> In *Battling to the End*, Chantre returns to the question and suggests the term “innermost mediation” to Girard, for whom it has an immediate Augustinian resonance. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard parodies a famous line in Augustine’s *Confessions* when he observes that modern man’s prideful desire, because borrowed from others, is “more exterior” to him than he is to himself.<sup>152</sup> In *Battling to the End*, however, Girard quotes Augustine’s own description of God as more intimately present to him than his own inmost being (*Confessions* 3.6.11: *interior intimo meo*), and he accepts Chantre’s suggested term: “‘Innermost mediation’ would be nothing but the imitation of Christ ... Christ alone enables us to escape from [an idolatrous] human imitation.”<sup>153</sup>

But how? Granting the existence of genuine “saints and heroes” in the midst of a violent world,<sup>154</sup> Chantre presses Girard to speak not just about the individual person’s Christian discipleship but also about the potential of people, joined through a “uniting ideal,” to act together to try “to control the rise of negative undifferentiation.”<sup>155</sup> In answer, Girard does not discount the value of political actions, commonly shared ideals, and heroism, but he insists that a “rational model” cannot, in and of itself, “thwart mimetism.”<sup>156</sup> Citing Pascal, Girard identifies the “rational model” of ideals (e.g., justice, human rights) with the “order of the spirit,” which can prepare the way for the “order of charity,” attainable only through Christ’s grace.<sup>157</sup>

In that mystical order of charity, Girard grants the possibility of being “up to a certain point ... in a state of positive undifferentiation, in other words, *identified with others*.”<sup>158</sup> “This is Christian love,” he says, “and it exists in our world. It is even very active. It saves many people, works in hospitals, and even operates in some forms of research. Without this love, the world would have exploded long ago.”<sup>159</sup> Discussing what he calls a “contagion of charity,” powerful enough to face “the worldwide empire of violence,” Girard echoes the words of Henri Bergson (1859–1941) quoted to him by Chantre: “‘True, complete, active mysticism *aspires to radiate*, by virtue of the charity which is its essence.’”<sup>160</sup> This mysticism Girard names the secret of the

151. “The Anthropology of the Cross,” in *The Girard Reader*, 268.

152. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 58–59.

153. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 133.

154. See Grant Kaplan, “Saint vs. Hero: René Girard’s Undoing of Romantic Hagiology,” in *Postmodern Saints of France: Refiguring ‘the Holy’ in Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. Colby Dickinson (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2013), 153–67.

155. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 130–31.

156. *Ibid.*, 131.

157. *Ibid.*, 132.

158. *Ibid.*, 131, emphasis original.

159. *Ibid.*

160. *Ibid.*, 73, 216, emphasis original.

kingdom that is already here in Christ and that is still coming, the “intimate mediation” that “transforms mimetism [sic] and opens the door to the other side of violence.”<sup>161</sup>

The best expression of, and guarantee for, mystical union with Christ, according to Girard, is an “empathy” that counters the contagion of violence through charitable “identification” with the victims, the needy, who (Judgment Day reveals) “*will have been Christ*” for us in Christ’s hiddenness.<sup>162</sup> Freeing “holiness from the sacred,”<sup>163</sup> this attentiveness to, and identification with, victims preserves a proper distance between Christianity and archaic religion, between the love of Christ and the worship of all the idols and antichrists: “There is only one good distance: the imitation of Christ in order to avoid the imitation of men.”<sup>164</sup>

A debunker of individualism and a prophet against the crowd, Girard maintains the importance of distance, of individual personhood, even in the “positive undifferentiation”<sup>165</sup> of the order of charity—its moments of grace, works of mercy, and identifications with Christ and others. Therefore, the Girardian “interindividual” remains someone profoundly affected by external influence who nonetheless retains an innermost freedom of choice (a Kierkegaardian “passionate inwardness and choice”) regarding the election of models, divine and diabolic, for desire.<sup>166</sup>

Owing to his own deep awareness of human sinfulness and scapegoating, Girard hesitates to identify any temporal collective, movement, community, or society with the already realized kingdom. The church, founded on Christ the once-rejected “cornerstone” (Eph 2:20), is built of “living stones” (1 Pet 2:5), each of them—like Peter,

161. Ibid., 205.

162. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 133, emphasis original. On this theme, see Ann W. Astell, “Saintly Mimesis, Contagion, and Empathy in the Thought of René Girard, Edith Stein, and Simone Weil,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 22 (2004): 116–31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.2004.0001>.

163. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 129. Girard’s expression here registers a response to Rudolf Otto’s *Idea of the Holy*. For an expression of Girard’s critical attitude toward Otto’s influential notion of the Holy as *tremendum et fascinans*, see Girard, *Things Hidden*, 67. See also Palaver, *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory*, 154; Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity*, 58.

164. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 129. Against a reading of Hölderlin that would amalgamate his Christ with the pagan gods, Girard employs a language of “distance” that recalls Simone Weil’s notion of distance in her essay, “The Love of God and Affliction,” in which Christ’s cross is said to bridge the infinite distance between God and the afflicted. See Weil, *Waiting for God*, 117–36.

165. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 131.

166. “The Anthropology of the Cross,” in *The Girard Reader*, 268. It is noteworthy that Girard sounds a Kierkegaardian theme already in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*: “All the heroes surrender their most fundamental individual prerogative, that of choosing their own desire” (55). While focusing in his analysis on the “lie of spontaneous desire” (16), Girard here admits the reality of a personal desire, choice, and freedom, for which mimetic desire is an enslaving substitute. See also Girard’s clarifying statements in his interview with Michel Treguer: Girard, *When These Things Begin*, 12.

the “rock” (Matt 16:18)—capable of scandalous obstruction and betrayal, but also of repentance, transformation, and final glory. The progressive purification of the historical papacy from its imitation of earthly kingship—a purification Girard sees exemplified in, and accomplished by, Pope John Paul II’s public “repentance” during the year 2000—is “the papacy’s triumph, freed of all temporal ties.”<sup>167</sup>

For Girard, victory over Satan comes, first of all, through repentance and renunciation. For him, as for Augustine and Tyconius, the City of God on earth is and remains *permixta*, a humbling combination of holiness and sinfulness, of wheat and weeds inseparable from each other and growing together until the final day.<sup>168</sup> For that reason, a deep humility and renunciation (for purgation), a vigilant search for understanding (for illumination), and an ardent charity (for union with God and others) are all needed by the individual and the community alike—all three of the mystical ways. “And the greatest of these is charity” (1 Cor 13:13).<sup>169</sup>

### Author biography

Ann W. Astell is Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. She is the author of six books, most recently *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages* (2006). She has edited seven collections of essays. Past President of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality and also of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, she has published recently in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, *Spiritus*, and *Religion and Literature*.

167. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 200–01.

168. Girard refers to the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24–30) in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 26–27. For a Girardian reading of the parable, see John F. Cornell, “A Parable of Scandal: Speculations about the Wheat and Weeds of Matthew 13,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 5 (1998): 98–117, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctn.1998.0003>.

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