Praise for *I Came to Cast Fire*

"*I Came to Cast Fire* is a comprehensive yet short and accessible introduction to the world of René Girard, casting a new light on the wise sage whose recognition is growing with each year. Every page reflects not only Girard's genius, but also the learned, wise, and eloquent author behind the book, Fr. Elias Carr. Perhaps most importantly for reaching a general audience, *I Came to Cast Fire* is, above all, an enjoyable read."

—**Cynthia L. Haven**, National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholar and author of *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard*

"Fr. Elias Carr has produced an engaging introduction to the life and thought of René Girard. Through anecdotes and practical examples, he makes Girard's work accessible to newcomers and provides fresh insights for those already familiar with this towering intellect. As Fr. Elias reminds us, René Girard's work is a timely interpretive key to understanding human history, the challenges of today's culture, and our need for conversion to Christ."

—**Bishop Robert J. McClory**, Diocese of Gary

"With *I Came to Cast Fire*, Fr. Elias Carr announces himself as one of the premier communicators of René Girard's mimetic theory. Fr. Elias provides everything one looks for in an introduction: clarity, precision, brevity, breadth, and accuracy. He manages to guide the reader on a patient and succinct tour through Girard's thought and its relationship to the Gospel, one that never feels rushed or careless. Fr. Elias even provides personal anecdotes that show how mimetic theory has helped him make sense of his life and priestly vocation. I highly recommend this book for anyone eager to learn what René Girard's work has to do with their faith and their life."

—**Grant Kaplan**, Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Saint Louis University

"In the writings of René Girard, the French genius, we find a dithyrambic deluge of chthonic thought and ouranic ecstasy. In *I Came to Cast Fire*, Dom Elias Carr channels the torrent into a drink-size portion for twenty-first-century Anglophones. Well done, Father!"

—**Bishop Kurt Burnette**, Eparch of Passaic

"*I Came to Cast Fire* is much more than an introduction to René Girard's mimetic theory. It provides a personal, engaging, and insightful theological interpretation of mimetic desire and scapegoating, especially within modernity. Fr. Elias highlights, in an accessible and energetic manner, the relevance of Girard's insights for fundamental questions of human life and the proclamation of the Gospel. Rather than 'fade away,' as Fr. Elias suggests about himself after introducing Girard, I hope that this is only the beginning, and that we can look forward to further reflections on Christian humanism and the connections between the human sciences and Catholic theology."

—**Clemens Cavallin**, Professor of Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of Life, and Ethics, NLA University College (Bergen, Norway)

I CAME
TO CAST FIRE

I CAME TO CAST FIRE

An Introduction to René Girard

Fr. Elias Carr

Foreword by Luke Burgis

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Foreword

LUKE BURGIS

"A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us," wrote Franz Kafka.[1] An axe splits apart, but a fire transforms. Fire melts the ice of the frozen sea, and it clears a forest for new growth. Some books might be axes, but this one works differently: it is filled with the same fire that has been driving a two-thousand-year evangelical subversion of the old sacred forms to clear the way for something new.

This tension between old and new is at the heart of both René Girard's work and Fr. Elias Carr's introduction to Girard. I felt a sense of urgency reading *I Came to Cast Fire*, much like I did when I read Girard's work for the first time. The words quicken a fire within me, even as the world threatens to snuff it out. The hopeful message of this book, and the hopeful message at the core of Girard's work, is that this fire cannot be extinguished for those who are committed to battling to the end.

"What if triumph were not the most important thing? What if the battle were worth more than the victory?" asked René Girard in his last book, *Battling to the End*.[2] This book continues in that same spirit with an incisive view of history that sees Christ as its Lord as well as its redeemer. To battle to the end means to consciously and continually overcome the passivity that leads to death

1. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken, 1977), 16.

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

and to choose instead the active love that leads to life. The fullness of that love is available in Christ.

And yet we so often hesitate at the invitation of divine love. We feel torn by a twofold movement of colonization, as Fr. Elias describes in these pages. We feel that we have been colonized by others' ideas and desires, and by a hostile culture and the many demands it imposes on us. And yet we are reminded constantly about the sins of the past, including our own. They are heaped upon our heads like burning coals. We confront those times when we have been the colonizers—when we have imposed our will on those we falsely view as enemies or threats to our autonomy.

On a human level, there is no way out of the cycles of reciprocal violence, shame, guilt, and cover-up that characterize the life of the world cut off from God. But Christ has given us an advocate, the Paraclete, whose fire destroys the old world and its fears, born of sin, and renews us with the same energizing power that the Apostles received on Pentecost—one that allowed them to boldly go to the ends of the earth, and even to their own deaths, proclaiming the Gospel.

Liberation is only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit, which is stronger than the powers that held the old world together. Freedom comes through the conversion that the Spirit makes possible.

Despite the many attempts to downplay or divorce Girard's ideas from the lived experience of Christianity, I don't believe mimetic theory can ever be fully understood except from within a life of faith. Girard, reflecting on his conversion experience later in life, said, "I'm convinced that God sends human beings a lot of signs that have no objective existence whatsoever for the wise and the learned. The ones those signs don't concern regard them

as imaginary, but those for whom they are intended can't be mistaken, because they're living the experience from within."[3]

We may admire the stained-glass windows of a cathedral from the outside, but we see their resplendence and understand their true meaning only from the inside. Likewise, Girard's work is profoundly spiritual, as Fr. Elias' book makes clear—and that can be most fully appreciated as one attempts to live out the Gospel. The spiritual life is a journey of desire, a *via desiderii*, and Girard helps us understand the terrain, temptations, and obstacles along the way. His work is currently undervalued in spiritual theology. This book makes an important contribution.

Conversion of our desire entails setting fire to the merely familiar to make way for what is true, which may appear to us as new (or, in the words of St. Augustine, "so ancient and so new"[4]). The old world is passing away, and it's natural to want to cling to it. We're nostalgic for the old world because it's comfortable there. We can see cause and effect, and we can control things—sometimes through the violence, the scapegoat mechanism, which Girard warns us is part of the old sacred order.

Or perhaps we're nostalgic for the old world because we are ashamed of what we now know. Like Adam and Eve in paradise, we want to hide ourselves—sometimes even from God. Greek Orthodox theologian Timothy G. Patitsas speculates that perhaps Adam hid himself because the knowledge he gained from eating the forbidden fruit allowed him to see Christ on the cross, the Lamb that was slain since the foundation of the world, and this knowledge was simply too much for him to bear.

Whether we accept that interpretation or not, it amplifies the message of Scripture and history: confrontation with the truth is difficult, and is not even fully possible except in the light

3. René Girard, *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 131–132.

4. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Frank Sheed (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2017), 258.

of Christ, who shows us the extent to which humanity deceives itself about who is a victim and who are the victimizers. "You will see the success of my theories when you recognize yourself as a persecutor," Girard once told a skeptic at a conference.[5] That is a truth that each of us must come to terms with.

There are now many books about Girard, but few that aim to speak to the heart as much as the head. This book is one of those few. We recognize our dependence on grace not by thinking about it hard enough, but through humility and love.

Girard believed that we are now living during the apocalypse, but his understanding of the apocalypse was very different from the image in the popular imagination, much of which has been shaped by bad movies. The apocalypse is not God's wrath destroying the world; that, Girard believed, was one of the many lies we tell ourselves to avoid coming to terms with the truth. The apocalypse, rather, is the final culmination in the great unveiling of who God is and who we are.

The great truth hidden since the foundation of the world—more foundational than the violence that has characterized so much of human history—is the divine love that created the universe and sustains it. That love has been made flesh and has come to cast fire. Fr. Elias has produced a book that is dangerous in the best sense of the word. If you read it well, you, too, may catch fire—and be made new.

5. Cynthia Haven, "Are We Ready to Listen to René Girard?," Zocalo Public Square, August 7, 2023, zocalopublicsquare.org.

Introduction

The Day I Discovered Girard

Let me tell you about the day that my life changed. In the summer of 2001, I was in my terrible twos as a baby priest at Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Annandale, Virginia. I had a gift certificate for the now-defunct Newman Book Store in Brookland near the Catholic University of America. A respected priest of the Archdiocese of Washington authored a pamphlet on Catholic literature in which he crisply characterized this store's wares as "some good"—hardly an endorsement. In the dank basement on Eighth Street, I browsed the shelves aimlessly, a pleasure that is increasingly lost in our online world. I rounded a corner, and the title *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* and the author René Girard came into focus. His name was known to me because of a couple articles in *First Things* in which I experienced the first inklings of Girard's sweeping mimetic theory.

In broad brush strokes, Girard formulated his theory in three stages: mimesis, scapegoating, Christ. First, through his reading of novels, he discerned that human desires are mimetic or imitative of another's desire, and that these mimetic desires give rise to rivalries. Second, these accumulating rivalries threaten to destroy the community unless a scapegoat presents itself. When it does, the community blames the scapegoat for its crisis. Girard describes this sequence of events as the "scapegoat mechanism," by which the community is reborn through the expulsion of the victim. Ritual sacrifice, myth, and prohibitions sustain the new

culture, which restrains mimetic rivalry. Girard speaks of persons or institutions that restrain violence, such as government, as the *katéchon* (the term is from St. Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians). Third, Girard argues that the violent origins of culture remained hidden until the Paschal Mystery revealed the scapegoat mechanism. Thereafter, the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, operates in history, proclaiming the innocence of the scapegoat, which gradually undermines the *katéchon*. Today, the modern concern for the victim has become the one universal ethic that has created the first planetary culture. Yet we are in a perilous situation because mimetic rivalries are multiplying and intensifying rapidly. Without resorting to the scapegoat mechanism, humanity faces a decision: self-destruction or conversion.

As I read *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* that summer, my head spun, my heart raced, and my imagination soared, because Girard's thought solved a problem for which I was not even aware that I was seeking an answer—namely, the difference faith must make in the world. If the faith is only an idea and never incarnated in our personal and social choices, then it is not Christian. Mimetic theory gave me a powerful way to interpret the signs of the times in the following year when both the events of September 11 and the clerical abuse scandals unfolded.

But mimetic theory is also very practical. I'll give you an example: As the headmaster of an elementary school, I needed to introduce a "fair share" policy for the parents' association because of the "free rider problem." Too many parents weren't doing their fair share. Those who were happy with the situation were unhappy with the new policy. I called a public meeting to explain the rationale for the policy, and easily over one hundred people came to the parish hall. After my presentation, one of the leading critics was raring to go at me. I stopped him, invited him up to the podium, and sat down among the audience. His tirade ignited resistance from other parents. I sat there and thought,

Thank God others are speaking up. If I were up there, I would *feel* like everyone was against me because the critic would be among the audience. It would be all of them against me—polarization. Mimetic theory taught me that how one stages a meeting influences the likelihood of conflict. That meeting ended well. With the exception of a few parents, most agreed that the policy was indeed fair.

But not everyone feels that way. Commenting on mimetic theory, Catholic University of America professor Michael Pakaluk argues that "the theory is doubtful for many reasons."[1] Why? Since Pakaluk does not elaborate, one can only speculate. First, there is the sheer quantity of Girard's texts that makes coming to understand his thought time-consuming. Although his key insights can be listed easily, the evidence and argumentation that support them demand extensive knowledge of a variety of disciplines. Second, Girard developed his theory over decades, refining and altering his theory in the light of criticism and new data. Thus, one must have an overview of his entire corpus and cannot simply rely on reading a few of his works. Third, Girard makes claims that are more heuristic than theoretical; that is, he proposes many routes for further investigation as implications of his theory that are yet to be confirmed. Fourth, Girard's style of writing varies from scientific and literary to rhetorical or even homiletic. Consequently, his corpus is better considered from the perspective of the whole so as to nuance its parts. Fifth, simplifications of his thought sometimes miss key elements of his argument. These contribute needless misunderstandings, which Girard himself acknowledges.[2]

In this book, I am seeking to alleviate these "many reasons" to doubt Girard's theory through a careful and concise summary of

1. Michael Pakaluk, "The Immaculate Conception and Mimetic Desire," The Catholic Thing, December 8, 2020, https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2020/12/08/the-immaculate-conception-and-mimetic-desire/.

2. René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 160.

mimetic theory over his entire corpus in light of its mature presentation. I have tried to write short, digestible chapters for those new to Girard, first by looking at Girard's life (chapter 1), then at the basic components of Girard's mimetic theory (chapters 2–8), and finally at how Girard sees these components playing out through human history (chapters 9–16). I have test-driven the text with those interested in, but unfamiliar with, mimetic theory. Any shortcomings in these simplifications lie with the author. The appendix contains a glossary of terms, itineraries for further reading, and a selected biography. Reading Girard is the best way to avoid misunderstandings, but it takes disciplined attention and reflection. One can also further benefit from participating in a community of readers to share and test one's discoveries. Mimetic theory's future is bright because there are still many paths to explore; I will describe one briefly in the conclusion. I hope that you will find this book a stimulating and amusing text that is merely your first step in coming to this man who has changed so many people's lives. As one plunges more deeply into his texts, one finds applications to everyday life and to global events to set the world on fire with the love of God.

CHAPTER 1

Meet René Noël Théophile Girard

If the Roman playwright Plautus is correct when he states that a name is a prophecy (*nomen est omen*), then Girard's name overflows with meaning: René (*renatus*, "reborn"), Noël ("the birthday of the Lord," from *natalis dies Domini*), and Théophile (*Theophilus* [Θεόφιλε], meaning "lover of God"). Girard's life bears testimony to the enduring power of baptismal grace (René) that only needs to be stirred into flame to make one a lover of God (Théophile), who ceaselessly contemplates the mystery of Bethlehem (Noël). Like St. Luke the Evangelist, Girard "decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you" (Luke 1:3). Girard's life project can be understood as his attempt—tentative and at times even intemperate—to offer a fresh account of the meaning of Christ, who "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).[1]

Just five years after World War I, on the evening of Christmas day in 1923, Girard was born to an anticlerical, Jesuit-educated father, Joseph Frédéric Marie Girard (1881–1962), and a Catholic mother, Marie-Thérèse de Loye Fabre (1893–1967), in Avignon, France,[2] as

1. This short biography, based on Girard's Stanford University colleague Cynthia Haven's *Evolution of Desire*, provides context to the origins and development of mimetic theory. Feel free to read it later, if you want to jump into mimetic theory itself.

2. For centuries, the French kings coveted the papal enclave, which consisted of the Comtat Venaissin (acquired in 1274) and Avignon (acquired in 1348). Seven popes (1305–1378) and two antipopes (1378–1403) reigned in Avignon. In 1791, a plebiscite was held that became

the second of five children. His parents were well educated: his father was an *archiviste-paléographe*, a specialist in medieval studies, and a curator at the Palais des Papes (Palace of the Popes). His mother was the first woman of the region to earn a *baccalauréat* (secondary school degree). To appreciate this achievement, one should take note that in 1931, only 2.5 percent of the French population held this distinction.[3] By the age of thirteen, Girard ceased practicing his faith, even if he did not reject it: "I was raised in the double religion of Dreyfusism and Catholicism (on my mother's side), although I didn't learn about Péguy until much later."[4]

The blitzkrieg, the collapse of the Third Republic, and the inauguration of the Vichy government over non-German-occupied France overshadowed Girard's late teenage years. After completing a second baccalaureate with distinction in 1941, he weighed his options, deciding to spend another year at home to prepare for the entrance exam for his father's alma mater, the École Nationale des Chartes (National School of Chartres), a hotbed of Dreyfusard activism during his father's studies. The Écoles supported a larger intellectual project to shape French national identity.[5]

Studying in Nazi-occupied Paris for two years and then in liberated Paris for two more (1943–1947) left Girard underwhelmed.

the pretext for its annexation to France, which the papacy reluctantly recognized at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

3. Cynthia Haven, *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 13.

4. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 15. The Dreyfus family was among those who moved to France after the newly organized German Empire (Kaiserreich) annexed Alsace and Lorraine (previously incorporated under French kings over the course of three centuries) in 1871. In 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a graduate of the elite École polytechnique (Engineering School) in 1878 and the highest-ranking Jew in the French army, was accused of sharing secrets with the Germans. Traditional anti-Jewish prejudices disposed the French to see Dreyfus as an alien outsider. Despite his protests of innocence and ambivalent evidence, the court of law and public opinion convicted him of treason and banished him to the penal colony on Devil's Island off of French Guiana. A small minority of critics, however, vociferously contested the unjust verdict until it was overturned in 1906. Among those who noted the parallel between this case and the Gospels was Charles Péguy, who fought as a Catholic and socialist to vindicate Dreyfus.

5. Through the scientific study of the vast number of mostly medieval documents pilfered from libraries, archives, and churches during the revolutionary period, the École trained professional librarians and archivists, who provided fodder for historians to control the present by interpreting the past according to the norms of positivism. See Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 34.

"This was the worst experience of my life," he recalled. "I hated it. I hated Paris. I hated Paris more than any other city."[6] The southerner from Avignon on the margins of cosmopolitan Paris longed for home. Yet Girard observed that were it not for the Nazi occupation and the difficulty with travel, he might have abandoned his studies due to his nostalgia. Midway through his studies and immediately after the liberation of Paris, Girard witnessed retaliation against those who were perceived to be German collaborators, whether politicians or simply women who were accused of sleeping with the enemy.[7]

Girard's decision to go to America changed everything.[8] He had only expected to stay for two years; however, during his studies at Indiana University, he met his future wife, Martha McCullough, in 1948. Even though he struggled to gain a command of English—almost all his major texts he composed in French, which he spoke with a beautiful Provençal accent[9]—he had found a new home. In 1950, he earned his doctorate in history with a dissertation on the "American Opinion of France, 1940–1943." McCullough and Girard married at the local Methodist church on June 18, 1951, the day of his graduation.

Eventually, they would have three children: two sons, Martin and Daniel, and a daughter, Mary. Noting that Girard's career would never have been possible had he stayed in France, Benoît Chantre, with whom Girard published his last major work, *Battling to the End*, contends, "Girard is, like Tocqueville, a great *French* thinker—and a great *French* moralist—who could yet nowhere else exist but in *the United States*."[10] Girard's academic career did not take off quickly. Indiana let him

6. Haven, 28.

7. Haven, 36–39.

8. Haven, 49.

9. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "A Tribute to René Girard," *Anthropoetics* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2016): anthropoetics.ucla.edu.

10. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 61. Emphasis in the original.

go because he did not publish sufficiently. He moved to Duke University and then Bryn Mawr College.

In late autumn of 1958, as he was working on the conclusion of his upcoming book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard was increasingly preoccupied with the similarities between religious experience and the writings of certain novelists, who were brave enough to admit that our desires are not our own, but rather come from a model. This he would call mimetic desire. He moreover began to feel his own skeptical convictions coming under cross-examination. This wrestling first came to an intellectual climax: "Everything was there at the beginning, all together. That's why I don't have any doubts. There's no 'Girardian system.' I'm teasing out a single, extremely dense insight."[11] Girard's intellectual conversion consisted of a moment of insight that he spent the rest of his life exploring.

His spiritual conversion began shortly thereafter when Girard, while commuting on a train from Bryn Mawr to Johns Hopkins, where he was teaching, discovered a lesion on his forehead. The subsequent medical examination left open whether it was cancerous. Though it turned out to be of little consequence health-wise, it catalyzed his spiritual awakening and a return to his Catholic roots. In the ensuing weeks, Girard devoted himself, as never before, to taking Lent seriously. On Spy Wednesday, March 25, 1959, he received the good news that he was cancer-free.[12] (March 25 marks liturgically the Solemnity of the Annunciation, the joyful mystery of the Incarnation of the Lord, nine months before his birth, Christmas, when the Blessed Virgin granted her *fiat*, "Let it be done," to God's plan for salvation.) Through this near encounter with death, Girard underwent a paschal experience.

11. Haven, 112.

12. Haven corrects the somewhat confusing text from *When These Things Begin*, 131. There, Ash Wednesday is confused with Spy Wednesday, the day before the Triduum on which is recalled Judas' scheming to hand over Jesus to the authorities. The context makes it clear that Girard means the Wednesday of Holy Week. See Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 118.

The moral conversion followed immediately thereafter. He found a priest to bless his marriage, allowed his sons to be baptized—his daughter would be born the following year—and committed himself to the practice of the Catholic faith. In retrospect, Girard's biographer Cynthia L. Haven writes, "The consent of the will occurred in what he [Girard] called the 'first conversion' experience. The second conversion gave him urgency, depth, and the endurance to take the next steps in the journey."[13]

While employed as a professor at Johns Hopkins University, Girard published the text that had contributed to his conversion, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, in France in 1961. The title hinted at Girard's intellectual conversion. Literally rendered in English as "Romantic Lies and Novelistic Truth," it was later translated as *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and published in English in 1966. The title plays on the French word for novel (*roman*) and the nineteenth-century philosophy of Romanticism, which celebrated creativity, genius, and originality, especially in the arts.

Girard proposed the first elements of mimetic theory in terms of the experience of conversion as death and resurrection. His title in French explains what is at stake: modernity is founded on the "Romantic lie" that human beings determine their desires autonomously and freely, and the novelistic truth contradicts this claim, stating that mimetic desire more powerfully influences desire than reason or will.[14] Girard prized those novelists who had the honesty to acknowledge the Romantic lie in the face of this novelistic truth. In Girard's view, this would entail a death and resurrection experience, the ego dying through the truth that it is held in bondage to mimesis, and rising with a new sense of humility because it

13. Haven, 118.

14. By choosing "Romantic," Girard does not mean to exclude the other source of the modern myth of individualism: the liberalism of Enlightenment thinkers. Both sustain this myth.

no longer fears the truth that one is not original, but rather like everyone else.

In October 1966, Girard organized an international conference on "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," at which an obscure philosopher, Jacques Derrida, introduced deconstructionism to American academia. According to this literary theory, texts communicate not so much objective truth (something true always and everywhere), but rather subjective wordplay in which a text can be decoded to find its hidden, unexpected meanings (something that is true for you but not for me). Derrida became an intellectual superstar. While Girard appreciated Derrida's early essay on Plato and the *pharmakos*, he also perceived a great threat to scholarship since deconstructionism manifested a lack of faith in reality itself.[15] If reality is unknowable or unreachable and therefore everything is just wordplay and interpretation, then what is left of the search for truth? Girard could not sacrifice the search for truth because he was coming to recognize the one truth that the postmodern world did not and could not abandon: the concern for the victim.[16] With the rising tide of deconstructionism and an increasingly tense rivalry with Derrida, Girard decided that it was best to withdraw from Johns Hopkins, taking a position at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1968.

Nevertheless, it was a time of prodigious activity, as Girard was transposing his mimetic insights from *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* to anthropology, ethnology, myth, ritual, and religion. The French public widely acclaimed Girard for the fruit of these labors, *La violence et le sacré* (*Violence and the Sacred*), published in French in 1972. In this second book, Girard focused on sacrifice rather than mimesis. This might have seemed surprising, but even before Girard had published *Violence and the Sacred*, he

15. Haven, 143.

16. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 177–178.

was already at work on his next book, which would bring biblical revelation and Christianity into this orbit.

Growing restless, Girard was lured back to Johns Hopkins University, an institution of which he was always fond, with an appointment to the prestigious Richard A. Macksey Humanities Center in 1976.[17] The English translation of *La violence et le sacré*, *Violence and the Sacred*, appeared in 1977. The following year, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* was published in France—published in English nine years later as *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. While *Violence and the Sacred* applied mimetic theory to archaic religion, *Things Hidden* introduced biblical religion and its singular role in demythologizing myth and uncovering the origins of culture. *Things Hidden* records Girard's conversations with two colleagues on a wide variety of matters in which he revealed the extent to which the Gospel played a fundamental role in his thought, causing some to part ways with his theory and others to become more deeply attracted to it. Girard acknowledged his own inadequacy for the task: "I hold that truth is not an empty word, or a mere 'effect' as people say nowadays. I hold that everything capable of diverting us from madness and death, from now on, is inextricably linked to this truth. But I do not know how to speak about these matters. I can only approach texts and institutions, and relating them to one another seems to me to throw light in every direction."[18]

Finally, in 1981, he became the Andrew B. Hammond Professor of French Language, Literature, and Civilization at Stanford University, where he taught until his retirement in 1995. His important works from this period include *Le bouc émissaire* (1982; *The Scapegoat*, 1986), *La route antique des hommes pervers* (1985; *Job: The Victim of His People*, 1987), *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (1991), and *Quand ces choses commenceront* (1994;

17. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 187–188.

18. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 446.

When These Things Begin, 2014). *The Scapegoat* consists of studies of Old Testament stories and "persecution texts," which in his view stand midway between myth, which conceals scapegoating, and the Gospel, which reveals it openly. His complete exegesis of Job applies mimetic theory to its reflection on the problem of evil and the suffering of the innocent. With *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*, which Girard wrote in his second language, English, he wanted to cast the Bard's text in a new light, which, as it turned out, most Shakespeare scholars found neither illuminating nor wanted, jealously protecting their well-guarded ground from a novice interloper.

In 1990, he cofounded with his friend, the Innsbruck theologian Raymund Schwager, SJ, the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. Girard's mimetic theology and Schwager's dramatic theology developed in tandem after Schwager's discovery of Girard in 1972. Their independent lines of research converged and enriched their respective projects, which took on an institutional expression in the Colloquium.

After his retirement, Girard published major works including *The Girard Reader* (1996), *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair* (1999; *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 2001), *Celui par qui la scandale arrive* (2001; *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, 2014), *Les origines de la culture* (2004; *Evolution and Conversion*, 2008), and *Achever Clausewitz* (2007; *Battling to the End*, 2010). In this period, no book stands out as more important than *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, a bestseller in France but a quiet seller in America (which has been reprinted more than twenty times). Appearing in French at the end of the second millennium of Christianity, and in English during the momentous year of 2001, this book—with a helpful introduction by Syracuse University professor James Williams—is the best place to start with Girard's works.

On March 17, 2005, René Girard was elected as one of the forty *immortels* by the members of the *Académie*

Française. For his achievements, Girard's friend and colleague from Stanford University, Michel Serres, named him for the first time "the new Darwin of the human sciences."[19] Ten years later, on November 4, 2015, Girard died peacefully in his home in Stanford, California, at the age of ninety-one. His requiem was held at St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Palo Alto ten days later, just after the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. A memorial service took place on February 15, 2016, at the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris. Based on the text of Joseph Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ* and evoking the revolution of the Resurrection, Serres eulogized, "From that day on, the new earth, virgin and mother, generates a new era where time, newly oriented, turns its back on death. Death no longer lies before our time, as our term, but flees, defeated, behind us."[20]

The Resurrection changes everything. Girard's life and writings offer a glimpse of the new world brought into being on Easter morning, which forges ahead, now nearly two millennia later. The next chapters seek to unravel his "single, extremely dense insight."

19. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 226.

20. Michel Serres, "Hommage à M. René Girard, en l'église Saint-Germain-des-Prés," Académie française, February 15, 2016, academie-francaise.fr.

CHAPTER 2

The Big Question

What makes human beings different from other forms of life? Thanks to advances in science, we appreciate more and more the complex and wonderful history of life in the universe. We can only speculate, at this point, about the likelihood of life on other planets based on our knowledge of the conditions that are necessary for life to arise, survive, and thrive. Our only example of life in the universe, however, remains the earth; the rest is science fiction. Our *Pale Blue Dot*—the title of the popular astronomer Carl Sagan's book—teems with life. With plants and animals, we share this "common home," as Pope Francis puts it in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, and yet we are decisively different from the rest of them. How? What is distinctively human?

While answers abound, culture seems a good place to start because humans are the only ones who express themselves in culture. What is culture? While in common daily language we associate "culture" with the artifacts of civilization—language, literature, art, government, economics, and so forth—the term really comes from a most human act, *cult*, which means "worship." The act of worshiping creates culture, not the other way around. It also creates politics and religion. We try, mostly unsuccessfully, to distinguish religion, culture, and politics, but they are really the same thing. "Culture" derives from *cult* (worship). "Politics" comes from *polis* (πόλις), the Greek word that is commonly rendered as "city" but really refers to the citizens who constitute a

worshiping community. "Religion" (*religio*) first referred to a set of rituals and symbols that expressed the identity of its society. Only later, in the Enlightenment, did religion come to mean what it does today: a worldview or a belief system, both of which are very distant from its original communal meaning.

How did worship arise? This question has occupied many serious thinkers from the beginning of human history. Human cultures tell myths about their origins that explain the divine, natural, and social worlds. These myths likewise explain the origins of practices such as ritual, sacrifice, and taboos. With the turn to scientific explanations for the origins of things, new theories arose, explaining worship in terms of its useful functions, such as promoting social peace and good order, rather than accepting myths at face value. Girard's proposal should be seen as a continuation of this line of explanation. At the same time, however, Girard does not exclude the possibility of—indeed, he even argues for—explanations that transcend rationalistic or atheistic accounts of religion.

For example, Karl Marx argued that culture and religion (and more broadly, ideas in general) are the products of the economic organization of a society (slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, etc.). Marx argued that human communities pass through distinct stages of economic organization that would lead to a paradisal condition free from coercion. Religion was the "opium of the masses." (Consider the importance of opium as an escapist drug in the nineteenth century over which wars were fought between the British and Chinese Empires—because it provided relief from the misery of modernization.)

Marx and his associate Friedrich Engels were atheists. Although they rationalized their atheism with their theories, it seems that their atheism—as it does with many—comes from their revulsion to the evil, cruelty, and injustice they witnessed. If there was a God, let alone a good God, how could he let these things

exist? If there is no God, what, if any, limits are there in one's quest to eradicate suffering, evil, and injustice from the world? What followed in the wake of their cry was the establishment of communist societies, some of which exist to this day, and cultural Marxism, which poisons much of the rest of the world with its extension of class struggle to new domains such as race, gender, and ethnicity. While the social ills they wished to alleviate were no doubt real, their therapies often ended up killing the patient.

By contrast, Girard argues that religion explains human origins. He proposes scenarios by which protohumans might have become human—that is, a culture-making animal. This transition from protohuman to human takes place through a coevolutionary process of biology and culture—that is, the reciprocal interaction between nature and culture. "Nature" refers to the world that we experience around us as given (which today seems to be shrinking), whereas "culture" refers to the world that we experience as something we collectively and individually have made. At times, the distinction can be blurry. For example, if people are forced to dwell on a floodplain because they cannot afford to live elsewhere, is a flood strictly a natural disaster, or the result of both nature (given) and culture (made by humans)?

To discover a universal pattern to reconstruct his scenario of humanization, Girard appeals to two kinds of evidence. First, he extensively consults written sources, especially myths. He supplements these with nonliterary sources from anthropology (the study of human origins) and its subdisciplines, archaeology (the study of material evidence) and ethnology (the comparative study of human groups). He also consults ethology (the study of animal behavior) to uncover whether behavioral patterns in animals might have been adapted to meet the requirements of *homo sapiens*. He places all this evidence within an evolutionary framework, which tries to explain how living beings adapt to their environment to survive and thrive. Considering the evidence, Girard

concludes that humanity is a child of religion, which emerges from the scapegoat mechanism. Put simply for the moment, the scapegoat mechanism provided a solution to the problem of unbounded violence that arose from humanity's mimetic (imitative) desire. This was not something devised by human ingenuity or reason; rather, the first human beings stumbled into it. Since ethologists have found evidence of such behavior in primates, perhaps it has prehuman antecedents. Whatever the case, the scapegoat mechanism and its consequences, ritual and religion, protected the young species from unlimited violence, the unintended byproduct of mimesis (imitation).

CHAPTER 3

Mimetic Desire: That Which Is Truly Ours

The next two chapters summarize the first key insight of Girard—namely, that human desire is mimetic in nature. This will be difficult to accept. Indeed, there will be a part of you that will surely resist this claim because it offends our everyday notion of ourselves as independent, self-governing individuals. First, I will explain mimetic desire and, in the next chapter, the Romantic lie—that is, the myth of modern individualism. Recall that Girard's intellectual conversion came as a result of this discovery. It was also hard for him, as it was for the novelists from whom he learned about mimetic desire, to accept at the start that our desires—what we most cherish as our very own—come from others. But seeking the truth entails the acceptance of difficult, even undesirable, conclusions. The truth is that we are not nearly as original or self-governing as we like to believe. Yet, with this knowledge, we can become more so. That is the paradox and the joy of Girard's discovery of mimetic desires. Let's begin.

THE METAPHYSICS OF MIMETIC DESIRE

Girard identifies mimetic desire as the essential difference between man and other animals. Though constrained by the same biological needs for food, shelter, reproduction, etc., the genetic

determination of behavior (instincts, hierarchies of dominance, etc.) diminished during human evolution and opened the way for behavior based on wants (*désirs*) as well as needs (*appétits*). While needs are grounded in biology, wants are influenced strongly by other people who model desires; hence, we imitate and adopt their desires (mimetic). Indeed, because wants and needs blend, the role of the model affects both wants and needs. In either case, however, what is desirable in the other is not ultimately any particular thing—whether it be a person, relationship, object, experience, or feeling—but *being* itself. Or as Girard puts it himself, "All desire is a desire for being."[1] This requires some explanation.

When I was a kid shopping in the mall for clothing, I would go to the Gap. I saw the models wearing clothing that projected health, strength, and beauty. I wanted those clothes because I wanted to be that way. I wanted to *be* robust, strong, and attractive. However, after I bought the clothing and brought it home, I didn't look that way. I had confused the shirt with what was underneath—namely, the muscular physique of the mannequin. Instead of strong and handsome, I was dumpy or, as it was sometimes said, "husky." The clothing caught my attention, but what I really wanted was what was underneath. The "underneath" is being. I wanted to be someone else who was in shape, athletic, attractive. In mimetic theory, Girard sees that behind desires for success, wealth, status, pleasure, relationships, goodness, even love, is the longing for *being*, a longing to be more than what one currently is. Here, at the heart of Girard's naturalistic explanation of human beings, we find, perhaps surprisingly, a metaphysical category that points to our creaturely dependence on the Creator, who *is* Being itself.

Let's break this down. St. Thomas Aquinas argues we find a distinction in each thing between its nature (i.e., *what* something

1. René Girard, *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 12.

is; an "essence" or *essentia*) and its existence (i.e., *that* something is; "being" or *esse*). So, while there is a multiplicity of expressions of being human (every person is unique), we are all nevertheless human. We all have the same nature. We're all, in a way, the same thing. But while we all possess a human nature (*what* we are), we do not possess the power to make ourselves exist (*that* we are). We simply experience our being here; we did not cause it. It is just something that is for us, and likewise for everything else in the universe. Since we do not make ourselves exist, we may conclude with philosophers that we must depend on a source—whose essence *is* its existence—for our own existence. This source is, in Aristotle's language, the first cause.

The Bible further clarifies this source of our existence: he has revealed himself as "I Am Who I Am" to the prophet Moses (Exod. 3:14), whose name we routinely encounter in the Bible under the title "Lord."[2] Human beings as creatures are thus contingent beings. We don't have to exist. But we are not an accident either—the product of laws and luck. We can see ourselves as beings loved into existence by Love itself. Someone wants us to be here.

We should also note at this point that human beings have two kinds of existence. Our bodily or physical (*physis* means body, among other things, in Greek) existence includes not only our body as such but also our emotions and our mental capacities that rely on our brain. Bodily existence is not only material but also, due to our mind, extends into the realm of ideas, abstraction, and contemplation. It is for this reason that we can marvel at the fact that our bodies share in the amazing history of the universe. Thanks to our souls, however, we also transcend our bodily existence as *meta*physical, "beyond-the-bodily," beings.

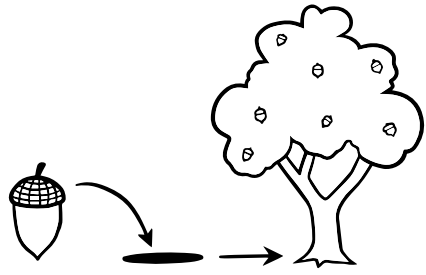
2. In light of a modern tendency to use the vocalized Hebrew name for God in songs (e.g., "Yahweh, I know you are near") and biblical translations, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, under the direction of Pope Benedict, directed the bishops to return to this venerable tradition of reverence for the transcendence of God and the holiness of his name. See "Letter to the Bishops' Conferences on 'The Name of God,'" June 29, 2008, usccb.org.

We are both. Pope St. John Paul II puts it this way: "Created in the image of God, man is both a corporeal and spiritual being. Bound to the external world, he also transcends it. Besides being a bodily creature, as a spirit he is a person. This truth about man is an object of our faith, as it is a biblical truth about his being constituted in 'image and likeness' of God."[3]

This understanding of human beings is theological in origin because God reveals it to us in Scripture. As corporeal beings, we depend on the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink, the parents who made us, the families who raised us, the friends who rejoice in us, and the communities that sustain us. All of these corporeal dependencies become clear in the light of our spiritual dimension because all depend on God for their very existence.

Another metaphysical way of understanding our dependence relates to the discussion of potency and act. All created beings (everything and everyone but God) exist in the tension between *potency* (their capacity to become what they are according to their essence/nature) and *act* (reaching the fullness or perfection of their essence). We possess both at the same time, naturally, because this is according to our nature. Let me explain. I don't just become human when I am an adult (although some cultures have acted this way, treating children or the unborn as disposable). Rather, I am human from the moment of conception. Yet at the same time, it is also quite clear that our humanity is yet to be fully actualized because we are only a zygote.

3. John Paul II, "Man Is a Spiritual and Corporeal Being," general audience, April 16, 1986, in *Audiences of Pope John Paul II* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana).



But whether an acorn or a tree, it is always an oak.

It would also be false to imagine that we achieve the perfect state of our humanity before death. This cannot be the case. Before death our life is still tentative and its ultimate meaning obscure. As long as we live, we can frustrate our natural end by refusing to go along with it (that's sin). God has decided, however, to give the last word not to sin, but rather to the Word made flesh, Jesus, in whom there is always hope to get back on the right path (faith and Baptism). Only after death and judgment will the meaning of our life become definitive in terms of attaining through God's grace our nature or mature end. Put succinctly, we will live in the right relationship with God (knowing him face to face), our body (resurrection), our neighbor (the heavenly Jerusalem), and all the universe (the new creation). This and nothing else is the mature and perfect form of human nature.

To sum up, all being relies on God, who is pure existence (it is his nature to exist), dependent on nothing and no one, unlike everyone and everything else. Girard's claim about human desire, therefore, presumes a metaphysical understanding of being and becoming. Although that shirt from the Gap would never make me abundant in being through the attributes of strength and beauty, the resurrection of the body will.

A MIMETIC VOCATION

I can see now in hindsight the role that mimesis played in my vocation. When I say this, it is not meant in any way to discredit grace or God's call, but rather to perceive the way in which God works in our lives and how mimesis can be very positive. When I arrived at graduate school at the Catholic University of America (CUA) in 1990, I had no intention of becoming a priest. I had occasionally thought about it when I was growing up, but I did not know anyone who became a priest or was becoming one. We had none in our family. I went to public schools before university. We belonged to a large, post–Vatican II suburban parish where we had little contact with the clergy. I was never an altar boy. We often bounced around to different parishes for Sunday Mass, depending on how it fit into the schedule for televised sports. I simply lacked models.

That changed when I came to CUA. For the first time in my life, I felt like the world was right. I don't mean that everything was perfect there. I mean that as a Catholic child, I always felt out of place in public school, but I did not know why. My parents figured that everyone was Irish, Italian, or Jewish, just like back in New York City, so how different could public school really be? As I child, I could not articulate this sense of being out of place. It only became clear to me later, at CUA, where things made sense.

I met my first model—today he is a fellow canon of Stift Klosterneuburg, a more-than-nine-hundred-year-old abbey of Canons Regular of Saint Augustine who serve in Austria, Norway, and the United States—who in those days was not yet even a seminarian. I went to Mass with my parents at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. At the end of the Saturday evening Mass on September 1, 1990, Stephen Nash (later Fr. Daniel) invited the students to be altar servers or lectors. My mom leaned over and said, "I bet you would like to do that." It was my Cana moment. She gave me the right nudge to do what

I already wanted to do but would have been afraid to do because I would have revealed my desire. She gave me the cover to do it, and I did it. I introduced myself and said I wanted to be a lector. He responded that they didn't need lectors, but servers. I said, "I've never served." He said, "You will learn." And I did. Over the following years, thanks to his example and his words, I learned to love the liturgy and the Catholic faith as he did. He took a kid from Long Island—as he was himself—and opened the world to me. His joy for life and love for people showed me that a priestly vocation embraces the world in all its joy and sorrow, in its adventures and mysteries.

After completing my master's degree, I decided to take a break and discern my vocation. I was weighing it over those two years. I went to Germany. It was a lonely experience much of the time, but the introspection and suffering did me good. I realized that the path that I was on in my studies was not the right one. It was time for a change. I moved to Virginia to live with my brother and a friend of his. It was a simple existence of work and prayer. In Lent of 1993, he and I mimetically inspired each other to pray the Rosary daily (I made it up as best as I could because I had not learned it as a child) and to read the New Testament. Whenever our desire wavered, we only needed to ask, "What page are you on?" and the desire to beat the other came back. By Easter we had not only finished the New Testament but made it into the Old Testament, only to hit the wall when we got to Leviticus.

During that spring, we joined a small, young adult–led Rosary and discussion group. On one occasion, a couple of the recently ordained priests came over to join us. One of them in particular struck me with his intelligent, attractive, and affable personality. I said to myself, *I want to be like him.* Not too much later, while I was alone praying in our little apartment near Ballston, Virginia, I said yes to my vocation. Immediately and subsequently,

a profound peace filled my soul that never left me despite all the turmoil and trials of the seminary.

During my time in formation, God blessed me with great role models, fathers who also later became brothers in the priesthood and friends: Monsignor Pereda, Monsignor McKay, and Fr. Aldo. Friends are amongst God's greatest graces because they are the models one can safely imitate. I learned so much from these men. If I am any good as a priest, it is largely thanks to their example and friendship. Finally, on May 15, 1999, I was ordained a priest. Fr. Daniel tells me that he has never seen anyone before or since who was so happy on his day of ordination.

MIMETIC DESIRE IN SLOW MOTION

To understand desire, one must distinguish between desire as a *capacity*, which is common to human beings, and desire as *what one wants*, which is open, mobile, and changeable. For example, I am hungry, but what do I want to eat? I am out at a French restaurant, and I order *foie gras* because everyone is, even though I hate liver, or so I thought. Or why don't I want the newest iPhone even though my colleagues have just gotten them? Why are some desires strong and others weak? What might account for these differences?

Girard suggests that people do not know *what* to desire because it is not a matter of knowing, but rather of wanting. Rarely arising from rational calculation or careful planning, desire often feels spontaneous and surprising. We cannot force ourselves to want such and such. It appears mysterious to us. We do not know why we want what we want, but we would like to find out.

Girard describes human desire as "mimetic" because he has observed a link between what people want and who else wants it. *Mimesis* is the Greek word that we know in English as "imitation" (from the Latin *imitatio*). Mimetic desire explains that what we desire often depends profoundly on what *others* desire. We adopt

the desires of others, mostly without ever realizing it. This begins right away as an infant. Before we have the use of reason, we are schooled in mimetic desire. We observe others, and they help us to specify what we want. It is hardly surprising to see children imitating their parents or siblings. As we become adolescents, our peer groups and friends provide compelling models, as do teachers, coaches, and celebrities. By adulthood we may attain sufficient self-knowledge to become aware of our patterns of wanting, creating a significant place for planning and deliberation.

This is not to say, however, that all wanting is therefore only mimetic, but rather to claim that for human beings, other human beings do play a big role in what we want specifically. Why do I fall in love with this or that person? In part, because someone else has made this person lovable in our eyes. This gives rise to the bizarre love triangles of literature and daily life. In those situations, imitation is certainly not "the sincerest form of flattery" because of the threat of competition and loss. Indeed, since flattery can also be insincere and manipulative, this saying comes under further suspicion. Observing that the original feels cheapened by the copycat or the knockoff, Oscar Wilde elongated the phrase to "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery *that mediocrity can pay to greatness.*" Does anyone believe a "Folex" (fake Rolex) praises a Rolex? There is something deeply unsettling about imitation.

THE BENEFITS

As a universal capacity of being human, mimesis explains both cultural diversity and personal idiosyncrasy. Human beings as culture-making animals come in many expressions. Mimesis makes human behavior plastic, thereby increasing fitness for survival by an expanding scope of adaptive flexibility to respond successfully to environmental challenges. Indeed, it is likely that mimesis accelerated human evolution as it added a new environmental pressure on

the brain to be able to manage exciting and dangerous possibilities.[4] Mimesis contributes to the transmission of culture. Children learn through imitation, acquiring language and other skills for social success. Learning their culture's ethos, they become part of the community and eventually model it to the next generation.

Mimetic desire also confers the capacity for openness to others, which can lead both to desiring the good for the other (*ti voglio bene*, "I want your good") and escaping from self-preoccupation.[5] At the same time, it can corrupt if we do not learn to resist those desires that are destructive to our neighbor and ourselves. Although mimetic desire seems mysterious and powerful, with the right formation, Girard strongly affirms that we are free to choose to imitate well, even in the presence of powerful temptations to succumb to conflicts. This education in desire requires both the discovery of mimetic desire and its consequences (rivalry, violence, scapegoating, and culture) as well as personal conversion.

Mimesis structures interpersonal relationships by linking desire and being.[6] Again, "all desire is a desire for being"; Haven adds, "And the being we long for becomes wrapped up in a person, who becomes idol, and eventually, rival, locked in an impossible conflict for an object, an honor, a promotion, a lover, or the esteem of others, which is in itself a shorthand for a bigger battle with bigger forces."[7] What we want most is to be. Since we begin in ignorance of this condition, we need enlightenment, which many religious, philosophical, and spiritual traditions seek to address. We can learn to perceive this fundamental desire for being if we become conscious of our metaphysical situation. But is knowledge enough? No, we

4. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 93–94.

5. René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 64.

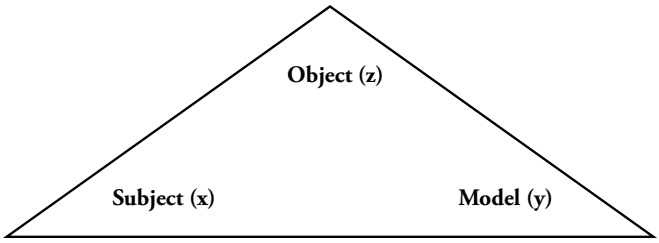
6. Burton Mack, "Introduction: Religion and Ritual," in *Violent Origins*, ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 13.

7. Cynthia L. Haven, *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 107.

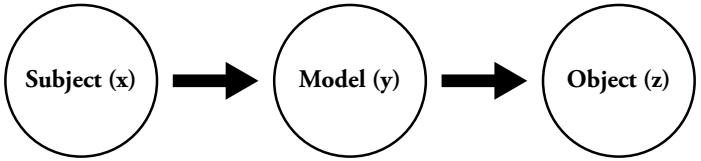
need more than knowledge; we also need a model who can motivate us to desire well.

TRIANGULAR DESIRE

Although mimesis is triangular, consisting of (x) the subject (or person), (y) the model (or other/mediator), and (z) the object,[8] its geometry is not a triangle:



Rather, it is something more like a sequence, at least at the beginning. For the subject, the model conveys desirability on the object: I want the object because the model wants it.



The subject refers to the person who desires that which the model possesses—namely, the object. To bring out different facets of the one whom one imitates, Girard uses three different terms: (1) the "model," (2) the "other," and (3) the "mediator."

The "model" generally proposes a desirable object to the subject unconsciously; the model is simply going about his or her business.

8. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 2–3.

Of course, those who understand this process can manipulate it for their advantage. In any case, no model is original in a metaphysical sense. Only God is the source of his own existence. The same goes for desires. We acquire them from others, and then we model them for others. This is a dynamic reality that is constantly happening. By the time we become aware of it—if we ever do—we have already been imitating and modeling desires for many years.

Let's take an example: the famous case in which Solomon adjudicates between two prostitutes claiming to be a child's mother (1 Kings 3:16–28). In terms of mimetic desire, the child is the object. One woman wants to be the other woman. In order to do so, she wants what the other has—namely, the child. Recall, the desirable object is not an end in itself. She doesn't really want the child. She wants to be the other woman. In order to become her, she wants what she has. Therefore, the conflict arises from the fact that the lying prostitute desires to be the honest prostitute. By possessing the child, she becomes more like the woman she desires to be. The child is not in itself important; he is a means to an end.

The honest prostitute willingly sacrifices her own desire to vindicate her claim as the child's true mother in order to protect her child from Solomon's threat to divide the child in two.

The lying prostitute, on the other hand, willingly allows the sacrifice of the child because in the end she truly wants what her model, the honest prostitute, has: she wants to be her. She perceives her as being more real, as more abundantly existing, than herself. She wants to be the honest prostitute because behind

all desiring is the desire to be. The object, the child, loses its salience in the conflict and recedes in importance.[9]

The second term, the "other," simply places the two persons in opposition.

The third term, "mediator," refers to the role that the model or the other plays as one who mediates desire. "Mediation" has a number of important meanings for Girard to which we shall return below. In brief, in a mimetic relationship, both the subject and the model mediate desire to each other; Girard calls this "double mediation." "Internal mediation" and "external mediation" describe two kinds of distance between the subject and the model that indicate the likelihood of conflict. In the end, three terms—model, other, and mediator—refer to the same person, although the context might suggest the reason for choosing one term over the others.

The object is not the final point of desire. Beyond the object—whatever or whoever that might be—is desire's true aim: the model's being.[10] This metaphysical hunger causes the acquisitive nature of human desire. Poor in both being and desires, the subject seeks to appropriate the being of the other, the model, through imitating what the other desires, through adopting his words, deeds, and relationships, ultimately becoming the other. This is the basis for advertising and marketing, associating a good or service with an attractive model. Strange as it seems, we are radically dependent on God, creation, and others, yet our modern worldview tells us that we are independent as individuals and that we determine our desires.

9. René Girard with Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008), 153–154.

10. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 53.